

God's Road is Rough

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 00] And the living word of the living God, please keep that open. We'll pray together for God's help and consider these words. Gracious Father, we thank you that you have breathed out your word to us.

Father, we thank you that all scripture is breathed out by you. And Lord, even when we are deep in the story of the Old Testament, that even there your spirit is speaking.

So please help us, we pray, enlighten our minds. Lord, ready our hearts to receive from your word today what you would have us hear. We pray that you would lead us ultimately to Christ, who is the yes and amen to all your good promises.

This we pray in his name. Amen. Well, I don't know if you're a reader. My first introduction to Christian books was as a student in our church in Edinburgh.

We started as a kind of reading group with an 11th century monk named Anselm. And then we moved on to a 4th century church father named Athanasius.

[1 : 14] And if that sounds hard, the toughest bit was actually that we met at 7 o'clock on a Friday morning. The most up-to-date thing I think we read was from the 1700s.

A guy called Thomas Boston, a Scottish minister, he had a series of sermons called *The Crook in the Lot*. And if Jacob would have struggled with Anselm and Athanasius, I think he would have got on well with *The Crook in the Lot*.

It's a funny title. By lot, he just means our situation, like we would say our lot in life. And by crook, he's talking about trouble and difficulty.

So it's a book about understanding that there is trouble and difficulty in life. As Thomas Boston puts it, everybody's lot in this world has some crook in it.

Nobody lives a charmed life free from pain and tears. But the point of the book is that that's not one path through life that we accidentally kind of stumble onto and we have to find our way back to the straight and easy path that God's got planned for us.

[2 : 28] The point is that the rough and crooked path is the path God's laid for us to walk. In short, God's road is rough.

I think if we had Jacob's copy of *The Crook in the Lot*, we would find it heavily thumbed, underlined, highlighted, scribbled on. He set out on a journey with God, and that's not over-spiritualizing it.

Last time we heard God promise Jacob, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

But almost straight away, the path he's walking starts to climb. Some horrible things happen in this chapter. There's no way around it. And they stick to Jacob for the rest of his life.

So is God with him? Or has he left him? Of course, those questions aren't just theoretical. If you're walking with the Lord today, you know that his path takes us where we wouldn't have chosen to go.

[3 : 46] And perhaps you've asked those questions in your heart. If you haven't, in fact, said them out loud. Is God still walking with me? Or have I somehow gone the wrong way, and he's not with me anymore?

Let's see how our passage helps us this morning with that. Firstly, to show us that God is still with us on the way. Now remember, Jacob's on a mission, right?

His mom and dad have sent him away from home to find a wife from the other side of the family who live away in Haran. The context, I looked at this this week, that would be like us walking from Edinburgh to London, 450 miles or so, but of course in much hotter and drier conditions, far fewer people on the way, and no Google Maps to tell you where to go.

Add to that, right, that Jacob is not the outdoorsy one of the two brothers, is he? And there's no guarantee that he's going to get there in one piece.

And it's not as if he could turn around and head back if he ran into trouble because his brother back home has vowed to kill him. Jacob is seriously stuck between a rock and a hard place.

[5 : 02] But as if by magic, look, the story cuts to him arriving in the east, right? 450 miles in his rear view mirror and miraculously nothing to report.

It's all been fine. And so he starts to look for the next signpost, and who should he see but some people who can help him? Look at this with me in verse four. Jacob said to these shepherds, my brothers, where do you come from?

They said, we're from Haran. He said to them, do you know Laban, the son of Nahor? They said, we know him. And he said, is it well with him?

And they said, it is well. And look, Rachel, his daughter, is coming with the sheep. What do you know? 450 miles under his feet, and who does he find but some shepherds from the very place that he's going who happen to know the very man that he's going to find and if that wasn't enough, oh, look, his daughter Rachel, here she comes.

Coincidence? I think not. The whole conversation has that air of kind of unbelievable luck. What were the chances?

[6 : 18] But the Bible has no concept of luck or coincidence or magic. We're supposed to recognize that this is God keeping his promise to be with Jacob, to protect him, to provide for him, and not to leave him till his home's safe.

It's grace that's brought him safe this far, and grace will lead him home. And now, look, the story really picks up speed.

While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came. As soon as Jacob saw Rachel, he opened the well and gave water to the sheep. As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, he ran to meet him.

Right? It's breathless, isn't it? Now, I don't know if this is true or just legend, but I have heard that there is a phenomenon in New York called riding the green wave.

So you're cruising down one of these kind of super long avenues, and as you approach each intersection, the light turns green at just the right minute so that you get to cruise on through, and you don't have to stop once riding the green wave.

[7 : 31] Apparently, it's quite rare, if not actually just an urban myth. But Jacob is really riding the green wave here, isn't he? Not even an amber. Nothing to stop him.

He's speeding off into God's will at 100 miles an hour. Find a wife from Laban's family. Here comes his daughter now. For the romantics among ye, there's an even bigger sense of this being a moment written in the stars, because this is, if we know the story exactly, how Jacob's mom and dad got together.

Remember this, back in chapter 24, the servant is sent away to Haran, the same place, to find a wife for Isaac. He stops by a well, and who should come along but Rebecca, and soon after her, none other than Laban.

When Jacob first lays eyes on Rachel, there is a serious sense of déjà vu, almost as if God had planned it. It's a match made in heaven.

All the signs are screaming in the first half of this chapter that God is with Jacob, just as he promised.

[8 : 53] God is back all the way. And so, brothers and sisters, that has to be our starting point here too. God is with us on the way.

He is faithful to his promise to protect us and provide for us as we walk with him and one day to bring us home.

Perhaps you can pick out times in your life when that was as clear as day to ye. You couldn't deny God was with ye, because how could things have gone just right, in just that way, without him being in the picture.

And wherever he's taken you since then, you know that he's with you, because you look back and you see how he's sorted it all out for you in the past. Or we look back through history, and we read some old books, and we see that humanly speaking, the church has no right to still be here.

It should have just been stamped out by relentless persecution in the early centuries under the emperors Nero and Diocletian, or crumbled under false teaching under various priests and popes in the Middle Ages.

[10:10] And of course, we could go even further back, couldn't we, to the time of the patriarchs, as we are just now, and see that there's no way on earth that this family should have made it past Genesis 3, let alone all the way through to Jesus and on to the end of Revelation.

Look at where we've come from, and we can see that we are only here today, individually and as a church, because God has kept his word to be with us and keep us, just as he promised.

There's no luck, no chance, no coincidence. He's brought us to this point because he is faithful to his family.

And we need to be sure of that to steady our hearts. We can lose sight of that, can't we, in our own pain and confusion.

But as we zoom out a little bit from our own situation and look back the days, the years, the centuries, we can't miss that God has been as good as his word.

[11:21] I will never leave ye, nor forsake ye. One word of caution in our passage, though, is how we respond when things are going smoothly.

All right, so Jacob sees that everything's going his way. God is with him, and he gets completely carried away in a way that has serious consequences down the line.

Earlier in the story, the servant who went away to find Rebecca was cautious, cautious, prayerful, waiting for God to make the first move. Jacob sees Rachel and rushes in, cries all over her, and shoots his mouth off.

Right, we've heard loads in verses two and three about how the stone was huge and how the shepherds, even they had to wait till everyone was there before they could kind of heft this enormous rock off the mouth of the well and give water to the sheep.

As soon as Jacob sees Rachel, he decides he's going to be the big man and lift the heavy stone off without any help. Right, so we know what he's up to. He is not playing it cool.

[12:35] He's out to impress. And then, verse 11, Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. Not the smoothest first date, is it?

Given that he's not even told this poor girl who he is yet. And importantly, when Laban comes, Jacob doesn't hesitate in verse 13 to tell Laban all these things.

Now, what things? It doesn't say, but a good guess would be that he told Laban about how he's Isaac and Rebekah's son come to marry his daughter. Probably he would have needed to explain then why he was totally on his own and had come without any gifts or money or animals to give him because he's estranged from his family.

Possibly then, how he became estranged from his family? By having tricked his brother and stolen God's blessing out from under his nose. verse 13 says he told Laban everything.

Very soon, we're going to discover that Laban is not the kind of guy who you want to know everything about you. And as beautiful as Rachel is, her character leaves a lot to be desired.

[13:59] It's a warning to us, isn't it, that even when things seem to be going smoothly, that's as much a test of our character as when things are not going well. When we know God is with us and he's for us, we should walk prayerfully with wisdom, waiting for God to make the way clear to us, not rushing in in our own great wisdom and grasping at what's in front of us without waiting for God to show us how and when.

Be it a relationship, a job, a move, a commitment, any decision, any crossroads in our life. God's blessing is never an excuse to take things into our own hands in a hasty or headstrong way. Jacob's path is about to get a lot rougher and that's not all his fault, but he certainly doesn't help himself by the foolish way that he responds to God's gracious help on the smooth part of his journey.

So let's see how that goes then in our second point. God's way is never straightforward. Laban's reply to Jacob in verse 14 is the first sign that things are about to get bumpy.

I think it sounds really warm, doesn't it? Surely you are my bone and flesh. Come on in, nephew, you're one of us, you're part of the family. But it also could be quite sinister, couldn't it?

[15:34] Come on in, you're mine. It's an echo of what Adam said to Eve in the garden. Adam delighted over this new woman because he saw in her his counterpart, his equal and his opposite number.

We're one, he said. At last, you're bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. flesh. But we've seen through Genesis, haven't we, how sin has damaged every human relationship since then, even in this family.

Again, don't know if you're a reader, we're great lovers of the Gruffalo in our house. If you know the story, you'll know that a mouse meets a fox, a snake, and an owl, and they all extend very warm invitations to the mouse.

Come and have tea in my treetop house. But even a toddler can see that the mouse is not being invited to be a guest in their houses. He will be the tea.

I think that is what's going on here. Laban's words are a warm welcome, hiding a scheming heart. The huge irony in our passage is that Jacob, the deceiver, doesn't see it coming.

[16:50] This is the Jacob who tricked his brother into selling him his inheritance at the price of a bowl of stew. Now he is tricked into giving up 14 years of labor to his own uncle for two marriages, one of which he never wanted.

So how does that come about? Well, after a month, Laban says to Jacob, give me a price. You shouldn't be here serving for nothing. What do you want? And it's only now that we find out that Laban has not one but two daughters.

daughters. And notice how Genesis describes them in verse 16. Like, an older daughter, Leah, as well as a younger daughter, Rachel.

Now, if you've been through our series so far, does that not give you butterflies? How's that gone before? Two brothers, now two sisters, one older, one younger.

Now, like the brothers, that's not the only difference between them. Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance.

[17:59] People speculate over Leah's eyes. Was she short-sighted or partially blind? We're not told. We're only told that whatever it was affected her appearance. Because by contrast with Leah's weak eyes, Rachel was beautiful.

So now we know why it's taken us so long to meet Leah, because Jacob only has eyes for Rachel. In fact, Jacob loved Rachel. Let me say the Bible isn't approving Jacob's choice. It's not necessarily disapproving either.

It's being realistic about the human heart. Jacob chooses lovely Rachel over unloved Leah. It's a familiar story, isn't it?

Things like that are really painful. And perhaps there's something about you, your appearance that makes you feel less than beautiful. Perhaps you've grown up with sisters or friends that people gush over and ignore you.

[19:06] God knows about that. And he recognizes it in his words. Leah is unfairly unloved. And if you've experienced anything like that, God cares as he cared for Leah.

We'll see that next time in Genesis or you can read on to verse 31. For now, what's obvious is that Jacob is going gaga for Rachel. Name your prices, Laban.

I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter, Rachel. And now one writer pointed out in the week that slaves would only serve six years before being set free.

Jacob is offering way over the price. Today, a young man might bring a ring, mightn't he, if he proposed. The rule of thumb is that that ring should cost something like three months wages. Well, Jacob doesn't have a ring, but if he did, he'd be offering a hundred-carat diamond. But then again, we wonder, he is asking for someone's daughter as his wages.

[20:13] That's a bit sticky, isn't it? You might almost expect her dad to say either she's priceless, you can't buy her, or your family, if you like her, why don't you marry her and forget the work?

Instead, he replies, as if they're talking about a used car or an old computer, better that I give her to you than that I give her to any other man. Stay with me.

Again, the Bible is not saying what's going on is right, only that it happened. And indeed, we're going to see how this wicked deal does so much damage in the pages to come.

Jacob serves his seven years, and if this doesn't make you puke, I don't know what will. They seem to him but a few days. Because of the love he had for her. He's totally blinded, isn't he, by his love to what's really going on.

Meanwhile, Laban seems to have forgotten all about the engagement. Jacob has to remind him he's done his time, so can he have his wife now? Laban doesn't say anything, but he gets the party together, doesn't he?

[21:22] Sadly, Jacob's family can't make it. It's only the people of the place there, which serves to remind us how vulnerable Jacob is. He's here, no family, no money, no home.

He's completely at Laban's mercy, which makes it even harder to read verse 23. But in the evening, he took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob, and he went into her.

The deceiver has been deceived. He turns over in the morning, and behold, it was Leah. Now, clearly, the punch lands hardest on Jacob, doesn't it?

But just to pause for a minute on his new bride, she's been palmed off by a father who didn't love her onto a new husband who didn't love her.

this will eat away at Leah for years to come. In fact, her first three children are all named after her suffering, verse 32, 33, and 34.

[22 : 30] They are cries for help. She longs to hear Jacob say to her, doesn't she, what Adam said to Eve, at last, bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.

Instead, she is unloved and unwanted. Worse still, she's joined in the marriage only a week later by none other than her beautiful little sister. Now she is trapped under her shadow for good.

Simply to recognize, brothers and sisters, that Jacob isn't the only one who gets a crook in his lot in our passage. As Thomas Boston would say, everybody's lot in this world has some crook in it.

We'll come back to Leah next time, but for now, it's Jacob that the camera follows. Just feel the irony that throbs through verses 25 and 26. Look, Jacob says, what is this you have done to me? Did I not serve you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me? Isn't that just the question that his own brother and dad would want to put to him?

[23 : 44] Jacob, who mercilessly lied, cheated and stole from his own family to get what he wanted? But just listen to Laban's reply. Laban said, it is not so done in our country, listen, to give the younger before the firstborn.

Do you feel that knife twisting in Jacob's heart? You wonder if he fainted or he vomited as he felt his own life imploding and the whole world that he's built for himself crashing in on his head because of course, this has been the issue all along, hasn't it?

Jacob, the younger brother, treading on his older brother to get to the top. Now he has been trodden on by a man who won't let the younger usurp the older, not out of any sense of justice, but out of cruelty.

Laban has exploited Jacob, deceived him, stabbed him in the back, put a serious dent in his future, a crook in his lot. And now he demands on top of that another seven year service for Rachel too.

So do you see the irony, the twisting knife, Jacob, who was led to Laban's house with not a penny to his name, is landed with 14 years hard labor, two wives and two servants, seven years behind him and seven years still to go, working for the very man who has shattered his life.

[25 : 27] So, is God still with him? We know that he is, so how has it all gone so, so wrong?

Friends, God's road is rough. That's not necessarily an easy thing for us to hear.

If you're finding life really hard, it's hard to hear that this is the life God's got planned for you. But that is much better news than what we more readily tell ourselves and believe, which is either that our lives are spinning wildly out of control or that it's down to something that we've done and it's all our fault.

Right, isn't that where our thoughts go when it starts to get rough? What wrong turning have I taken to lead me down this terrible path? That's the veiled dig behind the whole self-help industry, isn't it?

If you broke it, you can fix it. Or, what's pulling the strings of my life that I can't control? Which I think is basically where most people kind of credit their existence, the universe, chance, luck, coincidence, karma, whatever you call it, some unknown and impersonal force that toys with us.

[26 : 55] Either way, there's nothing you can do to get back on the right track because you're not in control of your life and you don't know what is. Friends, Genesis tells us much better news, which is that the God who created the world is the faithful God of his fallen people.

And when the road gets rough for us, the reason isn't ultimately because you've taken a wrong turn and it's not because your life is out of control. It's because that's the path that your loving creator and faithful God is walking with you down.

God is not waiting for you on the nice, straight, and easy path wondering where you've got to.

He is holding your hand on the twisting, narrow, and rough path that you're on. Everyone's life is like that in some way.

Everyone's lot has some crook in it. And Christians don't get a free pass. God's blessing does not come with an easy life or a lesser crook.

[28 : 15] Perhaps, like Jacob, your life has a permanent trouble in it. His marriage isn't something that can be undone. It's not for a season. It's for life.

Health problems that can't be cured. broken relationships that can't be mended. Difficult marriages that can't be undone.

A lifestyle you wouldn't have chosen. Or perhaps choices that you can't unmake. God leads us down paths that we wouldn't have chosen for ourselves.

If you're sitting here this morning and you don't think that's you, it's coming. It's coming. especially if you're walking with him because he wants you to know that however rough the way gets, he is with you and will keep you and won't ever leave you until he's brought you safely to himself.

Our God wants us to lean on him as we walk, not cruise along in our own wisdom and strength. His road is rough for a reason. And so brothers and sisters, if your life isn't going the way you wanted or you're in a difficult season, Genesis invites us not to let that cast a shadow over God's promises.

[29 : 42] He promises he is still with you and he is still there to protect you and to provide for you. So trust his promise and walk with him in faith.

Lift your eyes up off the floor says Genesis and look back and see his record of faithfulness in the past and then turn and set your eyes on the eternal horizon that he is leading you towards and believe him when he says that if you've set out with him through life, he will stick with you and will bring you home to glory whatever it takes.

Because the good work he's begun in us he will bring to completion on the day of Christ Jesus. His grace has led us safe this far and his grace will see us home.

Let's commit ourselves to him now as we pray. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Faithful God, we come before you as those who live troubled lives and Father, it is difficult to see sometimes from where we're standing where the road is going or why it has had to come this way. our Father, we thank you that you never leave us or forsake us and that there is never a step that we have taken with you that you have not been holding us up all the way.

[31 : 27] And Father, we pray this morning that you would grant us that faith to lean hard on your promises when they are least visible to us. Lord, we pray for those who are in difficult seasons and those, Lord, whose lives are marked by particular suffering.

Lord, would you draw near to these dear brothers and sisters even today to assure them that you are true and trustworthy, that you are with them and for them. And Lord, there is mystery in your ways and your ways are higher than our ways.

But Lord, help us as a church family to walk together and Lord, to seek you together. And Lord, when one of us is weak, Lord, let others come around to strengthen.

Father, help us, we pray, to walk together by faith. And Lord, for those who are not yet walking with you, Lord, would you assure them this morning that you are with them in their troubles, Lord, whatever they be.

Be with us, we pray, our God, in Jesus' name. Amen.