

**“God – Our Provider”
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Genesis 30:25-31:14**

There is a great little story tucked into the 30th chapter of Genesis. It's one of those Horatio Algiers or Bill Gates stories of someone who starts with nothing and then becomes very successful. We love those stories and especially if the person overcomes great odds to reach their success.

When we last looked at Genesis we were in the middle of the account of the life of Jacob.

A quick overview will put this man, Jacob, in historical perspective.

***1** Genesis:

1-5	Adam
6-11	Noah
12-23	Abraham
24 & 26	Isaac
25	Jacob and Esau
27-28	Jacob steals Esau's blessing
29	Jacob marries Leah and Rachel
30	Jacob's family increases

Jacob was apparently a self-centered, grasping, young man who wound up deceiving his father, seriously cheating his older brother and running for his life.

With little, but the proverbial clothes on his back, he took refuge on his uncle's ranch hundreds of miles away.

He fell in love with his youngest cousin and agreed to work for his uncle for 7 years for the right to marry her.

His uncle cheated him however and gave his older daughter, Leah, to Jacob for his wife.

Jacob agreed to work another 7 years to earn the younger daughter, Rachel, also.

During those years Jacob has 11 sons and a daughter.

*2The situation that marks the beginning of our story for today is that while Jacob had two wives and 12 young kids, he had no other resources.

He has worked for his uncle for 14 years and other than room and board he has received nothing else for his labor.

He has a tremendous responsibility but no assets.

14 years later and he's still a poor man.

At that point he goes to his uncle, whose name is Laban, and tells him he wants to take his family (that he has paid for with 14 years of hard labor) and go home.

Old Laban, ever the conniving uncle, begs Jacob to stay and promises that **this time** he will pay him.

*3Jacob reminds Laban how prosperous Laban has become through Jacob's hard work and the Lord's blessing.

But he adds, I have to do something for my own family.

Laban responds by asking what he can give Jacob.

Jacob says, I don't want you to give me anything, I just want to make a deal with you so I can actually start making a profit around here.

To understand the deal they make, you have to understand something of what they understood about animal husbandry and genetics.

Laban was a sheep and goat rancher and Jacob was the chief shepherd.

Now a shepherd was far more than the guy who sat on the hillside making whistle sounds through blades of grass all day while the sheep pastured.

The shepherd had to know about the proper diet for the sheep and about good breeding – how to make certain that the strongest and most valuable sheep reproduced.

The most valued and by far the most numerous sheep were white and the most valued and by far the most numerous goats were black.

And when white sheep mated they tended to produce white lambs.

And likewise when black goats mated they tended to produce black kids.

Occasionally white sheep would produce a spotted or speckled lamb. And of course if spotted sheep mated they were more likely, than pure white sheep, to produce spotted lambs.

*4 So Jacob said, here's the deal.

Let me go through the herd and separate out just the fewer and less valuable spotted sheep and goats and they will be mine along with any spotted lambs and kids they produce.

Laban said okay.

Jacob would continue to do all he had been doing for Laban, and for wages he would get the relatively few spotted lambs and kids that would be produced.

Knowing what he did about genetics, however, Laban immediately stacked the deck against Jacob.

*5 That very day, Laban went through his herds and removed all the spotted sheep and goats and put them in the care of his sons three days distance away from the rest of the flocks.

By removing all the spotted sheep and goats, he not only immediately stole from Jacob those sheep and goats, but he just as importantly reduced the likelihood that spotted lambs or kids would be born because all the sheep and goats that were left for Jacob to tend were either all white or all black.

Jacob had been cheated for 14 years and now he was being cheated again.

Amazingly, Jacob went ahead with the deal anyway.

With the disadvantage Jacob had, it would have taken him many, many years to build up herds sufficient to support his family.

So according to the story, Jacob did some animal management of his own.

*6At the time of year that the animals were supposed to breed, Jacob took poplar tree branches and stripped slivers of the bark away to create dark and light striped sticks that he placed in front of the watering troughs where the animals mated.

Thus a greater number of sheep and goats, than normal, would deliver striped lambs or goats and they would be added to Jacob's stock. (How this worked, I'll describe later).

Not only that, but Jacob would also make certain that only the healthiest sheep and goats would mate in front of the striped tree branches thus insuring that the multicolored lambs and kids would be the stronger and in turn produce even more multicolored lambs and kids.

Just six years later, it says in Genesis 30:43, "In this way the man grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks and maidservants and menservants, and camels and donkeys."

I think that story appeals to something in all of us.

Magazines and television specials know that many of us love to hear the stories of how individuals overcame great odds and went on to even greater success.

We love to see the pictures of the average, even nerdy Bill Gates as a child and then hear how he became the wealthiest man in the world.

We enjoy hearing the story of the early, single-mom-impoverished, life of some professional football star, and then see pictures of his three homes and his 7 automobiles.

We even stand in awe of people in our own neighborhoods or churches who seem to have made it.

We're just jealous of those who inherited it but we are in awe of those who started with nothing and now have it all.

I think we like to hear those stories and we like to know those people because it keeps the dream alive.

If someone as average as that (look at their high school graduation picture – they look just like the rest of us) if they can get there, maybe we can too.

- We like it that hardworking Jacob finally gets what is rightfully his.
- We like it that the old scrooge Laban finally gets bested.
- We like it that Jacob is smart and clever.
- We love the picture of this “up from the bottom” success story.

But is this story about hard work, shrewdness, justice and success?

Is this just another story of how to get ahead in life by being cleverer than the next person?

From the larger context, I’m certain it is **not** about those things. But before I tell you what I’m convinced it **is** about, let me remind you for whom this story was first written.

Moses authored the first five books of the Old Testament and he wrote them just before the Israelite people began their invasion of Canaan.

This was a people with no country, who had been marching or camped in the desert for 40 years and were now about to invade a land that had well defended cities and good armies.

Talk about an uncertain future!

Circumstances were stacked against them and they didn’t have the assets to guarantee their future.

Moses wanted them to learn something from Jacob’s experience!

Don’t we all wish we could control our futures?

Don’t we, in fact, spend a lot of energy (mental or otherwise) attempting to control the future?

We often attack our work, our health, and even our relationships in ways that are designed (though often unconsciously) to insure our advantage in the future.

We are greatly tempted to think that by our resourcefulness and industriousness we can overcome obstacles and insure that future.

And we especially like Bible stories that seem to indicate that because it gives us greater confidence that maybe our efforts will pay off.

Is this a “be all you can be” story, a “six steps to success” seminar, a “how to survive and thrive in an unfair world” lesson?

No, in fact it is quite the opposite.

- I. It is not about Jacob’s prosperity but about God’s purposes.
 - II. And it is not about Jacob’s clever ingenuity but about God’s gracious intervention.
 - III. And it is not about Jacob’s material possessions but about his spiritual response.

- I. First of all, the story is **not** about Jacob’s prosperity but about God’s purposes.

If we look only at the immediate text we see a rags to riches story but with a broader context in view we see a different issue.

*8,9 Several times God had promised Jacob that through Jacob God would continue to unfold his plan for a special people in the world who would belong to him.

He had begun that plan with Abraham and continued it through Abraham’s son Isaac.

Then to Jacob himself God had said that he would bless Jacob with a large family, a land of his own and that through Jacob God would bless those around him.

What we see in this text is the unfolding of God’s plan for Jacob.

God’s plan was that the nations around Jacob would be blessed because of Jacob and what do we see happening in our text?

Laban is blessed by the presence of Jacob.

Because of Jacob, Laban became prosperous.

God’s plan was that Jacob would be the father of the tribes, the families, of the nation of Israel.

And earlier in chapter 30 we saw that unfolding, as Jacob had 11 of the 12 sons that would become the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel.

God's plan was that Jacob would inherit a land of his own and the prosperity that goes with that – in our text we see the beginning of that and God makes him prosperous and prepares to send him back to the promised land.

Jacob's deal with Laban is not just about Jacob becoming a wealthy man, **it is about God working his gracious plan in Jacob's life.**

This story is not about Jacob's very limited view of the future but about God's perfect vision of the future.

Most of us would like to paint our own picture of the future and then ask God to bless it and guarantee it.

But are we willing to let God paint the picture?

That is the picture he will bless and guarantee.

Our first reaction is that God's picture of the future may include things we don't like and so we would rather paint our own.

But look at Jacob.

Had he painted the picture, he would have left his uncle's place a very poor man.

He was ready to leave with nothing.

But because God painted the picture, Jacob left not as a penniless man with a large family but a prosperous man ready to take the next step in the unfolding drama of God's plan for his life.

Whose picture did Jacob **then** think was best?

Forgive me if you have heard too often of the circumstances surrounding our adoption of our son Paris.

But two years ago and even six months ago, if God had let us paint the picture of the future we would have painted it quite differently.

With our limited perspective we would have thought the best picture possible was for Paris to be adopted by some family – and we feared even that could not happen.

But when God painted the picture he went far beyond your greatest imagination – he painted us as that family.

Ask me now whose picture was best!

We too often fear God's plan for our lives, when what the Scripture demonstrates over and over again is that anything else is significantly less.

Who do you want to paint the picture of your future?

The issue in this story is not about Jacob's prosperity but about God's best plan for Jacob's future.

II. Secondly the story here is not about Jacob's clever ingenuity but about God's gracious intervention.

When we first read this story of Jacob and Laban we get the impression that Jacob really outwitted the old rascal.

The unaware would think that Jacob's shrewd business practices were what made him wealthy.

If Jacob had begun putting on seminars about how to beat the market, many would have flocked to hear this wise, successful man.

Jacob himself could have begun to believe that he was now prosperous because

he was a cut above the competition,
a little smarter than the average man, and
unique in his willingness to make the sacrifices
necessary to earn what he had earned.

But to the contrary, Jacob knew all along, and never forgot, by whose hand he had gained his prosperity.

Even to Laban in our story, Jacob acknowledges that it was the Lord who was responsible for blessing Laban through Jacob.

Later when Jacob talks to his wives about leaving he says it more forcefully:

Genesis 31:5b-9 **"The God of my father** has been with me. You know that I've worked for your father with all my strength, yet your father has cheated me by changing my wages ten

times. However **God has not allowed** him to harm me...**God** has taken away all your father's livestock and **has given them to me.**"

Jacob was apparently not deluded into thinking he was the source of his prosperity – he knew it was from God.

You might say, "Doesn't Jacob have the right to be proud of his accomplishments? After all it was Jacob who did the hard work and it was Jacob who used good sense in breeding the stronger animals, and it was Jacob who shrewdly planned how to get more spotted animals."

Yes, but Jacob recognized that all of that came from the Lord.

Bible scholars are perplexed by the part of the story where Jacob puts striped tree branches in front of the cattle while they are mating in order for them to bear more striped lambs or kids.

We know (or think we know) that those striped branches could have no affect on the kind of offspring produced.

Was this just superstition and God honored it in spite of it?

I think John Calvin offers the most plausible explanation of this and one that fits the rest of the context so well.

He suggests, based on the dream that Jacob discusses with his wife in chapter 31, that God told Jacob to put these poplar branches in front of the flocks just as God told Moses to hold up the bronze image of a snake to which the people of Israel, years later, could look and be healed when they were plagued for their sin, by snakes.

It has been calculated that Jacob never could have accumulated the wealth he did in six short years unless God intervened to make the flocks more productive.

Putting striped branches in front of the animals was such a silly thing for Jacob to do that every time he did it, it would remind him that the productivity of those sheep and goats was nothing less than a miracle of God.

Would Jacob be proud of his prosperity?

NO. He knew God outlined the picture and God was coloring it in.

He knew that while God called on him to be part of the process, God alone was the source, by his gracious intervention.

Helen Roseveare, a missionary doctor from England to Zaire tells how she delivered a premature baby whose mother died in childbirth.

Having no incubator, they wrapped the baby, put it as close to the fire as they dared and then had one of the nurses sleep with the baby.

They had planned to use a hot-water bottle but the only one they had broke as they were filling it.

The next day Helen told the orphanage children about the birth and the death and the broken hot-water bottle.

With the usual bluntness and naïve faith of children, a ten-year-old little girl prayed that God would send a hot water bottle that day and also asked that God send a dolly for the baby as well.

Helen said that she didn't know whether to say something about the prayer or not since she didn't want the children to be disappointed.

She knew there were no hot-water bottles in their region, and having never received a package from home in four years, she wasn't likely to get one that day. And furthermore who would send a hot-water bottle to the equator?

Mid-afternoon, Helen got a notice that a parcel had been delivered to her room.

With 30 pairs of children's eyes glued to the box, she opened it.

She pulled out bright sewing material, bandages, knitted jerseys and a host of other things.

But when Helen put her hand deeper into the box, she felt... could it really be?

She pulled it out and in her hand was a brand new hot-water bottle.

She said she just broke out crying.

She hadn't even asked for it, not believing God could do it.

The little girl who had prayed rushed forward and without hesitation said, God must have sent the dolly too and at the bottom they found it – one beautifully dressed baby doll.

The package had been packed and sent five months earlier.

God is the source – He provides.

Jacob was not a self-made man worshipping his creator.
He was becoming a God-made man worshipping THE creator.

III. Lastly, this story about Jacob is not about material prosperity but about the spiritual responses of humility, gratitude and stewardship.

Jacob was not passive in the outworking of God’s plan for his life.
Jacob was a steward of what God gave him.
Jacob used his head, Jacob worked hard, Jacob persevered even when it looked like he would never get ahead.
He was a true steward of the resources God gave him **but he humbly recognized that it all came from God.**

A young Olympic athlete was talking to a new friend and describing what life had been like for the past several years – the discipline, the sweat, and even the pain at times.

The friend began to ask questions:

How did you get started in gymnastics?

Oh, my dad was a gymnast in college and noticing that I was built like him, he began to work out with me.

Isn’t it expensive to train like you do?

Yes, my dad worked an additional job, part-time, to pay for the gym.

What about a coach?

My dad knew this friend who got us in touch with my coach – one of the best.

How did you get to your workouts and how did you get your school work done?

My dad drove me and he helped me with my homework every day.

Wow, an Olympic gymnast, I'll bet you're really proud.

Yes, I've won almost every competition I've entered.

No, I meant, I bet you're really proud of your dad!

(written by GLN)

Jacob was not proud of himself, he was proud of his heavenly father.

Too often, in our daily living, we see the world around us, and our future, from such a limited perspective.

We begin to believe and act like we are all alone in making our future happen.

But our world is not a closed system operating only by the forces from within.

This is God's world - and the world's future, and our future, belongs to God.

God intersects with his world at every point.

He is superintending, controlling, positively manipulating, all things to accomplish his purposes, most of all, his gracious purposes for his own – Jacob and you and me.

Do we really believe that?

Do we relate to God that way? – Worshipping him, thanking him?

Do we pray that way? - Depending on him?

Our God will provide – We can trust him!