

The Next Generation, Part 9: Suffering and Sovereign Blessing (Gen 30-31)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at GCBC on December 1, 2013

Today we'll be in Gen 31 starting at end of Gen 30. We're going to see that God is sovereign over our suffering as well as over blessings we receive.

We'll see sins against us and suffering can't stop God's plan; God uses them to refine us to be the people He can use, like He's been doing with Jacob.

When God prepares a special servant, it often takes suffering and years out of the limelight in an obscure place. Jacob started on the run because someone wanted to kill him (his brother Esau). He's been wandering around the fields of Aramaea as a shepherd now for 20 years while God prepares him to be Israel's father and leader back to their Promised Land. In the next book of the Bible, Exodus, Moses also flees for his life so he won't be killed, and he wanders around the fields of Midian out of the limelight in obscurity. For Moses, it was also 40 years as a shepherd preparing him to lead Israel back to this Promised Land. David also spent many years as a shepherd in fields of Bethlehem out of the limelight in obscurity, and later on the run like both Moses and Jacob when Saul wanted to kill him. But in those years God prepared David to be the leader of Israel in the land. This is often how God prepares His servants. If you're suffering...that's normal for even God's greatest servants.

A descendant of Jacob and David would be born in Bethlehem as shepherds watched flocks in the fields nearby. He was born in obscurity and lived 30 years out of the limelight as God prepared Him to be The Suffering Servant Isaiah prophesied. The king of His day tried to kill Him, His brothers hated Him. He was a shepherd, too, a Good Shepherd. He fulfilled what OT Israel didn't. Jesus the true Israel leads His people to inherit all promises in Him. Today's story, like all OT stories, will point us to Jesus]

This is how God works despite opposition to His kingdom plans like King Herod, and in David's day with King Saul, and in Moses' day with the King of Egypt, all harsh masters. In Jacob's day his opposition and harsh master was a man named Laban and in Genesis 30:25 Jacob says *'let my people go'*

Genesis 30:25 *Now it came about when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, "Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my own country."²⁶ "Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me depart; for you yourself know my service which I have rendered you."²⁷ But Laban said to him, "If now it pleases you, stay with me; I have divined [i.e. pagan divination] that the LORD has blessed me on your account."²⁸ He continued, "Name me your wages, and I will give it."²⁹ But he said to him, "You yourself know how I have served you and how your cattle have fared with me."³⁰ "For you had little before I came and it has increased to a multitude, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now, when shall I provide for my own household also?"*

³¹ *So he said, "What shall I give you?" And Jacob said, "You shall not give me anything. If you will do this one thing for me, I will again pasture and keep your flock:³² let me pass through your entire flock today, removing from there every speckled and spotted sheep and every black one among the lambs and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my*

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wages.³³ *“So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come concerning my wages. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, will be considered stolen.”*³⁴ Laban said, *“Good, let it be according to your word.”*

Sheep are usually white, goats usually don't have spots or stripes, but Jacob says 'all I want is the black sheep and goats with spots or stripes and you can keep the majority, the rest who are all one color.' I'm told any shepherd knows females of only one color rarely produce offspring of a different color or mixture. Laban wants to make sure his percentage will be even better by taking those colors away, stacking the deck even more in his favor and to pull the wool over Jacob's eyes (or away from his eyesight)

³⁵ *So he removed on that day the striped and spotted male goats and all the speckled and spotted female goats, every one with white in it, and all the black ones among the sheep, and gave them into the care of his sons.*³⁶ *And he put a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob fed the rest of Laban's flocks. [no more “baa, baa black sheep” now]*

Laban doesn't give Jacob what he asked and he unfairly takes away the animals most likely to produce the odd-colored ones for Jacob's wages, so Laban basically makes Jacob work for virtually no wages yet again. But the sin of man can't thwart the sovereign plan of God (a theme of Genesis). By sovereign blessing, v. 43 says Jacob *“became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks and female and male servants and camels and donkeys.”*

This is a preview of Exodus 1 which begins by listing the 12 sons of Jacob, and all the schemes of Pharaoh to try and stop God's blessing to that family: 1:12 *“But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew.”* (same Hebrew word used of Jacob's family here the more Laban afflicted).

Is there a scientific explanation for how Jacob's flocks grew in the mating methods Jacob used at the end of the chapter? No, it's a sovereign blessing.

Jacob didn't know the modern science of genetics and breeding, he did what he knew in his day, but God in His providence supernaturally intervened as Jacob explains in **31:8**: *If he [Laban] spoke thus, ‘The speckled shall be your wages,’ then all the flock brought forth speckled; and if he spoke thus, ‘The striped shall be your wages,’ then all the flock brought forth striped ...*¹⁰ *“And it came about at the time when the flock were mating that I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream, and behold, the male goats which were mating were striped, speckled, and mottled.*¹¹ *“Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob,’ and I said, ‘Here I am.’”*¹² *“He said, ‘Lift up now your eyes and see that all the male goats which are mating are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you’*

God saw what Laban was doing and this blessing was God's doing. Jacob in v. 9 makes clear to Rachel and Leah God had given these increased flocks. Jacob's unnatural prosperity was also clear to Laban's servants back in v. 1: *Now Jacob heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, “Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and from what belonged to our father he has*

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made all this wealth.”² Jacob saw the attitude of Laban, and behold, it was not friendly toward him as formerly.³ Then the LORD said to Jacob, ‘Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.’

God commands Jacob to take his family from this foreign land back to the Promised Land and this sets the stage for ‘the first Exodus of Israel.’ In Gen 32 on this journey, God will give Jacob the new name *Israel* (32:28). Israel in Gen 31-35 leaves an oppressive master to worship God in the Promised Land in an exodus by God’s leading much like the later book of Exodus. This story also looks beyond Moses to Jesus and His church in oppression today. What can we learn from what Jacob and Israel learned in suffering? I think there are 4 lessons in this chapter for all God’s suffering people today.

1. People need to be loved and led through suffering (v. 1-18)

Jacob has grown from how he initially responded to Rachel’s suffering in Genesis 30:1 where we read: *Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she became jealous of her sister; and she said to Jacob, “Give me children, or else I die.”² Then Jacob’s anger burned against Rachel, and he said, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?”³ She said, “Here is my maid Bilhah, go in to her that she may bear on my knees ...” [i.e., a slave for sex to be Rachel’s surrogate mother]*

Jacob instead of leading spiritually, listens to and follows his wife into sin.

But now at the start of Gen 31, Jacob loves and leads his family spiritually.

⁴ So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to his flock in the field,⁵ and said to them, “I see your father’s attitude, that it is not friendly toward me as formerly, but the God of my father has been with me.⁶ “You know that I have served your father with all my strength.⁷ “Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times; however, God did not allow him to hurt me. [then he reminds them of God’s sovereign blessing we read earlier]

Jacob’s suffering in shepherding sheep now helps him shepherd his family as he now leads them in God’s Word. He doesn’t just plow ahead, he brings them along with him, with what God said in v. 13: *‘I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth.’¹⁴ Rachel and Leah said to him, “Do we still have any portion or inheritance in our father’s house?¹⁵ “Are we not reckoned by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and has also entirely consumed our purchase price.¹⁶ “Surely all the wealth which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and our children; now then, do whatever God has said to you.”¹⁷ Then Jacob arose and put his children and his wives upon camels;¹⁸ and he drove away all his livestock and all his property which he had gathered, his acquired livestock which he had gathered in Paddan-aram, to go to the land of Canaan ...*

There’s an application here for family shepherds, for fathers and parents. In our membership covenant vows we ask all to affirm next Sunday PM it says ‘To bring up those in my care in the teaching of the Lord in my family (Ephesians 6:4; Deuteronomy 6:7; Psalm 78:1-6)’

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The background I wrote on the handout last week: 'other churches since the founding of early colonies included statements on parental commitments to their biblical duties. While some from various backgrounds have desired to express similar sentiments in a parent dedication prayer for their baby, we desire all to be reminded of and reaffirming this as GCBC members.'

Most parents haven't brought their little ones on stage for prayer, but this is a way for all to express this commitment in reaffirming member covenants.

In 1674, a church in the colony of Massachusetts pastored by John Eliot 'solemnly renewed a covenant, the first clause of which was: "That our children shall be brought up in the admonition of the Lord, as in our families, so in public ... [it mentions the separate age-based children's classes till age 13 but emphasized the importance of home teaching first].'ⁱ

In 20th century youth movements some have rejected the historic emphasis on parental teaching of children, others in 21st century family movements have rejected the historic practice of the church teaching children in classes in addition to church services, but we don't want to reject either here. We want both in biblical and historical balance,ⁱⁱ parents fulfilling their role to teach their children and the church teaching all as well (not just men/adults)

There's not just an application for family shepherding, loving and leading children in God's truth, there's also an application in the family of God, the church, God's children need it. A flock of sheep is in need of shepherding beyond just the ministry of pastors, all of us are to minister (Eph 4:11-16). [family devotions is important, your church family also needs God's truth] Our church has many suffering and bereaved who need love and leading. In the last 3 years, some 15 or so spouses have died. Others are battling cancer.

This afternoon is an opportunity to minister to Bruce, just by being here at 2 pm; your presence is a ministry. Jami Balmet after last Tuesday's memorial.

Christmas holidays can be hard for those who have lost a loved one and are alone. Pray about what you and your family might be able to do this month. You can contact office for a list of those who have lost spouses last 2 years.

1. People need to be loved and led through suffering (v. 1-18)

2. We need to trust God's promises and presence in suffering (v. 19-42)

I'm not sure Rachel is trusting in v. 19: *When Laban had gone to shear his flock, then Rachel stole the household idols that were her father's.*

It doesn't say why Rachel stole her father's family gods, some think it was so he couldn't use them for divination to find out which way they went, or other suggest household idols might tie in with an inheritance claim, or was it superstition or fear or revenge or spite? This angers Laban and endangers them when she should have trusted fully in God's promises and presence.

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Jacob doesn't know she stole them and in v. 20 Laban doesn't know they stole away in secret, as the NKJV says it. The ESV translates v. 20 '*Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean*' with a footnote: '*Hebrew stole the heart of; also v. 26-27.*' One scholar calls this an 'odd expression in Hebrew. The phrase is perhaps to be understood as a double word-play: the word 'heart' in Hebrew is *leb*, and it echoes the name 'Laban'; the term 'Aramean' [from] the stem *ramah* ... means 'to cheat'. Thus the idea is that 'Laban the heartless cheat has been beaten at his own game!'ⁱⁱⁱ We might say today "eat your heart out, you cheater!" Whatever heart Laban has, that is.

²⁵ *Laban caught up with Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen camped in the hill country of Gilead.* ²⁶ *Then Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done by deceiving me ..."*

That's the same wording Jacob used when Laban deceived him with Leah when he thought he was marrying Rachel as agreed. Did Laban remember? "*What have you done by deceiving me and carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword?*" ²⁷ "*Why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell me so that I might have sent you away with joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre...*[yeah, right, like Herod wanting to celebrate the birth of the king of the Jews; or Pharaoh throwing a party Israel's send-off?]

Laban the lying manipulator in v. 28 cries that he didn't even get to kiss his grandkids and daughter goodbye, and he sounds sympathetic in v. 30 but his real complaint comes out, v. 30: *Now you have indeed gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods?*

In other words, it's bad enough you stole my heart, why steal my idols, too? It wasn't enough for you to rip my heart out – you had to rip off my family gods?! That's worse than kidnapping, that's god-napping! I get it that you want to go back to your family and God--but give back me my family gods!

Jacob says, v. 32: "*The one with whom you find your gods shall not live; in the presence of our kinsmen point out what is yours among my belongings and take it for yourself.*" *For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.* ³³ *So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two maids, but he did not find them. Then he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's tent.* ³⁴ *Now Rachel had taken the household idols and put them in the camel's saddle, and she sat on them. And Laban felt through all the tent but did not find them.* ³⁵ *She said to her father, "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is upon me." So he searched but did not find the household idols.*

Again Laban the master deceiver gets deceived. Like father, like daughter. 'It's that time of month right now and I have bad cramps, dad, please don't be mad I can't stand up.' The trickster is tricked. Period (by a fake period)! The master deceiver is now called "master" or "lord" while being deceived. Rachel hasn't forgotten dad hiding her away on what should have been her wedding to Jacob, giving Leah instead; now she hides dad's true 'precious.'

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Jacob doesn't know about the presence of the false gods but he does know the presence of the true God, and this emboldens him to stand up to Laban. Part of being a good shepherd is protecting a flock from predators and now Jacob rises up and stands up to Laban the wolf to protect his family: ³⁶ *Then Jacob became angry and contended with Laban; and Jacob said to Laban, "What is my transgression? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me?"* ³⁷ *"Though you have felt through all my goods, what have you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two."* ³⁸ *"These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten the rams of your flocks."* ³⁹ *"That which was torn of beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself. You required it of my hand whether stolen by day or stolen by night."* ⁴⁰ *"Thus I was: by day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes [a good shepherd]*

Jacob has gone above and beyond his rights in the law. Even in the Code of Hammurabi a shepherd didn't have to bear the loss himself of a sheep killed by a lion. Jacob has not been treated fairly or even legally, and the language of "day" and "night" in v. 40 suggests 'Laban made such claims even when Jacob was not with the flock. Apparently Jacob was under obligation seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day!'^{iv} And you think your boss is bad!

But this is all build up to Jacob's main point: ⁴¹ *"These twenty years I have been in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock, and you changed my wages ten times."* ⁴² ***"If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had not been for me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, so He rendered judgment ... God was for me, Jacob said, and if God is for us who can be against us! The key statement of this whole story is right here: God is for me and blesses me despite sin and He sees my suffering and He knows and He judges the truth.***

No matter who accuses or abuses, God sees, He knows the truth, He judges sinners, He will make wrongs right one day, He's to be feared not Laban. In v. 31 Jacob admitted he had been afraid of Laban, but he fears God more and Jacob calls God in v. 42 'the fear of Isaac' (the one father feared, too). In this verse, I think we see how Jacob who was dishonest by nature (Gen 27) has become a man marked by honesty and integrity: trusting God's presence

Look at v. 5 where Jacob reminds his family of God's presence and promise ⁵ *[Jacob] said to them, "I see your father's attitude, that it is not friendly toward me as formerly, **but the God of my father has been with me.**"* ⁶ *"You know that I have served your father with all my strength."* ⁷ *"Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times; however, **God did not allow him to hurt me...**"* [in v. 29 Laban had power to harm, but God spoke to Laban and warned him against evil to Jacob, even speaking evil to him]. In v. 12b God told Jacob he had seen all that Laban had been doing to him. This is a great reminder to us to trust God's presence, promise, protecting. In v. 13 God reminds Jacob He is the God of Bethel where Jacob met him.

Let's go back to Bethel in chapter 28 to be reminded of promises fulfilled.

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Gen 28:12 is the vision of Jacob's ladder or stairway from heaven to earth, reminding him God's presence is right where he is. In v. 14 God promises "*Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.*"

- this Heb. word for multiplying/spreading was used/fulfilled in 30:30
- "in you" others "blessed" was also the same language used in 30:30

¹⁵ "*Behold, I am with you...*" [Jacob says in 31:5 "*God...has been with me*"] *and will keep you wherever you go ...* [word for Jacob's protection in 31:24] *and will bring you back to this land ...* [word for Jacob's return in 31:3, 13] *for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.*"

The land promises were for Israel but all those other promises God fulfills for Jacob are for us as well: *I am with you, will keep you, I will never leave you nor forsake you.*" We need to trust God's presence and promises (#2)...

3. Like Jesus we need to seek peace and love those who make us suffer

You can read more about this at the end of Matthew 5 (loving our enemies) or end of Romans 12 (as much as is possible or in your power, live at peace) - by grace in this case it was possible in v. 44, Laban says let's make peace. ⁴⁵ *Then Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar.* ⁴⁶ *Jacob said to his kinsmen, "Gather stones." So they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap ...* [they make a covenant of peace, not to harm each other and to separate in peace, with this witness and God as their witness]

Even with all the wrongs Jacob suffered from Laban 20 years, he's quick to extend his hand in peace. Jacob first sets up a memorial stone and calls his family to build. Jacob's goal in confronting was reconciliation, not revenge. In v. 53 Laban swears by Abraham's God and his family gods (plural verb) but at the end of v. 53 Jacob fears and swears by the only true God of Isaac. ⁵⁴ *Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his kinsmen to the meal; and they ate the meal and spent the night on the mountain.*

⁵⁵ *Early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place.*

OT covenants were cut in blood, by a sacrifice. This was a covenant meal:

- it included a physical reminder or memorial (v. 50)
- the sign reminded them of protection from wrath (v. 51-52)
- a blood sacrifice was needed (v. 54)
- it was a family meal where they ate bread (v. 54 ESV/NKJV/NAS f.n.)
- it was followed by their leaving to the Promised Land (v. 55)

If we fast forward to chapter 12 of Exodus, we find much of this repeated:

- there was a physical memorial God instituted in Passover (12:14)
- the sign on the door was for protection from God's wrath (12:12-13)

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- a blood sacrifice was needed (same Heb. word sacrifice in 12:27)
- a family meal with bread, unleavened symbolizing w/out sin (12:20)

In later Israel's case, the pillar that reminded them of God's presence was a moving one, a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (13:21-22). In both cases the covenant meal was at night and the next day they left to the Promised Land with reluctant blessing from their harsh master who's left no choice but to tell them to leave with families and flocks (Ex 12:31-32).

In both cases, false gods were insulted in the process (Laban's when Rachel sat on them, and Pharaoh's gods of water and creatures by God's plagues).

In both cases the harsh master originally tried to chase down fleeing Israel but was prevented (Ex 14) and he was plundered in the process (Gen 31:9 uses the same Hebrew word as Ex 12:36, "*they plundered the Egyptians.*") There's echoes and parallels here with the Exodus and Christ's redemption. Jesus also plundered our enemy's property at the cross (Mt 12:29, Col 2:15).

Fast forwarding to the NT, Jesus during a Passover instituted communion, a new covenant meal to signify a greater redemption from our slavery to sin.

- this has physical symbols for memorials/remembrance (1 Cor 11:25)
- this N.C. sign reminds us of protection from God's wrath (Rom 5:9)
- Christ's blood sacrifice was needed for peace/forgiveness (Mt 26:28)
- Communion we eat with bread symbolizing the sinless Savior living for us the perfect life we could never live, giving His life for us and to us (1 Cor 11:23-24). It's also a family meal, only for true children of God who examine their own lives for the leaven of sin first, only those who know what it means to "discern the body rightly." If you are not sure you're a disciple who knows what it means to discern the body, or if you have unrepentant sin against Christ or His body, maybe you knew it last time but still refuse to obey, let it pass today. Don't partake in a manner unworthy of Christ's peace this represents.

The Lord was faithful to bring Jacob back to his father's house in Gen 31 and there's one more thing communion reminds us of: the Lord Jesus will be faithful to bring us back to His Father's house where He went to prepare for us a place. The Lord Jesus will one day come back to separate sheep from goats, not by any external marks or colors like in this story, the Lord will separate them on His right for eternal blessing for all who trust in the Good Shepherd, but the rest will face eternal judgment. Every color of person will worship around the throne of the Lamb of God in heaven, unblemished and spotless. Our natural appearance is dark stained by sin but Jesus washes us white as snow. This is what communion looks forward to. And what marks His true sheep will be how they loved suffering people, according to Mt 25.

- People need to be loved and led through suffering
- We need to trust God's promises and presence in suffering
- Like Jesus we need to seek peace and love those who make us suffer

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ⁱ *The Sunday-School World*, ed. by James Gray, p. 253.

http://www.archive.org/stream/sundayschoolworl03gray/sundayschoolworl03gray_djvu.txt

ⁱⁱ See "Children's Ministry in Bible Times" (<http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=416131336162>) and for church history on children's Sunday School or catechism classes, see

<http://christiannurture.blogspot.com/2012/02/sketch-of-history-of-age-segregation.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ John Currid, *Genesis*, vol. 2, p. 110.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 118.