

God who gives Victory over Opposition

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[0 : 0 0] Father God, thank you for your word. Thank you for how true it is. Thank you for how vital it is for us in our lives. Please help me as I preach and everyone as they listen. In Jesus' name, Amen.

One of the most common prayers in our church this past season has been for religious freedom. And actually, as you walk out the door, there's a petition to sign that we can petition our local member of parliament to maintain and preserve our religious freedoms. Christian doctrines, which were once widely accepted by our society, now need the protection of law. Otherwise, we might one day be accused of hate speech or bigotry or something like that.

And the classic Christian response in times of trouble is this. Don't worry, God is with you. But what is that worth? Think about your children or your grandchildren.

Think about the dangers and the troubles of life they've yet to face. So jobs and money and relationships and sickness. And not to mention where our society will stand on religious freedom in a generation to come.

If I said to you, don't worry, God is with them. What is that worth to you? In our passage, Jacob is in trouble on all sides. He's journeying home to the promised land.

[1 : 1 9] He has his father-in-law, Laban, chasing him from behind. And he's got his big bad brother, Esau, waiting for him ahead next week. He is in danger all around.

Jacob needs to learn what it is worth that God is with him. And so on your screen there, thanks, Wolf, on the screen is a promise God made to Jacob specifically.

And what I've done, I've indented the two parts of the promise. And those two parts of the promise are our two points in the sermon today. So notice the first part there, I will watch over you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this land.

Both parts of the promise are joined by the bit at the top. I am with you. For us here, as we journey to our promised land, when we feel surrounded by trouble on all sides, we need to learn what it is worth that God is with us.

Christians trot out this very glib statement all the time. God's with you, don't worry. But what is that worth we need to learn? So point number one. We didn't read it, as I said, but if you can just cast your eye over to verse 25, under the heading where it says, Jacob's flocks increase.

[2 : 4 1] Jacob has now been working for Laban for 20 years since last week when we left him. But finally he's had enough and he wants to go home. That's verse 26. You see, last week we said Jacob was arrogant, that he was self-made, that he needed some discipline.

Well, it turns out that 20 years under a boss like Laban is just what the doctor ordered. Because now he's learning the lesson. He's learning what God is like. And he says to Laban in verse 30, He says, The little you had before I came has increased greatly, and the Lord has blessed you, Laban, wherever I, Jacob, have been.

You see, now he wants to go home, and he wants his share of Laban's wealth. But Jacob knows him all too well. Laban is his arch enemy. He knows he's not going to get a penny without a fight.

And so what he does is challenge Laban to a game of sheep chess. Now, I think I've seen chess played with real, actual people. But Laban is playing with sheep.

Verse 32, he says, Let me go through all your flocks today and remove from them every speckled or spotted sheep, every dark-colored lamb, every spotted or speckled goat. They will be my wages.

[3 : 56] Jacob says his severance pay for 20 years of making Laban rich will be just a few speckled and spotty livestock. He's beginning sheep chess with just the pawns.

Now, Laban must be licking his lips and clapping his hands together. Jacob seems to have checkmated himself right out of the gate. And Laban, being Laban, decides to cheat just for good measure.

If you play a game with anyone who cheats, we have in our family. Some people cheat and they think it's funny. It's really not. But anyway, Laban decides to cheat. And so what he does is he orders his sons to remove all the speckled and spotty and stripy animals and move them three days away.

That is verse 35 and 36. You see, if Jacob's severance pay is to be only the odd-colored animals, Laban is going to leave him only the white animals.

Because even I know that white sheep produce white lambs and speckled sheep produce speckled and spotty lambs. Last time Laban and Jacob played chess, it was for daughters.

[5 : 06] Remember last week? And Laban won that game, didn't he? He managed to get poor old ugly Leah married off. Sorry. And he got 14 years of hard labor out of Jacob.

But this time it is not Jacob versus Laban. It is Jacob's God versus Laban instead. See, Laban is rich and powerful.

And he is cunning and cruel. He's a bully. He's enough to strike fear into the heart of Jacob. But God laughs at the Labans of the world. And what happens next is too unbelievable to make up.

So please look at it. Verse 37 and 38. Jacob makes stripy sticks. And he does that by stripping the bark off branches. And he puts those branches in the watering troughs of all the pure colored animals, which Laban has left him.

Verse 39. That's the one that baffles the average Aussie sheep farmer. It says, Whenever they, that is the white animals, mated in front of the stripy branches, they bore young that were streaked or speckled or spotted.

[6 : 10] You see, if you think you can checkmate God, he will turn the normal laws of farming on their head just to laugh at you. See, we're supposed to laugh rather than be afraid of the Labans of the world.

Jacob endured 20 years of enslavement and mistreatment. But the whole time God has kept him safe wherever he has been. That was point number one. You see, he's starting to learn what it is worth that God is with him.

That is the lesson he's going to need to learn for the bigger danger that is about to come in point number two. So have a look at chapter 31. You see, not since Jacob ran for his life from brother Esau has he felt the same terror he feels in chapter 31.

And it's because of four small words in verse 1. It says, Laban's sons were saying. We spoke a lot about Laban's daughters.

We never looked at his sons, but they are starting to talk. And they said in verse 2, In other words, he has stolen our inheritance.

[7 : 26] And as things get really dangerous and menacing, Jacob's God shows up. For the first time in 20 years, he speaks.

Verse 3, Then the Lord said to Jacob, Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives. The trouble for Jacob is that is no help. You see, the land of his fathers means the land of angry Isaac.

He's still angry that Jacob cheated him. And to your relatives, that means the big bad brother Esau who wants him dead. There's trouble from a dad and his brothers behind.

There's trouble from a dad and his brother ahead. Jacob is surrounded. He is trapped. And in this crisis, we will learn what 20 years of discipline has taught him.

His only hope is there at the end of verse 3. It's our theme today. It says, I will be with you. Jacob is about to learn what that is worth.

[8 : 26] In verse 13, The angel of God takes them back. So over the page, verse 13. The angel of God takes them back to the time when Jacob and God first met. He says, I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me.

Remember, Jacob made a promise. He said, If God will be with me, will bring me home safely, then the Lord will be my God. And God says, Now leave this land at once and go back home.

I'm about to make that happen for you. And so Jacob gives the news, or gives his wives the news that every man in the world, or every husband in the world is terrified about.

He says, Darlings, we need to pack up everything, leave our home and move in with my family. So you could imagine sort of like a frying pan coming at his head.

But instead, something remarkable happens. And I think this is a sign that God is going to bring Jacob home. For the first time, we see Rachel and Leah united.

[9 : 28] Look at the start of verse 14. It says, Then Rachel and Leah replied. See, Rachel and Leah were always in division, fighting over who's got the most amount of babies.

But together united. They say, Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father's estate? Doesn't he regard us as foreigners? Not only has he sold us, but he's used up what was paid for us.

Surely all the wealth that God took away from our father belongs to us and our children. So, Jacob, do whatever God has told you. And as they begin to pack up the caravan and assemble everything, Rachel does something really strange.

Verse 19. Rachel stole her father's household gods. Now, we're not exactly sure why. Maybe she stole it out of revenge. So, Laban, you stole my husband for seven years.

I'm going to steal your gods. But I think she stole it for protection. See, she knows that God is with them. But like everything in paganism, you need to hedge your bets.

[10 : 29] So, she makes sure the gods are with them by kidnapping them and putting them in her saddle. By now, Laban hears that they have fled. So, verse 22. He gathers his relatives and pursues them.

I think it has a more menacing translation. It is, They formed a posse to hunt them down. And so, this is the contrast. It is Laban's hunting party versus Jacob's escape plan.

It is Laban's strengths versus God's protection. It is Laban's little god versus the god of Jacob. And finally, in the hills of Gilead, they hunt them down.

Verse 26. It's a perfect summary of the character of Laban. He plays the innocent victim. He says, he's the one who's been wronged. That he's really a loving father.

He just wanted to give his kids a kiss goodbye and a going away party. But really, he came out to them with an army. And verse 29 is really menacing. He says, But God is with Jacob.

[11 : 36] He warns Laban in a dream not to do or say anything. Laban being Laban. He can't help himself. He says, verse 30. Why did you steal my little gods? Jacob is innocent of the charge.

But in verse 32, he accidentally puts his wife in danger. He says, if you find anyone who's your gods, that person shall not live. You see, if Rachel stole the little gods for protection, that little statue better wake up.

Because Laban is about to go searching for it tent by tent. That's what happens in verse 33 and 34. He goes into Rachel's tent, but she is too crafty. She's hidden the little statue in her saddlebag and is now sitting on it.

You see, it oughtn't to be possible to kidnap a god. Rachel thinks that's what it means for God to be with them, to be literally in her saddlebag.

She needs to learn to trust in the God of Abraham and Isaac. You see, while the God of Jacob is watching and protecting, this little God of Laban has been kidnapped.

[12 : 45] And things get even more ridiculous now, and actually a bit gross, if I'm honest. Verse 35. Please look at verse 35. Rachel said to her father, don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence.

I'm having my period. You see, in a crisis, in a crisis, you find out what your gods are made of. Laban's little god is made of stone and wood and is currently being defiled by Rachel's time of the month.

It's pretty gross, isn't it? But we're meant to laugh. Our authors want us to laugh at Laban's little god. And in verse 41, Jacob finally stands up to the bully and he gives the speech of his life.

Verse 41. It was like this. For 20 years I was in your household. I worked for you 14 years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks. And you changed my wages 10 times.

And here it is. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the fear of Isaac had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty handed. But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands.

[14 : 00] And last night he rebuked you. You see, Laban is a picture of a man who sets himself up against God. Laban is the happy, arrogant atheist who points at Christians and thinks we're all stupid and gullible.

Laban is here for the atheists to recognize themselves. He said 20 years of puffing himself up, of making himself rich, of taking all of God's blessings without bending the knee once.

But today, all his power and his little gods are alone against the God of Abraham and the fear of Isaac.

And Laban is the one who looks little and small and stupid and beaten. And the contrasts for the rest of the passage are really quite delicious.

I'm just going to run you through them. So in verse 42, the God of Jacob is the one who sees and is concerned, whereas the little God of Laban is stuffed away in a saddlebag. In verse 44, Laban and a whole army behind him, they are the ones who need a peace treaty from a family caravan.

[15 : 13] Laban is the one who's come out to hurt his daughters. But in verse 55, he is the one who kisses them and ends up blessing them and sending them on their way. We said last week that God was disciplining Jacob.

This week, he's been teaching him what it is worth that he is with him in a crisis. This is the lesson Jacob needs as he faces the big test next week of big bad brother Esau.

Do you see how the chapters are working together? And this is a lesson that helps us at the bigger level when we're fearful of, you know, where our society will be a generation from now.

And it also helps us in the crisis in the family when we're really worried about our children and that generation. What is it worth that God is with you?

This doesn't always mean it will be sunny days. Remember, for Jacob, 20 years enslaved and mistreated. But God did watch over him and preserved his life.

[16:17] There is pain on the journey. It is not bruise-free arrival, but it is arrival until we get to our promised land.

And so that is the lesson from today. But if you really want to hear this passage as the first audience did, as Moses, the author, intended, you have to go back to chapter 15.

And so, Booth, can we just have on the screen? This is the promise God made to Abraham, to Jacob's grandfather, Abram. And I want you to see, can you see the parallels between that promise and what happened to Jacob in Haran?

So, he was a stranger in a foreign country. You can see that there. Yep, that happened. Enslaved and mistreated. Yes, he was. We talked about that. God punished the nation they served as slaves.

We saw that. God did that to Laban. And they will come out with great possessions. We saw that as well. The only wrong note is right at the top, the 400 years bit. Because that promise there isn't speaking about Jacob in Haran per se.

[17:27] It's really about the exodus from Egypt. You see, Moses' first audience were the Israelites. 600,000 Jacobs on their way to a promised land.

Moses wrote Genesis for his first audience, the Israelites, to help them make it home. To help them make it on the journey. You see, just like Jacob from our passage, the Israelites one day will be enslaved and mistreated.

One day, they will make the bad guy rich. One day, just like Jacob, they'll have to flee with flocks and family. One day, they'll have a big bad evil man behind them, Pharaoh, and big bad brother Esau, that is Edom, ahead of them.

Israel need to learn what it is worth that God is with them. And so Moses shows them an identical story, so that when they get to their 40 years in the wilderness, they will know what that means.

They will have learnt the lesson. Do you see the parallels in the story? It's genius storytelling, I think. For us here, on your handout, I said that we are the next audience.

[18:35] We here in 2019. Perhaps we in this room have forgotten what that lesson is worth. Perhaps we're easily overwhelmed by the troubles outside.

Perhaps we feel outnumbered and left behind by our culture, that we forget that God is still with us. Standing for Jesus will always leave us facing persecution.

It will always leave us outnumbered. We don't want to be glib about the Christian life. But perhaps we swap the God of power for the fear of little gods instead.

Perhaps we swap God for little gods that are defiled and hidden and useless. Perhaps we have forgotten of the love and the strength and the power and the watchfulness and protection of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

So what I want to do is finish today by reading some verses from the New Testament. And what I'd like you to do is please close your eyes. If you've fallen asleep, that won't be a problem for you.

[19 : 43] But I'm going to read some verses from the New Testament. Can you please close your eyes as I read them? You can pray if you want, but I'm going to pray to finish. This is from Matthew. Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.

This is from John. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever. The spirit of truth.

You know him for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you. And this from Romans. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written, for your sake we face death all day long. We're considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

[20 : 49] No, in all persecutions we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And so Father God, we praise you that you are with us. Would we learn, as we see these stories, what that is worth? Especially when we feel like we're in trouble behind and ahead and all around.

Thank you that you will bring us home to the new creation. Father, thank you that you're honest about the troubles of life on the journey. Please help us to trust in you, not stupid, weak idols.

We need your help in Jesus' name. Amen.