
Getting What You Deserve

Genesis 29

So what will God's provision and protection look like in Jacob's life? If we were to trudge along the road with him as he traveled to Haran, what would Jacob expect? What would you encourage him to expect?

He, no doubt has much on his mind. He has left the land of God's promise under less than ideal circumstances. He has been caught up in deceit and caught in his deception. He has caused his father great distress and his brother great desire for revenge. He is running not only for a wife, remember that is the stated context for his departure although we know more thanks to our narrator, but is also running for his life. Guilt and fear are tremendous burdens to bear. Often, just being relieved of these problems feels so good, that we fail to adequately deal with the issues that saddled us with them in the first place. I am certain that Jacob is still carrying this burden (we will be told so later in the upcoming narratives).

And then, Jacob just had this incredible vision of God's wonder and glory as he, in spite of his sin, God has affirmed Jacob's place in the covenantal blessing initially bestowed upon Abraham. God is with him, God is blessing him, God has plans and purposes for him, Jacob can probably not contain his emotion. He probably is very excited about what God is going to do for him next!

Well, the providential and invincible purposes of God are actually moving for our good and His glory, even when we are getting what we richly deserve!

In Willing Service to Others (v.1-14)

Jacob travels on to Haran, arriving at the fields on the outskirts of the city.

Careful Confrontation of the Shepherds (v.1-8)

29 Then Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east. ² As he looked, he saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep lying beside it, for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large, ³ and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place over the mouth of the well.

⁴ Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where do you come from?" They said, "We are from Haran." ⁵ He said to them, "Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?" They said, "We know him." ⁶ He said to them, "Is it well with him?" They said, "It is well; and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!" ⁷ He said, "Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered together. Water the sheep and go, pasture them." ⁸ But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep."

God's providence brings him to the place where the flocks are watered. There is a field and a well there. In a common practice to prevent the well from being contaminated, a large stone was laid on its top. When all the flocks and their shepherds had arrived, then they would take the stone off and bring the flocks to water drawn from the well.

Certainly, this scene would have felt like what his mother would have told him about her situation so many years ago. He is in Haran. He is here to seek a wife. Here is a well. A scene

like this has probably been played out day after day on the month-long journey. And now it looks like it is unfolding before his very eyes.

He asks the shepherds gathered near the well. Yes, they are from Haran. Yes, they know Laban and all is well with him. In fact, here comes his daughter, Rachel. Now, Jacob is a bit of a man about the world. He seems to be an experienced shepherd himself. He looks at his watch and realizes that these shepherds are lolling about with their flocks at the wrong time of day. They ought to go water the sheep and put them out to pasture. "We don't do it that way," they reply. It strikes me that these men are here at this time waiting for Rachel to come to the well.

Gallant Assistance for Rachel (v.9-12)

⁹ While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess. ¹⁰ Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother. ¹¹ Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. ¹² And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father.

While he is discussing this with them, Rachel arrives with her flock. When Jacob saw her and knew that she was the one the shepherds had identified, he leaps to her aid. He, by himself, rolls the stone off the wells. He draws the water and fills the troughs so that her entire flock can be watered. He is showing her honor and respect that the shepherds who were waiting on her seem to know little of. She is going to notice him.

Then, in typical near eastern fashion, he greets her with a kiss and weeps aloud. He has come to the end of his journey. Who would be at the destination but a relative of his uncle, Laban? When would he arrive at the destination but when she is coming out to water her flocks? Here is clearly the attending providence and provision of God. His weeping here is an expression of his great mingled emotions of gladness and relief. Then he identifies himself to her. She seems to drop everything and runs to tell her father.

Glad Meeting with Laban (v.13-14)

¹³ As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, ¹⁴ and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month.

Laban is overjoyed to hear that a relative is in town. And a son of his sister, no less. He runs out to meet Jacob, gives him a welcoming greeting and brings him into his home. Jacob is seeing firsthand the attending hand of God. God is with him on the journey to Haran all the way into Laban's home.

The Bible says that Jacob told Laban all these things. We don't know exactly what that entails. It is possible that Jacob related with open honesty why he was here. He may have told the whole story. I am inclined in that direction because of how Laban responds. With words that evoke Adam's seeing Eve for the first time, Laban says, "You are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." They are family that is all that matters.

But there is beginning an ominous note here as well. Moses is saying that Laban and Jacob are cut from the same cloth. They are related, yes. But they are also much alike in other, more foreboding ways.

As I read this, I am struck by how ordinary Jacob is, at some level. He is at times a gallant and manly in his way. He is at times, very culturally near eastern. He, for all his scheming and deceit, appears to be blind to Laban until it is too late. Ah, he is not quite a smooth, sophisticated, sharp as he might want to appear.

Jacob also shows us how to move with joy in God's providences. He seems to resonate with the God who is moving for him. He is willing to do hard work in the midst of what God is doing. He does not sit back and passively wait for God to do for him what he will not do for himself.

Here is a lesson for us as well. God has told you that He is actually engaged in your world. He is not distant or far. He is not standing in the wings, arms folded, waiting to see what will happen or what you will do. His messengers are moving to and fro about the cosmos carrying out his bidding. And as the book of Hebrews reminds us, they are serving God's purposes for His people. God is guiding and guarding your ways. You may plan, but God is directing the way those plans unfold. Jacob is surely imagining what arriving at Haran will be like with dreams of meeting his future wife. And then, here it is in Technicolor reality.

And so passes thirty happy days of life in Laban's home.

With Painfully Pointed Correction (v.15-30)

We do not know all that transpired during that month. We do know for certain that Jacob began to love Rachel. We begin to see God's painfully pointed hand of correction at work.

In the Pursuit of Blessing (v.15-19)

¹⁵ Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" ¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. ¹⁸ Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." ¹⁹ Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me."

Jacob begins to live and work in Laban's household. We can guess that this "man of the tent" knew a bit about tending sheep and about manipulating... I mean managing people. And Jacob likely worked hard, knowing that God was with him. He was eager to help at the well and probably was very efficient in his "duties" in Laban's employ.

Laban recognized however that it was unfair to be the beneficiary of this quality labor without some form of payment and he offers Jacob whatever he would like. He probably envisioned a parcel of the family land, a small flock of sheep, a small sum of money to relocate back in Canaan would be his repayment. But Jacob had his eyes on Rachel from the moment he arrived. Rachel, yes Rachel as his wife would be his salary!

Laban agrees that this would be a reasonable request, especially in light of the price Jacob would pay. Seven productive years to trade as the dowry for his lovely younger daughter, Laban likely thought he was getting such a bargain!

But our narrator lets us in on a bit of a problem, Rachel is one of two and indeed the younger! We should be primed and ready for the rest of the story as it unfolds.

In the Reaping of Harvest (v.20-25)

²⁰ So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." ²² So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast.

²³ But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. ²⁴ (Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant.)

²⁵ And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?"

Picking up the story in verse 20 we expect to find a willing worker and a joyous wedding celebration. The anticipated parallel with Isaac and Rebekah cause us to expect a similar outcome, but let's see as we read on to verse 25.

What a turn of events for Jacob. Do you see the irony? Do you see the way that God has brought about a harvest of justice even in his gracious blessing? I don't begin to think I understand how this could happen, even in an age before electric lights, but what a surprise!

In the Mess of Complications (v.26-30)

²⁶ Laban said, "It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.

²⁷ Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." ²⁸ Jacob did so, and completed her week. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. ²⁹ (Laban gave his female servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her servant.) ³⁰ So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years.

Jacob protested. "Foul!" He cried. "Not fair!" You can almost see him at the mouth of Laban's tent stomping his feet and kicking the dirt. This is not the bargain that we established! You can almost hear him claim that Laban is a big liar and deceiver.

Then Laban speaks words that had to cut to the very heart of Jacobs protest if not his own emotional heart as well. "Leah is the firstborn." Those words would have stung like a bee. Laban's words could have just as well been spoken by God as well. The end does not justify the means.

But in this, Jacob was still willing to exchange another seven years to secure the privilege of have Rachel as his wife, but you can bet that all is not well yet.

Remember, those of you that have been worrying that Jacob seems to be skating by without any problem in this narrative, wham! God lets him have it...right where it counts so to speak. Do not feel sorry for Esau, he rejects God's plans and purposes, but bear in mind even when we are knowing the recipients of God's grace and mercy there still might be consequences to our sins and failures.

Reflect and Respond

Here are our lessons from this narrative...

Let us first of all hear this lesson again. God is actually engaged in our world. He is not waiting to see what will happen or what you will do. Indeed we may plan, but God is directing the way those plans unfold. From the narratives of the Bible we learn how and why God works in these ways. The difference between them and us is not so much in the way God is working but in what we know about *why* God is acting in this way. We should trust God for his plan in our often complex and complicated lives.

Jacob worked hard when he thought that God was with him. And since we know that He is with us as well, we too should work hard in both understanding His character and will and in reflecting the glory of Christ who has perfectly gone before. He is with us always... in our mundane and normal just as he was with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And lastly, God is able to work out temporal correction for our failures when he so desires. Let's not fall into the trap where we think that just because all is well that you "got away" with whatever sin or problem you think you might be hiding. Or that God must not love you or care for you because in the working out of whatever situation you find yourself in God didn't also eliminate the consequences. That is often how we judge God's blessing. God was so good when "such and such a problem was resolved and I didn't even have to ___!" You can fill in the blank. How often have we given or heard testimonies to that effect? And then on the flip side, we become hardened, angry, bitter when God drags us through lessons of chastening to change and soften our hearts. May we pray that God would soften our hearts to be receptive to accept his plan and work even harder, legitimately, for the prize that he has set before us.

The providential and invincible purposes of God are actually moving for our good and His glory, even when we are getting what we richly deserve!