

Foundations: God As Our Witness
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 33:13-22; John 8:12-19; Genesis 31:22-55

Our final Scripture reading today is from Genesis 31:22-55. It's long, but it concludes our section with Jacob in the hands of Laban, so it's worth covering it all today. May God bless the reading of His perfect, infallible, and holy Word. "On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled. Taking his relatives with him, he pursued Jacob for seven days and caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead. Then God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream at night and said to him, "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad." Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country of Gilead when Laban overtook him, and Laban and his relatives camped there too.

Then Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done? You've deceived me, and you've carried off my daughters like captives in war. Why did you run off secretly and deceive me? Why didn't you tell me, so I could send you away with joy and singing to the music of tambourines and harps? You didn't even let me kiss my grandchildren and my daughters goodbye. You have done a foolish thing. I have the power to harm you; but last night the God of your father said to me, 'Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.' Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father's house. But why did you steal my gods?"

Jacob answered Laban, "I was afraid, because I thought you would take your daughters away from me by force. But if you find anyone who has your gods, he shall not live. In the presence of our relatives, see for yourself whether there is anything of yours here with me; and if so, take it." Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods. So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two maidservants, but he found nothing. After he came out of Leah's tent, he entered Rachel's tent. Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them inside her camel's saddle and was sitting on them. Laban searched through everything in the tent but found nothing. Rachel said to her father, "Don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence; I'm having my period." So he searched but could not find the household gods.

Jacob was angry and took Laban to task. "What is my crime?" he asked Laban. "What sin have I committed that you hunt me down? Now that you have searched through all my goods, what have you found that belongs to your household? Put it here in front of your relatives and mine, and let them judge between the two of us. I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten rams from your flocks. I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself. And you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night. This was my situation: The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes. It was like this for the twenty years I was in your household. I worked for you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, and you changed my wages ten times. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed. But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you."

Laban answered Jacob, "The women are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks. All you see is mine. Yet what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about the children they have borne? Come now, let's make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us." So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. He said to his relatives, "Gather some stones." So they took stones and piled them in a heap, and they ate there by the heap. Laban called it Jegar Sahadutha, and Jacob called it Galeed.

Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me today." That is why it was called Galeed. It was also called Mizpah, because he said, "May the LORD keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other. If you mistreat my daughters or if you take any wives besides my daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me." Laban also said to Jacob, "Here is this heap, and here is this pillar I have set up between you and me. This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not go past this heap to your side to harm you and that you will not go past this heap and pillar to my side to harm me. May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us." So Jacob took an oath in the name of the Fear of his father Isaac. He offered a sacrifice there in the hill country and invited his relatives to a meal. After they had eaten, they spent the night there. Early the next morning Laban kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then he left and returned home."

We're getting ready for the 4th of July. Many of us are looking forward to hamburgers and hot dogs and potato salad, maybe heading out that night in the driveway with sparklers, or perhaps bigger and better fireworks if you're particularly brave and foolhardy. We might think of the 4th of July as a celebration of our freedoms and our nation. Some of us might even do a history lesson and look back at the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the founding fathers that risked so much to free the colonies from Great Britain.

But the reasoning behind the signing of the Declaration and the War of Independence wasn't some lofty idea of freedom. It was based in an argument not all that dissimilar than the one we heard today between Laban and Jacob. The king held that as British colonies and royal subjects, we owed our loyalty to the crown and our mother country, and that force would be brought to bear to bring those colonies in line.

Meanwhile, the American colonists brought up all the abuses of the crown, the most notable one we might all remember from our history classes, "taxation without representation." Nobody was thrilled about paying taxes to England without some say in how we were governed. And thus, our country began because of a disagreement about how much the colonist were being robbed without say. Laban and Jacob, anyone?

If you were with us last week, you know that Jacob and his family made a run for it after they recognized that Laban and his sons were none too pleased that the family fortunes were all now in the hands of Jacob, as God blessed Jacob in spite of Laban's ongoing treachery. While Scripture indicates that Jacob didn't put his full trust in God and let God handle the situation, it also indicates that there was real trouble brewing. They took off with everything they had, knowing they'd have at least a three-day head start. Rachel, unbeknownst to everyone else, stole Laban's household gods, and away they went.

As it turns out, Jacob's fears were well-founded. Laban does come after them, and even though God has warned him not to say anything, Laban goes on a tear about how Jacob has stolen his daughters like spoils of war and how he would have sent them off with love and a huge procession. Of course, then Laban threatens Jacob, saying that only God had held him back from violence. So which is it, Laban? It's all disingenuous; none of what he says can be trusted.

Then there's this issue with the household gods. Laban desperately wants them back, and Jacob is insistent he didn't take them. Laban frantically searches Jacob's camp for anything stolen, but particularly the gods. What we might miss in all of Laban's search and Rachel's deception is how idolatry is so clearly despised here.

Rachel has put them in her saddle and is sitting on them. Then she uses the excuse that she is, in Hebrew, "in the way of women." Rachel is sitting on these gods. She's riding a camel, which for later Jews would be considered an unclean animal. Then she claims what she claims – these household gods are defiled three different ways. This is ancient Jewish humor how these household gods are treated. But for Laban, they mean everything – they aren't just a means of worship but they establish him as the family head. It shows where his priorities are.

Then Jacob lights into Laban. The anger of twenty years comes flowing out of him. And while Laban knows he has no leg to stand on, that everything that Jacob says is true, he still decides to declare that everything before him belongs to him – but what can he do? Laban shows what a truly awful person he really is. But this also gives us an opportunity to look at our own conversations and see where they fail and where they succeed.

We might have heard of the Triple Filter test for conversation: Is it true? Is it good? Is it useful? That's been attributed to Socrates, but that's not true. The first modern version is from Amy Carmichael, a missionary to India in the 1930s and 1940s, who wrote, "Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?" Sounds good, but Scripture has an even better test for good speech.

Paul says in Ephesians 4:25, "each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body." He continues in verse 29, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." So, the fourfold test we see the apostle giving us is: *Is it true? Does it build up? Does it fit the occasion? Does it give grace?*

When we look at conversations Jesus had, we might question whether they pass this test. Jesus had strong words of condemnation for the Pharisees. Yet the purpose of His words was not to leave them in their sin but to give them an opportunity to receive grace. When Jesus gave woes to the Pharisees, it was because Jesus gave them ample opportunity to respond to the truth, to receive grace, to be built up in the faith. They responded by trying to have Him killed.

Even then, though, Jesus was giving grace by warning them what would happen if they did not turn and they did not come around to His message. We also note that Jesus' words always fit the occasion, even if people took offense at those words. As Paul says, the words need to be good for building up, not that they have that effect. We are responsible for the words we say, not necessarily how others react to them when they are grace-filled and intended to build up.

When we look at Jacob and Laban's words, we see a fight brewing for decades when they didn't speak the truth to one another. They didn't speak gracefully to each other; they didn't follow these ideals. And it leads to a situation where not only do they never see each other again, neither do their families. I believe the bulk of the blame goes to Laban here; Jacob speaks the truth here, and Laban is only interested in falsehood and misdirection. But Jacob is also pulling no punches, and it leaves a relationship that is in tatters when they depart company.

If we are to keep representing Jesus well in difficult times, we're going to have to learn how to speak with truth, love, and grace befitting the occasion. That's hard at times. We have just seen *Roe vs. Wade* fall as an abortion standard for our country. As most of you know, I work at a pregnancy resource center to support my family and support the work of the church. I thoroughly believe in the pro-life cause, and I believe that means supporting women, children, and families not just through the point of birth but helping them with resources so that they can all not just survive but grow and thrive. From the Christian worldview, this was an achievement.

And yet I haven't been posting about it on Facebook, and I haven't commented on the posts of many friends, though I've been very tempted to do so. I would have been speaking out of truth, but not necessarily grace or kindness, and certainly not an appropriate time. Facebook is also not a very good venue for issues of major significance like this one. Pat answers and quick comments don't convince anyone of a different opinion.

Literally as I was writing this paragraph, I saw a podcast from another pastor whom I like personally about why he wasn't a Calvinist. I'll tell you what – I'm a five-point Calvinist and believe it is by far the most biblical way to understand Scripture. Was posting on his Facebook and telling him so the right answer? No, as much as I wanted to say something. Because while it might be true, and even though I would want to show him grace to build him up, it's not the right forum or place.

As we see with Jacob, personal anger can make the truth gnarly. We all know someone who says they just want to be "honest," but that usually is just trying to give themselves room to be nasty, not to speak actual truth with grace and love and charity. I have found that harsh words spoken in anger, even when they are true, when they aren't meant to build us up, can burn a hole in us of unforgiveness.

We must use our words carefully, watching our tongues. They can get us into so much trouble. We might wonder, if saying anything can get us into such trouble, should we ever say anything at all? Of course. There are times we must speak up. When others have been treated unjustly, when something has the direct potential to harm others, there are many times we have to speak out. But Scripture tells us we should be slow to speak and quick to listen. In today's world, we are far better off saying little and making our words count, letting them be full of God's light and love and peace and grace, than saying a lot and regretting what we say later.

This whole affair eventually ends with a standoff that is resolved only when both parties agree to make a covenant with one another. They build a pillar of stones and they covenant not to go past it to harm one another. The pillars are a physical representation of their agreement before God. From here on, God will witness and judge anything they do against one another.

Friends, *what if we truly believed God as our witness?* What if we lived our lives as if we knew God was always present? Psalm 56 says, “For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.” The phrase “before God,” “before the face of God,” in Latin is *coram Deo*. *Coram Deo* is a name for many churches and schools; I have a couple CDs named *Coram Deo*. Theologian R.C. Sproul talked about it a lot.

Coram Deo is a reminder that all life is about God and that we as Christians are meant to live our lives before the face of God. *Coram Deo* reminds us that our lives are meant to glorify, honor, and worship God. Something as simple as that phrase can get us in the right mindset, helping us remember that God is truly our witness, that our lives are genuinely lived before God no matter what we do or how we act, so we should act in such a way that gives God glory.

Laban and Jacob didn’t see eye to eye on God. Laban is the one who makes the terms of the agreement, and he calls on both the god of Abraham and the god of Nahor their ancestor. But Jacob only takes his covenant on “the fear of Isaac,” which meant that he was deliberately agreeing that YHWH was the One witnessing the covenant, not god foreign to him. Nevertheless, both agreed that YHWH was who would keep Jacob in line. And ultimately, it was their mutual concern over the wrath of God – or for Laban, his multiple gods – that would keep them from striking out against one another.

It’s funny how Scripture is taken out of context. “May the LORD keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other” is inscribed on wedding rings and used in marriage ceremonies. It’s not some term of endearment. It’s Laban’s warning to Jacob that he better stay faithful to his daughters while they’re apart or God’s going to get him! It was never meant to be a blessing where we pray that God will watch over our loved one when we are apart.

But the foundational concept, whether blessing or warning, is still this – the LORD keeps watch. This is in contrast to the modern world, which tells us that we can do whatever we want, that there is no judge, there is no final arbiter of moral character, that you and you alone choose what is moral and what is not (though it’s easiest for you if you go along with the moral headwinds of the culture). If there is no god, if there is no moral authority higher than yourself, then you can do what you please.

But if the LORD is there, and does watch, it changes everything. Because not only do we know the reality of judgment, we also know that God sent Jesus into the world to know us and be known by us. He sent Jesus so we could live before His face and be pleasing to Him. Through Jesus, we can live *coram Deo*. We do not have to wonder if God is smiling or frowning on us. Through the forgiveness of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, we know what it is to live in a way pleasing to God and have the tools to live it out – incompletely, imperfectly, but genuinely. The question is, will we follow the world’s way or God’s way? For all their failings, Jacob and Laban came to agreement that God would watch over them, and it made peace between them. If we live *coram Deo*, we may not always have peace with our enemies, but we’ll have peace with God, and that matters most.

Next week...Jacob gets nervous about an inevitable reunion with his brother Esau. What will he do? Come next week and find out!