



**LIVING WORD  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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## **The Schemer Schemed**

**Genesis 30:25-31:1**

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We've had a two-week break from Genesis, so let me give a little recap. We've been looking at God's work in the life of Jacob. Jacob was the supplanter—the back-stabbing schemer—who stole his brothers' birthright and inheritance and was forced to flee from Esau's murderous rage. He ran back to Haran—to the far-away land from which God had called Abraham. But he didn't just flee there; his mother and father sent him to Haran to find a wife from amongst their own people. Remember that on his way to Haran, God had come to Jacob in a dream at Bethel. Jacob saw a ladder or stair descending from heaven. God came to Jacob and called him into covenant fellowship with himself. All the covenant blessings and obligations he had given to Abraham and then to Isaac he now gave to Jacob. And Jacob was amazed. He setup a commemorative pillar, made an offering there to God, and renamed the place "Bethel", "House of God". And yet despite God's gracious call and promises, Jacob was really only interested in what he could get out of this relationship with God. God had promised him offspring like the dust of the earth, possession of the land, and to be with Jacob wherever he went. Jacob's response was to tell God that *if* God truly did make good on all these promises, *then* God would be his God. But this is what we've seen characterising Jacob's life all along: he values the things of God, but he only values them for what he thinks he can get out of them. And this is what God had overcome as he transforms Jacob from sinner into saint. This is why Jacob's story is so important to us. A lot of people today are just like Jacob. They're only interested in God in terms of what he can do for them; they make deals with God; or they try to obtain the

things of God on their own terms and by their own schemes. Brothers and sisters, God can and will teach and transform us, just as he did Jacob.

In Chapters 29 and 30 we saw Jacob passing through God's "Department of Ironic Punishments". Jacob meets his uncle, Laban, who is in many ways simply an older and more experienced version of Jacob the Schemer. Laban swindled the swindler when he tricked Jacob into marrying Leah instead of Rachel. And then in the midst of Leah's and Rachel's rivalry, Jacob the player, who spent his life using other people as pawns in his schemes, is played by his wives in their schemes to get the things they want. Now in the second half of Chapter 30 we see Jacob dealing with the scheming and swindling Laban again. But remember to look for God working in the background. Jacob's life has been one scheme after another. He's a man who knows what he wants and who's willing to do anything to get it, no matter who gets hurt in the process. Behind the scenes, though, God is at work bringing his own plans to fruit. Behind the scenes, God's teaching the swindler what it feels like to be swindled and teaching the player what it feels like to be played. And all the while, God is setting Jacob up for the blessings he had promised. Jacob's problem is that he doesn't perceive any of this yet. And in that respect he's just like we so often are. When we aren't prepared to see God at work, we won't see him at work and we'll miss the lessons he's teaching us. We keep going on with our own plans and our own schemes. The good news that we find in Jacob's story is that God doesn't leave him blind; eventually God opens Jacob's eyes—he removes the scales and everything changes for Jacob.

In the last section the storyteller told us about the births of Jacob's first eleven sons. Leah had children, then Rachel's maid, Bilhah had children as Rachel's surrogate. Leah then gave her maid, Zilpah to bear children for her, then Leah bore another son and a daughter, and the story finally ended with Rachel—finally—giving birth to Joseph, the son for whom she had been so desperate. Rachel's finally having a son of her own changes the situation

between Jacob's family and Laban. As we've seen before, bearing children—and especially sons—assured a wife of her place in the family. Bearing sons for her husband was a wife's chief duty in that culture, because it was through those sons that the husband would live on. They would inherit his wealth, they would carry on his name and his heritage, and they would pray for him in the afterlife. If a woman failed to bear sons for her husband it could nullify her marriage contract. And so as long as Rachel was barren, her natural inclination would have been to stay close to her father. In a worst case scenario, should her husband divorce her, she could always go back to her father's home. Assuming that Laban cared for the welfare of his daughters, he would have been hesitant to let Jacob leave before she had borne him a son. He didn't want Jacob dumping her in some far off land; better she be close to home if her husband were to divorce her. But now that she's finally borne a son, Jacob is free to go—in theory. And so, in 30:25, he approaches his uncle, Laban:

**As soon as Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, that I may go, for you know the service that I have given you."**  
(Genesis 30:25-26)

There are a couple of things to notice here. First, Jacob talks about Canaan as "my own home and country". He knows that he has a connection with that land. That's where his inheritance and his future lie, not in Haran. It looks like Jacob's has recognised—at least in some measure—that God has been at work fulfilling his promises. He's taken care of Jacob just as he has promised and he's blessed him with a multitude of children—twelve, at least, that we know of so far. In talking about "my home and country" it certainly seems as though Jacob is now remembering God's promise to see him safely home. Jacob may be in it for himself, but at least he's beginning to recognise God at work.

The second thing we can note here is that Jacob is fed up with Laban. Jacob doesn't so much *ask* Laban to let him go, he *tells* him to let him go. He reminds Laban right up front of their contract—seven years for Leah and seven years for Rachel—and that he's now fulfilled the terms of that contract. The language is terse and aggressive. There's no "please"; there's nothing polite about it. It should remind us of Abraham's servant who, in his excitement over having been led by God to the right girl for his master, insisted that Laban immediately let him return to Canaan with her. If the later custom found in Deuteronomy is anything to go by, Laban should have sent Jacob off with a liberal supply of livestock, grain, and wine. That was the expectation when a man freed his slave. If it was expected that man would be so generous to a former slave, should he not be much more generous with his son-in-law? The problem is that Laban's never seen his treated Jacob like "family" and Jacob knows it. As he addresses Laban, Jacob stresses his "service"—Laban's taken advantage of him and treated him like a slave. Jacob wants to go home, but Laban won't let go that easily. He stalled Abraham's servant years before and now he stalls Jacob.

**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."** (Genesis 30:27-28)

"If I have found favour in your sight." Those are words to open negotiations. Laban knows Jacob's upset and so he tries to butter him up. Laban know that Jacob's a wheeler-dealer like himself, so he gets ready to make another deal with Jacob. He starts by noting just how rich he's become because of Jacob. Apparently Laban sought his pagan gods out for an explanation as to why he was prospering and instead got a reply from the God of Jacob. It underscores Laban's greed and foolishness. What should have been obvious from Jacob's hard work, he had to seek by divination. But his comment about God's blessing through Jacob is just Laban's

backhanded way of saying that he can't afford to let Jacob go. Jacob's the source of his good fortune and he doesn't want to give him up. And so Laban opens the negotiations for another deal and that should be a warning. The last time Laban made a deal with Jacob it ended with Jacob working seven years for the wrong girl. No matter what the details of this new deal, we know that Laban only intends to take advantage of Jacob as he has all along.

Laban asks Jacob to name his wages, but Jacob knows Laban well enough not to bother. Regardless of the circumstances, Laban should have sent his son-in-law, daughters, and grandchildren off with generosity. The fact that he won't do so and especially that he refuses even after God's generous blessings on him through Jacob simply underscores the fact that trying to negotiate anything out of Laban is a lost cause. Instead, Jacob tries to shame Laban for his stingy underhandedness.

**Jacob said to him, "You yourself know how I have served you, and how your livestock has fared with me. For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now when shall I provide for my own household also?"** (Genesis 30:29-30)

Laban isn't in the least fazed by Jacob's attempt to shame him. He simply asks again, "What shall I give you?" And now it's Jacob's turn to scheme.

**Jacob said, "You shall not give me anything. If you will do this for me, I will again pasture 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 they shall be my wages. So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come to look into my wages with you. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen."** (Genesis 30:31-33)

Jacob makes an offer that stingy Laban can't refuse. The breeds of sheep and goats common in that day and place produced few animals with mixed colouring. Goats were normally black or brown all over and sheep were normally white all over. In any large flock there would be a few with stripes or spots, but not very many. Jacob suggests to Laban that he continue working for him, starting with a flock of sheep and goats of mixed colouring and that at the end of the set time period, his wages will be all the offspring of mixed colour. Laban can keep all the white sheep and all the black goats. Of course, Laban jumps at this. Jacob will continue to be a source of blessing on his flocks and he'll only have to pay him the small number of striped and spotted goats and sheep. A shepherd's usual wages would have been twenty per cent of the lambs and kids born to the flock along with a portion of their milk and wool.<sup>1</sup> If Laban only has to pay Jacob the small number of stripped and spotted lambs and kids that the flock produces, well, that's an even better deal.

**Laban said, "Good! Let it be as you have said."** (Genesis 30:34)

Jacob has a scheme up his sleeve, but so does Laban. Laban knew enough about breeding to know that removing the striped and spotted animals from Jacob's flock up-front would mean even fewer stripped and spotted kids and lambs. And that's exactly what he does. Jacob has asked for very little, but Laban's going to give him even less.

**But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it, and every lamb that was black, and put them in the charge of his sons. And he set a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob pastured the rest of Laban's flock.** (Genesis 30:35-36)

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<sup>1</sup> J. J. Finkelstein "An Old Babylonian Herding Contract and Genesis 31:38f." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88 (1968), pp. 30-36.

Laban does the best he can to remove the breeding stock that will produce Jacob's wages. And not only does he remove them from Jacob's flock, but he gives them to his sons and then instructs his sons to pasture their flocks three days away, just to make sure there's no interbreeding. The irony of the situation is that in removing the striped and spotted sheep and goats from Jacob's flock, Laban plays right into God's hand. God's whole purpose here is to make himself known and Laban's attempt to scam Jacob is only going to create more proof that Jacob's blessing is supernatural.

The problem, however, is that even though pagan Laban has acknowledged that his blessing has come through Jacob's God, Jacob still seems to think that it all depends on him. Not to be foiled by Laban's removal of his preferred breeding stock, Jacob engages in his own scheme. As Rachel had superstitiously tried using mandrakes to produce a son, now Jacob superstitiously tries to influence the colouring of his flock using sympathetic magic.

**Then Jacob took fresh sticks of poplar and almond and plane trees, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the sticks. He set the sticks that he had peeled in front of the flocks in the troughs, that is, the watering places, where the flocks came to drink. And since they bred when they came to drink, the flocks bred in front of the sticks and so the flocks brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted. And Jacob separated the lambs and set the faces of the flocks toward the striped and all the black in the flock of Laban. He put his own droves apart and did not put them with Laban's flock. Whenever the stronger of the flock were breeding, Jacob would lay the sticks in the troughs before the eyes of the flock, that they might breed among the sticks, but for the feebler of the flock he would not lay them there. So the feebler would be Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's. (Genesis 30:37-42)**

Jacob thinks that he can influence the colouring of the lambs and kids based on the superstitious notion that the colouring of the young will be influenced by what the parents are looking at while mating. Accordingly, he places sticks with white stripes in front of the normally black goats when they breed and when the normally white sheep breed, he places black goats in front of them. The amazing thing is that it works—or at least it *seems* to. In verse 43 we're told:

**Thus the man increased greatly and had large flocks, female servants and male servants, and camels and donkeys.**

Jacob winds up with so many striped and spotted goats and so many dark-coloured sheep that he's able to trade them for camels, donkeys, and slaves. In fact, the story ends with the accusation of Laban's sons in 31:1.

**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."**

The silly thing about that accusation is that Laban's wealth was only so great to begin with because of the blessing that came from God through Jacob. And that the miraculous multiplication of the striped and spotted animals didn't detract from the blessing Laban already had. Laban's sons are as greedy as he is.

But was it Jacob's superstitious scheme that brought about his success? Jacob seems to have thought so at the time, but if we jump ahead a few verses, we see Jacob giving the credit to God. Laban's sons confront him over what they see as an injustice and Jacob responds to them in 31:9-13.

**God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me. 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.'"**

It took a direct revelation from God, but Jacob did finally acknowledge—he finally realised—that God was making good on his promises to him. Rachel had shown a lack of faith in trying to conceive a son with the mandrakes. Jacob now shows a lack of faith in trying to grow his flocks with magic. The remarkable thing is that God is gracious. Despite weak and flawed faith, God gives Rachel the son she wanted so badly and he blesses Jacob as Laban tries to rip him off. In both cases blessing comes not by human scheming, but as a result of God's sovereign grace. God doesn't give up on his children. Even when we make mistakes and even when our faith is flawed, he remains committed. Gordon Wenham comments: "God is not frustrated by the cheat...justice will finally be seen to be done, and...his promises to his people, here personified in Jacob, of land, protection, and blessing to the nations will, despite all opposition, eventually triumph."<sup>2</sup>

God's plans for us will succeed. And they'll succeed despite our mistakes. But Jacob's story warns us not to make the same mistakes that Jacob made. Jacob's root problem was an upside-down faith. He believed in God, but he was only interested in what God could do for him. He was only interested in serving God if he got something in return. And because his faith was upside-down, Jacob wasn't prepared to trust God to provide the blessing he had promised. Jacob thought it all depended on himself and his own scheming. Jacob was thinking just like a pagan. He spent his life scheming dishonest schemes to get his hands on the things

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<sup>2</sup> *Genesis 16-50* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 260.

of God: stealing from his brother and lying to his father. And yet this isn't just Jacob's problem. There are a lot of people in the Church with this same pagan mindset. They're only interested in God because of what they think he can give them. They want God's blessing, but they scheme and manipulate other just like Jacob to get their hands on that blessing. They make their way through life as if God's blessing depends on them instead of God. Brothers and sisters, that's not God's way. God wants to teach us to trust him. If we trust him and let him work in our lives he does amazing things.

In the 1950s Andrew van der Bijl worked smuggling Bibles through the Iron Curtain into Eastern Europe. In his book, *God's Smuggler*, he writes about sitting in his car at the Romanian border, watching as the Soviet officials tore apart and ransacked the cars waiting in front of him, looking for contraband. He knew that any serious inspection would turn up the Bibles he had hidden in his car and so he prayed:

"Lord, I know that no amount of cleverness on my part can get me through this border search. Dare I ask for a miracle? Let me take some of the Bibles out and leave them in the open where they will be seen. Then, Lord, I cannot possibly be depending on my own stratagems, can I? I will be depending utterly upon You."

That's exactly what Brother Andrew did. He goes on:

"It was my turn. I put the little VW in low gear, inched up to the officer standing at the left side of the road, handed him my papers and started to get out. But his knee was against the door, holding it closed. He looked at my photograph in the passport, scribbled something down, shoved the papers back under my nose, and abruptly waved me on.

"Surely thirty seconds had not passed. I started the engine and inched forward. Was I supposed to pull over, out of the way, where the car could be taken apart?

Was I...surely I wasn't...I coasted forward, my foot poised above the brake. Nothing happened. I looked out the rear mirror. The guard was waving the next car to stop, indicating to the driver that he had to get out. On I drove a few more yards. The guard was having the driver behind me open the hood of his car. And then I was too far away to doubt that indeed I had made it through that incredible checkpoint in the space of thirty seconds.

"My heart was racing. Not with the excitement of the crossing, but with the excitement of having caught such a spectacular glimpse of God at work."<sup>3</sup>

Brother Andrew saw God at work because he had the faith to let God work. In fact, leaving Bibles and Christian literature in the open became his common practise as he smuggled them into the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. This doesn't mean we shouldn't make plans or that we shouldn't take any initiative. God was just as much at work in the many other instances when people smuggled Bibles through the Iron Curtain by hiding them instead of leaving them in plain sight. In this instance, however, Andrew could see that his own plans were not likely going to work, he prayed, and he acted in faith. The end result was an incredible episode that God used, not only to encourage and strengthen his faith, but to give him a story that has since encouraged and strengthened the faith of countless others. Dear friends, is that how we live out our faith? We may not live with such exciting and intriguing situations in our lives, but that doesn't mean we don't have choices to make each day. Do we choose to pursue blessing through our own scheming, or are we living in faith and waiting for God to bless us? If Genesis teaches us anything, it's that God is always engaged with his creation and with his creatures. His call to us is to walk before him and to be blameless. If we will do that, he will take care of everything else.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, strengthen our faith, we pray. Open our eyes to your hand at work in our lives and remind us each day of your promises. Let us never forget your call, "Walk before me and be blameless," and give us the faith to follow that call. Let us seek your blessing by glorifying you in all we do. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Brother Andrew, John Sherrill, and Elizabeth Sherrill, *God's Smuggler* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1967), pp. 152-153.