

Settling Scores

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[0 : 00] Now I do apologize that you're going to feel like you're back in school with my introduction at mass class. But we're going to begin tonight by solving a problem.

So look with me at the first verse of our passage, verse 22. We've learned last week that Jacob had convinced his wives to come with him to leave their father Laban and come with him back to his own land, to his father Isaac in Canaan.

But Jacob also left without telling Laban. And so we read in verse 22, So here's the mathematical problem for you.

Assuming, you always got to have some assumptions for mass problem, assuming that Jacob was traveling at a constant speed, how much faster than Jacob was Laban traveling?

All right, you can talk to each other. Give your 30 seconds to... Some of you drawing a blank. No? No? There you go.

[1 : 20] Okay. 10 days travel in 7 days. Therefore, it's 10 divided by 7, or 1.4286, or 42.86%.

Okay? Did you enjoy that? Now, the reason I mention this is because Haran, where Jacob fled, and Gilead, where Laban catches up with him, that's about 300...

I mean, we don't really know the exact location, but it's actually about 300 miles apart, which means Jacob, he was traveling for 10 days, was actually traveling at a speed of about 30 miles a day. And that's roughly the distance between Melbourne and Belgrave.

Okay? If you're just trying to... And that's sort of doable, right? Although, if you think about it with young children, and two wives, and a lot of sheep, that's actually quite a distance to be traveling each day.

Still, you would think that Jacob was in a hurry. He was fearful that Laban would come after him, which, in fact, he does. So he would have been traveling as quickly as he could. Now, Laban, on the other hand, traveling 42.86% faster, would be traveling at about 43 miles a day.

[2 : 32] That's about the distance between Geelong and Melbourne. Okay? And you would think, of course, he would be traveling faster. He's trying to chase Jacob. But don't forget that he, too, had to pack supplies for the journey and bring them with him, including the tents, which we read about in the next verse.

But Laban, you see, was trying to... He was spurred on by anger, wasn't he? He was trying to get to Jacob, because he wasn't happy that Jacob had left without telling him.

And so here we have this showdown, finally. And we know it's meant to be a showdown, because the words that we read in verse 23, for example, like, caught up with him in the hill country, verses 25, pitching tents and camping.

Those are actually military terms used to describe parties in a conflict. And we can only guess what Laban would have done had God not intervened.

I think he was actually pretty hot under the collar. But one night, just as Laban was about to catch up to Jacob, God appears to him in a dream and says in verse 24, be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.

[3 : 48] So God has actually put Laban on notice by the time he gets to Jacob. Nevertheless, when Laban finally confronts Jacob in verse 26, there's still feigned outrage, as Laban brings a made-up charge against Jacob.

So I want to read again what he says, but just consider as you hear how ludicrous some of these accusations are. He says, What have you done?

You've deceived me. You've carried off my daughters like captives in war. Why did you run off secretly and deceive me? Why did you tell me? So I could send you away with joy and singing to the music of timbrels and harps.

You didn't even let me kiss my grandchildren and my daughters goodbye. You have done a foolish thing. I have the power to harm you, but last night the God of your father said to me, Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.

And now you have gone off because you long to return to your father's household. But why did you steal my gods? I don't know whether you picked it up, but there's a lot of presumption here, isn't there?

[4 : 59] At first, Laban's treating everything as though they belong to him. They're my daughters, my grandchildren, not Jacob's wives, not Jacob's children, which actually he worked long and hard for and fulfilled all his obligations to Laban for.

He even goes on to say that Jacob is his, right? Because he expects Jacob to have to ask before leaving. And if you think about it, what are the chances really that he would have said yes if Jacob had asked?

Not very high, is it? Based on past record and based on what he's about to do here. Then of course, there's that show of fake generosity and affection, isn't there?

You know, if you had told me, I would have sent you off with hugs and kisses and dancing and music. I mean, do we really, really believe Laban? I don't think so.

And so, finally, when sort of in all, you know, nothing seems to work because of what God's taught him not to do, what he does then in verse 30 is to contrive something to accuse Jacob of.

[6 : 09] So we read verse 30, Why did you steal my gods? Now, I don't know whether Laban would have said this because he really cared for his gods or not, or whether this was just a pretext to find something to make Jacob beholden to him again.

But what happens now is we get to this moment of suspense in the story because as readers, we do know who actually stole the gods, don't we?

Even though, as we read in verse 32, Jacob himself isn't aware. And so his answer in verse 31 actually imperils Rachel's life.

Remember, Rachel is his favorite wife. He says, I was afraid because I thought you would take your daughters away from me by force. But if you find anyone who has your gods, that person shall not live.

In the presence of our relatives, see for yourself whether there is anything of yours here with me, and if so, take it. And so Laban takes this opportunity to ransack every tent, but he finds nothing.

[7 : 21] Of course, verse 34, what Rachel has already done is taken the household gods and put them inside her camel saddle and then set on them.

So that when Laban gets to her tent, she says in verse 35, don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence. I'm having my period. And so with that, she actually foils her father's attempt to wrest control back from Jacob.

And it's sort of ironic because this is sort of Rachel's payback, isn't it? Last week we learned how Laban had sold her and Leah and squandered the money in the process.

But there's also another delicious irony in all of this because for a few chapters now, we've seen how Jacob has been deceived by Laban.

So there's a train there where Jacob was the initial deceiver, remember? Deceiving Esau. But then Laban deceives him with the wife sort of swap and things related to that.

[8 : 28] Jacob was deceived by Laban and uncle he thought he could trust. But now Laban is deceived by his own daughter. Again, someone he thinks he could have trusted.

And so in a roundabout way, Jacob gets even with Laban but without him realizing it because he doesn't know that she has the gods. Well, that's the first point.

But we come now to the second part of the story, verse 36 and point 2, where having now not found the gods, Jacob lets fly his pent-up charge against Laban.

Things that have been building up for 20 years. So verse 36, let me keep reading. Jacob was angry and took Laban to task. What is my crime?

He asked Laban. How have I wronged you that you hunt me down? And now that you've searched through all my goods, what have you found that belongs to your household? Put it here in front of your relatives and mine and let them judge between the two of us.

[9 : 33] The answer, of course, is nothing. There's nothing to put in front. And then he goes, I have been with you for 20 years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten rams from your flocks.

I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts. I bore the loss myself. And you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night. This was my situation.

The heat consumed me in the daytime, the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes. It was like this for 20 years I was in your household. I worked for you 14 years for your two daughters and then 6 years for your flock.

And you changed my wages 10 times. Jacob doesn't hold back, does he? One by one, every grievance now comes out to the public.

Some of these we already know. 14 years he worked for Leah and Rachel. But then we now know he worked another 6 for the sheep. Obviously the sheep less valuable than wives so it's only 6 years.

[10 : 38] But we learned that even though the flock weren't his, Jacob had to bear all the risk of the loss. That's a raw deal, isn't it? His working conditions were atrocious so by heat, the heat consumed him in the daytime and then the cold by night and then sleep flat for him so he hardly slept a wink.

And then we find out his wages were changed on him 10 times and we can assume that that wasn't a pay rise that he's talking about. I mean, if you were in Australia you would have been calling the shepherds union, wouldn't you?

This is worker exploitation right here. But the Jacob we see as well is actually no longer the same man that we saw early on.

Rather, he's actually begun to realize who is ordering his life and affairs in spite of his struggles. Because in the midst of his struggles, Jacob sees God's hand.

He's already said that in a previous chapter that Laban's flocks were being blessed because God was blessing him. And now again, even though he's angry and justifiably so, he can see God's protection over him.

[11 : 53] So verse 42, which is sort of the summary verse really of his time with Laban. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the fear of Isaac had not been with me, you would have surely set me away empty-handed.

But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands and last night he rebuked you. Jacob gets it now, doesn't he?

He knows that God is with him, watching over him, acting and advocating for him much more effectively than any union rep would do. Well, having heard all this, Laban still wouldn't concede.

Even though he's seen all this, he knows his match. Yet, in verse 43, he proposes a faith-saving gesture. Listen again, I mean, how audacious.

He says, the women are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks. All you see is mine. Yet, what can I do today about these daughters of mine or about the children they have born?

[13 : 04] Come now, let's make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us. That's a bit cheeky, isn't it? Not willing to concede that any of this was just really given by God to Jacob.

And yet, Jacob was being generous. And he actually agrees to this covenant. So first, what they do is erect a pile of stones, another pile. There's a lot of, if you probably went to Canaan, there's a lot of pillars of stones lying around, isn't there?

But this time, it's got two names. The first is Jega Sahaduta, yep, Jega Sahaduta, pretty long. And then the second one, Galid.

But both of them mean the same thing, witness heap. One's in Aramaic, which is Laban's language, and then the other one is Hebrew, which is in Jacob's language. Why this?

Well, it kind of reminds me of the story when, I think a few years back, when we visited the UN in Geneva, the guy was telling us a story about how, I think it was Iran and Iraq, two countries were at war and then finally they decided that they were going to agree to a ceasefire.

[14 : 16] And yet the point was that even though they had agreed all the substantive terms for peace, there was a risk the whole deal was going to fall over. And why was that? because neither was willing to give on the protocols of the peace signing ceremony.

Details like who was actually going to walk into the room first and where they were going to see, which language were going to be used first. They were really just symbolic things really, but they were being haggled over because, for instance, the symbols that if the first party that comes into the room, that was a sign that they were the first ones, they were the ones that were actually conceding first to the peace.

That was how sort of, how much detail and how much significance they put to these kind of seemingly random details. And so I think this is sort of kind of what's happening here, that neither Laban or Jacob were willing to recognize the place in the other person's language.

And so they had two names. And this place, Galit or whatever, becomes like the marker that separates Jacob and Laban.

And actually, if you look at the map, it's actually where the northern border of the promised land is. And so in verse 49, the place is also called Mitzpah because of what Laban says.

[15 : 43] It becomes a border and he says, May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other. If you mistreat my daughters or if you take any wives beside my daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me.

Now, it's actually, some people use this very verse, May the Lord keep watch between you and me, as though it was sort of like a prayer of blessing. You know, like, May God keep watch over you while we're apart, that sense.

But actually, if you read the rest of the passage from verses 51 to 53, it actually is more of a bit like a threat that says, don't you dare mistreat my daughters or take other wives or else God will visit the ill on you that I wouldn't be able to do.

And given that, and this is words from Laban, but given that Laban himself hasn't really treated his daughters well, this was again a bit rich coming from him. but he makes this same vow and then he goes on to say that he will not harm Jacob provided Jacob does the same.

And then in verse 53, he says, May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us. And just to finish the story, Jacob too takes this same oath, but he uses the name only of the fear of Isaac.

[17 : 10] And again, the fear of Isaac, this phrase is actually an interesting one because it's only ever used here in this story twice. Once in verse 42 and the other time here in verse 53.

Now it's obviously a reference to the God of Abraham, but it's not clear why he uses this odd term. You know, there's no context to it as it were. It could mean that be a reference to the fear that God instills in those he reveals himself to, which he's just done to Laban, maybe.

Or else it's the reverent fear that Jacob himself has of God. But either way, Jacob only swears by this name, the fear of Isaac.

And then they eat together, again like a piecemeal, and then the next day they part company and Laban gets his goodbye kiss as he says that he wanted to. And that's how the story ends.

Now I've gone through the story relatively quickly because now I want to just double back and consider what the whole point of this story is. What do we learn from this apart from the fact that it actually happened and that this was the way that Jacob found freedom finally from Laban?

[18 : 27] Well, if you look at your outlines, you'll see I have two comparisons to make tonight. First, compare Jacob's God or the fear of Isaac to Laban's household gods or idols.

Jacob's God, our God, we've really seen at work each week in this series. He's the one who's in control over human affairs, guiding and shaping events, blessing the weak and leading his chosen ones.

And it's not been any different tonight. He intervenes to stop Laban. He protects Jacob from harm, even if it means using Rachel to deceive her father.

In previous week, we've seen God appear to his own people like Jacob. But tonight, we see that he's able even to appear to those who don't really worship him like Laban.

God doesn't need to ask permission, can you see, from those household gods. He just does it. And Laban, even though he doesn't worship God, obeys him.

[19 : 34] By contrast, look at Laban's gods. I think the story is actually taught in such a way that it's actually a bit comical. We're meant to look at these gods of Laban and actually laugh at them.

Because although they're meant to be gods, they're actually quite helpless, aren't they? It's Laban himself who has to chase after them to rescue them. And when Laban is hunting for them in the tents, they couldn't even shout and say, we're here under the camel's saddles.

They're dumb. They're dumb idols. And in the final ignominy of it all, where do they find themselves? Under Rachel's bottom. Presumably while she's having her period, although that could be a lie.

So, sorry for the pun, but they're literally the butt of the joke. Aren't they? Maybe. That's a bad joke.

Now, of course, we sort of, we laugh at that and here in the Western world, you know, I know that some of the Asian restaurants and that still have physical idols in their restaurant, but we don't normally see physical idols anymore, do we?

[20 : 47] Where we go into people's house and see them put on shelves. But that doesn't mean that there aren't any idols. in our society. Why is that?

Because an idol is anything that we look to to give us comfort and security and blessing in life. So money and wealth could be idols and they're the obvious ones.

But it could also be our children or our boyfriends and girlfriends or achievement or recognition. But if any of those things are our idols, then they're actually very similar to how Laban treats his household gods.

Idols are always very high maintenance. We keep having to look after them, worry about whether we lose them or not. They demand our undivided attention.

So take money, for instance, if that's our idol, then we're always worrying whether we have enough of it. Or if it's our children, then we constantly fret over how we can make them live our dreams or desires.

[21 : 52] Or if it's achievements, then we're always wanting to continue to keep achieving or else they'll no longer gain us those opportunities that we want in life. But that's the irony, isn't it?

Because just as happens with Laban, these idols don't really do anything for us. They ask so much from us and yet they enslave us. and can't guarantee true reward or satisfaction in life.

By contrast, God watches over Jacob. He blesses him even when he's being mistreated by Laban. God is not high maintenance, is he?

And the reality of all this is, and if we think about this, if the true and living God isn't in our lives, that is, if we don't serve and revere God, then we inevitably end up serving idols instead.

We always find substitutes for God because deep down we are inherently insecure. We can't help but latch on to things to help us overcome those insecurities.

[23 : 07] Deep down we know that actually we are very vulnerable in this unexpected and cruel world that we lived in. And so, we will latch on to anything and make them idols.

Even when we know that we're clutching at straws, even if it just gives us the faintest of hope, we latch on to them. But as Christians, I think we can be just so thankful that because of Jesus, we now actually have a way out of idol worshipping.

we have freed ourselves from idols because of what Jesus has done. And that's why I put that reading right in the middle there. Just as we finish hearing about the household gods of Laban, I wanted us to hear these verses from 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 and verse 8 to 10 and particularly in verse 9 which I put on the screen again.

But Paul says that once the Thessalonians heard the Lord's message, which is the gospel, they turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Believing in Jesus gives us the power by his spirit to turn from idols and serve the one true God and then to wait for his son's return from heaven.

[24 : 39] We don't have to trust in idols anymore, whether the physical ones or the ones that are in our hearts because in Christ we have all the security we need to live.

In Christ we are in that same position that Jacob was, having God by our side as he says in verse 42, seeing our every affliction and the toil of our hands and he will settle all the scores on our behalf.

He will make sure that justice is done if not today, then one day, even if it's when Jesus comes again. Which brings me to the second comparison tonight, that of Laban's and Jacob's faith.

Jacob's faith is now of one who has turned to the living God. We've seen that. And over the past few weeks, I hope you've seen how his faith has actually grown. And tonight is no different.

As I've already said, despite his anger with Laban, he now knows that it is the Lord who has protected him and that he's intervened on his behalf, particularly in that dream to Laban. Laban, on the other hand, he's all over the place.

[25 : 46] I don't know whether you've noticed, because even though he's clearly met God in his dream, so much so that if we read verse 49, he can say, may the Lord keep watch between you and me.

And yet, he's not relinquished his idols, has he? to serve this true and living God. And so in verse 53, which is at the very end of the story, when he comes to taking his oath, he still puts God alongside the other ancestral gods, doesn't he?

He says, may the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor and the God of their father judge between us. Now, this is in a reference, the English is a bit unclear, but this is in a reference to one God.

rather, the God of Nahor and the God of their father were actually idols. And the reason why we know this is in Joshua chapter 24 and verse 2, it says that Abraham, Nahor and their father all worship other gods beyond the river.

That was before God called Abraham out of that land. And the Hebrew word there for judge is actually a plural verb, that is, it refers to many gods, judging between us.

[26 : 58] Of course, when God called Abraham from idol worship, then this God, his God, and the God of Isaac became the God that we know now, the God of Jesus Christ.

And this is the God that Jacob finally starts worshipping and worships alone. Which is why in the very next verse, by contrast, when Jacob then swears, he only swears by the name of the fear of Isaac.

It is Jacob's way of saying that he's rejecting all the other gods that Laban has mentioned in the very verse before. And so my friends, knowing idols for what they really are, let's not do what Laban did.

You know, come to church and pray and praise God by the name of Jesus one day, and then only to head out into the week, and then pay allegiance to all the other gods in the world. Now I know that I've spent many years working in the same sort of environments that many of you are doing right now.

I realize how challenging it is. When you turn up and work and all you hear are your colleagues or your fellow students boast about the happiness that money and pleasure brings, or what a fantastic weekend they've had with booze and sex or whatever, it can be very tempting to think that those gods are real.

[28 : 21] But don't be fooled by that. Rather, work hard at remembering who the true God is. It's a long time sometimes, isn't it, between Sunday to Sunday, seven days.

And that's why I want to encourage you to have daily disciplines of praying, of listening to God's word. Even if you're just listening to a Bible reading on your way to work on a train, via the app or something, that's still a reminder, isn't it, that there is only one true living God.

And that's why I also want to encourage some of you, if you're able to, to be part of a prayer group at work, or just to even, you know, I know lunchtime is really tight, but take ten minutes to go on a prayer walk around the office or something, so that as you do that, you remember it is the fear of the Lord or the fear of Isaac that you're constantly taking around with you, that is with you at your place of work.

So that as the grievances mount up at work, if your colleagues or your boss is mistreating you, you can still remember that Christ, God, is by your side, that God sees your labor, he sees your affliction, and he will intervene in his time to make sure justice is done.

Keep doing that as you are working, even as I know increasingly the workplace is becoming more and more secular, they want to push God out of it. But do these little things so that you keep remembering that God is by your side, not just on Sunday, but from Monday to Friday and on Saturday as well.

[30 : 09] So I just want to close now by giving you just some time to just in your seats, in the quiet, to bring before God your own lives, whether you're still working or you're at school.

See where the temptations might be for you to follow idols, and then ask God to help you to reject them and to follow him instead. So just a minute of quiet and then I'll pray for us at the end.

Father, we thank you for the good news of Jesus Christ, that the message proclaimed to us enables us to believe in Jesus, to turn away from idols, and to serve the one true living God.

Father, keep our hearts and our minds dedicated wholly to you and to your son, Jesus. give us courage as we are at work, at school, to reject the idols that others put in front of us.

Help us to see them for what they are, things that will not satisfy us. Help us not to be tempted, even though sometimes they seem so real, even though sometimes we see others apparently being blessed by these things.

[31 : 44] Help us, Father, to see where true blessing lies, only in your son. Help us to see that by persevering and waiting for your son's return, we will get the truest reward in life, that of eternity in your kingdom.

where blessing will abound forevermore. We pray and ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.