

'If God is for us, who can be against us?'

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[0 : 00] Let's have this passage open in front of you. Let us ask God for his help with it before we come to it together. Father, we thank you and praise you for your words.

We thank you that you do speak to each and every one of us through it, and we pray you would do so now by your Spirit, that we may grow in our love and our knowledge of you and of your Son, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Well, we were thinking, weren't we, just a little moment ago with the children about what we do when God seems to be leading us down a path that we think surely can't be the right way.

Over the last few chapters of Genesis, Jacob has not had an easy time of it, has he? He had to flee from home because his brother Esau was plotting to kill him.

Admittedly, Jacob wasn't guiltless in that matter, was he? But it wasn't an easy place to begin, and Jacob's road since then has been decidedly rough. He fled to what he thought would be the safety of his uncle's home.

[1 : 19] But it turned out, didn't it, that Laban, Jacob's uncle to whom he fled, is, well, Laban is a piece of work, isn't he?

He is cunning and deceptive, and he has little to no interest in making Jacob's life easy. In fact, he seems only to be uninterested in what he can get out of Jacob.

He made him serve seven years to marry Rachel, only to give him his older daughter Leah instead, and then extracted another seven years of labor from him before giving him Rachel.

And we then saw last week, didn't we, that Laban was determined to send Jacob away with nothing for all the work he had done. He made an agreement that Jacob would take the spotted and speckled sheep, only for Laban to hide all the spotted and speckled sheep three days' journey away.

Jacob has not had it easy. This has been a long 20 years. But we have seen that although the road is not always smooth, God is always faithful.

[2 : 37] God had promised to bless Jacob, and so even through the hardships, we have seen, haven't we, of our kind of our bird's eye view of Jacob's life, that God has been with him.

God has been blessing him. He has blessed him with a family, and he has blessed him with an abundance of possessions. God has been faithful. But God also promised to Jacob that he would bring him back to the promised land.

That is the journey we see begin here in chapter 31. It will be three chapters before Jacob sets foot once more in Canaan.

And we'll take this week and next to see that journey unfold, because while it might only be one journey, the Bible spends a long time in it because we learn a lot from it.

And we learn a lot in particular about the God who is guiding Jacob's footsteps every step of the way. So this morning, as we complete part one of Jacob's journey back to the promised land, we're going to see three things.

[3 : 49] First, we're going to see God's provision, then God's protection, and thirdly, God's preeminence. So let's begin our first point this morning, looking at God's provision.

If you just glance up there with me to the last verse of chapter 30, we are left there, aren't we, with a very wealthy Jacob. He has large flocks, servants, camels, and donkeys.

I spent a few years in London a while ago. If you went right into the center of London, sort of around Regent Street, you'd be almost guaranteed if you spent any length of time there to see the kind of the super wealthy driving down the road very slowly in their fluorescent Lamborghinis.

I'm pretty confident they weren't doing it to get anywhere. Driving through the very center of London was the fastest route to absolutely nowhere. They were doing it to just show off how rich they were.

Well, if you wanted to do the same thing in Jacob's time, right, you would have gone to the marketplaces of Damascus and rode your camel. Camels were a sign of serious wealth.

[5 : 08] And Jacob had camels and large flocks and servants and donkeys. This was more than a man with enough to start up his own petting zoo. He was extremely wealthy.

And Laban's sons did not like what they were seeing, did they? That's where we began our reading. Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, Jacob has taken all that was our fathers and from what was our fathers, he has gained all his wealth.

Here's this Jacob who came with nothing and now from our dad's stuff, he's made himself minted. They didn't like what they were seeing.

At least, that's how they saw it though. Jacob has made himself wealthy of our dad's good. But read on and we know, don't we, and Jacob knows he's not made himself rich.

His riches have not come from his hand, but God. Look at all the language Jacob uses in those verses to describe what has happened over the last 20 years. Verse 7, when Laban tried to cheat him out of his wages, what does Jacob say?

[6 : 26] God did not permit him to harm me. Verse 9, thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me.

Verse 12, God says to Jacob, lift up your eyes and see all the goats that mate with a flock are stripes, spotted and mottled, for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. Rachel and Leah know it too.

Verse 16, all the wealth that God has taken from our father belongs to us and our children. Jacob is preparing here to set out on a mammoth journey with an enormous entourage, but he knows well by this point why it is that he has so much to pack up.

God has provided for him, even when it seemed likely he'd be left with nothing. He says to Laban later on in the chapter, if God had not been by my side, you would have sent me away empty-handed.

Empty-handed unless God had been by his side. We see in these verses, don't we, that for Jacob, God's provision is the difference between poverty and prosperity.

[7 : 47] Now there are, I think, two things that are helpful to take on this. First, we should trust in God's patient provision. For Jacob, yes, he ends up blessed by God's goodness and drain of his love.

for 20 years, okay, for 20 years, he would have very, really wondered if he was about to walk away with nothing. Trusting in God's provision means also trusting in God's timing.

And God's timing is not our timing. When speaking of God's apparent slowness to fulfill his promise, Peter reminds us in the New Testament that to God, one day is a thousand years and a thousand years is one day.

God does promise to provide for our every need, our every need, not our every desire, but he does not always provide according to the timetable we'd sometimes like him to meet.

He knows what he is doing in your life right now. He knows the road he has taken you on. Even if sometimes you're looking out the window and feeling like it must be a wrong turn.

[9 : 02] So we can trust in God's patient provision but we can also rejoice in God's eternal provision. I need to be clear, God does not promise us that the worldly wealth that he blessed Jacob with, right, no matter how faithful we are, we might well live in poverty during this lifetime.

time. But there is a provision and a richness that he blesses us with that far exceeds, right, even the camels that Jacob had.

In the letter to the church in Smyrna at the beginning of the book of Revelation, Jesus says, he says to them, I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich.

I know your tribulation and your poverty but you are rich. What on earth does that mean? I think it means they really are living below the breadline day to day but they nevertheless have a treasure of infinite worth.

Ephesians 1, 3 tells us that we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.

[10 : 32] Through Jesus we have received not only our daily needs but also the riches, the incomparable riches of grace and forgiveness and redemption and eternal life kept in heaven for us.

in Christ we might never be rich in this world but we carry with us a guarantee of an eternal provision that not only surpasses everything in this world and its value but it is also the only provision that meets our deepest needs.

So we should trust in God's provision, trusting also his time with it but we can also praise God for his eternal provision in Christ Jesus.

Secondly, we see in this chapter God's protection. Jacob and his family, they're all agreed at this point that it is time to leave, right?

God has provided for them, Laban does not favor them, it is time to move on and so they go and they go without telling Laban. We get two kind of key details there in verse 19 and 20.

[11 : 45] As they go, Rachel steals her father's household gods okay, tuck that foot away, we're going to pick up that thread of the story in a little while and they go in verse 20 without saying a word to Laban.

Now if this is us kind of jumping into the story for the first time, we might think that seems a little bit unkind, right? He's legging it with Laban's daughters and his grandchildren and not even giving him a chance to give him a hug and wave them off.

I don't think my in-laws would be too thankful if I tried that one. And that is exactly the way Laban will spin it when he catches up with Jacob.

But if we've been following Jacob since his time here, we'll know, won't we, exactly why Laban's doing this. In fact, Jacob explains it a little later in the chapter. Why did Jacob go without telling him?

Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. Laban is the kind of guy who, if you offered him a handshake goodbye, he wouldn't let go until you'd signed over all your possessions and made his name the only one in your will.

[13 : 02] He's not about playing fairly, so Jacob silently sneaks away. But when Laban finds out what's happened three days later, he doesn't exactly brush it off, does he?

He takes his men and sets off on a seven-day chase. And what's important to note here is that a lot of the language is military language.

He pursues Jacob, he overtook him, they pitch their tents opposing one another. He accuses him of driving away his daughters like captives of the sword. This is all the language of the battlefields.

Right? Laban is coming, ready for a fight. But what happens, verse 24? God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.

You watch yourself, Laban. Don't you do what you're planning on doing. It will not end well for you. And Laban knows, doesn't he, who's strongest in this situation.

[14 : 22] He was confident he could overpower Jacob. He knows he's not going to overpower Jacob's God. Verse 29, it is in my power to do you harm, he says to Jacob and his family.

Those are threatening words, aren't they? I think the implication is that he would have. But, but he says, the God of your father spoke to me last night.

God intervenes to protect his people from their pursuers. I think, right, I think at this point in the narrative, we're supposed to be kind of hearing, sensing a whole load of parallels.

Let me just summarize what's gone on in the last two chapters of Genesis and see if you can think of another biblical story with a similar plot line.

Here's what we've seen since the start of Genesis chapter 30. Right? God's family find themselves dwelling in a foreign land where they start having an abundance of children.

[15 : 34] Originally, relations with the head of the house in whose land they were living were okay, but things soon deteriorate to the point that God's people had to flee. They asked for permission to go, but ten times the conditions changed for departure, before eventually God's people upped and left with a wealth of the land in which they had been living in.

Not long after they leave, the head of the house in whose land they were living starts chasing after them, with the intention of waging war against them before God divinely intervenes to protect and deliver his people.

Sound familiar at all? That is what happens in Genesis 30 and 31. It's also what happens in Exodus 1 to 14.

What are we supposed to take from that? They're not identical stories by any means, but I think we're meant to see and hear God's perpetual protection for his people.

The Exodus generation didn't just happen to be in the right place at the right time to be beneficiaries of God's protection. God always protects his people and specifically I think we see from these parables that he protects his people so that they would be his people in his promised land being blessed by the fulfillment of his promises.

[17 : 05] That is the goal of God's protection. It explains in part doesn't it why we might not always be protected in our own lives from every inconvenience that we'd like to be protected from.

God has a particular end in mind and he is going to keep us to that end. And in Christ we are promised that same protection not immediately alleviating every one of life's trials but safe and secure in Christ.

That we too would one day be God's people in his promised land being blessed by the fulfillment of his promises. I read earlier in the service from Romans 8 if God is for us who can be against us?

Not Laban, not the Egyptians, not anyone. God faithfully protected Jacob that he might take him to Canaan because he had given him his words.

How much more so to those of us who he has not only given his words but has given us his son? He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how hail he not also with him graciously give us all things?

[18 : 36] God has given you his son this morning and he who began a good work and you will bring it to completion. He will not leave any one of his people behind but through his gracious protection will take us all safely to our eternal home in Christ.

God will protect us to that end. But it's important to remember, isn't it, that God's protection does not look like plain sailing in everyday life, does it?

Not only did Jacob undergo countless trials in his life over the course of many years, even in the moment where God was protecting him here, it looked like he was being overtaken by an enemy that had the strength to overpower him.

God being with us and God being for us will not flatten out every bump. Life will still be full of moments where we cannot comprehend God's purposes but he will, he will, he always has and he always will carry us safely over and through each and every one of them.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing. Finally, in this chapter we see God's preeminence, third and final point this morning, God's preeminence.

[20 : 06] Preeminence just means kind of surpassing everything in every way. In the second half of this chapter it invites us to make a comparison between the almighty God of Jacob and the household gods of Laban.

Because of God's divine intervention, Laban is not going to lay a hand on Jacob but neither is he about to walk away empty-handed because something is missing, verse 30.

Now you have gone away because you long greatly for your father's house but why did you steal my gods? Why did you steal my gods?

Laban has lost his gods. Jacob, unaware that it was his dearly beloved Rachel who had pocketed her dad's god, says go ahead. He thinks he's got nothing to hide.

Go ahead, search everything everything and whoever is found with them shall not live. So Laban goes searching for his gods.

[21 : 17] I think we're meant to see the irony here. Think about what we've seen over the last couple of chapters. God, the one true living God, he has opened the wounds of barren women.

He's caused white sheep to bring forth spotted lambs. He's faithfully, hasn't he kept his every promise to his faithless people. He's ordained all the events of the last 20 years so that Jacob would return to his land with a large family and a wealth of possessions and he has protected Jacob by speaking to Laban through his dreams.

There is nothing, there's nothing this God cannot do. There is nothing that is outside of his control. Meanwhile, Laban is looking for his gods.

He's picking up the pillow in Leah's tent and looking under to see if he can find them. He's rummaging in the saddle of Jacob's camel to see if he can find his God.

He searches high and low before coming to Rachel's tent and Rachel hides his God by sitting on them and saying, she cannot rise for the way of the woman is upon me.

[22 : 44] Do you see the contrast? Jacob sees the contrast as he unloads two decades of pent-up frustration on Laban.

He makes it clear once more, doesn't he, that while Laban has lost his God, Jacob's God has sovereignly provided for him even when Laban would have given him nothing.

And then we see later in the chapter that the two of them come to make a covenant together. And Laban in verse 53, he swears on the name of two gods.

But Jacob's having none of it. Laban swears on the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor. The Hebrew makes it a little more clear that it is two different gods that Laban's swearing by here.

Jacob swore by the fear of his father Isaac. Jacob knows there is only one God at play here.

[23 : 58] Now imagine if I asked for a show of hands and I put up your hand if you lost your gods in the last year. I don't imagine many of you are about to stick your hand in the air.

But let me just briefly dig under the surface for a moment and answer this question just to yourself. What do you think provides for and protects you?

What do you think provides for and protects you? What do you think provides for and protects you? Tim Keller the late pastor of Redeemer Church in New York I think fairly identified love, money and power as the idols of our age.

Few people in the United Kingdom today have images of gods sitting on their mantelpiece that might get nicked. But millions of people in this country do have very real idols set up in their hearts.

our gods are whatever we think will provide for and protect us. And for a lot of people today love, money, power, that is what we think will protect us.

[25 : 30] Love, money and power are what we think will provide for our every need. Laban thought it was his household gods and we rightly kind of don't we chuckle at this misplaced trust.

But if our hope for lasting provision and permanent protection is in anything, anything other than the creator himself, we're not really doing much better.

there is only one god and he is preeminent. There is none, nothing, no one who compares to him.

If you tried to compare anything or anyone to him, even if it was all the money in the world, we would find the same contrast as we see between Laban's god and Jacob's god in these chapters.

one holds everything in his hands. One can provide for every need. One is orchestrating all of history to provide for and protect his people and so bring them safely to their eternal home with him.

[26 : 45] The other gods, every other god, does not only not provide us but leave us, don't they? Chasing after them.

searching for them, looking for them in the hope they will look after us. But a god you can lose is no god at all.

That was true of Laban's god. It is true of love, it is true of money, it is true of power, it is true of anything and everything else. We might hold up as idols in our own lives, looking to them for provision and protection.

The good news of Genesis chapter 31 is that there is only one god and he is over and above everything and everyone and he is working all things for the good of his people even when they cannot see it and understand it themselves.

There is only one god and he alone is worthy of our worship, he alone deserves our praise and he alone can keep every one of his promises and so he alone provides for our every need and protects his people every step of the way.

[28 : 11] So let us gladly and joyfully put our hope and trust alone in the preeminent God who can do all things, praising him for his provision in Christ, trusting in his promised protection to bring all his people safely home.

Jacob's God is our God, the creator God. There is none like him, there never has been and never will be. So let us put our hope in him and in him alone.

Let us pray. together. Father, we thank you and praise you for who you are.

We rejoice in your provision for us. We thank you that you care for us each and every day. You place the foods on our tables before us. you clothe us, you place the roofs over our head, but we thank you most of all for the provision of our greatest needs and giving us your one and only son, Jesus Christ, that we might have redemption in him and hope of life everlasting.

Father, may we trust in your protection each and every day, knowing that you are a God who is for us. And we praise you for your preeminence, for there is none like you.

[29 : 50] You are holy, holy, holy. And we thank you and praise you that the one true living God is our God, who we can come and worship for and live for and enjoy forever.

In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. Amen.