

## **Unlikely Fulfillment** - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Genesis 31:1-55** (#521)

**Introduction:** There it was, staring at me from the front page of my latest Spanish assignment. The letter grade? It was a “D.” And right next to it? A smiley face. I was in high school and Spanish wasn’t coming easily to me. It didn’t seem to matter how much I studied, I just couldn’t grasp the language. To rub salt into the wound, the teacher had decided that I was a trouble-maker, and took every opportunity she could to put me on the spot in front of the class. So when I got that paper back, and saw the smiley face, I thought to myself “well, at least she knows I’m trying.” But then I looked over to my friend in the seat next to me: his grade was a “B.” And what followed his “B” was a frowny face. That’s when I realized that my teacher thought a “D” was the best I could do.

I suppose I should have looked at the bright side: at least the teacher was trying to encourage me. Yet that “D” was a slap in the face. It might as well have said “unlikely to succeed.” I wish I could say that I somehow turned around and was a straight “A” Spanish student, but I wasn’t. I did graduate high school though!

What about you and your struggles? What are the painful areas in your life that you just can’t seem to bring together? The pressure points left by old wounds, old sarcasms, or perhaps your own sense of failure? Is there something in your life that you just can’t fathom succeeding at?

As a pastor, I wonder if some of you would put your faith into that category? You try to read the Scriptures, but it seems like the words fall out of your head as soon as you close your Bible. You serve at church, but your efforts never seem to match those of others. Or perhaps you don’t serve here at church because you are paralyzed with fear of what others will think – maybe you tried in the past, it didn’t go well, and now you think “why would God use me?”

This morning we return to the story of Jacob. Spiritually, I think it’s fair to say that his progress has been slow. A “D” student, if ever there was one. He hasn’t failed, but he isn’t exactly blazing a course to be followed, is he? Yet the amazing thing about Jacob isn’t his own efforts, but rather, it’s the God who has chosen Him; the Lord who has made promises to Him. As we enter this chapter today, I want you to

keep your eyes open for how God treats Jacob. It's sometimes clear and other times subtle, but if you fix your eyes on the Lord, I think you'll see some encouragement for yourself as well. We have a long chapter before us, but it's one story, and not too complicated at that. So, let's dig in together at **Genesis 31**...

**31:1-21** We left off with a deal between Jacob and Laban. Jacob had determined to return to his homeland, but he didn't want to go empty-handed. His hope was that Laban would give him some of the flocks that he had been caring for as a payment of sorts. Laban, for his part, had benefited greatly from Jacob; both from his work but also from how the Lord had blessed Jacob and those around him – so he has no real intention of making it easy for him to leave. Yet, as we saw in the previous chapter, Jacob came up with a plan that resulted in adding quite a bit of wealth to his own holdings. Now, the time has come to move to step two of the plan: return to Canaan.

There are a number of reasons for this timing. The first that we read of is that Jacob hears what is being said about him, and it isn't good. In short, he has become a stench to Laban's family rather than a blessing. The second – and more important – reason is that the Lord Himself has notified Jacob that it's time to go. Notice the reminder at the end of **verse 3**: the Lord had promised to be with Jacob and He reminds Jacob of that promise now. He'll need that reminder in the hard times ahead.

Third, we are treated to a long section where Jacob details all the ways that he has been wronged by Laban. But even in this, Jacob recognizes God's protection and care, particularly with how the Lord has enriched Jacob's flocks. Jacob was treated to another dream, this time reaffirming that the Lord knows full well of Laban's trickery, and telling Jacob that it's time to return home.

After explaining these circumstances to his wives, Jacob then prepares to leave secretly. This won't be an easy task: he has quite a bit of property and a large family. So, he chooses a strategic time when Laban is away, shearing sheep. Oddly, Rachel steals her father's household idols as she is leaving.

The picture here is a hard one, isn't it? We have Jacob – certainly no saint – being oppressed by Laban, who is more than a match for Jacob in the dirty tricks department. We have the Lord telling Jacob that it's time to go, then Jacob looking for every way possible to slip out from under Laban's nose. And we have one of his wives, Rachel, stealing from her father as she leaves – perhaps in an effort to have something she can resell, a way to at least have some kind of inheritance from her trickster father. Of course, an exodus this large can't stay hidden for long. Let's read a bit further before we pause...

**31:22-35** Laban learns of Jacob's flight about three days after he departed. It then takes seven days – so ten total – to catch up to Jacob. But during this time, something miraculous happens: God comes to Laban by night and tells him that he is not to judge Jacob. Laban's role is not one of calling him out or encouraging him to leave. Said another way, he has no authority over Jacob anymore.

Eventually, Laban and his men overtake Jacob, and the meeting isn't exactly pleasant: Laban wants answers. Why did Jacob leave? From Laban's perspective, Jacob stole his daughters away – which isn't quite accurate, of course. And Laban implies that he would have gladly sent Jacob on his way had he only asked – which Jacob had done in the previous chapter and Laban did all he could to prevent Jacob's departure. During this conversation, he mentions that God spoke to him, which is why he hasn't come to harm Jacob. But he does hold one thing against him: Laban believes that Jacob stole his household gods.

For his part, Jacob's reply is more measured than we might expect. He even offers for Laban to make his own inspection of Jacob's caravan to see that he hasn't stolen anything. Laban performs his search, eventually making his way to Rachel's tent. She, of course, was the one who stole these idols. Yet she has a plan: she'll claim to be having her monthly cycle, and so doesn't want to rise to greet Laban. This means he can't search her tent thoroughly and he doesn't find out what his daughter had done.

So there things stand: Jacob has been pursued and accused falsely – at least, in his mind. We find Rachel acting more like Jacob than we might have hoped. And we see Laban spinning all kinds of stories to make himself look good. Isn't this the

mess of life? Without putting too fine a point on it, haven't you been in situations that were just this tricky? Maybe, like Jacob, it wasn't even your fault. Sometimes I think that's the hardest of all: when we are well aware of our struggles in the past but this time really *is* different – yet we are accused and treated as if nothing has changed. What will Jacob do? How should he respond? God has promised to be with him, what will it look like for Jacob to live in that reality? Let's see...

**31:36-42** Whereas Jacob was fairly calm and measured before, now he comes unglued. He brings up every offense imaginable: from the indignity of being treated like a criminal, to his issue with how he has cared for Laban's flocks yet how he and Laban's deal has been altered many times. And then Jacob pulls his trump card: he tells Laban that the only reason he has any blessing at all is because God was blessing him – Jacob – the whole time, and Laban just happened to be near enough to catch some of the overflow.

Let's pause here a moment to reflect: what do you think of Jacob now? On the one hand, he has clearly been wronged by Laban. Yet, on the other hand, it's not as if he has been innocent throughout this book. Maybe you feel like he's getting a taste of his own medicine? Or maybe you think the other way: Jacob was wronged in the whole Leah and Rachel thing, he's paid his dues as it were, and now the ongoing punishment is just too much?

Whatever your response, let me ask one further question: is Jacob the sort of person who should be blessed by God? If his story was modernized and put on the six o' clock news, would you turn to your spouse or kids or friend and say "yep – there's a man who deserves God's blessing"? I suspect none of us would. Perhaps, a bit like me in Spanish class, we would all be a bit more inclined to think "well, Jacob might be a bit improved, but the best he can do is about a 'D' spiritually. We shouldn't expect much from him. Certainly not any kind of amazing blessing upon him." And why might we say such a thing? Isn't it because we live in a world that is all law and little grace? Funny, isn't it, that our supposedly "kind" and "tolerant" society cares very little for what God has said, but if you violate even the smallest bit of what is socially and culturally approved, you have a scarlet letter marking you out. Didn't repost the right welcoming and affirming phrases on Facebook? Marked. Didn't get the right grades in school or join the right clubs to get admitted

into college? Marked. Didn't go to the right parties with the boss' favorites? Marked. Didn't vote the right way? Or read the right books? Or invest the right way? Marked, marked, marked. Your report card and mine reads "unlikely to succeed." And, for once, there is something true in all of that, because spiritually we won't fare any better. When it comes to keeping God's laws, the best our individual efforts can bring us is an "F." No wonder so many Christians feel like God is against them: everything in our world is about success, and spiritually, we see only too well how often we fail.

But that's not the end of the story. Let's catch the last part starting with **verse 43**...

**31:43-55** Laban still thinks he's in charge, as if Jacob is a just a hired hand. Yet he does realize that there is little he can do at this point, so he comes up with the idea of making an agreement between Jacob and himself. Jacob has his servants make a memorial of sorts, which Laban promptly names "the heap of witness" in Aramaic, the common trade language of the region. Jacob comes up with the same name, but insists on naming it in Hebrew. I don't know that we should make too much of this, but it is intriguing, isn't it? Perhaps there is more going on with Jacob's spiritual allegiance than we might think?

Laban's point is that this memorial will serve as a reminder – and as a witness before God. You can clearly tell that he doesn't trust Jacob one bit, yet we shouldn't miss the irony of Laban calling upon God to witness against Jacob. But, the end result is something of a cease-fire. Laban will count this pillar as the edge of his territory – he won't go beyond it. In turn, he expects Jacob to do the same from his side of things. He calls on the God of Abraham and of Nahor (Abraham's brother) to bear witness between he and Jacob.

From Jacob's side, he swears to this agreement by the "Fear of his father Isaac." That's an interesting phrase, isn't it? We saw it earlier as well, back in **verse 42**. It seems to clearly refer to the Lord, and it also teaches us something about Him: the Lord alone is worthy of our fear. I don't mean "fear" in the negative sense, but rather in the sense of realizing and recognizing that God alone is all-powerful. He alone is in charge. The Lord is worthy of all our respect. Nobody and nothing else. As an aside: is that true of you? Do you care more for serving the Lord, more for

His favor, than you do for what your boss says? Or your friends? Or the world? Is your desire to honor our God greater even than your very good desire for your spouse's or family's favor? You can only serve one Master – who will it be?

For Jacob, wayward and flaky as he often seems, what sets him apart is that he gets this right. In spite of his sins, in spite of his trickery, Jacob ends up relying upon what the Lord tells him again and again.

Which is what you and I need to see. It's not that obedience doesn't matter. Don't misunderstand and think that I'm telling you that Christians can live however they want so long as they give lip-service to God – nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus warns against that very thing in **Matthew 7**: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” So don't walk out of here today thinking that Christians can just have the right words and thoughts and it's all good. No, Christians must be those who act – who live – according to their beliefs.

And yet, the main thing we need to see in our passage today is that God is faithful to Jacob through thick and thin. He hasn't abandoned Jacob on account of his sins. He hasn't removed His promises and given them to somebody that you or I might think of as “more worthy.” God hasn't decided that Jacob has gone off the rails one too many times. No. Instead, our Lord continues to uphold His promises – and not grudgingly, but to the extent that He even reminds Jacob of them! Whatever you think of God, you need to think of Him in the terms that the Bible gives: this is the God who is steadfast and faithful, who shows loving faithfulness to a thousand generations. This is the God who called and rescued Abraham and Isaac – and now Jacob – from their course and blessed them with Himself. This is the God who not only upheld, but also judged and forgave King David. Our God is the One who promises His exiled people that He will return – that the best days are not behind us, but in front of us. He is the Lord who took on flesh, lived a perfect life among wicked people, and then died in our place for our sins. This is the God who rose on the third day and promises that all who trust in Him shall have eternal life. All of which leaves us with what we need most: security. Encouragement. Trust. Your spiritual report card? It's an “A”. And it's given by Jesus. Follow Him gratefully!