

A Faithful God in a Foreign Land

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[0 : 00] I'm always here for you. The door is always open. Call me anytime. Come round whenever you want.

Those are good words to hear from a friend, aren't they? Because they're the words of someone who cares about you enough to always have time for you.

Maybe you have someone like that in your life. Someone whose door you feel able to knock on at any hour, day or night.

That is a great thing to have, isn't it? But wouldn't it be even better if someone who really cared about you could say, not only I'm always here for you, but I'm always with you.

In your time of need, you won't have to come knocking on my door because I'll already be there right next to you. When you're unable to reach out, I'll already be by your side.

[1 : 20] The promise of an open door is good, but even better is the promise of somebody always by your side.

Last week, we saw Jacob's family, didn't we, grow because of God's promise.

Just a couple of chapters ago, Jacob was all alone in the wilderness on the run from his murderous brother who he had deceived.

And now we are picking up the story here in the middle of chapter 30, at a point where Jacob all of a sudden has a blossoming family of his own. He's the father of 11 sons and a daughter, not because of his goodness, but because of God's faithfulness.

But turn back with me to chapter 38. And you'll see that an abundance of offspring was not all that God had promised Jacob.

[2 : 19] Just look with me there from verse 13 of chapter 28. This is God's promise to Abraham, to Isaac, and now to Jacob. He says, I am the Lord, the God of Abraham, your father, and the God of Isaac.

The land on which you lie, I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south.

And in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, listen to this part of the promise. Behold, 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. We're reading those verses again because they are key to understanding what is going on here in chapter 13.

Last week we saw, didn't we, verse 14 there in the middle, begin to be fulfilled. Your offspring shall become like the dust of the earth. The children are coming thick and fast. The key to understanding this week's passage is seeing what's happening just either side of that verse there.

[3 : 50] What does God say to Jacob? The land on which you lie I will give to you. And behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.

I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you. God promises to bring Jacob back to this land, the promised land.

But God also promises, doesn't he, to be with Jacob and to keep him until he is brought back to the promised land.

What we are going to see this morning is Jacob longing for home but learning that God is faithful even in a foreign land.

So let's begin where our passage begins this morning with Jacob longing for home. Come back with me to chapter 30. And you'll see there in verse 25 of chapter 30 that as soon as Rachel bears Joseph, Jacob goes to Laban with a request, doesn't he?

[5 : 05] Send me away that I may go to my home and country. Now at this point in the story, Jacob has been in Haran for at least 14 years.

It's where he met the woman he loved. It's where he got married. It's where all of his children up to this point have been born and have grown up.

I mean, surely, even if it maybe felt a little unfamiliar at first, surely now it's beginning to feel a little bit like home. But we know, don't we, that's not how home works.

Home is about much more, isn't it, than the address that happens to be on our bank statement. And Jacob knows where his true home is.

It's not where he is living right now. It's not where he got married or where his children were born and grown up. Home for Jacob, true home for Jacob, is the place where God's promises find fulfillment.

[6 : 23] God had promised him a land. He had promised to bring him to that land and so Jacob knew ultimately that is where he truly belonged. In the land of promise, not the land of Haran.

Home is where God's promises find their fulfillment. And Jacob was longing for that land.

And that would have meant something, I think, probably quite a lot to the original audience of this book. The book of Genesis, what would have first been received by the people of Israel in the time of Moses after the exodus from Egypt, looking into the promise lands that they were standing on the cusp of.

Jacob had been on the move for 14 years. The people of Israel had been in Egypt for hundreds of years. They knew what it meant to be longing for home.

They'd been slaves in Egypt for generations. They'd been wandering, homeless in the wilderness for 40 years. Here, finally, in front of them, was the place where God's promises would find their fulfillment.

[7 : 52] But we learn, don't we, later on in the Bible, particularly in the book of Hebrews, that the rest that that home promised, or the rest that God promised, never quite arrived in the promised land of Canaan.

Not because God was not faithful to his promise, but because God always had something bigger and better in mind. When Joshua led this nation into the promised land, it was only ever a foretaste, a picture of the true and eternal rest God was promising his people in their true and eternal home. Apparently, up to 70% of adults have struggled with homesickness in their adult life. This isn't just something we feel when we're 12 years old and away on a school trip.

I would mean that the majority of us here in this room have had some experience of it. Likely, some are feeling it right now.

Unsurprisingly, it's particularly prevalent among students and internationals. Homesickness.

Longing to bear where we feel at home, where we feel at rest.

[9 : 24] there's a very real sense in which homesickness should be normal in the Christian life.

Because we should all, shouldn't we be longing for the place where God's promises find their complete and lasting fulfillment. At the beginning of his first letter, the Apostle Peter describes Christians as exiles.

in this world because this is not really where home is for us. Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, tells us to seek and set our minds on the things above.

A sense of homesickness is the natural state for God's people in this world because home is where we find true rest. and that home is waiting for us not anywhere in this world but in the world to come.

Longing for home. A place where God's promises find their fulfillment. That's where Jacob was. That is where the Israelites were.

[10 : 42] That is where we are. not yet fully at rest but one day soon to be. Jacob longs for home, the land of God's promise.

But in the meantime, he finds himself living with Laban. Our second point this morning, living with Laban.

And living with Laban is most definitely not restful. That is decidedly hard work. In the story, things seem to start on a fairly positive note.

Right, Jacob asks for leave to go with his family and Laban sees what he's about to lose, doesn't he? Not his daughters or his grandchildren, that doesn't seem to immediately concern him.

But losing his wealth, that's a worry. Because Laban knows that Jacob's presence in his home has made him rich.

[11:53] Right, Laban is minted. The guy has made a fortune and he knows it's only because Jacob has been around. So he says in verse 28, name your wages and I will give it.

This last Friday, I phoned to cancel our broadband package. And as soon as I said I was leaving, you've probably been here before, as soon as you threaten to go away, they come out, don't they, with a million offers that were nowhere to be seen beforehand.

hands. That's what initially happens with Laban. Don't leave, Jacob. That's going to cost me. I'll cut you a better deal. What do you want to stay?

But Jacob refuses. It's time for him to go and provide for his own household. I've done my time, he says. I've served you for 14 years, seven of which you tricked me into.

I've done it all. It's time for me to go. So Laban concedes in verse 31 and that's right. What then shall I give you?

[13:03] But Jacob refuses to take anything. Kind of. He doesn't take anything over and above what he is due from Laban's hand. But he does say, doesn't he, let me pass through your flock once more and take for myself the speckled and spotted sheep, the black lambs and the spotted and speckled goats.

It's a bit of a tongue twister. I was speaking to someone this week about job applications and how some of them ask you what salary you're expecting.

What do you think you should get paid? Answering that kind of question is like my worst nightmare. Well Jacob is basically being asked that question here by Laban. Name your price.

And Jacob in giving this answer about the spotted and speckled sheep is basically saying give me minimum wage.

What Jacob is asking here is at the very kind of bottom end of a salary for a hired shepherd. There was nothing special about the spotted and speckled sheep but they would have made up a small fraction of the flock.

[14:24] Jacob is saying don't give me special treatment as your son-in-law. Just let me take the minimum, the absolute minimum payment for the work I've done.

Laban, unsurprisingly, right, he jumps at the offer doesn't he? Great, you've got a deal. He's getting out the contract as quickly as he possibly can and getting Jacob to sign it before he changes his mind. Laban loves this deal.

But he thinks of a way to make it even better, for himself at least. Verse 35. But that day, Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it and every lamb that was black and put them in charge of his sons.

And he set a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob pastured the rest of Laban's flock.

You can imagine, can't you, the smugness on Laban's face as he introduces Jacob to his specially curated flock, monochrome as can be.

[15:45] turning to his son with a sly kind of grin in his face, saying, here you go, take every spotted sheep you can find. Jacob longed for home, but in the meantime, found himself living with Laban.

Jacob was trying to live faithfully and fairly. my honesty will answer for me, he says in verse 33. In spite of his past, he really seems here to be trying to do the right thing.

But righteous motives are not always immediately rewarded, are they? He does his best, he does what he thinks is right, and it immediately blows up in his face.

How many of us, I wonder, can recall a similar experience at work, at uni, at school, with friends, where you went out of your way to do the right thing, only to find that everything seems to instantly go pear shaped.

We know what it means to long for home, and we know what it means to find yourself treated unfairly by faithless people in a world where you are trying to be faithful. You can imagine Jacob wondering, can't you, as he is stuck in this foreign land, far from home, being cheated out of his wages.

[17:27] You can imagine him wondering, can't you, is God really here with me? Have you ever felt yourself feeling that way?

I know God promises to be with me, I believe God promises to be with me, but right now, right now it just really doesn't feel like it. That's probably how Jacob was feeling at the end of verse 36.

As he is given a field of perfectly white sheep to go and pasture. Jacob wanted to return home, but he couldn't travel with a family on a long journey without any provision, so he asked for a little and was given nothing.

And so here he is, stuck in Haran with nothing to show for 14 years hard labor, and no obvious route of ever getting home. Where are you, God?

I've tried to live faithfully and look at the mess I'm in. Where are you? you? But then we find some poplar trees, some peeled white streaks, and soon we see God's faithful provision for his people.

[19:03] So we come to a third and final point this morning, learning of God's faithfulness. things. There's no doubting, I don't think that, I mean, Jacob knows exactly what's happened here, doesn't he?

Right, he spent 14 years past from this flock, he knows there's speckled and spotted among it, and now he's looking at a flock of perfectly white sheep and perfectly black goats.

It's obvious what Laban has been up to. So Jacob hatches a plan. Right, he peels what white streaks into fresh sticks of poplar, almond, and plain trees, and places them in the troughs of the strongest and healthiest of the flock.

Apparently for sheep and goats, feeding time is mating time, why not multitask, and next thing you know, the flock is producing an abundance of healthy, strong, striped, spotted, and speckled goats and sheep.

Has Jacob kind of cracked the secret? Has he figured out the key to altering livestock's genetic codes? Well, I don't think so.

[20:22] And I don't think we're supposed to think so. Every culture, doesn't it, believes a long list of things that are not, strictly speaking, scientifically true.

we're not beyond that ourselves, are we? I mean, there's, don't want to burst too many bubbles, there's no such thing as a three-second rule if you drop your food. Goldfish can remember things for up to three months apparently.

Bulls are colourblind, so reds not exactly that much bothers you them. Don't let anyone pee on you if you get stung by a jellyfish.

we could go on and on, couldn't we? Sometimes we really do believe things that really don't work. I think we get two such examples of that in this chapter.

Remember the mandrakes that we were thinking about last week? Quite a lot of blank faces, I thought they were quite memorable. Earlier in chapter 30, Rachel got her hand on some mandrakes, these herbs, because she thought, as did many other people at the time, that mandrakes make you more fertile.

[21:43] So Rachel got her hand on some mandrakes, and lo and behold, later in the chapter, she became pregnant. So are mandrakes the key to pregnancy, just as stripped trees are the secret to striped sheep?

Well, to any onlooker, that might well have appeared to have been what happened. Rachel got mandrakes, Rachel became pregnant, Jacob peeled some stripes and some trees, spotted sheep were born.

But the narrator filled in the gap with the mandrakes, didn't he? Verse 22, then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her, and opened her womb.

It wasn't the mandrakes that opened Rachel's womb, it was God. And I think, and we'll have a look in just a moment's time, we get this from later on a bit in chapter 31, we're meant to see what's going on with the sticks of poplar and almond and plain trees the same way.

Because if verse 37 to 40 told us that Jacob built a laboratory and altered the goat's genetic code, we might come away from this chapter, kind of being amazed by Jacob's ingenuity.

[23:03] Man, this guy was really ahead of his time. Instead, we come away slightly baffled by Jacob's methods. And that, I think, is meant to lead us to learn about God's faithfulness to his people, even when they are in a foreign land.

That's where it's meant to lead us because that's exactly where it eventually led Jacob. Just glance down with me into chapter 31. This is a little while later.

He's speaking to Rachel and Leah. Look at what he says in verse 9. Thus, God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me.

Similarly, in verse 12. Why are all the flocks spotted and speckled? Because, God says, I have seen all that Laban is doing to you.

This is Jacob learning that God has been faithful to him even when he felt he was all alone. To the eyes of the watching world, Jacob put down some sticks and sheep came out spotted.

[24 : 21] But I think we're supposed to see the bigger picture here. Poplar trees don't produce speckled flocks, but God does. And God can work any and every way through anything to bring about his purposes.

Jacob is longing for home. He's trying to live faithfully in a faithless world. And at times it no doubt felt like he was all alone. And all he's doing here is the best according to what he knew how. But God had made a promise. And if there's one thing we've seen time and time again through this series in Genesis, it's that God keeps his promises.

And so he faithfully works through Jacob's actions to bless the man he had promised to bless. I am with you and I will keep you wherever you go.

I will never leave you. That was always true for Jacob. Even if it didn't always feel true for Jacob.

[25 : 48] Having been mistreated by Laban, Jacob stands at the end of this chapter still in a foreign land, but knowing the care of a faithful God.

He increased greatly and had a wealth of riches as the Lord had promised he would. things. I think it's important as we read through this, things happen quickly in this narrative, don't they?

But these events would have unfolded over at least a couple of years, perhaps as many as five, we learn later on. When Jacob felt trapped in Haran with nothing to feed his own family, it would have been easy to doubt, wouldn't it, day by day.

morning by morning as he wakes up and faces another day in the fields with nothing to show for it, whether God was really there with him.

He didn't know when he stuck those branches in the troughs whether anything would come of it, whether God would work through it or not for at least six months. It would have been a long wait, wouldn't it?

[27 : 02] Sometimes we feel that in our own life. Things go wrong. And it feels like a long old wait to see God's faithfulness come through. The great thing about Genesis is that we get to pull back, don't we, and see God's providence unfold from a distance.

And as we do so, it's plainly obvious, isn't it, that he is not only in control, not only does he know what he's doing, but he is always by Jacob's side.

That might well be how God's promised presence seems in our life too. We wonder where he is day by day, but he is with us through it all.

And his plan is perfect even when we can't make sense of it. God doesn't promise us the same temporal prosperity that Jacob received, but he does promise us his same presence.

The words of the most loving friend and father, not only that the door is always open, but that he is always with us. Jesus ascended into heaven uttering the words to his disciples I am with you always.

[28 : 34] I am with you always to the end of the age. And God is faithful to his promises.

God is with you by his spirit this very day. Even if you feel far from home, he is with you even when you are longing day by day for the land where God's promises find their fulfillment.

He is with you when you feel the faithless in this world seem to be in the ascendancy. He is with you when you wonder if you are on your own.

He is always with you because he has promised to be with you. And he never breaks his promises. Behold, I am with you and I will keep you wherever wherever you go. Let us pray.

[29 : 40] Father, we thank you and praise you that you are a faithful God and that you promise to be with us at all times, in all places.

Father, we thank you that in Christ we have a home to look forward to. you. But until we reach the place where your promises find fulfillment, Lord, help us to live faithfully, even in a faithless world, knowing that you are there with us each and every day in all that we do.

In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.