

In Spite of Ourselves... - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Genesis 30:25-43** (#520)

Introduction: “Why doesn’t God do something? Where is He? Doesn’t He see that we need Him?” As a pastor, many of the questions that I receive are related to these kinds of struggles and concerns. Retirees wondering what the future of our nation will look like. Mid-life employees concerned about social and political changes becoming a part of their workplaces. Young parents worried about influences on their children. “Where is God and what is He doing?” When we don’t see the answer to that question, we are often tempted to do two things. The first temptation is to take matters into our own hands: we decide that if God won’t show up, then we’ll do the work ourselves. The second temptation is related to that: we start to disbelieve God. We forget about – or even decide not to hold to – His promises. We start to think that maybe what the Bible says isn’t so relevant after all. And the result of giving in to these temptations is a weaker and weaker faith, or perhaps no faith at all.

As we’ve followed Jacob’s story in **Genesis**, maybe you have the same kind of questions. How is it that God could bless a deceiver like Jacob? And then, once he connects with Laban, why does God let Laban get away with such deception regarding Jacob’s wives? Didn’t God extend the promises of Abram to him? Then why does Jacob have virtually nothing – except for two bitter wives – while Laban, the scoundrel, seems to have everything? Perhaps Jacob just needs to step up, show some confidence, and take charge of his own life?

“Where is God? What is He doing?” Those are questions not just about your life and mine, but also ones that we are supposed to be asking throughout Jacob’s story. This morning, as we work through the rest of **Genesis 30**, I want you to realize something crucial to your own faith, to your own relationship with the Lord: these questions often reveal more about us and more about who we think God is than first meets the eye. Keep your eye on the ball: what is being revealed about the Lord through all these incidents? What is being revealed about human sin? What are we learning about who and how and why God blesses someone? And how are those answers radically different from what the world might assume or tell us? Let’s see where this is going, together, in **Genesis 30:25...**

30:25-34 This last part of this chapter consists of three parts – it’s a fairly simple story, yet the points being made are anything but. We begin with Jacob’s desire: he wants to return home, to leave Laban and go back to where his own parents are living, but he doesn’t want to do so empty-handed.

We get something of a time indicator in **verse 25**: the contest between Leah and Rachel has largely ended, or perhaps it would be better to say that it has reached an uneasy truce at this point. Jacob seems to be feeling confident that he is an established man in the world and that it’s time to return to where his extended family has settled. Of course, Esau will have to be dealt with – which we’ll read more about in the future – but Jacob is ready to get out from under Laban’s hand.

You and I might be a bit confused about the timeline at this point: Jacob has married Leah and Rachel, he has children – why does he need Laban’s permission to do anything? Part of the answer is cultural: in a society that honors their elders, the young did not simply assume that they could do what they wanted. Laban, after all, is the one who had provided his daughters to Jacob. Laban was the one whom Jacob worked for. And, as we see in these verses, Jacob also wanted Laban to agree to send him off with some prosperity of his own, as it were.

Laban, for his part, wants Jacob to stay. He’s been a good worker, enriching his own household. What’s more, Laban perceives that the Lord has blessed him simply because of Jacob’s presence. I should point out that your Bible may or may not read like mine in **verse 27**: the word that your Bible might translate as “divination” or “experience” often has the meaning of “omen” in Hebrew. Which still doesn’t clarify things much, does it? This is one of those verses that we simply aren’t quite sure what is intended – is Laban practicing divination? Or common wisdom? I want you to see how I’ve handled this so that you can grow in your own faith when you come across similar issues: one common response is to pick a position and stick to it no matter what. I wouldn’t counsel that: there is a debate for a reason. Even the experts – men and women who have given decades of their lives to studying the Hebrew language – don’t agree on the exact picture here. And going to Google or your Bible software isn’t going to work out any better.

Instead, what I would like to put before you is to embrace the tension. That might not be a popular idea in some of our circles, but I do believe it is the correct response. No matter which translation you favor, the concept remains the same. Being dogmatic about one view or another not only doesn't help, but also doesn't result in any significant difference in our understanding or application in this instance. So look at the whole verse, look at the bigger picture: whatever the precise details, Laban understands that the Lord's blessing rests upon Jacob, and therefore Jacob's presence means that Laban gets to benefit from that blessing, at least in part. Isn't that exactly what we are seeing here? My point, then, is to say that you can trust your Bible, but you also need to realize that it is a translation. No translation is perfect, simply because the ways that people think in different languages aren't exactly the same. Instead, realize that God – in His mercy – has given us enough information to grasp the overall point and then be at peace with that. His inspiration is perfect, our understanding is not. The proper response is humility before God's Word. So it is here.

Laban's offer to Jacob is to give him a raise – and Jacob even gets to name the amount! Talk about a deal! Of course, you should remember what we know of Laban at this point: he was a trickster when it came to Leah and Rachel, so we ought to be watching for that now.

Jacob, for his part, responds that he has served faithfully and well, but that it's time for him to provide for his own household. Which is a nice way of saying “a raise isn't what I'm after... I really do want to strike out on my own...”

The two end up settling on a deal: apparently Jacob will continue to serve Laban for a time, but during this temporary period, he'll be working to increase not only Laban's flocks, but some for himself as well. This way, when Jacob does leave, he won't be going empty-handed. The deal is basically that the flocks will end up divided by appearance: those animals that are speckled, spotted, or black in color – as in, the more uncommon animals – shall be Jacob's payment. This also provides a built-in check: in the future, Laban can keep tabs on everything by looking at Jacob's flock. If any of the animals don't have these characteristics, then he could – according to this deal – accuse Jacob of stealing. Laban thinks this is a great deal with terms that benefit him, so he agrees.

Let me make one point before we move on: Laban is blessed not because of himself and not because of some sort of wise business acumen on Jacob's part, but instead he is blessed simply by being near Jacob, whom God has chosen. On a very simple level, I want you to see how the Lord really is active in our world. In spite of all the problems and imperfections of any given church or any Christian family, would we dare to say that there is no blessing for growing up around them? The workers whom our church does business with end up blessed simply because we are honest – we pay our bills, we don't try to find loopholes. The children in our church may or may not end up following Jesus, but the influence of our church certainly forms their parents, which changes how their children are raised. Imperfectly, of course. But there would be an even greater difference otherwise.

My point isn't that our moral influence is what matters most, nor is it that everyone in our church will have only positive memories and no challenges. That is clearly not the case. Instead, my point is that when a people – a church, a family – sets themselves to following the Lord, what is seen in response is His blessing. Often not materially – not at all. But spiritually. At least, if there is any consistency between what Christians say and how they actually obey the Lord.

Which brings up the even more important point: the only way that we can be a blessing to others is if we have first been blessed by our Lord. The disciples, by hanging around with and following Jesus, certainly didn't end up with good, easy, or rich lives in any earthly sense. But by their actions and questions, you can see how what Christ Himself taught and lived – and accomplished – changed them. He blessed them with every spiritual blessing. That God-given gift can be yours if you would follow Jesus. It isn't the blessing of riches, good health, or an easy life. But it is the blessing of becoming a citizen of another kingdom – one that will never fall, one that won't change directions every four years. A kingdom that will be filled with joy, peace, and perfect love. If you are on the outside looking in, that blessing can be yours by trusting Jesus as your Savior. And if you do already follow Christ, even when discipleship doesn't feel like a blessing, hold on to the fact that His promises will be found true in eternity. His blessing will be forever.

Let's turn back to Jacob and Laban. What will life look like for them under this deal?

30:35-36 Life looks like Laban's cunning. The very day that the deal is made, he goes out and removes the animals that are striped or spotted or black in color and apparently sends them away from the flock. The idea is that since none of the remaining animals have these characteristics, it would be rare (though not impossible) for many future animals to have these characteristics. The goal is to deprive Jacob of any substantial reward for his work. Laban clearly doesn't trust Jacob, and so he is doing all he can to unfairly benefit even more from this deal.

We'll read about Jacob in just a moment, but I want you to note something: even though Laban is intentionally trying to undercut any sort of trust or good faith in the deal that he and Jacob have made, the Lord will still work for Jacob's good in all of this. The point for you and I is that the Lord – not the world or possessions or things – is the One who blesses His people. Since that's true, nobody in this life, no circumstance or setback, can take what genuinely matters from you. Nobody can take away your relationship with Jesus, which means that nothing can take away your part in His kingdom. So often, we think that circumstances change our reality. In the wonderful mathematics of the Gospel, the circumstances never ultimately change, because they are rooted in the unchanging God. What He has promised is exactly what will happen, even if our own lives are filled with all manner of doubts, setbacks, tragedies, and trials. When's the last time you thanked the Lord for the stability that you have in Christ? When is the last time you praised Him for being unchanging? Those blessings are easy to forget in a world that is obsessed with change and so-called "progress." But, sometimes unchanging stability is the biggest blessing of all.

Yet what will Jacob do about all this? We'll next see that Laban isn't the only one with plans...

30:37-43 Jacob has his own plan. I realize, reading these verses in the age of science, we have huge question marks in our minds. We know that genetics doesn't work this way, we understand that the genes offspring inherit from their parents don't depend upon what their folks were looking at when they were conceived, but

that was a common view at the time – it was Jacob’s thought, and so the Bible accurately reports it. Perhaps you are tempted, with passages like these, to say with the doubters “see! The Bible is filled with all kinds of wrong ideas – maybe it’s wrong about everything!” But that’s not the point being made here, so making judgments along those lines is taking these verses out of context – we’ll speak more of that in a moment.

Instead, Jacob comes up with a plan to, in essence, breed more animals that meet the requirements of the deal. And the goal in Jacob’s efforts isn’t simply to enlarge his own flock, but also to conveniently make them stronger, healthier, and better than what he manages for Laban. The end result is that Jacob’s flock – in spite of Laban’s unfair hurdles – not only grows in number, but also in quality. In fact, Jacob’s entire estate prospers during this time. While Laban’s isn’t commented on directly, we do see that his flocks are weaker than Jacob’s. Said another way, Jacob prospers in spite of Laban’s trickery and in spite of his own faulty methods.

All of which leads us to our final point: what we’ve seen in this chapter is that God’s people are blessed in spite of themselves, and now that they are blessed in spite of others. Here, we must understand that God’s people are sometimes blessed in spite of their wrong ideas. Jacob’s sticks didn’t change reality, but they also don’t stop God. He worked through imperfect methods to bring about what He had determined for Jacob. Isn’t that what God does for us? He works through imperfect parents to raise up faithful children. Through an imperfect – even unchristian – society to teach His people what it means to follow Him. And certainly through imperfect churches and leaders to show people what it means to trust and live for Christ. All of this happens even in the midst of trials, scandals, hardships, and families and churches being anything but ideal. Which returns us to where we began: what is God doing? He is caring for His people; He is upholding His promises even when we don’t like the timing. When we start to ask the question a different way, we’ll see that: “How is God caring for His people? Why is He blessing them?” It’s not based on what we deserve. It’s based on who we follow: Jesus secures all the blessing we need. He provides it right when it’s needed. And – in spite of ourselves – we receive what we don’t deserve. That’s the Gospel, that’s the good news. And that’s what we live, enjoy, and share with others. How will you demonstrate that this week? Who will you show it to? Let’s close in prayer...