

Part 32: Who Gets the Family Idol?

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In the guest room of our house you will find a massive leather bound Bible. It's a Bible that was first owned by my great grandfather, then my grandfather, and has now been passed down to me. It's a beautiful testimony to the historic Christianity that my family has long practiced. It's iconic of my family—but it's not just an icon. It's a representation of a particular hope, something which one generation has hoped to pass on to the next.

Heirlooms like that are often bigger than themselves. Whether it's the deed to Grandpa's farm, MeMaw's recipe book, or your brother's restored muscle car—they communicate a sense of prosperity and belonging in and of themselves. They provide us a sense of identity, security and peace.

Which is why my sermon today is titled, "Who Gets the Family Idol?" While the customs and circumstances of our text today may be foreign, the fears and desires are not. Rachel stole her dad's idol, Laban deceitfully bartered, and Jacob took to creative problem solving all in the name of future hope.

This passage is a diagnostic tool of our own heart. The words of all these people seem to be wrapped around the language of God's provision. They want the provision of God, and they believe God is able to give it. They want it for them and for their families. But the problem is they believe God's provision is dependent upon their own ability to secure it themselves. If they want the provision of God, it's going to be in the promise of men.

The most dangerous idolatry isn't that which is obvious. It's the kind that sounds faithful but lives faithlessly. Our main point today is this: **The provision of God is not found in the promise of man.**

It's all too easy for our talk to be of God but our trust to be in men. To help us see this we will work through the text in three parts. First, we will see **The Provision We Want**, second, we will find **The Perspective We Need**, and lastly we will take comfort in **The Peace We Fear**.

Jacob's journey to Uncle Laban's farm in Paddan-Aram started when he had lots of problems, and no possessions. He initially feared not finding a wife and now having children. But now that he's growing in both, so are his fears. Our passage opens as his eleventh son is born and we read this: **Genesis 30:25**, says that as soon as Rachel bore Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Send me away that I may go to my own home and country."

Until we learn to trust God fully, even his blessings feel like a burden. As God provided for Jacob, Jacob feared he couldn't provide for his family: more people meant more problems.

Here is our first point this morning: **The Provision We Want.**

Here's why we need to be careful: It sounds like Jacob is seeking the provision of God in the promise of God. It was God himself who appeared to him at Bethel and said that he would bring Jacob back to the land, and he would fulfill his promise to bless him and increase him.

This looks to be a faithful and good thing. It's as if Jacob is saying, "The Lord has blessed me here. He has grown me. But his greater provision is not here in the east country, but south in the Land he swore to my fathers—the Promised Land."

Uncle Laban though has grown accustomed to Jacob's fruitfulness. He gives a head-nod to Jacob's request but then begins to barter: **Genesis 30:27-28**, "But Laban said to him, 'If I have found favor in your sight, I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me because of you. Name your wages, and I will give it.'"

Laban models the modern, "spiritual but not religious," heart. He uses divination as a horoscope, he's got household idols, and he's not denying the existence of Jacob's God. But that introduces the problem: none of his gods are doing for him what Jacob's God is accomplishing for Jacob.

If he loses Jacob, he loses his provision. So if his gods won't help him, he's got to figure it out on his own. He'll buy the promise. Laban puts his money where his mouth is, "Name your wage."

Jacob should have said, "You don't need to buy it, the blessing of my father is a blessing for all the nations. Fear God, and trust in him. He'll care for you either way. But as for me, he's called me back home—and there's more provision in God's promise than all the riches of the world."

But that's not what Jacob says.

Jacob does what Eve did. Jacob does what we often do. We barter with the promise of others instead of faithfully moving towards the clear provision of God. Look at what happens next, (I'll give you the Tyler paraphrase, but you can follow along in **Genesis 30:31-34**), "I don't want wages, I want property. Let me continue with you and I'll just take the weird sheep. I'll walk through your flock today and set apart for myself all the speckled, spotted and black sheep and goats and they will be considered mine. I won't touch any of the white and healthy ones and if you find me having any, consider them stolen."

Laban fears losing the blessing of Jacob. Jacob fears not being able to provide for his own family. In different ways both men want things that are found only in God's promise. But they model a common mistake: We want God's promised provision but instead of trusting God to give in the place he's promised—they want God's provision on their own terms.

Here's what this sounds like in our heads: "If God has promised to give me A then I have to obtain it from B. And if I don't get B, then I'll never have A." God wants me to have peace doesn't he? Well, I better make my kids promise they will never disobey. God wants me to be loved doesn't he? I better tell the person I'm dating whatever they want to hear so that they will love me.

Dear church, do you wonder if God's promise for you in Jesus will be the death of you? Do you wonder that if you spend too much time trusting in the Lord, obeying his commandments, sharing the gospel, gathering as the church, and being generous with all you have, it might kill you? It might rob you of enjoying the very provision you're seeking? The Lord knows that you need to live. He actually designed our bodies and their needs, he designed our hearts and their passions. He knows what we need.

Jesus reminds us in Luke 11 that the whole world seeks after those things—but Christians are to seek first his Kingdom and all the rest of what we need will be sorted out by God. This takes faith. It's often hoping for what we can't see.

Laban's offer provides for Jacob a provision he can see. All Jacob sees is a long road to Canaan—but Laban's promise of provision is a much quicker offer. Why go all the way there, if I can get the provision of God here?

But notice two universal truths: First, never go in against a Sicilian when death is on the line. Second, never trust the word of a seemingly generous uncle when you've God's promise is on the line. Laban hears Jacob's offer, and much like Jacob's first offer for Rachel—he's all too quick to accept it.

Both men appear to be getting what they wanted, but in the end, both will lose. Why? The provision of God is not in the promises of men.

Here's what happens (you can follow along starting in **Genesis 30:35**): Laban secretly goes through the flocks first. He gives Jacob only the white and pure animals, and he hides the black and spotted ones with his children.

What is he doing? He's cheating Jacob. Jacob agreed to only take the animals that were blemished and colored. But what happens if there are no blemished or colored animals?

How is Jacob going to get out of this—he's made a terrible agreement and now he's got to figure it out. What's he going to do? (Starting in verse 37) He's not super-stitious, but he is a little-stitious. He heard an old wives tale, the same kind of thing we often hear about drinking from a cup upside down cures hiccups or eating a lot of salt while pregnant will help you have a boy.

This mystical and outlandish idea was this: Whatever image is presented before animals when they breed, that influences the kind of offspring they produce. So, in Genesis 30:38, Jacob takes sticks, and he peeled them to make them striped and multi-colored and put them in the watering troughs of the flocks when they came to breed.

Naturally, it worked.

Jacob can't believe his luck. So he gets even more inventive. The one who earlier boasted in his honesty began selectively breeding the stronger flocks out of his method and left uncle Laban with the weaker but whiter flocks.

And here's what we read: **Genesis 30:43**, Thus the man increased greatly and had large flocks, female servants and male servants, and camels and donkeys."

You might try to creatively attain God's provision without having to obey his promise and it might actually work for a little bit. Sin's fruits grow fast—but they spoil quickly.

Genesis 31:1-2, "Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, "Jacob has taken all that was our father's, and from what was our father's he has gained all this wealth." And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before."

Laban's got Jacob—but he's lost his own sons. Jacob's got flocks—but he's in trouble with Laban. The provision you want is not in the promise of man. God is going to make that clear to Jacob, to Laban and to us in our second point: **The Perspective We Need.**

Jacob was headed the right direction. He was headed to God's provision in the place God has promised to give it. He wasn't meant to flourish stealing Laban's goods in Paddan-Aram, he was meant to enjoy God's provision for him in the Land of Promise. God didn't come up short—Jacob did. We all have, but the same God who we turn away from is the same God who graciously sets us back on the right path.

That's what happens in **Genesis 31:3**, "Then the Lord said to Jacob, 'Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred and I will be with you.'"

There it is—the provision, "Go back to that land of family and prosperity," and the promise, "I will be with you."

It took rock bottom to see it, but now he does. He knows he's been looking in the wrong places for the provision and stability his family really needed. And he begins to share his own foolishness with his wives. When he tells them what is going on he shares the full vision God gave him, **Genesis 31:10-13**, "In the breeding season of the flock I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream that the goats that mated with the flock were striped, spotted, and mottled. Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am!' And he said, 'Lift up your eyes and see, all the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted, and mottled, for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred.' "

Jacob's little trick seemed to work—but only because it didn't have to. All Jacob did was go through extra effort. God promised to provide for Jacob and God's promise is so certain that he was going to provide even when Laban tried to dupe him. God doesn't need your inventiveness, he doesn't need your help to keep his word. You might think that God needs you to figure out the secret code of Christian living in order to be both happy as a Christian and as a human—but you don't. Christianity is for real people. So much of our anxiety is rooted in a flawed understanding of God's character.

He knows what you need, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you." Flip your perspective. It's not God who we should be skeptical of—it's everything else. Including our own hearts.

The first time God appeared to Jacob in Genesis 28 he pledged to not rest until he brought Jacob back into the Promised Land. God was going to provide him with a family, with possessions and with safety. God was going to be with him.

Do you remember what Jacob said? He said, **Genesis 28:20-22**, "If you will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then [you] shall be my God."

God promises Jacob the world, and Jacob says, "If you can manage to do all that, fine, I'll let you be my God." And God kept the receipt! Don't these words sting a bit more now? **Genesis 31:13**, "I am the God

of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred.”

We always think the question is: “Will God provide, will he do all he promised to do?” But the bigger question we need to ask ourselves is, “Will I do my part?” What is your part? What is all that is required? To make this God, your God. To believe his promise and to run to Jesus for our refuge from sin and our provision in life.

Our default is to distrust God and trust man, but true provision comes when we begin to trust God’s provision and begin to doubt man’s promise. After Jacob shares this with Rachel and Leah—they see things the same way. Their dad who claimed to love them was more concerned with his own wealth. The decision was clear to all of them and it should be clear to us: Run to the promise of God. Obey his call to go to Jesus, see him as faithful.

This isn’t something you believe once and it’s over—this is the life of faith. It’s going to be tested, and it’s tested quickly in our passage today. In Genesis 31:17-18, Jacob packs up everything and leaves. It looks like faith, but then we read this: **Genesis 31:19-21**, “Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father’s household gods. And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee. He fled with all that he had and arose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.”

Jacob still wasn’t so much as obeying God as he was fleeing Laban. He believed God enough to go, but he didn’t trust God enough to tell Laban why. Rachel stole one of Laban’s idols. Why? Maybe because she wanted extra protection, maybe because she wanted to hurt him. Either way it’s not good, and all of it came to Laban’s notice.

Genesis 31:12 tells us that three days after Jacob left, Laban heard of it. And he’s livid. He’s now lost his golden boy, his daughters, and his little household idol. So he gathers up the boys and they go Jacob hunting. He’s not looking to negotiate, he’s looking to eliminate.

And there’s this dreadful word that settles in **Genesis 31:25**, “And Laban overtook Jacob.”

There will be moments in your life, I’m sure, where you made the costly decision to obey God; to flee from sexual immorality, to confess your sin, to obey God’s call in your life only to find your obedience seemingly overtaken by the very things you sought to flee.

As we follow Jesus there might be times when we wonder if we’ve been duped. Did God bamboozle you? Is he as twisted as Laban? In those moments doubt can be devastating—but God never fails.

All Jacob saw was Laban’s arrival. But, Moses gives us a new perspective by sharing with us an event that Jacob didn’t get to see: **Genesis 31:24**, “But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, ‘Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.’” God makes Laban tongue tied! The Lord wasn’t frustrating Jacob’s journey to the Promised Land—instead he frustrated Laban’s attempt to take him back.

Laban can’t do anything to Jacob besides ask why he left without telling him. His only recourse is for him to say this: **Genesis 31:29-30**, “It is in my power to do you harm. But the God of your father spoke to me

last night, saying, 'Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.' And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?"

Don't miss this perspective. Laban is an utter fool. First, he says, "It is in my power to do you harm." It's as if Laban is trying to flex on Jacob. Laban could harm Jacob, but he won't because Jacob's God came and asked him nicely to be nice.

But then Laban has the gall to say, "I know your God, the Lord who blessed you and multiplied you, is the God who appeared to me out of nowhere and spoke to me and I will do him a favor this time and listen to him. But if you wouldn't mind, would you please return to me my gods."

Laban thinks he's powerful. Laban thinks he's in control. But Laban has to rescue even his own gods. Laban's idols are doing nothing for him. They aren't detaining Jacob, they are detained by Jacob's wife. They didn't speak to Laban, Laban simply realized they were gone. Your idols, the things you put your hope in do nothing for you and demand everything from you. They cannot save you and they will not rescue you.

The promises of man are empty and so too are the idols of the world. If your gods need saving, you need bigger gods. Our God saves. And he will save you. That's the perspective we need. If God is for us, who in the whole world could be against us. This is your hope. This is the hope for your family and those who come after you.

Rachel hid the idols. There's two morals here. Moral one—don't steal. Moral two—have a God so big he cannot be hidden. If your God can't be stolen, neither can his provision he promises us in Jesus. The provision of God is not in the promise of men. It's in him alone.

Jacob finally gets this. In **Genesis 31:42**, Jacob says, "If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night."

We have this kind of perspective, we can find our spine too. We can stand on God's promises and face whatever comes our way because we know from whom our salvation comes. There's a new fear in Jacob's life—and it's the God who fights for him and provides just as he promised. When our perspective is flipped, we no longer fear man and run, we fear God and we stand.

Laban is defeated, so now calls for a covenant with Jacob. And here's our final point this morning: **The Peace We Fear**.

Peace for you, peace for your family, peace with the world has to have at its base something bigger than man itself. We know that. Winston Churchill once said, ""The story of the human race is War. Except for brief and precarious interludes there has never been peace in the world; and before history began murderous strife was universal and unending."

We all want peace with men, we all want to know that the border will hold and we will be safe, along with our offspring. These two men set up physical markers on the border of their two lands: pillars and a heap.

Genesis 31:52 tells us what they symbolize. They stand as a reminder that Laban won't cross this heap to do harm to Jacob, and Jacob won't pass the heap and the pillar to do harm to Laban.

That's the treaty. That's their hope. That's the boundary between constant paranoia and peace. But what stands behind it? The symbol of hope needs something behind it. What's behind it? Laban tells us his: **Genesis 31:54**, "The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their fathers judge between us."

Laban's peace is the paranoid hope that one of the gods he's named will uphold the border of peace. The diversity of gods he's named speaks to the lack of peace he has. He's got to diversify his hopes because he's seen how fickle his idols have been.

But look at the distinction Jacob shows between his hope and Laban's: **Genesis 31:54**, "So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac."

Jacob didn't just swear by the God of his father, but he uses a distinct name for God, "The Fear of his Father." Isaac wasn't perfect. But Isaac modeled one thing to his son. God, the God of the promise, wasn't a trinket used to get what we want in life. God was the thing he needed in life. He feared losing God more than he feared losing the whole world.

Fathers, this Father's Day, consider what your children might see as the central piece of your hope. Who stands at the border in your life? When doubts invade, who comes to your defense? When sickness comes, to whom do you lead your family for peace? May our children look at a generation of godly men and say, "Let me take comfort in the Fear of my father."

Children, when you come out of your bed at night and you run to your parents—ask them for the hope we have in a God who saves. Ask them about peace that stands at the border. Ask them how fear is our peace.

Fear seems dangerous. God is fierce and fearful. But he is a safe place of refuge for all who rest in him. When he alone is our Fear, he alone is our peace. There are many dangers, toils and snares that will encroach on the border of your comfort—but your promise remains.

How do we know? Well, the Israelites who read Genesis knew. They were delivered out of Egypt in the same way Jacob was delivered from Laban. But just as it seemed Pharaoh and his army were stronger than God—God delivered them through the Red Sea. God delivered—and he delivered all the way. The cloud that went before them was their peace. God held the border. God kept them safe.

But our biggest enemy isn't Laban, nor is it Pharaoh. This fearful God himself was once our enemy. We didn't steal from his flock—we stole from his glory. All we had was his, everything we have is given to us by him and we took it for ourselves and treated it as if it belonged to us. We deserve his wrath. We stand justly confused. But he set up a heap at the border. He raised a pillar in the desert so that all who once feared their own security might find peace.

This is the cross of Jesus. God's wrath will not cross that line. Jesus swallowed it all, he took your punishment. And to be a Christian is to live in holy, peaceful fear, knowing that Jesus alone is our peace

and our provision. If he has brought us peace when we stand before the judge at the border of heaven, will he not also bring us peace here even when we stand before lesser judges?

What is the legacy you leave? What is the icon of your family's hope? What sets the tone for their lives? What comforts them and gives them identity? What is it that they fear in the best and most secure of all ways—may it be this God who has gone before us in Jesus. He is our peace. He is our hope when everything else fails

The God who kept Jacob, the God who kept the Israelites, he will keep you. That's a peace that endures. And that's a peace that frees us to follow him wherever he sends us.

Jesus died for your sins on the cross, he has purchased you for a life of obedience, he has called you to ministry in the church, he's guiding you to Christlikeness in this life, he has guaranteed you an inheritance in heaven—God keeps his word for you in Jesus. No other promise rings true—God's does. God's provision is in his promise to grant us all things in Jesus.

We will endure all things here. There's going to be conflict. There's going to be danger and difficulty. But the promise of God's provision in Jesus holds. In this life and in the next.

Would you like an heirloom that cannot be stolen, a hope that can't be lost, a promise that remains forever—look to God's provision in Jesus and give the whole of your life to it. Here's the legacy of faith and the hope that you need.

"Pardon for sin and peace that endureth, Thine own dear presence to cheer and guide; Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. Blessings all mine and ten thousand beside."