

Love for the Unlovely: The Story of Grace in the Life of Jacob

Almost There (Genesis 31:17-55)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC English Service on May 18, 2025

Introduction

- ❖ We've been in the life of Jacob for a number of months now. We took a break during Lent for that city-wide Awaken Houston series. Which, by the way, the Lord answered our prayers for 1,000 baptisms. The churches that participated, including us, reported over 1,200 baptisms. So praise God for how he's been moving in our churches.
 - Well, now that we're back in the life of Jacob, perhaps we need a fresh reminder that we're *not* just studying the life story of a biblical character. **The point we've been making is that, by looking at Jacob, we're ultimately studying the story of grace.**

- ❖ **The theme of his story is the grace of God.** Think about it. **By grace**, Jacob is chosen by God to be the special object of divine blessing even before he's born. Even before he does anything to prove he's worth it. **By grace**, he's protected from his twin brother's wrath and is led along the way to his mother's hometown where he finds a bride. Two of them! **By grace**, he's blessed with twelve sons who become the Twelve Tribes of Israel. **By grace**, he's blessed with prosperity despite the efforts of his father-in-law to impoverish him. It's all by grace. **Only the grace of God can explain how a selfish, conniving, manipulative liar and thief could be chosen and blessed to become one of the patriarchs of the faith.**

- ❖ But just like with every story of grace, even as God loves you just the way you are – without you having to change yourself first – **the point is that he loves you too much to leave you just the way you are.** His grace is a *transforming* grace. It aims to change you. To convert you. To make you into a new creation.
 - And that's what we see happening to Jacob. In the next chapter. He's almost there. He's not yet a new creation. His name is not yet changed to Israel. But he's almost there. He's definitely not the same as before. Compared to when we first met him in chapter 25. Even in last week's passage, we saw him uncharacteristically behave honorably. Even as his father-in-law Laban was trying his hardest to deceive him.
 - **And it's Laban who serves as the perfect foil.** Laban embodies the kind of person Jacob once was – selfish, manipulative, a constant liar. And now, by contrasting the two, we can see how much God has been changing Jacob. His conversion moment takes place in the next chapter. He's almost there. But what the events of our passage do – **is they highlight the growing difference between who Jacob once was and who he's becoming by the grace of God.**

- ❖ So this morning, I want to draw our attention to Laban. **Because, as a character, he displays the factors that typically keep someone from experiencing the transforming grace of God.** When we consider his words and actions, we're challenged to consider ourselves. Have we experienced the grace of conversion? Or are there similar factors keeping us back? And if we have been converted, if we're new creations, then how is that grace manifest in our lives?
 - In this morning's text, I want you to pay attention to three things happening to Laban. He has (1) his heart stolen, (2) his idols exposed, and (3) his Fear confronted. When these same things happen to us, it reveals the state of our soul and the extent of our experience with God's grace.

Stealing Your Heart

- ❖ We're going to start in v17 and talk about what it means biblically to have your heart stolen and what that reveals. But, before we go there, let's orient ourselves in the story. Recall that Jacob is now married to the two sisters, Leah and Rachel. He works as a shepherd for their father Laban. He worked fourteen years to pay off the double dowry. And then he worked another six years to accrue his own flock of sheep and goats. And over the course of those twenty years, his family grew to include eleven sons and one daughter.
 - At the start of chapter 31, Jacob knew that his relationship with his father-in-law and brothers-in-law was getting tenuous. They were growing more jealous, more envious, more resentful. He knew he couldn't stay in Paddan-aram for much longer. He had to get back home to Canaan. Even back in v3 the LORD spoke to Jacob and told him to *"return to the land of your fathers...and I will be with you."* So after getting the support of his wives, he packs up all his family and all his possessions and begins the long journey back home. Back to his father Isaac.
 - Look with me at v19. At this time, we read that, *"¹⁹Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods. ²⁰And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee."*

- ❖ **Now what led Rachel to steal her father's household gods is not that clear.** It's not even clear what they were. We're probably talking about small figurines they kept in their home the depicted certain gods. They were little miniature idols. Small enough for Rachel to stow away and hide in a camel's saddle. **Why did she do it?** Maybe because her dad would usually pray to these household gods seeking guidance or help. And she took them away to stifle his efforts to track them down. Or maybe she still believed in these idols and thought that bringing them along would bring good fortune. Or maybe they're made of precious metals, and she only cared about their intrinsic value.
 - One commentary mentions that, in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the OT), *"household gods"* is translated into a Greek word related to healing. So it's possible these idols were prayed to and relied upon to heal or protect household members from harm or disease. **Laban valued them as a means to watch over and protect his family.** Which explains why when he hears that Jacob has taken his family and *his household gods* – he's furious and goes after them in hot pursuit.

- ❖ What's fascinating is how in v20 it says that Jacob *"tricked"* Laban. And according to the footnote in my ESV Bible, the Hebrew literally translates as *"he stole the heart of Laban."* Laban uses that same phrase later in vv26-27. When he accuses Jacob of stealing my heart – of taking away my daughters and my grandchildren.
 - **Now what's ironic is that Jacob is being accused of stealing and, based on his track record, it's to be expected.** He has that reputation. But, this time, he's actually innocent. He's only taking what rightfully belongs to him. The text tells us directly at the end of v32 that he was completely unaware that Rachel had stolen her father's idols. So this time Jacob didn't steal a thing.

- ❖ **Him being accused of stealing actually tells us far more about his accuser.** “You stole my heart.” That statement, right there, reveals a whole lot about Laban. About Laban’s idols. He’s accusing Jacob of stealing his family. But he says you stole my heart. Which means he associates his “*heart*” with his daughters and his grandchildren. And the inclusion of these “*household gods*” being stolen as well – these literal idols Laban prays to for healing and protection over his family – that just accentuates the point. **Laban has turned his family into an idol.** You take away his family and you take away his heart.

- ❖ But if you dig deeper, you realize that – while family was a clear idol for Laban – the picture was more complicated. His family was – what Tim Keller describes in his book *Counterfeit Gods* – a **surface idol**. He was highly protective and possessive of his daughters and his grandchildren. But under every surface idol lies something far darker and more deadly. It’s what Keller calls a **deep idol**.
 - So on the surface, you can treat **money** as an idol, but quite possibly the deep idol underneath – what you’re really serving – is a deep-seated need for **security**. Having more money makes you feel more secure. Now why is it important to acknowledge and address the deep idols? Because even after making a lot of money, you’ll still feel insecure. Because now you’re afraid of losing it all.
 - Or let’s say you struggle with idolizing **relationships**. That’s the surface idol. But what could be under the surface is a deep need for **acceptance**. If you don’t address the deep idol, then it will continue to manifest itself in other surface idols. So maybe your marriage grows healthier and you’re no longer craving your spouse’s acceptance. But maybe what you still lack and what you’re still chasing after is the acceptance of your children or your colleagues. Your kids or your co-workers don’t like you. And that’s eating you up. You simply won’t rest until your deep-seated need for acceptance is addressed.

- ❖ So let’s think about Laban. **On the surface, his idol is his family.** Even those household gods he prays to are there to serve the good of his family. **But underneath the surface, his deep idol appears to be power – his need to be in control.** That would explain his actions in the narrative. Why he deceives Jacob to marry Leah – because his plan had been to marry off his oldest first and it had to happen the way he planned it. That explains why he refuses to let his daughters go. Why he clings so tightly to them – even after they’re married and already mothers. That explains why he reacts badly to the news that they’ve left for Canaan.
 - **Laban is what we would call a control freak.** He has to be in control of the situation. He struggles to let go. **He remains highly possessive of his family.** Did you notice how he couldn’t even acknowledge that they were Jacob’s wives? He kept calling them “*my daughters*.” (31:26, 28, 43). Just look at v43, “Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, “*The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine.*”

- ❖ **Laban just *has* to be in control.** He feeds off the power it gives him. **And you can be sure that doesn't just manifest itself in how he treats his family.** He's just as controlling and possessive when it comes to his work – to managing his flocks (as we saw last week).
 - Laban's deep idol to possess power and be in control is unaddressed and still seated at the control center of his life (his heart). So to learn that Jacob has taken away a cherished surface idol – over which Laban had wielded absolute control, i.e. his family – it felt, to Laban, like Jacob had stolen his heart.

- ❖ Friends, do you see how this works? **So obviously the big question for all of us to ask ourselves is this – what is my heart?** What am I ultimately putting my security in? Who am I ultimately turning to for acceptance? What am I ultimately placing my trust in – allowing me to let go of control?
 - Here's a way to figure it out. Ask yourself: What cherished person, possession, or pursuit in your life – if it were taken away – would utterly crush you? Would cause you to react badly, to lash out aggressively, just like Laban? **Who or what in your life – if it were taken away – would feel like someone just stole your heart?**

- ❖ And hear me out. I'm not suggesting that the grief or sorrow you feel at the loss of this person or that opportunity is somehow evidence of idolatry. Those feelings are normal and to be expected for any Christian experiencing loss. **But Christians are able to lose cherished things – even beloved family members – and still not have their hearts stolen.** Because their hearts belong to the Lord. Jesus is the one person who can never be taken away from you. The one relationship that lasts forever. The one God who will never fail you.

Exposing Your Idols

- ❖ That leads to our second point. **After having his heart stolen – revealing his idols – Laban then has his idols exposed. That is, they're exposed as impotent. As powerless.** As unable to carry the weight of godhood. This is a humbling point that Rachel makes. It's most likely unintentional. But nonetheless, as the narrative unfolds, the point is made: Idols always fail.

- ❖ Let's return back to the text. In v30, Laban accuses Jacob of stealing his household gods. An accusation he denies. Jacob goes so far as to say that, if anyone in his party is discovered to have stolen the idols, their life is forfeit. He has no idea that Rachel has them. This raises the stakes and heightens the tension in the story.
 - But Rachel is clever. After Laban went around feeling and searching in everyone's tents, he finally enters Rachel's. He finds her seated and unable to rise. Listen to v34, *“³⁴Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle and sat on them. Laban felt all about the tent, but did not find them. ³⁵And she said to her father, “Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me.” So he searched but did not find the household gods.”*

- ❖ This is quick thinking on Rachel's part. Using menstruation as an excuse. Most dads are uncomfortable talking about this with their daughters. It's no different in those days. **In fact, back then a woman's menstrual flow would've made her ceremonially unclean.** And if you sat on the same seat after her, you'd be considered unclean as well. So there was even more reason for Laban to just take Rachel at her word and conclude his search.
- ❖ But the whole point is that we, as readers, know what's going on. We know where the idols are hidden. We know how close Rachel was to getting caught and losing her life. **And it's those very facts – that she easily stole those household gods, easily hid them, and audaciously sat on them (making them unclean) – that exposes the weakness of idols.**
 - They can't speak up and reveal their location. They're helpless. And they're humiliated. Treated like sanitary napkins. That's what idols amount to. **They're speechless, powerless objects that always fail you in the end.**
- ❖ That, of course, is in stark contrast to the LORD. Whom we're told, in v24, appeared to Laban in a dream and spoke a word of warning. *"But 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.""* What a difference between the LORD God and Laban's household gods!
 - **While these household gods stay silent and remain useless, the LORD God is speaking up, issuing warnings, and protecting his people.** Unlike idols, he never fails. He doesn't stay silent. God intervenes.
- ❖ Do you see the difference? Now bring this home. Let's make it personal. Think about how the many ways in which your idols have proven powerless. How have they failed you? How have they disappointed you or left you empty, longing for more?
 - **I think back to my conversion moment during in the halfway point of my college career.** It was precipitated by a season where I had the best grades in my life and was in the best shape in my life. And I was in a dating relationship, which on the outside looked like it was going well. **Everything I was pursuing I was achieving. You would think I was a pretty happy guy.** A pretty contented fellow.
- ❖ But that was far from the truth. **It's ironic how I had all I wanted at the time, and yet I had no peace at any time.** I carried around this gnawing sense of emptiness. I had no satisfaction. No sense of purpose. At the time I couldn't understand it. But now I get it. I was relying on the surface idols – of having good grades, being physically fit, being in a relationship – and that was how I was trying to satisfy my deep idols. Good grades were supposed to be my security. Being in good shape was supposed to be my validation. Being in a good relationship was supposed to satisfy that need for acceptance. That's what I was promised. **But the harsh reality is – idols never keep their promises.** Idols always fail you.
 - What I needed was for the grace of God to intervene. To humble me. To expose the futility of my idols. **I needed to be broken. Like Jacob is broken in the next chapter.** And that's what happened to me halfway through college. I was broken, converted, and became a new creation. The trajectory of my life was never the same.

- ❖ **Look, it's never fun to have your idols exposed.** It doesn't feel good. No one enjoys the feeling of being broken. But that's what leads to a life-converting moment. **The last thing you want is to remain in Laban's shoes – still blind to your idolatry.** Still convinced your idols are enough. You don't want that. You don't want to be deluded like that.
 - So if God is starting to expose your idols, welcome what he's doing even if it hurts. You're almost there. Welcome his severe mercy. It feels like he's breaking you, but really he's healing you. Making you whole.

Confronting Your Fear

- ❖ So far, we've seen Laban get his heart stolen. Then his idols exposed. And lastly, we'll see his Fear confronted. These are all related. All intended to help you identify your idols. So that you can turn from them. So that you can experience the transforming grace of God. And we said earlier, one way to figure out what you idolize is to ask yourself, "What is my heart?"
 - But there's another way to come at it. **Ask yourself, "What is my Fear?"** That's a revealing question. What is it that I fear the most? The answer will tell me what I treasure the most. What I worship the most.

- ❖ But first let me show you where I'm seeing this in the text. Look starting in v36. **After Laban's search turns up empty, Jacob feels righteously angry.** He was falsely accused and publicly shamed. Twenty years of pent up anger and frustration at Laban – for all of his unjust practices – it all spews forth in vv36-42. And the key verse is v42, "*If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night.*"
 - **Jacob recognizes God's hand as he works in and through all of these events and circumstances.** He acknowledges that it was God stifling Laban's efforts to swindle him over all these years. It was God who intervened, rebuking Laban in a dream, warning him not to harm Jacob. It was all God. It was all grace.

- ❖ For twenty years, Laban manipulated and used Jacob to enrich himself. But now God enables Jacob to triumph over Laban without a fight. **Laban has the superior numbers and the greater strength in arms. But now he recognizes that Jacob has the LORD God on his side.** And that's what keeps Laban from acting on his aggression.
 - He realizes he's in the weaker position. So, in v43, he tries to save face and proposes a covenant. Let's make a treaty. **A nonaggression pact.** Listen to v44, "*Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I. And let it be a witness between you and me.*"

- ❖ So we read that "*Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar.*" It's like what he did back in Genesis 28:18 when he took the stone he was using as a pillow and set up it as a pillar to witness to that very place where God first revealed himself. So, once again, he's setting up a singular stone. This time to witness to the covenant he's making with Laban.

- ❖ And note how this is in contrast to the “*heap of stones*” set up next to it. **What’s being emphasized is that – entering into this covenant – are two co-equal parties but with vast differences.** These two different stone memorials represent two different belief systems. Jacob’s one stone represents the monotheistic God of Abraham. That heap of many stones represents the polytheistic outlook of Laban and his kin who worship the God of Nahor.
 - They use two different languages to give the memorials two different names. And hold two different meals of fellowship at the foot of these memorials. **The message being conveyed is that Jacob has now become a patriarch in his own right, representing his own people group distinct from that of Laban the Aramean.**
 - Laban goes on to basically say, “Let these stone memorials function like a border between us. I promise to never pass over these stones with the intent of doing you harm. Will you promise the same?” It’s a nonaggression pact.

- ❖ Now what stands out the most in these verses is that particular phrase that Jacob uses to describe the LORD. Look back at v42. He addresses the LORD in three ways, “*the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac.*” And, again, in v53, it says that Jacob swore “*by the Fear of his father Isaac.*”
 - What an interesting name for God! You might find it strange or even inappropriate. **Wouldn’t it be better to call him the Love of Isaac? The Praise of Isaac? The Hope of Isaac? Aren’t there better words? Why the Fear?**

- ❖ **Because what you fear the most – especially what you fear the most to lose – that reveals what you cherish the most in life.** If you understand your deepest fears, you’ll understand what you heart most deeply trusts in for security, for significance, for purpose in life.
 - For example, **if your deep idol is acceptance** and you’re always looking to others to fulfill it – if you’re a people-pleaser – **then your greatest fear is rejection.** But, on the other hand, **if your deep idol is power** and you’re always trying to wield it over others – if you’re a control-freak – **then your greatest fear is humiliation.** You can deal with rejection. But you can’t handle being disrespected.

- ❖ People-pleasers are fine with being humiliated – as long as you like them. Control-freaks are okay if you don’t particularly like them – as long as you respect them. So they’re different, but they’re the same in that it all comes down to what they fear the most. What they fear the most to lose or to never have in the first place. **What is your greatest fear? Answering that reveals what you most want in life.** What your heart most deeply turns to and trusts in.

- ❖ **I think it’s beautiful that when Jacob thought about his father Isaac, he concluded that what my dad feared the most was the LORD.** Not in the sense of being terrified by God. But in the sense that his relationship with God was the most important thing in all the world for Isaac. The one thing he feared the most to lose.

- ❖ **It makes me wonder what my kids would describe as the Fear of Jason.** Based on how I'm living my life, from their perspective, what would they think that I fear the most to lose? That I treasure the most in life. That I worship the most with all my heart? I would hope they say God – that God is the Fear of my dad. But I wouldn't blame them if they arrived at a different conclusion. It's a convicting question.
- ❖ What about you? **What would those who know you best conclude is your Fear?** Would they call God that? Like we said, for Laban, his kinsman would probably call “family” the Fear of Laban or describe “power” as the Fear of Laban. That's what he worshipped. That's what he feared the most to lose.
 - Now remember, Jacob is still a work-in-progress. **It's too soon to call God “the Fear of Jacob.”** God is certainly the Fear of his fathers. And, soon, in the next chapter, the LORD will be accurately described as Jacob's Fear. He's almost there.
 - But what needs to happen first is that that deep fear of *not* being loved and accepted – that deep emptiness Jacob has been trying to fill with the love of a father or the love of a woman – that needs to be filled by God. That deep desire can only be satisfied through the love and acceptance of God.
- ❖ Friends, the same needs to happen for us. All of us have a deep-seated need to be love and to feel accepted. **We'll waste our time entertaining surface idol after surface idol until we find our rest in the love of God secured in the gospel.** Where Jesus took our sins upon himself and gave to us his righteousness – that we might be fully accepted by God.
 - **May the Lord Jesus be your Fear.** Because you'll never have to fear losing his love. **May Christ be your heart.** For nothing can steal him away from you. *“Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Rom 8:38-39)