


Messy Life:
The Story of Jacob
Part 10
Our Work or God's Grace?

TALKINGPOINTS WALKINGPOINTS

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Talk together about the glory of God's kingdom. –Psalm 145:11
Love the Lord your God and **walk** in all his ways. –Joshua 22:5

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

Observation—*What do I see?*

- From an easy-to-read version (such as the New Century Version), read and summarize the action of:
 - Genesis 30:25-36 At the end of this interaction, notice especially what Laban did.
 - Genesis 30:37—31:2 Notice especially who appears to be causing the flocks to be speckled.
 - Genesis 31:3-9 Notice to whom Jacob gives the credit for his growing flock and fortunes.
 - Genesis 31:10-12 Here Jacob gives a critical flashback: whose idea was this breeding plan?
- Summarize the principles of "God's sovereign initiative" and "man's faithful involvement".
- If we are *unaware* of the flashback (④), **who appears to be** the determinative agent in this outcome?
Who became privy to this flashback? Jacob? Rachel and Leah? Laban and sons?

Interpretation—*What does it mean?*

- What does 2 Kings 6:15–17 teach us about what human eyes can see and what spiritual eyes can see?
Laban and sons saw with merely human eyes. Who did they **think** "took away our sheep" (31:1)?
Jacob saw with spiritual eyes. Who did he **know** "took away Laban's livestock" (31:5, 9)?
- We know that it was God who took away Laban's livestock—so did Jacob do nothing (30:37-43)?
Explain the principle we see in action here: "God was the **ultimate cause** of Jacob's flourishing, while Jacob's obedient actions were the **instrumental (or, proximate) cause** of his flourishing."

Application—*What do I do with this?*

- What applications of the principle of "ultimate causation versus instrumental causation" apply to...
 - ...the flourishing of your marriage and family?
 - ...your flourishing at work?
 - ...the flourishing of your spiritual growth and development?
- Choose one of the above areas (family life, work, spiritual development). What obedient action do you know God is calling you to in that domain? How well are you following through with your part?

Sermon Summary Genesis 30:25—31:20

There was a time in Jacob's life when he thought that success came because he did certain things. What I hope to show you today is that success comes not solely because of what you do, but because of something else. This lesson dawned on Jacob while serving his father-in-law Laban. After fourteen years of service, Jacob wanted to leave his father-in-law's employ and start his own business. So, he decided to turn in his resignation (Genesis 30:25-27).

Under Jacob's supervision of his flocks, Laban had become rich. However, Jacob had nothing to show for those long fourteen years of hard work. But now Jacob was ready to return to his own country. The problem was, he had no assets with which to start his own business. So, he turns in his resignation to his father-in-law Laban and suggests a way that Laban can send him off with a large bonus in appreciation for all that he has done for him. Laban was perplexed by how much his wealth had increased since he put Jacob in charge of his flocks. He couldn't make sense of it. He decided to consult a soothsayer or oracle to discover the secret to his success. God can work through anyone, and through this practice of divination, he made it known to Laban that Jacob was under the special care of Yahweh. God had blessed Jacob's service. God was the ultimate cause of the blessing.

Laban does not want Jacob to leave because he realizes that Jacob is the source of his blessing, at least indirectly. So, he tries to talk him into staying (v.28-31). Jacob did not want Laban to give him anything. He had learned that God would supply what He wanted him to have. He did not want to be indebted to Laban in any way (v.32-34). Only those future spotted and speckled animals born from the normal-colored animals would become Jacob's. Since the solid-colored animals were by far the more numerous, and since it was much less likely that they would bear striped and speckled offspring, this arrangement was highly favorable to Laban and very unfavorable to Jacob. The arrangement Jacob strikes with Laban is that he would get to keep only those speckled and striped animals born to the solid-colored animals—which genetically should be very few. The number was up to God. Laban keeps all the rest. Jacob had put himself entirely at God's mercy. It would be up to God to indicate, by a very unlikely set of circumstances, whether Jacob should prosper personally or not. Laban jumped at the proposal, but the more he thought about it, the more suspicious he became. With such thoughts in his mind, Laban decided not to trust Jacob to keep the two sets of flocks separate (v. 35-36).

Let me summarize what Jacob does next (v. 37-43). Jacob believed that through selective breeding he could simply trust God to increase the statistical proportion of animals in future generations of Laban's flocks that would appear with recessive traits, and he could eventually develop a flock of predominantly spotted and speckled animals that would be strong and healthy. The result of Jacob's efforts is found in v.43. In Genesis 31:1-2, we read that Laban and his sons were jealous of Jacob's success and falsely attributed it to some dishonesty on Jacob's part. But remember, Laban had agreed to Jacob's proposal. At the time, he thought there was no way Jacob could benefit from this plan. The odds were strongly in Laban's favor. But God was responsible for Jacob's success. This success caused a growing rift (v.3). Those five words, "I will be with you" provided all the motivation Jacob needed to take his next steps. But first he had to convince his wives that it was time to leave (v. 4-7). "Time and time again," Jacob told his wives, "your father tried to cheat me out of my wages" (v.8-10). Jacob was very aware that his success had not come because he was such a great breeder. It came as a result of God's blessing.

It is at this point that Jacob reveals to his wives that God has visited him again, just as he had over twenty years ago at Bethel (v.11-16). Leah and Rachel then realized that their father was unconcerned about their future. Whatever inheritance they might once have had would now go to their brothers. Over the years they had observed the actions of their father and brothers in contrast with those of Jacob. They understand why God had blessed their husband. Consequently, they saw God's blessing of Jacob as God's way of restoring what rightly belonged to them and to their children. They were ready to leave (v.17-18)!

But in the midst of this triumphant exodus, the Biblical writer includes an interesting detail (v.19). We don't know why Rachel stole these idols. Some commentators have suggested that she may have been reluctant to completely abandon her family's pagan superstitions. If so, her attitude was like that of many Christians today. They are happy to know the Lord, but they are unwilling to make a clean break with the world. We hold onto our idols, just in case. The story continues in verse 20. This was a very long journey across difficult terrain. With cattle, we're talking about 15 days to make this 300-mile journey. What does God want us to learn from this portion of God's Word? I think God wants us to learn that success does not come from anything we do. Ultimately our success is due to something else or should I say - someone else! Our success ultimately comes from God. It took a while, but Jacob eventually learned that his success wasn't due to his skills or great cleverness. It came about because God was committed to blessing him. God decided to bless him. It was part of his master plan. I'm not saying that God doesn't use our intellect and efforts and wise choices. He does. But they guarantee nothing. And if God chooses to bless us in some area, he can, and often does, do so despite our sin and bad choices (Gen. 28:13-15). What God promises he accomplishes!

The Bible tells us that every good gift comes from above. That is the point I want to drive home today. Whatever has come to us, it is the Lord's goodness that has brought it to us.

Digging Deeper in Your Daily Quiet Time

Godly people have always been concerned that God get the glory in our success. Let's use the "Five Question Bible Study" method to explore this in the life of Ezra...

Monday— Study Ezra 1:1–3 for the context. Jews return from the exile to rebuild the Temple.

Tuesday— Study Ezra 7:6-10, 27-28. Trace the references to God's hand. What do you learn?

Wednesday— Study Ezra 8:18-32. Trace the references to God's hand. What do you learn?

Thursday— Study Nehemiah 2:1-8, 17-18. Trace the references to God's hand. What do you learn?

Friday— Study what the Lord's hand does in Psalm 10:12; 18:15; 104:28 and 145:16.

Saturday— Make the prayer of Psalm 31:14–17 your own.

Bible Text: _____

Date: _____



What idea particularly strikes me from this text? [Note in which verse(s) it is found.]



What question does this text raise in my mind—and how would **this text** answer it?



What about Jesus Christ—his character and/or his redemption—relates to this text?



What action must I take as a result of this text? Be concrete and specific.



With whom will I share what I learned from this text? [and what was their response?]