



The Deceiver Is Deceived

Wrestling with God: The Stories of Isaac & Jacob, Part 5

Genesis 29-31 David Sunday March 12, 2017

O Lord, hear our prayer, because we do not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from Your mouth. We open our mouths and pant with longing for Your commandments today. We walk in darkness apart from the light and illumination of Your Word. So we thank You that Your Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our paths. Lord, we thank You that Your Word, the Living Word, came and dwelt among us, so that in all our wanderings, all our deception, all our sin we can know that You are a God Who remains with us and remains faithful to Your promises to us. We pray that our confidence in Your grace and mercy toward us would increase as we look at this passage today. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

I want to speak today to those of you who have believed in God's promise, but you're just now in the middle of life's journey and following Jesus, and you're finding yourself in a hard place. Nothing is going the way you want it to. Nothing seems to be working out and you're frustrated. I want to talk to you about the big picture, because you and I are a work in progress. God is at work in our lives to change us. Even though we still have a long way to go, He will fulfill His purpose for you and for me.

I want everyone who trusts in God to know that you are not on Plan B. God's purposes for your life are being fulfilled even through your mistakes, your sins, your failures and your futility. It doesn't mean that our sins are not a big deal, or that God is pleased with them, or that there won't be consequences for the things we do wrongly. But what I want to learn today is that you cannot mess up God's plan for your life. God is fulfilling His purposes for His children.

We're going to see that in Genesis 29-31. We've been looking at the life of Jacob in the Old Testament, and now I want to purposefully take a long section—chapters 19 through 31—so we can see the big picture of this section. I want us to see what God is doing in these 20 years of Jacob's life when he finds himself in a place called Haran under the thumb of his Uncle Laban—his crazy Uncle Laban.

You'll remember that last week in chapter 29, Jacob was sleeping on a stone pillow. He had a dream in which he saw the heavens open and the angels of God ascending and descending on a stairway to heaven, and the Lord was there. Jacob heard these wonderful promises from God: "I will be with you. I will keep you wherever you go. And I will bring you home. I will bring you back to this place." Today we have access into God's presence through Christ. Jesus is our stairway—the way into God's presence—and the One Who will fulfill these same promises for us.

Jacob is on a journey away from the Promised Land, because his brother Esau wants to kill him, which takes him all the way into northern Syria or northwest Mesopotamia. It's about a 500-mile journey to where his Uncle Laban lives. I imagine Jacob is making that journey with a spring in his step. He's leaving the past behind; he's looking forward to what will happen in his life with God's blessing in Haran—and he's looking for a wife. But instead of describing years of pure bliss and happiness, in chapters 29-31 we read about a whole lot of frustrations, troubles and trials. In Haran, as Jacob is serving under the thumb of his crazy Uncle Laban, he is experiencing the discipline and training of the Lord.

I love how Derek Kidner, a British commentator, is a master of pithy, concise statements. Here's how he describes what's going on in chapters 29-31:

"In Laban, Jacob met his match and his means of discipline." Jacob meets his match and Jacob is meeting God's hand of discipline on his life. "Twenty years of drudgery and friction were to weather his character. The reader can reflect that presumably Jacob is not the only person to have needed a Laban in his life." Do you need your character to be weathered? Do you need God to still work in you? Are you ready to welcome some friction, some drudgery, some difficulty, if that's part of what God is using to mold you into the image and character of His Son?

The Kissing Stone

This section of Scripture helps us understand what's going on in your life and my life when we're facing drudgery, frustration and friction. It doesn't start out that way in chapter 29. I call verses 1-20 the kissing stone, as Jacob is on this journey and comes to the land of the east in verse one. These are probably people who do not know God. There he encounters some shepherds by a well.

Verse two: "*As he looked, he saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep lying beside it, for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large.*" Pay attention to that stone—the kissing stone. It's a large stone. "*When all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds...*" That's plural—it would take several men.

³ *The shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place over the mouth of the well.* ⁴ *Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where do you come from?" They said, "We are from Haran."* ⁵ *He said to them, "Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?" They said, "We know him."* ⁶ *He said to them, "Is it well with him?" They said, "It is well; and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!"*

I can just imagine Jacob is thinking, "How can I get some time alone with Rachel?" So he says in verse seven, "*Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered together. Water the sheep and go, pasture them.*" In other words, "Guys, get out of here. I want to be with Rachel." But they said, "*We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep.*"

"Listen, Jacob, there's a way we do things around here. We do it at a certain time in a certain way. We're used to rolling this stone away from the well together, when we want to do it."

Look at verse nine: "While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess." I love verse ten: "*Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother...*" The Bible doesn't say there was a surge of testosterone or anything like that. But we do read this: "*Jacob,*" all by himself, "*came near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth.*" He must have been thinking, "I'm going to impress her with my strength!" Derek Kidner calls it "a feat of strength—a superb entry." What an impression Jacob is making on Rachel, as all by himself he rolls the stone from the well's mouth and waters the flock of Laban, his mother's brother. And then at that stone, "*Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father.*"

Then in verses 13-14, Uncle Laban hears this news and he runs to meet Jacob. He embraces him, kisses him and brings him to his house. "*Jacob told Laban all these things, and Laban said to him, 'Surely you are my bone and my flesh!' And he stayed with him a month.*" So far, so good. He's met his uncle. He's getting to know his distant cousin, who he's very much desiring to have as his wife. Then in verse 15, Laban says, "*Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?*" Someone has said this is like a spider inviting a fly into its web. Trouble is on the horizon.

Verse 16: "*Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were weak.*" Or it could mean soft. It doesn't mean necessarily that her eyes were ugly. It could be a compliment here—she had delicate eyes.

But then it says, *“Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance.”* There’s something about Leah’s eyes—but there is everything about Rachel. Her form, her body, her appearance—she is a strikingly attractive woman.

Verse 18: *“Jacob loved Rachel.”* In that culture, it was customary for there to be a bride price that the groom would pay to the bride’s father. It was a way of protecting the woman, so men wouldn’t enter into marriage flippantly, or try to get out of a marriage flippantly—divorcing their wives and leaving them with nothing. Or if the husband were to die, and his wife would be left, that bride price or dowry would be used to take care of her.

Well, Jacob doesn’t have any money. Isaac his father sent him on this journey without any provision to pay for a bride, so he has to work for her. Jacob doesn’t want to risk refusal, so he sets the price he’s willing to pay for Rachel very, very high. We read in verse 18 that Jacob tells Laban, *“I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.”* That’s how much she meant to him.

Laban, who is going to become Jacob’s father-in-law, is not that excited about giving his daughter away as we see that in verse 19. But he’s willing to acquiesce, and I think he’s kind of covering himself here. Notice, he never quite agrees. He says enough to make Jacob think that this is a done deal. But what he says is, *“It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.”* So Jacob does.

Then verse 20 is one of the most beautifully romantic verses in the entire Bible. There aren’t many romantic marriages in the Old Testament, but this verse could go on a Hallmark card. If this verse doesn’t tug at your heartstrings, you’ve probably never been in love. It says, *“Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.”* Wives, don’t you want your husbands to say that about you? “I will serve you year after year after year, and it just seems like nothing because of the love I have for you.” It’s a beautiful, beautiful expression.

A Taste of His Own Medicine

Wouldn’t you just love the story to end here with “...and they lived happily ever after”? That would just be great. But it’s not going to be that way at all. In verse 21, Jacob gets a taste of his own medicine. It’s time to get married. The seven years are up. “Then Jacob said to Laban,” very brusquely, very bluntly—this is not the typical way you should speak to your future father-in-law—*“Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.”* It means exactly what you think it means. Robert Alter says, “Genesis is showing us a man driven by and overwhelmed with emotional and sexual longing for one woman.”

Verse 22: *“So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast.”* It was a custom to have a wedding feast, a male-dominated event where all the people would come together to celebrate. Then finally, at the end of that feast, the father of the bride would bring his daughter in, heavily veiled.

And what happens in this story is unbelievable and astounding, like one of the worst anti-climaxes in all of literature. Verse 23:

“But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her.” (Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant.) And in the morning, behold, it was Leah!

How did that happen? We’re scratching our heads. I don’t know. There was no electricity—that’s for sure—so it was dark. There was probably a big veil involved. And I assume that they had more than cake and fruit punch at the feast. However it happened, Jacob was tricked. He was deceived—and he is indignant. Verse 25: *“And Jacob said to Laban, ‘What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?’”* It’s the same word in Hebrew that is used in chapter 27 to describe what Jacob did to his father Isaac. Deceive. Trick. Cheat.

Tim Keller has a magnificent sermon about Leah, the kind of sermon that if you’re a preacher, once you hear it you feel like, “I’ve never preached a sermon in my life.” It’s just that good. It’s called, “The Girl Nobody Wanted.” I’d encourage you to find it on line and listen to it. It’s just wonderful. He quotes an ancient rabbi who imagines the conversation between Jacob and Leah that next morning.

“Jacob says to Leah, ‘I called out “Rachel” in the dark, and you answered. Why did you do that to me?’ And Leah says to Jacob, ‘Your father called out “Esau” in the dark, and you answered. Why did you do that to him?’” Fury dies on Jacob’s lips. He’s cut to the quick. Suddenly the evil he has done has come to Jacob, then he sees what it’s like to be manipulated and deceived. He has no choice but to keep on working for Rachel. And that’s what happens.

Laban just very, very heartlessly says in verse 26, *“It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.”* In other words, “You might have been able to trick Esau and steal your older brother’s birthright and blessing, but that’s not how we do it around here. The older comes first. Leah’s the older: *“Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.”* So Jacob had to do just that. He completed Leah’s week of wedding celebration, and then he gets Rachel, along with her female servant Bilhah. And we read in verse 30, *“So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel*

more than Leah.” That is a recipe for disaster and lots of heartache. Then Jacob “*served Laban for another seven years.*”

Friends, if Jacob is the conductor of his life, this is looking like a train wreck. You might think, “Well, what goes around comes around.” Or more biblically, “Be sure your sin will find you out (Numbers 32:23). Do not be deceived, Jacob. Whatever a man sows, that will he also reap” (Galatians 6:7-8). All that’s true. But the Gospel Transformation Bible helps us understand something deeper is also going on. Let’s look at what it says.

“Laban’s deceitfulness toward Jacob is not some kind of divine ‘payback.’” When you are going through hard times as a child of God, it’s not just God trying to pay you back for all the bad things you’ve done. “Rather, this painful experience in Jacob’s life is part of God’s ongoing purposes of mercy, molding Jacob into a man submissive and humble before God.”

How many of you have prayed, “Lord, I want to be like Jesus. Whatever it takes, make me like Him”? What if part of God’s mercy in your life is stuff like this? Hardship. Being deceived. Being manipulated. Things not going your way. Frustration. Futility. Not getting what you want out of life. What if God’s not just saying, “I’m paying you back. I’m against you”? What if God is saying, “My son, My daughter, do not despise the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when you are reprovved by Him”? For those whom God loves, He disciplines, and He chastises everyone He receives as His son or daughter (Hebrews 12:5-6). What if it’s God’s mercy in your life?

Thankfully, friends, we see in these chapters Jacob is not the conductor of his own life—and you and I are not the conductors of our lives either. There are going to be heartache. It’s understandable when he says he loved Rachel more than Leah, but it’s chilling too. We’ve got the stage set now for a very tawdry and bitter family feud that’s going to continue to have bad fruit and difficulty throughout Jacob’s life.

Meet the Family

So let’s move to the next section in Genesis 29:31.

Just a word here about polygamy. You see it in the Bible and you might think, “Is the Bible telling us this is okay?” It’s not. Two things I want you to know. It was never God’s intention from the beginning. We see that in Genesis chapters one and two, where God said marriage is one man and one woman, cleaving to one another for life. That was God’s plan from the beginning in creation. He does not desire polygamy. He works through it. He continues His blessing in spite of it. But this is not God’s will.

Secondly, when you read about polygamy in the Bible, you never see one big happy family all living together in peace and joy. It always is shown in an unfavorable light, and you definitely see it in this story. God always shows us the terrible consequences of it. You've probably heard of the program, "Sister Wives." I've never watched it. I don't recommend it at all. I'm convinced it's horrible just from what little I've heard. But that show has nothing compared to the drama of Scripture that we see right here in Genesis.

What would it be like to be Leah? Let's look at the pain she's enduring. How pathetic it is as she bears these children, beginning in verse 31. But notice too that the Lord is with her. God always has a heart for those who are defenseless, those who are overlooked, those who are unloved, those who are despised by men, those who are abused. God has a heart for those who are abused and He will be their Defender.

"When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben," which means, *"See, a son. For she said, 'Because the Lord has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me.'"* Oh, how sad to see a woman bearing her husband's first child, and in her heart of hearts is this longing, "Oh, that my husband would love me, now that I've given him a child." But that longing is going to be an unrequited longing.

Verse 33: *"She conceived again and bore a son, and said, 'Because the Lord has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also.' And she called his name Simeon,"* which means "heard." The Lord heard her.

Verse 34: *"Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, 'Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.' Therefore his name was called Levi,"* which means attached.

What is it that Leah wants more than anything in her life? It's for her husband to love her, to be attached to her, to recognize her value in his life. Yet the Lord is favoring Leah. He is enabling her—not Rachel—to be fruitful and multiply. And in the process, Leah is learning an important lesson of where her true identity is found. It's not found in having a husband who loves you, as desirable as that is and as right as that should be. That's not where Leah's true identity is found. It's found in the Lord, Who hears her, Who defends her, Who blesses her. That's where all our identity needs to be found. And through her first three pregnancies, she seems to be struggling with this misplaced identity, instead of really resting and rejoicing in the fact that the Lord is looking upon her.

I have sympathy for her. I can understand. But something changes with the birth of her fourth son. Look at verse 35: *"And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, 'This time I*

will praise the Lord.’ Therefore she called his name Judah,” which means praise. *“Then she ceased bearing.”* Isn’t it remarkable that Leah is the one whom God chooses to give birth to Levi, who is the father of the priestly tribe, and then Judah, from whose kingly tribe Jesus the Messiah King will emerge—the Lion of the tribe of Judah? Leah is the mother of Jesus. Isn’t that remarkable?

But isn’t it noteworthy that there’s a breakthrough here in her life when Judah is born? Nothing more about Jacob loving her. “This time, Lord, I’m going to praise You.”

Sometimes in our lives we just have to stop and ask, “Lord, what am I doing? All worried about this and that. Worried about all this frustration and stress in my life, nothing’s working out. Wait a minute. How about if I just stop and this time I will praise You, Lord?”

This reminds me of an article I read last week by a pastor from a rural part of our country, but he writes a weekly article for the Lifeway “Pastor’s Walk.” He had been writing recently that so far 2017 has not been a good year for him. He feels as though his sermons have been flat and his leadership has been stymied. He feels discouraged, like he has nothing to offer. Then as he sat down to write this next article with some piece of pastoral wisdom, he could not come up with anything. He just had a blank screen. Then into the room walks his seven-year-old son. He looks at his daddy and says, “What are you doing, Dad?” His dad says, “I’m writing an article.” His son looks at the screen. “It sure doesn’t look like you’re writing anything.” He climbs on to his dad’s lap and asks, “Can I write something?” His dad responds, “Sure.” The son starts with the letter ‘p.’ Dad’s thinking, “Oh, no, not potty humor. What’s going on with this seven-year-old?” But he let him keep writing. And here’s what his boy wrote on the screen—with no capitalizations, no punctuation and a misspelled word: “praise the lord your god with all your hart mind soul.”

When the dad/pastor saw what his son wrote, he wrote this: “Sometimes it takes a seven-year-old to remind us that all we are and have—even our blank pages—should be used as instruments of worship to Jesus Christ.” That’s what life is for, to praise the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul.

Leah’s starting to learn this lesson. That’s what God’s working to bring about in all these people’s lives. Let’s keep looking at them as the story unfolds, as it involves others besides Leah.

There’s Rachel. What does she feel in Genesis 30:1? Jealousy. She envies her sister. She says to Jacob in verse one, *“Give me children, or I shall die!”* Jacob’s response is pathetic and angry: *“Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, ‘Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?’”* That is spiritual abuse, friends—throwing salt

into her wound. He put her down spiritually, refusing to come alongside her in her suffering, despising her instead.

As Rachel bears the shame and reproach, she thinks, “What can I do except give him my servant Bilhah?” So she does. Jacob goes in to her and more children are born. Then the sibling rivalry intensifies in verse nine: “*When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife.*” This results in more children and more rivalries. Thus the 12 tribes of Israel—the nation through which God is going to bring blessing to the entire world—is being formed out of this mess.

Is God a God of grace and mercy or what? Does God know how to work His purposes out through all the mess we make of our lives? Stories like this should convince us of that. And as these babies are being born through the maidservants, Rachel is so desperate that she’s willing to trade intimacy with Jacob for some mandrakes from the field—an apple-like fruit which was thought to be an aid to fertility. But that’s not going to work. God doesn’t need to be manipulated by our superstitious schemes.

Verse 22: “*Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and said, God has taken away my reproach.’ And she called his name Joseph*” —which loosely translated means, “Will you please give me another one?” And sure enough, her prayer is going to be answered in chapter 35 with the birth of Benjamin. But it’s tragic, because in giving birth to Benjamin, she loses her own life. Is God doing something in all this?

Laboring With Laban

There’s more frustration as well, as we see beginning in verse 25. You know, when a man’s got trouble at home, if he can at least go to his job and feel like “king of the hill” there—if life is going well at work—then maybe he can make it through life. But if he has trouble both at home and at work, that’s real trouble.

As Jacob is laboring with Laban, his work is full of trouble. The text shows us how much Laban is prospering because of Jacob’s faithful service. Jacob deserves a “Most Valued Employee” award. Look at verse 27: “*Laban said to him, ‘If I have found favor in your sight, I have learned by divination (not God’s way of guidance, but the message is true) that the Lord has blessed me because of you. Name your wages, and I will give it.’*”

Jacob digs in with Laban in verses 29-30, saying, “Yes indeed, the Lord has blessed you through me. And wherever I’ve turned, God has blessed you.” We have to wonder, “Jacob, do you understand just how much it’s God Who’s doing the blessing, or are you taking some of the

credit for yourself?” But Jacob agrees to stay with Laban, making a deal with him beginning in verse 31: “Let’s separate the flocks. I’ll take the spotted and speckled goats and the dark lambs. You take the white ones.” And in verse 34, Laban agrees to this deal.

But I ask you, would you trust Laban based on his track record? Sure enough, as soon as they’re finished speaking, Laban runs off and removes the male goats that are striped and spotted and all the female goats that are speckled and spotted, and gives them over to his sons. They take all these animals away on a three-day journey, leaving Jacob with nothing but still caring for Laban’s flock.

I wonder if that strikes a chord with you. Do you know what it’s like to work for a boss who’s exploiting you? Have you been in a situation where you can never move up and gain something for yourself in the process? You’re making lots of money for the company and doing your job well, but it seems like your fate is at the mercy of the higher-ups. You just can’t get ahead.

What you need to remember is what we see in the story of Jacob: God’s hand is in all this. Your livelihood, your success, is not at the mercy of any man. Your success is at the mercy of God, Who is a merciful God. You’ve read about how Jacob starts this curious “selective breeding” program, by brainwashing the sheep into having patchy lambs by looking at a patchy tree branch. I have no idea what that’s all about or if that works, but what happens at the end of the story is that Jacob—in spite of all his ways of deception and manipulation—is still blessed by God.

Look at the end of chapter 30: *“Thus the man increased greatly and had large flocks, female servants and male servants, and camels and donkeys.”* God is taking care of Jacob. God is fulfilling His promise to Jacob, even in spite of Jacob. And friends, when God is disciplining His children—which He is always doing in our lives—even in the midst of the discipline and training, He is blessing us at the same time. He’s not out to get us, but is out to mold us into the character of His Son.

Homeward Bound

Let’s move on to chapter 31. It’s time for Jacob to get out of Haran. In fact, he’s being driven out by all of Laban’s sons, who can’t understand why he keeps succeeding at the expense of their father. They want him out of there. No one really wants Jacob around. Esau drives him away. Now Laban’s sons are driving him away. But God is also calling Jacob back to the Promised Land. Verse three, *“Then the Lord said to Jacob, ‘Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.’”*

Remember that from chapter 28? “I’m going to be with you everywhere you go, and I’m going to bring you safely home.” Now it’s 20 years later and God has not forgotten His promise. God has not forgotten His purpose. So in verses four through ten, Jacob convinces Rachel and Leah that it is time to go. They need to leave. In verses 11-13, the Lord reminds him, “I am the One Who has blessed you. Now arise, go from this land and return to the land of your kindred.” In verses 14-16, Rachel and Leah are ready to leave their dad, because they see how much he has exploited them and has taken what belonged to them. Laban’s greed is ruining everything in his life.

So beginning in verse 17, Jacob sneaks away. He has Laban’s flocks; he has Laban’s daughters; he has Laban’s grandchildren. They get away for ten days before Laban catches up with them. When he does, he’s livid. He’s irate. He would kill Jacob if he could, but God has warned Laban not to harm him. The chapter finally ends with Laban letting Jacob go. There’s a treaty with stones and a pillar and a dinner, and Laban blesses his daughters and his grandchildren and kisses them goodbye.

So Jacob is on his way home—just as God had promised. And the key verse in chapter 31 is verse 42: *“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. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night.”*

What if God were not on our side? Then all the frustration, all the futility of this life, would be meaningless. Completely meaningless. If God is the Conductor of our lives and if He is weaving all this together, we can go through the hardships, friction and drudgery. We can go through the frustration when we’re thinking, “Why is everything going wrong?” We can know with a calm assurance, “God, You are working Your purposes out. And even though I don’t deserve it, even though I’m manipulative and deceitful and dishonest, You are for me.”

Isn’t that the gospel message? God is for us in Christ. He has come into the mess of our lives and has entered into our suffering. He has born our shame and reproach, having died on the cross for us and risen again. And there’s more to this story than we have yet seen. He’s bringing us into a new creation that will not be characterized by all this frustration and futility. That is our hope.

So as we come to the end of this narrative—after learning of Jacob’s 20 years of struggle and drudgery and disappointment—the question I want to ask is, “Lord, what do You want me to learn from this?” I think there are three threads:

1. This story studies the pathology of our disillusionment with life.

First, I want to learn reasons for my disillusionment with life. Why are we so disillusioned? What's wrong? I think Tim Keller hits it well when he says this: "A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living."

I want to ask you, friends, what is that in your life—that if you lost it, life doesn't feel worth living anymore? You know what it was for Jacob? "Rachel! I want Rachel. If I have Rachel, I'll be happy." He got Rachel, all right. But he got trouble with Rachel. What did Leah want? "Oh, if my husband would just love me, be attached to me. I don't know if I can live without that." Until finally she says, "No, I will praise the Lord with all my heart, mind and soul. It's what I'll do." What about Laban? What did he want more than anything? Money. Power. Control. What did Rachel want more than anything? "Give me children or I'll die!" She got them—and she died getting the second one.

What do you want more than anything? What gives your life meaning, purpose, value? What helps you keep on going? Sometimes it's even good things that can get in the way, right? C.S. Lewis said it so well when he said most people, if they've really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want—and they want acutely—something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise.

He said he wasn't just talking about the bad marriage or the bad vacation or the bad job. He was talking about the best of marriages, the best of vacations, the best jobs—all of them leave us with a measure of dissatisfaction. There's something we long for that we can never, ever find in this world—not even with the best we receive.

What was C.S. Lewis' conclusion? "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." It must mean there's something better, something more real, something more tangible, something more satisfying than anything I can find in this world—and that's the truth of Scripture. We were made for another world, no longer tainted by sin. We get disillusioned when we start trying to look in this life for what can only be satisfied in that life.

2. This story illustrates the patient process of God's discipline in our lives. God is very patient. If it takes Him 20 years to humble us, He's happy to take 20 years. He'll do whatever it takes. And He might put a Laban into our lives to accomplish that.

Charles Swindoll used to tell a story about the cod fish from New England. Some people in Texas wanted cod to eat, so the people in Maine tried to freeze the fish and send them to Texas.

But by the time the frozen fish reached Texas they had lost their flavor and texture. So then they tried putting the living fish in a tank of salt water, but by the time they reached Texas, a lot of them had died. Then finally someone had a brilliant solution. “What we’re going to do is put the cod in a tank with a bunch of cat fish—because cat fish and cod are enemies.” So when they put the cat fish in with the cod, the cat fish chased those cod all around the tank from Maine to Texas. The cod never quit swimming, so by the time they reached Texas they were full of flavor and texture because they had kept swimming in that tank.

That’s what Swindoll and Ray Pritchard said Laban was like in Jacob’s life. He’s like the cat fish, keeping him moving, irritating him. I wonder if you are able to give God thanks for the cat fish in your life—for the disappointments and difficulties. It doesn’t seem pleasant at the time you’re being disciplined by God, does it? But it is yielding the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

3. This story testifies to God’s undaunted faithfulness to fulfill His plan of grace in the lives of His people. God is with us. God is for us. And when we get to the end of this story, “Then, Lord, shall I fully know—not ‘til then—how much I owe.” One thing I’m sure of: no believer, when they get before God in glory, is ever going to say, “God, You gave me a raw deal.” We’re all going to be like Jacob: *“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 we’re not empty-handed. We’ve been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. We’re just loaded with benefits from God. Why is that? Because of His great faithfulness. Let’s praise Him for that!

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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