

Begetting Children: Wealth, Wisdom, and Blessing

Genesis 30:25-36, 31:1-9, Proverbs 2:1-10

Portions adapted from "Helping God Out" by Thomas Black @ SermonCentral.com

The freshly appointed bank president was so intimidated by his new responsibilities, that he nervously sought the advice of his gray-haired predecessor: "Sir, what has been the secret of your success?"

"The secret, young man, is two words: right decisions!" replied the older man.

"But how do you make right decisions?"

"One word: experience."

"But how do you get experience?"

The old man smiled. "Two words: wrong decisions."

(Ted W. Engstrom and Edward R. Dayton, editors, "Murphy's Law," Christian Leadership Letter, February, 1981, p. 1; www.PreachingToday.com)

Today's story from the life of Jacob is rather simple: After 14 years of marriage and enriching his father-in-law Laban, Jacob now wants to go home, but instead, he agrees to remain a few years more so that he can build up some wealth for his own family. It is a time of right and wrong decision making by both our hero Jacob and others as well. But the overarching lesson from this passage is:

- **That God's plans for our life will succeed regardless of either our deservedness, or another's opposition, or even our own schemes.**
- **AND our response to this truth is to simply commit our life to honoring God and trusting Him to keep his promises.**

Let's review the story: Jacob has just completed his obligation by giving Laban 14 years of indentured service in exchange for his two wives, even though he had only wanted one. And while Jacob has certainly been blessed during this time with now four wives and 10 children, nevertheless he has earned no personal wealth by which to support his family, since up to this point all his work has profited only Laban who apparently did not care to share.

So now, Jacob hopes to get back home where his family can live well enough off of the portion of his family inheritance that he thought was still coming to him. But we already know that God still has more plans for building Jacob's personally earned wealth along with his character.

Laban, however, knows only how valuable Jacob has been to him; having little when Jacob arrived, Laban has now become rich because of God's blessing on his son-in-law. Jacob is a golden goose Laban doesn't want to lose. It is interesting that Laban, who will later claim that he does not want to lose his daughters, at this point shows his true

character in that it is his prized worker that he wants to keep near him. For Laban it's not about love or family, it is always about the MONEY.

But Laban is not only greedy, he is fundamentally dishonest, and Jacob has had 14 years to observe this. So Laban's generous offer for Jacob to "*name his wages*" is not fooling anybody. Do you remember that this was the exact same offer that Laban gave him when Jacob first asked to marry just one of his daughters?

And obviously Jacob knew that just such a deceptive offer was coming, because he quickly replies: "*You shall not give me anything; but if you will [make a simple bargain with] me, I will again feed your flock and keep it: let me pass through all your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages (29-33).*"

Surely the phrase, "*You shall not give me anything*", was a bargain that cheapskate Laban equally quickly, accepted. Jacob knew what to say to this schemer, since he himself was still a practitioner of the same art. So these two schemers are about to enter into one final round with each other.

Now, normally sheep are white and goats are black, which is the preferred coloration. For any of these colors to change a recessive gene has to take precedence. Thus, black sheep and bi-colored goats would only be a small minority of most flocks, especially if Laban made sure to give Jacob as few of these animals as possible to begin with. So Laban immediately and secretly, contrary to his agreement with Jacob, removed and hid most of his off-color animals before Jacob had the chance to pull out his own breeding stock. Jacob would have to begin with all white sheep and black goats; thus Laban was looking forward to many more years of cheap labor.

But Jacob had been assured of God's blessing—and besides, he had a scheme of his own to guarantee his success. Being educated in the latest cutting edge science of animal husbandry, Jacob believed that animals would produce the type of offspring that they saw while pregnant. So he made sure that his pregnant ewes saw only black lambs and his pregnant nanny's saw bi-colored poles. And sure enough most of the flocks under his charge came out black or bi-colored—thus quickly increasing Jacob's personal wealth. Now we know that what an animal looks at in no way determines what color its offspring will be, and that mandrake roots will not help you get pregnant, but the people Jacob's day did not--and that's the point.

Jacob was once again scheming, trying to bring about his own blessing. Six years later, when it's time to leave, Jacob will be humbled and will acknowledge that God was the one behind his animal breeding success. But for right now, Jacob was doing what he thought would insure that he got some of the blessing God had promised him.

That is what this text is about. Jacob's growing flock was another fulfillment of God's promise to him at Bethel (Genesis 28). **God was providing for Jacob EVEN while he was continuing His training for Jacob to trust him.** But because Jacob was again relying on his own schemes he was going to put in a lot more useless effort than had he just trusted God to continue blessing his honest work.

So Jacob and Laban go another six-year round of schemer versus schemer after which Jacob is now wealthy enough to leave; and it's the right time to do so because Laban's family is beginning to want Jacob's additional wealth for themselves.

Laban reminds me of the industrialist Andrew Carnegie of Pittsburgh who at one time was acknowledged as the richest man in the world. Yet when he was asked how much wealth would he need to be happy, he replied: "*just a little more than I have right now.*"

So, when Jacob's 20 year exile and education program comes to an end, God revisits him in another dream assuring him that He has seen Laban's dishonesty—and Jacob's own scheming as well, and that it was God—not striped poles or black lambs who had caused Jacob's success in breeding large off-color flocks. God then says to him, *I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and return to the land of your birth.*" (31:13)

So how does this apply to us? What lesson should we take home from Jacob's flock tending days?

Do you resort to scheming when faced with a problem?

Do you ever try to "help God out"?

Or, are you content even in an uncomfortable situation to trust Him?

Our ignorance of God's ability and desire to bless us doesn't negate God's plan. Neither does it relieve us of responsibility to live honorably. As he does in Jacob's life, God is working to rewire our hearts so that we will be more reliant upon His provision—even if he has to dismantle our stubbornness in the process.

The secret of our success is not what we think it is. Often, true success comes from some very surprising place. Both Laban and Jacob thought they were the source of their own success. And that's what some of us do, too. We count on our shrewd deals to get ahead. Oh, we may not be cheating anybody in particular, but there are times when we attribute our own success to our own cleverness.

In reality, God was only blessing Laban, in spite of his deceitful ways, because He was blessing Jacob. And God was blessing Jacob, in spite of his self-help schemes, because God had promised to bless Jacob wherever he went until He brought him back home. And now after 20 years of training it was time for Jacob to go home.

Jacob had become wealthy NOT because of what Jacob did, but because GOD prospered him regardless of what he did. Jacob's scheme of peeling strips of bark off the branches of trees, of putting them in front of the strong females at the right time, of removing them when the weak females were in heat, all of that was a waste of time and effort. All Jacob had to do was depend on the Lord who had promised to take care of him (Genesis 28:13-15). Instead, his self-help scheme had just created a lot of extra, unnecessary, and frustrating work for himself, because Laban—true to his greedy dishonest nature--kept changing the terms of the deal (Genesis 31:7).

And sometimes we do the same thing. We think it's our efforts that make a difference when it is God who is causing our success. Now, don't get me wrong. God never rewards laziness. We are always responsible for our own actions. But if we think that it's our own hard work that produces the results, we're only kidding ourselves. Scripture makes it very clear: "*EVERY good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father...*" (James 1:17). Our every success, our every blessing, our every achievement, comes from God Himself, who delights in giving his children good things.

So stop exhausting yourself with useless schemes. Stop trying so hard to work all your complicated plans, and simply trust the Lord. Depend on Him to keep His word to you, and you will enjoy your life a whole lot more.

Two Kentucky farmers who owned racing stables had developed a keen rivalry. One spring each of them entered a horse in a local steeplechase. Thinking that a professional rider might help him outdo his competitor, one of the farmers engaged a crack jockey. Near the end of the race, these two horses were neck and neck with a large lead over the rest of the pack at the last fence, but suddenly both fell, unseating their riders.

The professional jockey quickly remounted and rode on to win the race. Returning triumphantly to the paddock, the jockey found the farmer who had hired him fuming with rage.

"What's the matter?" the jockey asked. "I won, didn't I?"

"Oh, yea," roared the farmer. "You won all right, but you crossed the finish line on the wrong horse."

In his hurry to remount after the fall, the jockey had jumped on his competitor's horse. (Judy C. Knupke, Newton Lower Falls, Massachusetts, Leadership, Vol. 12, no. 4; www.PreachingToday.com)

A lot of people are riding the wrong horse of their own self-effort through life. Because our own self-effort cannot acquire what matters most in our life.

Our own self-effort will never get us into God's family. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.*" Our own self effort will never get us to heaven.

And our own self-effort cannot make us more righteous here on this earth. In Galatians three, Paul asks the question, "*Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?*" (Galatians 3:3). It is by letting God's Spirit work in our life that we become righteous.

So, our own human effort cannot get us to heaven. Our own human effort cannot make us better people here on earth. And most certainly, **our own self-effort cannot fix our mates or our children.** First Peter chapter three talks to wives about winning over their husbands, "*without words,*" but by "*the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit*" (1 Peter 3:1-4). You don't win your spouse by nagging, or dropping hints, or manipulating him/her into making the "right" decisions. No. You do it by living your life like God wants you to live it, trusting Him to get through to your spouse.

We think it's our schemes that produce results when all along it is God working in and through us. Jesus said, "*Apart from me you can do nothing*" (John 15:5). So we must live our lives in daily dependence upon Him. Otherwise, we're just uselessly expending our energy in a frustrating, wasted effort.

The moral of this story is that God will work His plans for us regardless of our deservedness, in spite of any opposition, and in spite of our own self-help schemes which sometimes just make our life more difficult. Because God loves us, He wants to prosper His children and He will do this if we will just keep our end of the bargain by seeking Him and his righteousness with our whole heart. Just what He promised Jacob, God also promises the same for us:

To always be with us,
And to still bless us through good times or bad,
Until He brings us home.

Amen?

Since we are speaking of seeking God's kingdom and righteousness, you know that last Thursday was our National Day of Prayer. In 1952 an Act of Congress made it an annual event. And every year our President signs a proclamation calling for all citizens to pray. **I am sure that President Obama signed such a call again this year.**

Sadly, most citizens must no longer think we need God's guidance, especially at a national level. Many churches no longer even publicize the National Day of Prayer. That says a lot about whom we as a nation really trust.

I hope you take time to ask for God's guidance and blessing not only for your own life, but for our nation as well; not just one day a year but every time you bow your head in prayer.

I came across an older Presidential Proclamation for this day that I would like to share with you.

*"It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, **announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations are blessed whose God is the Lord.***

And, insomuch as we know that, by His divine law, nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole people?

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown.

But we have forgotten God. *We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us."*

It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

(signed by President Abraham Lincoln, March 30, 1863.)

A spooky lesson that I learned along with this prayer is that it was the political conflict and turmoil, the haranguing and misunderstandings surrounding the presidential election of 1861, which was the original spark of our Civil war. May we remember our Godly dependence, and repent, before something such as this happens again.