

He Who Keeps Israel

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] And we're now going to turn to our Bible reading. Do grab a Bible if you don't have one. There are plenty spread around the front, the side, the back. If you're not sure, again, someone in the orange lanyards would love to give one to you.

Do grab one and follow along as we read this evening from Genesis chapter 31. And Willie Philip, our senior minister, is going to be preaching God's word to us shortly.

And we're going to be reading Genesis chapter 31, beginning at verse 17 through to chapter 32, verse 2.

So if you are using one of the visitor's Bibles, page 25. But Genesis chapter 31, beginning at verse 17. So Jacob aroused and set his sons and his wives on camels.

He drove away all his livestock, all his property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan Aram, to go to the land of Canaan, to his father, Isaac.

[1 : 09] Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods. And Jacob tricked Laban, the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee.

He fled with all that he had, and arose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead. When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days, and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead.

But God came to Laban, the Aramean, in a dream by night, and said to him, Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.

And Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen pitched tents in the hill country of Gilead. And Laban said to Jacob, What have you done, that you have tricked me, and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword?

Why did you flee secretly and trick me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre? And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell?

[2 : 28] Now you have done foolishly. It is in my power to do you harm. But the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.

And now you have gone away, because you longed greatly for your father's house. But why did you steal my gods? Jacob answered and said to Laban, Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force.

Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsmen, point out what I have that is yours, and take it. Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.

So Laban went into Jacob's tent, and into Leah's tent, and into the tent of the two female servants, but he did not find them. And he went out of Leah's tent, and entered Rachel's.

Now Rachel had taken the household gods, and put them in the camel's saddle, and sat on them. Laban felt all about the tent, but did not find them. And she said to her father, Let not my lord be angry, that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me.

[3 : 45] So he searched, but did not find the household gods. Then Jacob became angry, and berated Laban. Jacob said to Laban, What is my offense? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me?

For you have felt through all my goods. What have you found, of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsmen, and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two. These twenty years I have been with you.

Your ewes and your female goats, have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. What was torn by wild beasts, I did not bring to you. I bore the loss of it myself.

From my hand you required it, whether stolen by day, or stolen by night. There I was. By day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes.

These twenty years I have been in your house. I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times.

[4 : 46] If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. But God saw my affliction, and the labor of my hands, and rebuked you last night.

Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine.

But what can I do this day for these my daughters, or for their children, whom they have borne? Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.

So Jacob took a stone, and set it up as a pillar. And Jacob said to his kinsmen, Gather stones. And they took stones, and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap.

Laban called it Jager Sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galid. Laban said, This heap is a witness between you and me today. Therefore he named it Galid, and Mizpah, for he said, The Lord watch between you and me when we are out of one another's sight.

[6 : 03] If you oppress my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no one is with us, see, God is witness between you and me. Then Laban said to Jacob, See this heap, this heap, and the pillar which I have set between you and me.

This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me to do harm.

The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us. So Jacob swore by the fear of his father Isaac, and Jacob offered a sacrifice in the hill country, and called his kinsmen to eat bread.

They ate bread and spent the night in the hill country. Early in the morning, Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them.

Then Laban departed and returned home, but Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them, he said, This is God's camp.

[7 : 12] So he called the name of that place, Mahanaim. Amen. This is God's word. And we'll return to it shortly. Well, do pick up your Bibles, open them, if you would, at Genesis chapter 31, and a passage that Josh read to us there, beginning at verse 17.

All about the one who keeps Israel. Now, the New Testament is very clear in teaching us that all of us who are Abraham's true seed, Jacob's true seed, the seed of Israel through faith in Jesus Christ, all of us are called to join him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace that he bore.

That's how Hebrews 13 puts it. The Apostle Paul says the same thing. He certainly exemplified it, didn't he? When he fell foul of the state and he was imprisoned, he was deserted by all, even his churches, the churches he had planted, many believers and ministers that he had served with.

Shocking, extraordinary. But, he says, the Lord stood by me and strengthened me so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed to all the Gentiles and that they might hear it.

God did not desert his servant, but he fulfilled through him everything that he had promised for his part in God's plan and his glorious kingdom.

[8 : 50] And so it was for Jacob here in Genesis 31. He's in dire straits. Accusations of reproach and infamy and deceit are heaped on him by all manner of people because of his actions in fleeing from Laban and added to those accusations are many by Christian commentators on this chapter, I may say.

But God did not desert him. That's a great refrain of this passage, isn't it? But God, verse 24, but God came. Verse 29, but God spoke.

Verse 42, but God said and God met him with his angels. Verse 1 of chapter 32. Because behold, as the psalmist says, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore. forevermore. When God calls people to follow where he leads and when they trust and obey his voice and do that, however flawed they may be, whatever folly they may create from themselves, he will not abandon those who are his.

Never. And God had said to Jacob back in chapter 28, behold, I am with you. I will keep you wherever you go. I will not leave you. And what we see here in this passage tonight is God delivering on that promise.

[10 : 22] As Jacob sets out into the unknown, he's got enemies behind him, he's got reproach surrounding him, he's got all kinds of adversity still ahead of him. But God is with him.

And you know, that is a wonderfully, wonderfully assuring thing, isn't it, for us as believers today, for us as a church today. We're very, very aware, of course, of the many flaws and failings in our own lives.

But God's word so wonderfully, just as this passage here in so many places point us so wonderfully to Jacob's God, to our God, who promises to keep us from all evil, both now and forevermore.

It's a wonderful story, this. It's an exciting story. It's brilliantly told. It's a story of a parting followed by a pursuit ending up in a pact and then a very special place.

So look first at verses 17 to 21 which speak about this sudden parting. A sudden parting, yet one that bears witness to God's promised prospering of Jacob despite all of his shortcomings.

[11 : 32] All the focus in these verses is on Jacob's clear victory, his victory over both Laban's wealth and Laban's worship. It was a sudden parting.

It was something of a surreptitious one and people are very quick to criticize Jacob here. He shouldn't have run away like that. He shouldn't have deceived Laban. Look at Rachel stealing his gods and theft.

It's shocking, isn't it, for the household of faith to behave like this. And people are very quick to criticize. It's extraordinary, I think, how sanctimonious Christians can often be.

Remember the Pharisees who saw all the wonders that Jesus was doing, the marvelous works of healing, even of resurrection. What was the only thing they could come out with? Why don't your disciples wash their hands before dinner?

Extraordinary, isn't it, the heart of religion? In the text here in front of us, you will not find a hint, a hint of any criticism of Jacob. In fact, what we see is quite the opposite.

[12 : 34] Look at verse 3, right at the beginning of chapter 31. God himself had commanded Jacob to get up and to go back to Canaan. And Jacob had obeyed God straight away.

Went and told his wives, remember we saw last time, he repeated in verse 13 what God had said to him. Now, arise, go, let's get going right now. And so as soon as he had got his wives and his entourage with him, as John Calvin says, he yielded to no other distraction.

And herein appears the manly strength and constancy of his mind. That's what the text is telling us. Jacob is acting in clear obedience to God's word.

Now, he'll be criticized. Of course he will. He's criticized by Laban. Just as there will always be criticism of God's people living in obedience to God's command and God's word in a world that is very against God.

It's just a pity, isn't it, when professing Christians join in with the criticism of the world instead of standing with those who are seeking to be faithful and obedient to God's word, going against the flow of the culture.

[13 : 43] That often happens. But what the text is focusing on here is God's amazing provision for this man despite all adversity.

Verse 18, Jacob went with all his livestock, all his property that he'd gained since he first of all came all those 20 years ago. Do you remember? Penniless and pauperized.

And the story has recorded how God saw all the oppression that Laban meted out to Jacob and how God took all Laban's wealth and gave it to Jacob bit by bit by bit.

So that now, well, the slave is escaping from this tyrant but he is laden down with plunder. Just as, if you remember, later on, the Israelites would flee from Egypt and from their enslavers laden with plunder from the people of Egypt.

Laban's wealth is plundered and, look at verse 19, his worship is also brought to nothing. Do you see? His household gods are purloined by his own daughter.

[14 : 54] Now, we don't know why Rachel took them. Again, this is a whole focus of all kinds in the biblical commentaries. Many, many berating her for doing what she did. We don't know.

Maybe it was to spite her father. She certainly had plenty of reason to spite him. It was a nasty piece of work. Maybe she was very confused still spiritually. Maybe she was trying to hedge her bets and take the gods along.

We don't know and we're not told. And that tells us, really, that the writer here isn't that interested in the motive. What he is interested in, however, is showing us just how utterly feeble these gods of Laban really are.

Someone has said, here's a new crime being invented, godnapping. How pathetic these gods must be who can't even look after themselves, let alone look after Laban in this household.

And no wonder the Hebrew name that's given here for these gods, teraphim, sounds very suspiciously like the Hebrew word for dung pellets. This is nothing more than just a piece of dung.

[15 : 59] Rachel stole Laban's gods, verse 20. And literally here, the word translated tricked says, Jacob stole Laban's heart. The same word used again in verse 26 and 27.

It literally means Jacob stole away Laban's ability to think and to discern and to act properly. It's the same word used of Absalom later on in 2 Samuel where he stole away the hearts of the people of Israel.

He confused their thinking. He rendered them foolish. So poor Laban here. Here's his daughter Rachel leaving him with no gods and he's exposed by Jacob as also having no gumption.

He doesn't know what's happening and we're told verse 21, by the time he does, Jacob has gone at least three days away and he's heading for the land of Canaan for liberation.

Jacob set his face toward the hill country of Gilead. It may not have been very dignified. No doubt it looked rather bad, a bit suspicious as people saw it.

[17 : 03] But sometimes God's people find themselves in that position, don't they? And yet God blessed Jacob. God is directing Jacob and Jacob is acting in faith.

He is obeying God's clear word. So he didn't stop and look around and say to the Lord, this isn't going to look very good, Lord. The optics are really bad. Let's do it differently.

No. He arose. He set his face towards the promised land and like Abraham, he went as the Lord had told him.

And that is what the Bible means by faith. Doing what God tells you to do. But of course, following God doesn't mean that it's going to be a trouble-free journey.

And that's certainly what the next scene shows to us in verses 22 to 42. They tell us that this sudden parting is soon followed by a swift pursuit. And yet what these verses bear witness to is God's protection of Jacob, again, exactly according to promise, despite the near self-inflicted disaster that his family seems to be so prone to.

[18 : 15] All the focus here is on God's vindication of Jacob in the face of Laban's accusations and his threats of harm. And even more importantly, the focus is on a very public demonstration of the absolute triumph of Jacob's God over the powerless gods, the powerless idols of Laban's pagan worship.

So Laban doesn't hear for three days and that's because, remember, there's such a great distance between their camps. Laban himself had insisted on that, remember. And of course, that now comes back to bite him.

But when he hears, he's really mad. So off he goes pursuing him for seven days. So that means that Jacob and his entourage had ten days of rather uneasy travel.

No doubt, lots of anxious glances back looking for that dust cloud in the distance of pursuit. But eventually, they realize that Laban has caught up.

Perhaps he's outflanked them and cut them off. Verse 25 talks about their two camps being pitched against each other and the language there suggests it's a hostile posture. It's like two armies. But what Jacob doesn't yet know is that Laban too has had an encounter with God.

[19 : 32] Verse 24 says, he came in a dream and said, Laban, touch Jacob and you're mincemeat. Don't even speak to Jacob. Pull up and shut up.

That's my translation of the Hebrew there. God tells him to say nothing but notice Laban cannot keep his mouth shut, can he? He pours out this incoherent, lot of contradictory drivel in verses 26 to 30.

It's absolutely replete with irony. What have you done? He says. Remember that? That was exactly Jacob's words. Remember when Laban deceived him with Leah instead of Rachel.

And then there's this outraged accusation. You've kidnapped my daughters by force. Actually Laban, they were jolly glad to see the back of you. They were off. And then, look at verse 27, the sheer hypocrisy of it.

I wanted to throw you a leaving party, he says. A likely story that is. And then verse 28, this pompous denunciation.

[20 : 33] You've done very foolishly. That's another one, isn't it? A real classic of sanctimonious piety. You hear it all the time. Oh, it's, I agree with everything you say, I agree with everything you believe, just the way you've gone about it.

If you'd just done it differently, we'd be with you on that. That's always specious nonsense. As William still says, no one is ever a fool to do what God says, though all the world may think so.

And that's true, friends, even if it could have been done better. And things can always be done better, can't they? Christians can always do things better than they do them because we're not perfect, are we? And surely Jacob could have.

But Laban admits that he knows Jacob is doing what God told him. What the true God told him, that is the God who's appeared to him as well, the God who actually speaks, the God who actually does command his people, and he also recognizes that Jacob's got a real desire to go home.

But look at verse 30, he says, oh Jacob, but why did you steal my gods? It's a pathetic whimper, isn't it, at the end of a diatribe of all of that bluster?

[21 : 46] Jacob's God God of awesome power has shown himself to have Laban totally under his control, but here's Laban assuming that Jacob has got total power over his gods to steal them.

He's fraught with irony. And yet these are the gods that he bows down in front of every day. And that's the folly, isn't it, of all idolatry, whether it's religious or whether it's secular, whether it's human beings devoting their lives to things that have absolutely no power to save them, but have enormous power to enslave them, to tyrannize their lives.

So often people make themselves slaves, don't they, to material things or to ideologies or to ambitions, all kinds of false gods. Notice in verse 31, Jacob gives a very reasonable answer to all these rambling accusations.

He just says, well I left because I was afraid. I was afraid of your self-interest, of your unreasonable ways. And he had good reason.

And sometimes the wisest thing is to just depart for the health of family and church. Christians can sometimes be very sentimental, very over-spiritual.

[23 : 03] But the Bible's actually very down to earth, isn't it? When the household of faith is under threat, the leaders of the household of faith are called not to be naive, but to be realists. What did Paul say to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 when he saw them for the last time?

Guard the flock because false wolves, fierce wolves are going to come and attack them. Read Paul's letters. There are times when it is clear that flight out of real fear is a very sensible course.

When there's dangerous doctrine, where there's dangerous practice that can endanger the whole family of faith, the whole church of Jesus Christ. So Jacob here is seeking to be a responsible leader of that household.

Notice, he doesn't get into a great argument with Laban about the timing of his escape or any of that. He just replies very modestly and he denies any guilt at all about kidnapping his gods.

In fact, he takes the wind right out of Laban's sail because he says, well, verse 32, I've got nothing to hide. Feel free to search. You find anyone guilty? Well, they're dead.

[24 : 14] But, of course, he didn't know that his beloved Rachel had taken the gods. So what are we going to discover now?

His triumph turning to tragedy. The storyteller in verse 32 really ratchets up the attention. Imagine this as something being displayed on film. It would be slow motion, wouldn't it?

A slow motion search of Jacob's tent. And then they go out of that tent into Leah's tent. And then into the servant's tent. And there's nothing. And then into Rachel's tent.

And surely now the game's up, isn't it? But no, because what do we discover? The gods are in a saddlebag sitting under Rachel's backside.

First they're kidnapped and now they're used as a cushion. So Laban searches verse 34 and he doesn't find them. And then we have the *pièce de résistance* to rub this in.

[25 : 17] Rachel says, I can't get up because I'm having my time of the month. And Laban's gods are being utterly demeaned in this picture. What we're being told is Laban's gods are so powerful that they're on Rachel's backside and they're serving as a sanitary towel.

That's what this is telling us. Utter humiliation for these pathetic gods and their devotees. See, that is what this story is about. Moses' readers would see that immediately and very, very plainly.

This is a spiritual battle. This is a contest as to whose gods are the true gods. It's just like the plagues in Egypt, remember? Which showed us who is the true God with real power in heaven and earth.

And it is the one true and only living God, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. The Bible loves to mock utterly the folly of all human religion and all false gods.

Read it. Read in 1 Samuel. Do you remember that story? That marvelous story of the Philistine God Dagon and his temple falling down constantly in front, smashed to pieces in front of the ark of God's covenant. Or read the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel when he's challenging all the prophets of Baal in their frenzied dance calling on Baal to bring down fire from heaven.

[26 : 37] Oh, shout a little louder. Perhaps Baal's getting hard of hearing in his old age. Oh, shout a little louder. Perhaps Baal's gone to the toilet and the door's shut and he can't hear you. It's the most profound mockery.

This is all about which God is the real God and the true God and the only God with real power to save. And here it is the Lord and he saves Jacob and he protects him despite this self-inflicted danger of Rachel's action.

God vindicates Jacob. He vindicates his household. He justifies them, we might say, despite all of their sin and all of their folly. Do you see? Because he is a God of grace and of mercy.

He protects his own. He keeps those who trust him and those who follow him in spite of all their mess and all their mistakes. Aren't you glad that as a Christian that you can sing with the psalmist the God of Jacob is our fortress?

I certainly am. Jacob certainly was and he's unashamed to testify to that. Look at verses 36 to 42. He doesn't mince his words, does he?

[27 : 55] Challenges Laban. He goes on the front foot. He exposes all of his hypocrisy, all his empty rhetoric. And it's not wrong, do you know, the believer doesn't have to be on the back foot. He's on the front foot here.

He says, you're accusing me of wrong, but it's you who are in the wrong Laban. I've slaved 20 years for you. I've been more than fair to you. You've diddled me endlessly, changing my wages 10 times.

If it wasn't for my God, the God of my father Isaac, the God of Abraham protecting me, you would have fleeced me for everything. You'd have left me with absolutely nothing. But God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and he rebuked you last night.

And again, that language in verse 42, you see, is full of language that Moses' readers would recognize very vividly. It's right out of the account of the Exodus that they had lived through. The Egyptians would have sent the Israelites away empty-handed, but God had promised them otherwise and he saw their affliction.

He came down to save them and they left Egypt laden with plunder. And it's strong language. There is a time to be silent, but there is a time to speak when the church of Christ is being maligned and being defamed.

[29 : 18] But notice that Jacob's greatest defense is simply to point not only to his own honest conduct, which he does, but also to the clear evidence of God's protection and God's blessing upon his household.

Despite all its dysfunction, God had blessed them, God had increased them and God had prospered them and none could deny it. And that's a wonderful thing too, isn't it, when we see that because there is nothing that rejoices our hearts more than to see when God is giving an increase among his people, when he's drawing people to faith, when he's at work in our midst and showing himself to be the true God, the living God, the God who tires above every false God in this world.

And Laban couldn't gainsay Jacob. You see, he's defeated. Verse 43, well, what can I do, he says, but sue for peace. And that's what verses 43 to 54 are all about, this sworn pact.

A sworn pact that confirms God's peace around Jacob according to his promise. Despite the hostility, the jealousy towards the covenant family and the inevitable tensions that there are going to be with those who are outside, the household of faith.

The evidence of God being with this household on Jacob's side is so overwhelming despite all of their faults. And Jacob, Laban doesn't like it, but he can't deny it.

[30 : 50] And so just like, if you remember previously the Philistine kings with Abraham and then again the Philistine king Abimelech with Isaac, they wanted a covenant, they wanted a sworn pact of peace with Jacob.

He says in verse 44, and he says it will be a witness, it will guarantee peace and fair dealing between our families, our tribes, and our territories.

Now, Jacob has no need for such a pact. Jacob has the living God as his guaranteed protector. But notice how ready he is to be gracious here, to be conciliatory with Laban.

Verse 45, it's Jacob who sets up the pillar. It's Jacob who initiates the heap of stones to make this pact. John Calvin says this, he freely complained, indeed, when it was right to do so, but when the season of pacification arrived, he showed that he cherished no rancor.

And he goes on, and truly it becomes the children of God, not only with alacrity to embrace peace, but even ardently to search for it, as we're commanded in Psalm 34, which he quotes from, I will teach you the fear of the Lord, turn away from evil and do good, seek peace, and pursue it.

[32 : 13] Blessed are the peacemakers, said the Lord Jesus. Do you remember? They'll be called sons of God. It's not easy, is it, to embrace peace with somebody like Laban? Somebody who's mistreated you, somebody who's maligned you, somebody who's pursued you.

I'm sure many of us can think of characters in our lives who have been like that. It's not easy, is it, to pursue peace? But that's the word of the Lord. Now, John Calvin was certainly not a sentimentalist, but I think he's right in drawing attention here to that attitude in Jacob.

He freely stretches out the hand of kindness to Laban, he says. And that's what the Bible commands us to do, isn't it? Of course, that's not the same thing as surrender.

And that's equally clear because it's Jacob who takes the initiative. Jacob won't acquiesce in Laban's naming. Do you notice that? He insists on his own name in Hebrew, in the language of the promised land, verse 48, Galid, and Mizpah.

And he invokes the name of the Lord, Yahweh, Jehovah, the God of Abraham. He is the one who's watching over it all. So Laban, of course, has a very different view of who this God is and who it is who's watching over them because he regards this God who appeared to him, Jacob's God, with some fear, with some distrust.

[33 : 43] But Jacob, of course, loves him and knows him and trusts him. But Laban certainly knows that this God is powerful and so he invokes his watchful eye over Jacob because he certainly doesn't trust Jacob.

Look at verse 50. He solemnly invokes God to protect against Jacob taking any other wives. When it was Laban who had forced Jacob to have to take a second wife in the first place because of his deception.

So Laban hasn't changed at all. And he swears in verse 53 by the Lord, but if you notice he also swears by the God of Nahor and the God of their father.

And the word there in the Hebrews is plural. He's swearing by the God of Abraham and the gods of Nahor and the gods of their father. He's swearing by all the gods. But Jacob, do you notice, is very clear in his witness.

He swears by the one God, by the fear of Isaac, the awesome one of Isaac, his father. Perhaps Laban had forgotten that his God seemed to have got lost, remember.

[34 : 51] It's amazing, isn't it, how people can actually be faced with the overwhelming reality of living faith, with the manifest presence of the living God and yet still they can cling on to the trappings of dead and deadly religiosity.

Isn't that astonishing? As if there was no difference between the true gospel of the living God, the gospel that builds and strengthens the real church and all the false gods of just institutional dead churchianity, religion, that buries and keeps buried real living faith.

But people do that, don't they? They cling to their dead religious institutions just as Laban did here. We swear by all the gods, even though they're all lost and powerless.

See, between the spiritually alive and the confused and dead, there can be peace of a kind in earthly terms. That's what we're seeing here. But there can never be real fellowship.

Not on the deeper level. That's impossible. And so, again, as William still puts it, Jacob humbly cooperates and shares a covenant meal with Laban. But while he knows it's a covenant of separation, on whose terms Laban goes back to obscurity and he, Jacob, on to illustrious historicity and eternal destiny.

[36 : 19] And that's right, isn't it? Look at verse 55. Laban cuts a very sorry figure as he heads home. He's seen so much, hasn't he, this man, of God's revelation.

God has given him every opportunity to join himself with this household of Jacob, with the household of God, with the people of the living God. And yet, no, he hardens his heart, he turns away and he goes back.

He wants this God to protect his property he wants him to protect him from any disputes and all of that but that's all, nothing more. So Laban departs retreating to his home no doubt to go and get some new gods to keep up appearances.

Gods that look respectable to his neighbors, gods that don't interfere at all with any of your plans to make the best for yourself. Gods that will bless what you want to bless and not interfere with things that you don't want to be harmed.

Laban goes back but, verse 1, Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him and when Jacob saw them he said, this is God's camp and he called the name of that place Machinaim, two camps.

[37 : 39] And the episode concludes, you see, with these two little verses about Machinaim in Gilead about this strengthening place for Jacob and this encounter that affirms in a very personal way and a wonderful way God's presence with Jacob despite everything, despite all that had gone before, despite all the hurdles that still lie ahead of him.

I can imagine Jacob must have been utterly wrung out after all of this, can't you? Totally stressed after what had happened. Fleeing for ten days with all his family, his entourage, his possessions, an absolute rollercoaster of flight and pursuit and standoff and in this pact of peace.

The amazement of seeing God at work but the exhaustion of it. And now with Laban's departure he's surely thinking about the future. He's going back to Canaan.

What's he going to find in the hostility of his brother Esau? His parents, all the unknowns. I reckon it was pretty hard for Jacob to get up and keep going on his way.

That's often the way it is, isn't it? Great flatness, anti-climax after a time of real spiritual high or a real spiritual tension. Think about the rumination.

[38 : 57] Think about the lying down in bed at night with all of these things going around your head, robbing you of sleep, the creeping doubts, the self-doubt. What have I done for me and my family and my people?

He knows there's no going back. There's no going back. All his bridges are burned, aren't they? But what is it that lies ahead? Well, that's often a familiar feeling, isn't it, in our own lives?

Maybe it's very familiar for some of us right now, tonight. What's lying ahead for me, for my life, for my family, for my ministry? But you see, God had spoken and Jacob knew God's command, so he set his face towards the land of promise.

And he went on his way. He went on his way. It's just five words. But I'm sure they conceal a great, great deal of wrestling, all kinds of turmoil, didn't you? And yet, as he went forward in trusting obedience to God, what happened?

God drew near to his servant. He opened the heavens and the angels of God met him. He gave Jacob a wonderful assurance of his nearness.

[40 : 17] You're not alone, Jacob. It wasn't just your little household of lonely wonders. No, there's two camps here. There's his own camp, Jacob's camp, but there's also the camp of God himself, the whole heavenly host all around about him.

It's as if God's saying to Jacob, Jacob, look, I've been here all the time with all these angels all around you every day of this 20 years since you last saw us on the stairway to heaven before you went to Paddan Aram.

I've been here. It's just as Psalm 34 says, the angels of the Lord encamp around those who fear him and deliver them. Jacob had God's promise, you see.

He'd experience God's protection, but here at this critical juncture in his journey, God gave him a wonderfully special assurance, a deep sense of his presence to assure him just when he needed it the most, you're not alone, Jacob.

I'm here and all my angelic armies are all around your loved ones to protect you and care for you. I love that story in 2 Kings 6, you remember, when Elisha and his servant are in the house and the servant opens the curtains and looks out and all the armies of Syria are surrounding them and he's petrified and he goes to the prophet and says, look.

[41 : 40] And Elisha prays and says, Lord, just open his eyes. And he does. And the servant goes and looks again. And beyond the armies of Syria are vast, numerous hordes of a far greater army, the heavenly host.

And God sometimes does that to us, doesn't he? Just to strengthen and to hearten his flagging servants in the middle of a time of real conflict, maybe before a time of renewed trial and testing.

He gives us a glimpse and assurance of his near presence. Perhaps something or someone comes into our path, something just brings a personal assurance of the nearness of God.

And there's a wonderful tenderness in that. There's a wonderful tenderness here, isn't there? He shows Jacob his terrible might, the armies of heaven, the hosts of angelic armies, but he also shows him his tender mercy.

He's the God who draws near to be with his flagging people, to strengthen his servant. Like a nurse coming to somebody's sick in the hospital with a soothing balm.

[42 : 51] Not a feeble, domesticated God like the useless idols that can be shoved in a saddlebag and stolen. No, no, no. But the fear of Isaac, the awesome God of heaven.

And yet the awesome God of heaven is the God who comes down and draws near to be Emmanuel, God with us and near us.

and you see, we know, don't we, that he is the God who is now drawn near forever in the flesh, in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, taking our own flesh so that he even knows what it's like to feel alone.

He knows what it's like to be a human being doing battle in the spiritual realm. He knows what it's like to resist every temptation. He knows what it's like to face every attack of the evil one from the devil himself and all of his earthly allies.

He knows. And he knows what it's like for angels to come and minister to him, do you remember? As he saw off the devil in the wilderness, as he embarked on his earthly ministry.

[44 : 00] This is the God who's promised never to leave us alone, never ever, but to send his own spirit to minister to us, to strengthen us in our journey, in our battles.

I will be with you, he says, even to the end of the earth. And his angels are ministering spirits sent to serve and to surround those that he's saving. Remember Paul in Corinth in his time of great opposition.

And the Lord drew near him and said, don't be afraid, go on speaking because I'm with you. Did it again, do you remember, when he was in the middle of that shipwreck in the Mediterranean, God's angel came to him and said, fear not, Paul.

You must stand before Caesar in the place of fear, in the place of exhaustion, uncertainty. God made it a place of great strengthening, a place of enabling so that his servant could go on, go on in faith, trusting God.

For Jacob, that strengthening place was Mahanaim in Gilead, a place, Gilead, that was very famous for its medicinal balm. And surely that encounter was a wonderful balm for Jacob's weary soul that day.

[45 : 14] I was remembering as a young boy, often used to listen to a record that my father had, which he loved, which was of the American black singer, Paul Robeson, had a wonderful bass voice.

And on that record, there were many lovely Negro spirituals. And one of them was that lovely song, There's a Balm in Gilead. I actually found it on YouTube this week with Paul Robeson singing it. You can look it up.

He had a wonderful voice. I was quite moved with the memory. But the words minister to my soul again. Listen, sometimes I feel discouraged and think my works in vain.

But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again. There's a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him. And friends, the word to us today is that there's a strengthening place for all the spiritual seed of Jacob, all who have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[46 : 18] And he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. He is near. He is near to the brokenhearted. He is near to the crushed in spirit. He is near, says the Bible, to all who call on him in truth.

One who's greater than all the angels. Our great high priest in the heavens who's able even to sympathize with all our weaknesses. Think of that. And says to every one of us, everyone who's weary and burdened with the battles of faith, come to me and I will give you rest.

I will give you the strengthening place. So friends, as we set our faces towards our heavenly calling and the future, and as we encourage one another along our path of obedience, hearing and heeding God's word, let us with confidence draw near to the God who has drawn near to us, to that throne of grace, so that just like Jacob, we are promised we will receive mercy and we will find grace for every time of need.

Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him and they will meet you and me in our need.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, so often we do feel discouraged and we too can think our life and work is in vain, but how we thank you that your own Holy Spirit does indeed renew our souls again making the wounded whole, healing the sin-sick soul.

[47 : 59] How we thank you, our God and Savior, for the wonderful healing balm that is ours in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Lord, there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my works in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

[49 : 33] If you can preach like Peter, if you can pray like Paul, then go and tell your neighbors he died to save us whole.

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

To heal the sin-sick soul. Thank you, Joe.

Every bit as good as Paul Rubson.