

Jacob and Laban (or What to Expect when Walking to God's Tune)

Genesis 28-31

Recently I've turned 40 years of age and I've made a new acquaintance.
Because I am white and middle aged I now have a dermatologist,
a skin specialist who gives me a check up once a year

On my first visit he found two areas of damaged skin
and so as I lay on the bench half naked
he pulls out his gun of liquid nitrogen and says "I'm going to have to use this!"
Now, I was a little apprehensive;
this thing looks like a weapon,
it looks much more serious than a thermometer or stethoscope,
and he could sense my apprehension.

But he's a good doctor
and he did a very good job in explaining
exactly what the procedure would feel like
and exactly how long my skin would take to recover.
And the explanation helped me feel at ease.

It's an important part of medical practice isn't it, explaining what it is we can expect,
having our doctors outline as best they can
the course of events that make up an illness or a programme of treatment;
we want to know what it is that's ahead of us,
especially if it's new territory that were traversing

I wonder whether there's a similar dynamic involved in the Christian life.
When someone becomes a Christian,
when they place their belief and trust in Jesus
as the one who forgives sin and the one whom they obey
then that's the start of a new life; a life where, after we are saved,
God will have all sorts of work for us to do.

And because it's new it can be a little daunting,
perhaps for some people it's the fact of a new start
that's holding them back from placing their trust in Christ,
"What's this going to involve?" they ask themselves.
And so from time to time
it's helpful to think about what to expect as we walk with God.

Last week we met Jacob, the deceiver,
and we learnt that despite his failings God had a plan and a purpose for him.
He was the one through whom the promises to Abraham would be fulfilled.
He was called to play his part in God's big project.

This week we see just what that involved as Jacob endures
an unexpected, 20-year stay in his uncle's household.

Our readings were from ch 29, but this section of the story begins in ch 28,
so I'd like to draw your attention to Genesis 28:10

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. ¹¹ When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the
night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay
down to sleep.

Why did Jacob leave his Father's household in Beersheba?

Two reasons: (1) his parents were keen for Jacob
to find a wife from within the extended family,
so he was sent to his uncle's household in Harran,
(2) but secondly his brother Esau had made a vow to kill him.

And so almost immediately after he's been established as the new heir,
he finds himself on the run and homeless.

It's a bit like King David later on in the OT,

chosen by God and yet we find him hiding in caves fearing for his life,
and it's a bit like Jesus,

when speaking to his friends about what it means to follow him he said
the Son of Man (referring to himself) has no place to lay his head.

Sign up with God and it may not always be comfortable.

However, while Jacob is at this low point

he's about to receive a wonderful message of comfort
from the God who is directing this whole show.

As he sleeps Jacob receives a vision of a magnificent staircase
extending from where he lies right up into the heavens,

with God himself at the top. Yes God is high and mighty,

but the staircase suggests a direct connection between him and Jacob,
with angels coming down from God to minister upon the earth.

And added to this visual assurance is a verbal promise rehearsed from v 13.

Once more God repeats the big picture:

this is all about fulfilling the three promises to Abraham:

—land, descendants and a blessing for the whole world—

and then comes a more immediate promise to Jacob in v15: I am with you and
will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave
you until I have done what I have promised you.

Friends what should we expect as we seek to live as God's people?

We should expect God to be with us.

We may not receive the same wonderful vision that Jacob received,

but we do receive the same promise of God's presence.

What were Jesus' final words to his disciples at the end of Matthew's Gospel?

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

And how is it that Jesus is with us?

Well it's through the presence of the Holy Spirit;
it's through God himself dwelling within us.
We may not receive the same dream as Jacob,
but the reality of what we do have is even greater.
God isn't at the end of a staircase, he's right here inside of us.

Jacob's response to this revelation from God is an instructive one for us to consider,
Ch 28 v 20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me
on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear ²¹so that I return
safely to my father's household, then the LORD will be my God ²²and this stone that I have set
up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."

Jacob is saying "If God's going to be all this for me, then I'm going to be his.
I'll commit myself to him wholeheartedly, in terms of the God I identify with,
in terms of how I view my possessions.
If God's on my side, then I'm going to be on his.

Friends, have you made that kind of commitment,
a commitment to be God's man or woman in all aspects of your life?
It's a commitment you can make with confidence
because God has already made a commitment to you!
So go forth and walk with him boldly!

And so with this renewed knowledge of God's presence, Jacob continues on,
and in ch 29 arrives in his uncle's neighborhood.

Like so many scenes in the Bible this one is set at a well,
and we heard that this well was covered with a large rock.
The sense from v8 is that all the shepherds were needed to shift the rock,
But when Jacob saw Rachel among the shepherds
he springs up and shifts the rock himself,
such is his motivation to impress and serve this young woman.
It's love at first sight, and we're told in v 11 that Jacob kissed Rachel and began to
weep aloud. ¹² He had told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and a son of Rebekah.
So she ran and told her father.

What good luck!

God's plan for Jacob was to bring him to an attractive young woman!
Well, it would seem that Jacob is jumping the gun a little bit.
It's interesting to compare the events of this chapter
with the scene of Abraham's servant finding a wife for Isaac back in ch 24.
Both scenes are at a well,
both scenes make a comment about how attractive the women are
but Abraham's servant was careful to allow God to be directing the action.
Here Jacob assumes he knows the person God has chosen

he's literally grabbed hold of his wife without consulting God,
and now God is saying "well how do you feel about being deceived?
And despite how you feel about Rachel, you will learn that *Leah*
was the one I chose to mother the majority of your descendants."

Friends when we decide we're going to walk with God,
we can expect him to discipline and correct us. That's not a bad thing!
In the NT the writer to the Hebrews reminds us that the Lord disciplines the one
he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son." ⁷ Endure hardship as discipline;
the writer continues God is treating you as his children. For what children are not
disciplined by their father?
Like Jacob, we're not going to get it right,
and so God will be teaching us some lessons along the way.

What lessons were there for Jacob learn?
He learnt not to act in isolation from God,
and he also learnt not to confuse God's grace with God approval.
For a time we might get away with taking matters into our own hands,
and so we might think that God is approving of our actions!
"Ever since I've decided to quit church/give up ministry/make decisions just
for me, I've found that things have been going really well and so it's obvious
that God is honoring my decision."
Well, no, God is showing you grace, but it doesn't mean he's pleased,
and because he loves you may find that his discipline is about to descend.

But, as you endure that discipline God will still be working in you and with you
and you can expect to look back over your imperfect life
and see God's hand at work nonetheless.

After all the children are born to Leah and Rachel and their female servants,
Jacob decides in the second half of ch 30 that its time to head home,
Laban doesn't want him to leave because Jacob's a good manager of livestock
So Jacob finds himself again trying to make a deal with this snake of a relative.

Jacob proposes to split Laban's flocks according to colour:
Jacob would receive the coloured sheep and speckled goats,
while Laban would retain the white sheep and the plain goats.
Laban says "Sure!" and then on the sly
removes a whole stack of the coloured and speckled animals
and hides them away for himself.

But in the end,
the livestock that Jacob did receive outbred those that remained with Laban,
and so we read at the end of ch 30 (in verse 43) that In this way the man grew
exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks, and female and male servants, and
camels and donkeys.

What was the result of Jacobs prosperity?

Ch 31 v2 puts it in a wonderfully understated way:

And Jacob noticed that Laban's attitude toward him was not what it had been.

Laban had become Jealous,

and so God directs Jacob to go back home 20 years after he left.

It's at this point that Jacob recognizes that throughout this trouble,

God has indeed been with him and has indeed been generous.

He gathers Leah and Rachel and presents a little speech in front of them.

Ch 31:5 He said to them, "I see that your father's attitude toward me is not what it was before, but the God of my father has been with me. ⁶You know that I've worked for your father with all my strength, ⁷yet your father has cheated me by changing my wages ten times. However, God has not allowed him to harm me. ⁸If he (that is, Laban) said, 'The speckled ones will be your wages,' then all the flocks gave birth to speckled young; and if he said, 'The streaked ones will be your wages,' then all the flocks bore streaked young. ⁹So God has taken away your father's livestock and has given them to me.

And then he tells them that its time to leave Laban and head back home.

We discover in v14 that Leah and Rachel have had enough of their Father:

Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father's estate? ¹⁵Does he not regard us as foreigners? Not only has he sold us, but he has used up what was paid for us. ¹⁶Surely all the wealth that God took away from our father belongs to us and our children. So do whatever God has told you. They say to Jacob.

I don't know about you,

but reading these chapters I feel very uncomfortable with the way the women are treated, traded like currency. This response from the women shows us that we we're meant to feel uncomfortable about it; its not right and its just one more way that Laban was seeking to take advantage of those closest to him. So they leave.

It's been a rough two decades, but what does this new family have to show for it?

Jacob is now the father of at least 12 children,

and theirs is a very wealthy family.

It's taken time, but God has proved faithful to what he's promised,

even if that faithfulness can only be appreciated in hindsight.

Friends, don't loose patience with God,

because you'll get to a point when you'll look back and be quite surprised.

There's a laneway near our old place here in Waitara,

which had some grand old houses in it but like many blocks

these homes were razed to the ground so that units could be built.

I watched the process over many months

and the land went through three distinct phases.

First phase was the old house, which was flattened to the ground,

Then secondly a massive hole is dug for the foundation,

and then thirdly the new building rises.

It's like things go backwards in the middle,
they need to go down before they go up.

Now when we become Christians the old house is cleared away,
but things may go down before they go up, and we may be in for rough ride.
Jacob experienced something similar, and so that's what we can expect,
but the new building is marvelous and it's a building worth waiting for.
I'll lead us in prayer.