

***Foundations: Reversal of Fortune***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***Song of Solomon 8:4-7; 1 John 4:7-12; Genesis 29:1-20***

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Genesis 29:1-20. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "Then Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the eastern peoples. There he saw a well in the field, with three flocks of sheep lying near it because the flocks were watered from that well. The stone over the mouth of the well was large. When all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone away from the well's mouth and water the sheep. Then they would return the stone to its place over the mouth of the well. Jacob asked the shepherds, "My brothers, where are you from?" "We're from Haran," they replied. He said to them, "Do you know Laban, Nahor's grandson?" "Yes, we know him," they answered. Then Jacob asked them, "Is he well?" "Yes, he is," they said, "and here comes his daughter Rachel with the sheep." "Look," he said, "the sun is still high; it is not time for the flocks to be gathered. Water the sheep and take them back to pasture." "We can't," they replied, "until all the flocks are gathered and the stone has been rolled away from the mouth of the well. Then we will water the sheep." While he was still talking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess. When Jacob saw Rachel daughter of Laban, his mother's brother, and Laban's sheep, he went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered his uncle's sheep. Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud. He had told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and a son of Rebekah. So she ran and told her father. As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he hurried to meet him. He embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his home, and there Jacob told him all these things. Then Laban said to him, "You are my own flesh and blood." After Jacob had stayed with him for a whole month, Laban said to him, "Just because you are a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be." Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form, and beautiful. Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It's better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me." So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her."

Everyone likes a good love story. The romantic comedy may have fallen out of favor at the theaters, but they're still everywhere, from Netflix to the Hallmark Channel. Catha likes to point out that while I might be a science fiction fan, the stuff I like best is littered with romantic subplots...and she's not wrong. There's a reason *Romeo and Juliet* is still being read in freshman literature classes and we can get a remake of *West Side Story* fifty years after the fact. We eat it up. Because whether we've had a wonderful relationship or not, whether we really want one, there's something deep in the core of us that desires to love and be loved. God rooted that in us. It's hard for us to discern between the different kinds of love – the Greeks had at least four different words they used to discern familial love and self-giving love from passionate, romantic love. But love is at the core of who we are and what we need. Studies have even shown that you tend to live longer if you have strong, deep, loving interpersonal relationships. It's good for your health!

Over the course of the next several weeks, as we go through the story of Jacob, we're going to see God's hand in things in an indirect way. Part of this is because Jacob keeps trying to forge his own way ahead; part of it is because we're in a long narrative and we're breaking it up to talk about it each week. But God is more involved than we might think, and there are certain things about God we can learn through Jacob's life. So while we'll examine Jacob's life, we'll also see insights into God's life with us.

As you might remember, we picked up the story last week with Jacob out in the desert, far from home, beating a path away from the enraged Esau who planned to kill him for stealing his father's blessing. The LORD met Jacob out there in a dream, and Jacob was awestruck and frightened by it – so much so that he worshiped God and made a makeshift altar, and even made a vow to put his fortunes into God's hands, pledging to give God a tenth of all he received. The most important part, though, was the LORD's promise to Jacob – that He would be with Jacob and would watch over him until the promise of the land was fulfilled to his descendants.

Jacob's journey is now at its stopping point, probably a month-long journey or more, roughly 450 miles from where he started. He's reached Haran, the final stop for grandfather Abraham along his route to Canaan and the homeland of his mother Rebekah. This is long before major roadways or signposts, so Jacob is traveling with a lot of question marks. But God steers Jacob in the right direction, and by God's good providence, Jacob encounters shepherds who don't live far from Jacob's uncle Laban and his family. He meets them all at the well that the community used, especially for watering their herds.

Now, here's what's going on behind the scenes. These shepherds don't want to take the stone off the well until all the herds nearby have gathered. It's a big stone, but there's something else at play here, and that's that these shepherds are a bit lazy. The stone is an excuse for them to hang out for a bit without having to do anything. Jacob says as much. He criticizes them because they're slacking. But as they have this conversation, Rachel shows up.

Rachel is Laban's daughter, and she takes care of their sheep. And Jacob seems dumbstruck by her. She's very beautiful. There's even a pun going on with her name because it means "ewe." She's the little lamb leading her lambs to the well. So Jacob does what any guy who's trying to impress a girl does – he performs a feat of strength! He gets the stone away from the mouth of the well and makes sure her flock has what it needs. And there's a big introduction filled with hugs and kisses and tears. Finally there's a reversal of Jacob's fortunes; finally, he's among people he can trust...or mostly trust, as the case may be. But after meeting Rachel, Jacob's not going anywhere.

Quickly Rachel goes and tells her dad, who brings his own greetings. Laban extends his hospitality to Jacob, which he accepts. But there's a little bit of reading between the lines we have to do. We might remember that Laban was the chief negotiator when Abraham's servant came to Haran to arrange the marriage of Isaac to Rebekah. Abraham's servant came with a handsome dowry and impressive jewels. Laban definitely profited from brokering that marriage, and you can bet he was hoping for the same when Jacob arrived. After hearing the full story and why Jacob arrives empty-handed, Laban's response is, "Well, you are my flesh and blood." Not exactly a glorious welcome, you know? But Laban's looking for an angle.

And after a month in, Laban finds his angle. Jacob's clearly very useful to have around. Jacob may not have been the hunter Esau was, but he was a hard worker, and God was already blessing what Jacob did. Laban has already gotten more out of him than he ever expected, and for nothing. After a month, Laban has to address the elephant in the room – what is going to happen with Jacob? But he does it in a crafty manner. “Tell me what your wages should be.” And Jacob, infatuated as he is, asks for Rachel's hand in exchange for seven years of work.

Now we shouldn't take this as ludicrous because it means more than just Rachel. It means earning enough to build a dowry for Laban and for himself to have some sort of homestead for her. Yet it's clear Laban is going to get the far better deal. Still, Laban plays it off as a concession – “better I give her to you than some other man.” Not “you're a match made in heaven” or “I can see how much you love her,” much more sadly as a transaction, and that's the way Laban sees everything.

And waiting seven years to marry Rachel is tough. Jacob is not a young man; he's likely older than me at this point. Yet to him it seems like a few days because of his love for her. That's got to make any girl swoon right there. Up to this point in Scripture, we've not seen a relationship quite like this, and we rarely will again. In a world where marriages were often arranged for wealth and status and property and not for love, to see love front and center is unusual. It's even more unusual that the eldest daughter Leah isn't married off first. But Jacob's not really attracted to her the same way. We're told Leah has weak eyes, and no one really knows exactly what that means, though many have guessed. Simply put, Rachel is the one who's a knockout in every category. And Jacob knows it, willing to work for her dad on the cheap knowing that because of Rachel, he's getting the better end of the bargain.

Let's take a closer look at a few things that stood out to me as I thought about this passage this week. The first thing is this: *when God watches over us, we may not receive all we want, but we will receive all we need.* Jacob's reversal of fortune here isn't a sudden restoration of all he's presumably lost. He's essentially put himself into a seven-year indentured servitude contract. He breaks the contract, he loses the love of his life. He isn't making tons of money working for his uncle who's working the angles. But for the first time in his story, Jacob is basically content. He's working towards a goal rather than scheming his way into it. He's safe, he's happy – he's a long way from the comforts where he was under Isaac and Rebekah's roof, but he's a long way from the danger he was in from Esau. And in all this, God is slowly working to retrain Jacob's heart.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray for daily bread. We pray for the needs of the day. But we often hear, “if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.” We expect that God should be setting us up for the next week, month, or year, and we should easily be able to see the plan in front of us. But God rarely works like that. There are many paths we would never start down if we knew the hardships to come on those roads, even if those paths have been charted by the Lord in front of us. God is training us to turn to Him everyday, not to rely on ourselves but to rely on Him.

I don't know if I would have gone to seminary and spent all the time and effort and money to go into ministry if I had known the hardships of it all. I have no doubt that God has called us into ministry, but my plans were very different from God's plans. I expected a certain measure of financial stability, a full-time job, a certain amount of respect as a minister. Not unrealistic expectations – just the wrong ones. Has God been with us? Absolutely, in all sorts of situations. There have been challenges and blessings both from our ministry situation. And I can see where God has chiseled out some of my arrogance and pride...He's got more to go, I'm sure, but there's less there than there once was.

I'm guessing you have a similar story too. Your life with Christ might be perfect, but I imagine most of us don't feel like we've yet arrived. God is with us, yet there are still plenty of struggles. And that's OK. God meets us in the day to day. God isn't the means to an end. A relationship with God that will last into eternity – that's the goal. That's the end God intends for us. And so when things are low, remember that even as your situation slowly turns itself around, it doesn't mean God isn't with you – but that He molds us in His timing so that we rely on Him and not ourselves.

This leads me to another interesting thing we see in today's passage, and that is this: *God's people are called to patience.* The idea that Jacob could wait seven years for his bride strikes us as absolutely absurd. Who would do that? Who would wait that long? But in the ancient world, this was common. No one was going to give their daughter in marriage to someone who couldn't at least provide the basics of life. There was an expectation that a man would not marry until he could support a family. Jacob has no means, so he makes the means. And in the meantime, he waits.

Now we can and should extrapolate some obvious conclusions here. When it comes to the ethics and morality of Christians, we should be far above the rest of the world in pursuing physical purity, which means reserving our sexual selves for marriage. Even among young people raised in the church and who say they believe in Christ, very few hold to this ethic. It's not just the young, either, but most unmarried people. God calls us to a different standard – to a standard of patience. It's hard when the world says do what you feel like doing. And yet, God created us for monogamy and for abstinence outside of marriage. Not to be a killjoy, but to increase our joy! And so we should take note: Christians should set the standard, not follow the crowd, when it comes to patience in relationships. We aren't meant for many sexual relationships but one, a loving relationship with our spouse.

But I want to take this in another direction because this isn't where most of us are at today. Most of us today aren't dealing with that kind of patience. Instead, we're dealing with patience about something else entirely, and we're not very good at it. You might remember Paul's famous passage from 1 Corinthians 13 where he describes love, and he starts with, "Love is patient; love is kind." Love is first and foremost patient, not desiring instant gratification at all times but waiting for the right time.

Patience is something modern culture has squeezed right out of us. We're upset if we can't get it from Amazon overnight. Due to the computer chip shortage, you have to wait a month if you want to get the latest gaming system or car, and you'd think the world was coming to an end. We replace phones and computers that don't respond to us fast enough. We change companies if they don't get to our problem fast enough. We get into road rage when people don't let us in fast enough or don't drive fast enough. From hypertension to car accidents, impatience will be the death of us.

Friends, God doesn't work on our timing. He never will. Because how many times has our patience proven that we didn't need what we thought we needed? How many times does patience get rewarded? Patience breeds contentment because you're more pleased with what you receive when you receive it. If you want to stand out for Jesus in this world, all you have to do is start holding doors for people and being selfless enough to wait on others regularly. It shows. At one point in our culture, it might have been good manners. Now, patience is something that will set you apart. Patience doesn't put God in your debt; patience doesn't mean you'll get everything if you wait long enough. But patience does breed godliness in that God is patient with us, not condemning us for every sin but giving us the opportunity to repent and turn to Him.

Speaking of turning to Him, that's the last thing I want to do today, and that's return to the love story. Here's where we're going to conclude today: *Jacob's love for Rachel is a tiny glimpse into the portrait of God's love for us.* Jacob's love for Rachel is strong enough that he is willing to make a deal with Laban that doesn't seem to benefit him much. We might even call it foolish. And yet, of course, anyone up on their Hallmark movies and romantic comedies knows that the foolish heartfelt gesture is the thing that wins our hearts. Whether it's Jerry Maguire declaring "you complete me" or Forrest Gump telling Jenny "I know what love is," those are the moments that give you the lump in the throat.

If you really want to know what the story of the Bible is in just a few words, it's God's love story for us, a wayward bride He created for Himself that doesn't love initially love Him back. Throughout Scripture, God is long-patient with us, guiding us, wooing us, drawing us to Himself, His chosen ones. He loves His people so much He rescues them from Egypt and gives them a wonderful land, even though they want little to do with Him. They continually pursue other gods, yet time and again He sends them rescuers. Even when they utterly forsake Him, He never abandons them completely.

And in the perfect moment in time, He sends His Son to us so that we can be reconciled to Him and live with Him eternally, that we can be His bride. His Son gives up His life for us so we may enter into His joy. And at several points in Scripture, we His people are described as a bride prepared for her Bridegroom. When we see the love of Jacob who will wait seven years for Rachel, we get just a taste of how God has patiently waited to be united to His people as He has slowly and gracefully brought us into His love.

Friends, let us not rush around like the world does. Let us know that God loves us and has been showing that love in countless ways to us. May we recognize His love and live lives of purity and patience as God provides for us over and over again, preparing us to be His people forever.