

**“THE DECEIVER DECEIVED”**

In the previous passage, the Lord used the image of a ladder connecting heaven and earth to reassure Jacob that he would continue to be with him, even though Jacob had to leave the promised land. But in this passage, as Jacob arrives in the land of Haran, it is difficult for us to detect any signs that indicate that God is present with him. There is no acknowledgement of God, not by Jacob or by any of the other characters in the story. There is no mention of God by Moses, the author of Genesis, as he narrates what took place in Haran. And the evil that befalls Jacob in this passage makes us wonder where God is in all of this. If God has not left Jacob, if God is in fact keeping his promise to be with Jacob, then why does he allow such a terrible thing to happen to him? This is the question that I want us to focus upon tonight.

As Jacob arrives in the area around Haran, he comes to a well. We have seen this happen before in Genesis. The same thing happened when Abraham sent his servant to Haran to find a wife for his son Isaac. It was at a well that the servant met up with Rebekah, the woman who would become Isaac’s wife. The well in this passage might even be the same one. The similarities between these two passages prepare us for what is about to take place. The covenant family had come to a well in Haran before, looking for a suitable spouse for Isaac. Now Jacob comes to a well looking for the very same thing.

There is, however, one significant difference between that earlier story at the well and this one. In that passage, the first thing that Abraham’s servant did upon arriving at the well was to petition the Lord to grant him success in finding a bride for Isaac. We do not

see Jacob doing anything like that. He does not arrive at the well with the humble and prayerful attitude that characterized Abraham's servant. Instead, after asking the shepherds that he met there a few quick questions, he has the nerve to start telling them what to do. There is a brashness about Jacob that is very unbecoming. Here is a man who needs to be taken down a notch or two. And that is exactly what is going to happen to him.

But before it can happen, the stage has to be fully set. Enter Laban's younger daughter Rachel. Again, we are reminded of the meeting between Abraham's servant and Rebekah several chapters ago. As you will recall, it was quite an undertaking for Rebekah to draw water for the ten camels that Abraham had sent with his servant. And now it is Jacob who performs above and beyond the call of duty to provide water for Rachel's flock. As we learn from the shepherds who Jacob met there, the rock that covered this well was too big for just one or two men to remove. They had to wait until the other shepherds arrived before they could move it out of the way. But Jacob will not allow Rachel to wait, so removes the rock all by himself.

This action may not seem like very much to us, but think about it from Laban's perspective. Here comes another member of Abraham's family. The last such visit resulted in a windfall for Laban's family, as Abraham's servant gave them many costly goods as a bride-price. And here comes Laban's daughter, returning from the well to tell her father about Jacob's impressive feat. Jacob may not have had the kind of riches that the servant had when he came to Haran, but this could actually work in Laban's favor.

After all, this strong young man is going to need to earn a living now that he is so far from home, is he not? Remember, Laban lived in an agrarian society, long before the invention of farm machines. A hard worker like Jacob could make a significant difference in the bottom line for the man for whom he worked. You can almost see the dollar signs in Laban's eyes as he greets his nephew for the first time.

I would imagine that Laban knew what Jacob was going to say when he asked him what he wanted for his wages. Jacob had been living with him for a month. He would have had plenty of opportunities to observe the interactions between Jacob and Rachel. He would have known that they were falling in love. And he also would have known that Jacob did not have anything to offer for Rachel. Laban had him right where he wanted him.

Jacob's offer of seven years of labor for Rachel's hand in marriage was very extravagant, going well beyond a typical bride-price in that culture. But those seven years seemed like nothing to Jacob because of his love for Rachel. At this point in the story, a reader who is not familiar with the way it ends might begin to think that this is just about where "happily ever after" begins. But there was no happily ever after for Jacob and Rachel. Jacob the deceiver had finally met his match in his deceptive uncle.

Stop for just a minute to consider this man Laban. What kind of a man is this? Not only does he think nothing of treating his nephew, the one he greets as "my bone and my flesh," in such a cruel manner, but he also has no regard for the future happiness of his own daughters. Rachel had a chance at a happy marriage. But Laban ruined it. And

because of his actions, these two sisters will spend the rest of their lives fighting for the affections of the man that they have been forced to share for a husband. If ever there was a man who made money into his god, if ever there was a man who put the accumulation of wealth before everything else, it was Laban.

It might seem hard to believe that Jacob could have fallen for Laban's ruse, but consider the circumstances. It happened at night, in an age that did not have any artificial lighting. In Jacob's world, nighttime was really dark. On top of that, it is likely that Leah would have worn a veil, so that Jacob would not have been able to see her face at all, not even by candlelight. And then there is the strong likelihood that Jacob would have consumed some alcohol during the wedding celebration, so that his senses were at least somewhat dulled. Given these factors, it is not very difficult to see how Jacob could have been tricked.

There is a bitter irony to what happens to Jacob in this story. The reason why he had to go to Haran in the first place was because he had deceived his father by pretending to be his older brother. And what happens to him once he gets to Haran? He is deceived by Laban, who has Leah pretend to be her younger sister. Jacob has gotten a taste of his own medicine.

When Jacob discovers what has happened, he confronts his uncle for this deception. And what does Laban do? He actually tries to claim the moral high ground. He says, "It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn." Laban tries to make it sound as though Jacob is the one to blame for wanting to marry Rachel instead of

Leah. But we can easily see through Laban's words. He doesn't really care about his society's customs. If he did, he could have brought this matter up seven years earlier, when Jacob first asked him for Rachel. Laban was simply using the traditions and standards of his culture as a cover for his own sin. We see the same sort of thing in our culture. We see it whenever people try to use the conventions and values of the wider society in order to support their own selfish interests. How many times do Christians who raise objections about the morality of a particular practice find themselves being accused of being intolerant?

This brings us back to the question with which we began this sermon: where was God in all of this? The answer to this question is that God was right there in Haran. He was with Jacob. He was keeping his promise, as he always does. The Lord allowed these things to happen to Jacob because he had sent him into exile in order to humble him. Sometimes, God has to take drastic measures to open our eyes to see how sinful we really are. He loves us too much to leave us in our sin. And our sinfulness is far more extensive than we think it is. Jacob had to be subjected to the schemes of Laban so that he could come to see the sin in his own heart. The Lord will use whatever means are necessary to open our eyes to see the extent of our sin with greater clarity. This is something that we all need. In the words of Robert Murray M'Cheyne,

“Learn to be humbled far more than you have ever been. None of you have ever been sufficiently humbled under a sense of sin; for this reason, that none of you

have ever seen fully the plague of your own heart. There are chambers in your heart you have never yet seen into - there are caves in that ocean you have never fathomed - there are fountains of bitterness you have never tasted. When you have felt the wickedness of your heart to the uttermost, then lie down under this awful truth, that you have only seen a few yards into a pit that is bottomless - that you carry about with you a slumbering volcano - a heart whose wickedness you do not and cannot know.” [*Sermons*, 35]

We do not know how sinful we really are. But God does. And he is determined to save his children from the sin that wants to rule over us, regardless of the measures that he has to take in order to do so.

In this story from the life of Jacob, we are given a glimpse into the outworking of God’s saving work in one man’s life. The salvation of a soul, the process by which the Lord transforms a sinner into a saint, is the greatest of all of God’s works. And it is a work that takes an entire lifetime to accomplish. This is certainly what we see in Jacob’s life, isn’t it? We do not see Jacob praying the sinner’s prayer at one moment and then going on to enjoy spiritual victory after spiritual victory. It is true that he had a powerful encounter with God at Bethel, but just look at what happened to him when he arrived in Haran. Jacob’s story teaches us that salvation is not so much a transaction that is made at one particular moment in time as it is a process that is being worked out over a lifetime. It is true that a person needs to repent and place his faith in Jesus Christ. Conversion is

absolutely necessary, even if some people may not be able to pinpoint the precise moment when they were converted to Christ. But it is equally true that a Christian is someone who is being saved in the present and who will be saved in the future. If you are a Christian, then God is working out your salvation right now, and he is using the particular circumstances of your life to do it.

Ask yourself this question on a regular basis: what is there in my life right now that the Lord may be using to humble me? In what ways might the Lord be trying to further unveil the depths of my sin? God will continue to exert his saving power in your life, working through the circumstances that he ordains for your life, to keep you mindful of just how dependent you are upon him for your salvation. There will be times when this is very unpleasant. There may even be times when it seems downright unfair, or even cruel. I would imagine that Jacob felt that way when he woke up to find Leah beside him instead of Rachel. But God was not being cruel to Jacob in allowing this to happen to him, as awful as it was. Nor was God being unfair to him. This was what the Lord deemed to be necessary to save this man from his sin. It was part of how God was working out Jacob's salvation. And the same is true of everything that you are experiencing in your life right now if you belong to Jesus Christ. It is the reason why we confess, in the answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism, that "all things must be subservient to my salvation." The events that befell Jacob when he went to Haran were subservient to his salvation, and so is every event that takes place in your life, if you belong to Jesus Christ.