

## Genesis (2011) 31C

- God's sovereignty is absolute
  - No part of life lies outside His divine will
    - He knows all knowledge, controls all events, determines all outcomes
    - Spurgeon stated:

I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes - that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens - that the chaff from the hand of the winnowing is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence - the fall of . . . leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche.

- The most amazing thing about God's sovereignty is the way His control masquerades as everyday life
  - It's as if God is hiding in plain view
  - A chance meeting of friends on the street, a unexpected check in the mail, a random thought in our minds
  - Or as Spurgeon put it, the march of an insect and the falling of leaves
- God is especially active in the lives of His people, prompting events and circumstances to encourage spiritual development
  - In our story of Jacob, we've reached one of those moments when God shows Himself in the details of a passing encounter
  - And through the experience, God shows Himself to be a patient, teaching Father who loves His children and keeps His word
- We left Jacob and his family in the hill country of Gilead
  - He has fled Laban, but Laban followed and confronted Jacob
    - He accuses Jacob of leaving without notice, which was true
    - But God has appeared to Laban to prevent him from acting against Jacob

- Last week we noted Laban's example of how God works through unbelievers just as He does those who fear Him
  - In fact, we marveled a bit at the way Laban can acknowledge God's existence
  - And experience fear and respect for His power
  - And even obey His instructions...
  - Yet Laban never has a testimony of saving faith
    - He is merely like the demons: a man who experienced the reality of God but never obtained a relationship by faith
- Today we continue to watch the confrontation evolve and the lessons continue

[Gen. 31:27](#) "Why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell me so that I might have sent you away with joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre;

[Gen. 31:28](#) and did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters? Now you have done foolishly.

[Gen. 31:29](#) "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 speak either good or bad to Jacob.'

[Gen. 31:30](#) "Now you have indeed gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods?"

[Gen. 31:31](#) Then Jacob replied to Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force.

[Gen. 31:32](#) "The one with whom you find your gods shall not live; in the presence of our kinsmen point out what is yours among my belongings and take it for yourself." For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.

- Laban discovered the absence of the household idols
  - In the haste to pack up supplies and other necessities, Laban noticed that the idols were missing from his home
    - These idols usually held a prominent place in the home, often at a sacred setting or altar
    - So it would have been easy for Laban to notice they were gone
    - This was a high crime in the culture
  - Last week we learned that these idols are more than merely religious icons

- They were the symbols of authority within the family tribe
  - The one who possesses the family idols can lay claim to the patriarchal authority and the inheritance
  - Laban is threatened by the prospect that Jacob could return at any time with the idols and displace Laban's sons
- Laban expects to use this crime as an opportunity to compel Jacob to return to working for him
  - If Jacob refused, Laban would have the right to call for Jacob's death as penalty for his crime
  - So Laban pursues Jacob, catches him, complains about the departure, and then drops the bomb
    - You stole my idols
- Jacob's response is exactly as we might expect from someone in his situation
  - In v.31 Jacob gives a truthful, if a bit pathetic, excuse for his surreptitious departure
    - He was afraid that Laban wouldn't allow Jacob to leave with Laban's daughters
    - Perhaps this is true, and Laban was certainly capable of such things
    - Nevertheless, Jacob is confessing his own lack of faith in God's power to solve these problems
      - It stands to reason that if God appears to Jacob and directs him to leave Laban, then God has a plan for how to get the family out safely
      - God didn't need Jacob's help, especially help that came in the form of another deception
    - This is an ends-justifies-the-means logic
      - "Since God told me to do something, I am free to do whatever is necessary to bring this about..."
      - That is not a faith-based walk

- At its worst, this kind of thinking leads men to do very ungodly things in the name of following God
- Crusades, Inquisition, Saul and the Pharisees persecuting Christians, and many contemporary examples abound
- Jacob's actions are less severe than my examples, but his approach is fundamentally the same
  - He lies to further the cause of obedience
  - Instead, he should have done the right thing at each step and watched as God cleared his path of obstacles
  - When we act in this way, the experience builds our faith better than anything else I know
- Then in v.32, Jacob responds to Laban's second accusation
  - Jacob is insulted by the accusation that he or anyone in his house stole Laban's idols
    - Remember, in this culture saving face and preserving honor was all important
      - Laban made a strong accusation that threatens Jacob's very honor
    - So Jacob responds in an equally forceful way declaring his innocence, offering to allow Jacob to conduct a search, and promising a severe penalty for anyone who may be guilty of the act
  - Jacob's statement is the right thing to say, because the act would deserve such a penalty
    - But of course he has no idea he is placing one of his own wives under a death sentence
    - He doesn't know Rachel took the idols, so he's confident that he will be vindicated in the end
- Laban proceeds to search the camp of Jacob

**Gen. 31:33** So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two maids, but he did not find them. Then he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's tent.

[Gen. 31:34](#) Now Rachel had taken the household idols and put them in the camel's saddle, and she sat on them. And Laban felt through all the tent but did not find them.

[Gen. 31:35](#) She said to her father, "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is upon me." So he searched but did not find the household idols.

- Laban searches each tent in Jacob's caravan and finds nothing
  - Finally, he enters Rachel's tent
    - Now we know that Rachel has the idols, so the suspense peaks at this point
    - How will God protect Jacob and Rachel?
      - There is still another child to come from Rachel
      - How will God keep Rachel from suffering the penalty that Jacob pronounced?
  - As Laban enters Rachel's tent, he finds her sitting on a saddle in her tent
    - Saddles were made of leather and blankets, and when the caravan is encamped, they served as lounges in the tents
    - Rachel is sitting on the idols, and normally she was required to stand in the presence of a man entering her tent as a show of respect
    - But women who were experiencing menstruation were not required to stand
      - Remembering this is an age of rudimentary sanitation, women typically refrained from much standing or walking during this time
      - First, they were considered unclean because of blood flow (even before the giving of the law)
      - And they didn't want that flow to be exposed
  - So Laban must respect her decision to remain seated
    - Was Rebecca lying about her condition? Perhaps, but perhaps not
      - It may have been a convenient time for Laban's arrival

- Or she may have concocted the story to protect herself
- Either way, it served the purpose of protecting her guilt
  - The idols are never found
  - Like Laban used custom to trick Jacob into marrying two women, now Rachel uses a custom to fool Laban
- As Laban comes up empty handed, the shame moves from Jacob back to Laban
  - Laban is now ashamed for appearing to have made a false accusation
    - What's interesting about this situation is Jacob still doesn't know about Rachel's guilt
    - He suffered the humiliation of watching Laban methodically search the camp, but all the time Jacob was confident no gods would show up
    - Now Jacob assumes he's been proven right, but in reality Jacob himself is being deceived just like Laban
  - Here we see God's sovereignty in full display
    - Over the course of these relationships, Laban deceived Jacob, Jacob deceived Laban, and now Rachel has deceived both of them
    - With each step of sin, God turned it to produce a godly outcome He intended
    - As all the deception comes to a climactic end, God's purpose in grooming and growing Jacob begins to come to the surface
  - Jacob has endured 20 years of misery at the hands of Laban, and just as he thought he had escaped the man, he suffers one more indignity, or so he thinks
    - God permitted each of these indignities to address some character flaw in Jacob and to strengthen his faith
    - And now all those lessons produce a boiling point as Jacob lets Laban have it

**Gen. 31:36** Then Jacob became angry and contended with Laban; and Jacob said to Laban, "What is my transgression? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me?"

[Gen. 31:37](#) “Though 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.

[Gen. 31:38](#) “These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten the rams of your flocks.

[Gen. 31:39](#) “That which was torn of beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself. You required it of my hand whether stolen by day or stolen by night.

[Gen. 31:40](#) “Thus I was: by day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes.

[Gen. 31:41](#) “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 changed my wages ten times.

[Gen. 31:42](#) “If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had not been for me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, so He rendered judgment last night.”

- This is a passionate and angry Jacob, a man who has a lot to be angry about
  - He begins by asking rhetorically, “What is my sin that you should pursue me so hotly and embarrass me in this way?”
    - You searched everything in my camp, so show me what you found?
    - Jacob is done with pretense or saving face or preserving Laban’s honor
    - He’s talking plainly and honestly with Laban
  - And in his recounting of his life in Haran, we hear Jacob’s testimony of God
    - Jacob begins by reminding Laban of his faithfulness in service to him
    - He served twenty years, which was in keeping with their agreements
    - Secondly, he did his job well, ensuring that the goats and sheep didn’t miscarry, demonstrating Jacob’s care and skill in the work
  - Despite Jacob’s efforts, Laban treated him wrongly throughout their time together
    - Jacob reminds Laban that when a wild beast killed a goat or sheep in the field, Jacob bore those losses himself

- Under the custom of the day, a shepherd wasn't expected to absorb the cost of animals lost to thieves or wild animal attacks
  - He could bring back the carcass of the dead animal to prove it was the result of an animal
  - Jacob never bothered to produce such proof when animals were killed
- Laban required that Jacob bear those losses himself, meaning it was Jacob's responsibility to repay Laban for those animals
- Furthermore, Jacob worked under difficult and harsh conditions living in the fields caring for the flocks
  - Hot days, cold evenings, and sleepless nights in protecting the flock
  - While Jacob worked for 20 years in keeping with his agreements, Laban changed the wages ten times trying to minimize Jacob's wealth and maximize his own
- In summary, Jacob worked hard doing everything in honor and according to his word, while Laban did everything in dishonor and in an attempt to win an advantage
- So what does Jacob conclude in reflecting on how the past twenty years have transpired?
  - In v.42 he says that if the God of Abraham and Isaac had not also been for Jacob, Jacob would have had nothing to show for his 20 years
    - We can fairly assume that no man had ever out-smarted Laban before
    - He was a true scoundrel who took every advantage, yet he hadn't found a way to best Jacob
    - And when Jacob finally had enough and left Laban, Laban was intent on following Jacob, and destroying him with any excuse he could find
  - Jacob declares that God has seen his affliction and his hard work and has rendered judgment in favor of Jacob
    - At the end of v.42, Jacob adds that God has rendered judgment against you last night



- Literally in Hebrew, Jacob says God rebuked you yesterday
  - Jacob is referring to the dream God gave Laban telling him not to speak good or bad to Jacob
  - Jacob is interpreting that dream to be a sign that God is working for Jacob to protect him
- Notice though that Jacob has made a fundamental mistake in understanding why God did what He did
  - Jacob believes that he is prevailing in this struggle with Laban because he was worked hard and done the right things
  - And since Laban has done bad things, God is passing judgment against Laban
  - Is this how God's favor works?
    - Is God favoring Jacob because Jacob is a man who does the right things?
    - And has God chosen to leave Laban at a disadvantage because he is a dishonest man?
  - Well, if you're confused about how to answer remember how we got here
    - Jacob deceived Laban when he left and Rachel is hiding stolen idols
    - Ironically, this is probably the first time in their relationship that Jacob is entirely in the wrong and Laban is entirely right, at least about the immediate circumstances
  - If God were going to reward the person in the right, it would be Laban receiving a reward and Jacob and Rachel receiving the rebuke
- Instead, God has protected Jacob, just as Jacob has stated
  - The basis for that favor was not Jacob's performance, but God's grace
    - Jacob has taken an important step forward in his understanding of the God he worships

- He knows that God is working to bring good outcomes in Jacob's life
- But Jacob still has a false view understanding of his own righteousness while overlooking God's grace
- Jacob the man is also a picture of Israel the nation, and this thinking permeates the nation of Israel over all of its existence
  - Works above faith, law above grace
  - External vs. internal, appearance before reality
- Jacob is simply the first in a family that reflects this thinking even as God works to show them the truth
- In Chapter 32, the Lord takes the extraordinary step of appearing to Jacob in a theophany, a physical form to impress upon Jacob that his view of God's mercy needs to change
  - But for now, let's finish Chapter 31 watching God in His wisdom turning man's sin to good to protect Jacob

[Gen. 31:43](#) Then Laban replied to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne?"

[Gen. 31:44](#) "So now come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me."

[Gen. 31:45](#) Then Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar.

[Gen. 31:46](#) Jacob said to his kinsmen, "Gather stones." So they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap.

[Gen. 31:47](#) Now Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed.

[Gen. 31:48](#) Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me this day." Therefore it was named Galeed,

[Gen. 31:49](#) and Mizpah, for he said, "May the LORD watch between you and me when we are absent one from the other.

[Gen. 31:50](#) "If you mistreat my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no man is with us, see, God is witness between you and me."

[Gen. 31:51](#) Laban said to Jacob, "Behold this heap and behold the pillar which I have set between you and me.

[Gen. 31:52](#) "This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass by this heap to you for harm, and you will not pass by this heap and this pillar to me, for harm.

[Gen. 31:53](#) "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.

[Gen. 31:54](#) Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his kinsmen to the meal; and they ate the meal and spent the night on the mountain.

[Gen. 31:55](#) Early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place.

- In response to Jacob's protest, Laban demands a covenant
  - Remember, covenants were powerful agreements that bound each party to mutual obedience under penalty of death
    - In this case, the agreement Laban seeks is actually an agreement of protection
    - He demands that Jacob never cross this line again, and likewise Laban will never cross into Jacob's territory
    - Furthermore, Jacob can never take additional wives
  - Why does Laban insist on these rules in the covenant?
    - Superficially, Laban claims that since these two men are at odds with one another now, they must remain separated for protection
  - In reality, Laban has other reasons for this agreement
    - Remember the household idols?
    - Though Laban couldn't find them, he knows that Jacob has them
    - So he fears that Jacob will return sometime with the idols and lay claim to Laban's property
    - So the line in the sand protects Laban from Jacob's claims
  - Secondly, Jacob is prohibited from taking other wives so that his family won't extend into other families or clans which then might inherit Laban's idols and cross the line looking for his inheritance
- These are Laban's intentions, to protect himself and prevent Jacob from ever harming him in the future
  - But God is using this agreement to protect Jacob and the nation of Israel
    - By agreeing to never take an additional wife, Jacob is prevented from taking a wife from among the Canaanites, like Esau did

- God is at work in Laban's terms to ensure that Jacob remains apart from the Canaanite people
- Next week we'll see Jacob prepare to face his latest and greatest adversary, only to discover he's been fighting in the wrong way from the start