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BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

Genesis 31:17-55

by

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Genesis Lesson 57

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Genesis 31:17-55

A farmer went to the Farmer's Market each week to sell, among other things, the cottage cheese and apple butter made on his farm. He carried these in two large tubs from which he ladled the product into smaller containers for the customers. One day he got to market and discovered that he had forgotten one ladle, so he tried to use the same ladle for both products. But before long the two tubs were so mixed together that he couldn't tell which was which.

As Christians we are supposed to be distinct from the world, but many professing Christians have blended in with the world so much that it's hard to tell the difference between them and it. I admit, it's not always easy to relate to the world in a Christian manner. I've often felt like I was between a rock and a hard place, not knowing quite how to act or what to say in some situations. I've often blown it. But it's comforting to know that as long as I'm seeking the Lord, He will protect me when I'm between that rock and hard place and will work patiently with me as I'm in the process of maturing.

In Genesis 31, Jacob is between a rock and a hard place. He has left Haran and is heading back to Canaan in obedience to the Lord. Behind him is his crafty father-in-law, Laban. Before him is his brother, Esau, whom he had cheated and run from 20 years before. Jacob, in a blundering sort of way, is attempting to break away from Laban and to get back to the place God wants him to be, which means facing Esau. So Jacob is trying to obey God, but he's caught between the rock of Laban and the hard place of Esau, both of whom represent the world. But in spite of Jacob's immaturity and mistakes, God's protective hand is on him. So there are two themes in this story: (1) God's protection of His

people from the world in spite of their blunders; and, (2) The need for God's people to separate themselves from the world, as seen in Jacob's separation from Laban and return to the place God wants him.

God protects His people as they seek
to live separately from the world.

There are parallels between Jacob's situation and that of Moses' readers. Just as God protected Jacob in his departure from Haran to return to Canaan, so He had protected the nation Israel in its departure from Egypt to return to Canaan. Just as Jacob and his family still had a lot of rough edges, so Israel had many shortcomings and sins. Yet God graciously had His hand on both Jacob and the nation. And He graciously has His protective hand on us as we seek to live separately from the world, in spite of our blunders.

1. God graciously protects His people from the world.

We need God's gracious protection for two reasons:

A. We need God's gracious protection because the world is a cunning enemy.

Laban represents the world, and he is a crafty fellow. He's the kind of guy who gives you a friendly slap on the back and takes your wallet at the same time. He tosses around spiritual language as if he believes in the Lord, but obviously he's a polytheist who will use whatever god suits his current advantage. He's a pious hypocrite who would have you believe he's the world's most loving father, when really all he cares about is his own pocketbook.

Jacob had noticed Laban's hostile attitude toward him lately (31:2, 5). He had desired to return to his homeland

(30:25). God had confirmed that desire with a specific command for Jacob to return (31:3, 13). But Laban wasn't the sort of guy you just tell, "Bye, Laban, it's been nice knowing you!" Jacob knew that parting wouldn't be easy because Laban knew that Jacob was largely responsible for his prosperity. But now Jacob sees his opening: Laban has gone three days' journey away to shear his sheep (30:36). So Jacob hastily loads his things and heads south.

Three days later, Laban hears about it. He knows where Jacob is headed, so he and his men take off after him. It takes him seven days to overtake him, and by then Jacob is almost home. Since he had gone about 300 miles in ten days, Jacob was making tracks! Probably Laban was planning to use force with Jacob, but God intervened by telling Laban in a dream not to harm Jacob. Not to "speak to him either good or bad" (31:24, 29) is a Hebrew expression that means, "Don't use either flattery or threats to try to persuade Jacob to return" (see also 24:50). If the Lord hadn't stopped Laban, Jacob probably would have returned home empty handed, at best.

Laban's opening salvo is to accuse Jacob of kidnapping his daughters (he doesn't call them "Jacob's wives"). With great bombast he claims that he would have sent them away with a joyous party. At this point, perhaps Jacob and his wives rolled their eyes as if to say, "Yeah, right!" So Laban changes tactics and bullies Jacob by claiming that he could hurt him if he wanted to, but, he admits, God had intervened, so he decided to be nice and back off. He's trying to take credit for being Mr. Nice Guy, when really, God forced it on him! Next he condescendingly says, "You've left because you were homesick." Then he acts hurt by asking, "But why did you steal my gods?" (31:30). What a manipulative deceiver!

Jacob is confident that no one has stolen Laban's gods, so he lets him search all his belongings. When Laban doesn't find the hidden idols, which Rachel is sitting on, twenty years of Jacob's pent up anger boils over. After Jacob's angry defense, Laban sees he's beat. But he never admits it. Instead, he plays the wounded hero by falsely claiming that Jacob's wives, children, flocks, and everything in sight are not Jacob's, but Laban's (31:43)! But, he's going to be bighearted and let Jacob have it all, as long as he agrees to a treaty. Finally, he kisses his sons (= "grandsons") and daughters, blesses them and returns home. G. Campbell Morgan deflates Laban by observing that "the last sight we have of him is the interesting spectacle of a man kissing his sons and daughters, after having wronged them through all the long years" (*The Analyzed Bible* [Baker], p. 196).

What a picture of craftiness! But that's the world, isn't it? The god of this world is a master of deceit and treachery. Those who serve the god of this world are like Laban: self-seeking, out to do whatever they have to do to get what they want, and sounding both threatening and pious in the process. The world accuses those in the church of hypocrisy, but they are no better and usually much worse. Because the world is such a cunning enemy, we could not survive without God's gracious protection.

- B. We need God's gracious protection because we are so much like the world.

We need the Lord to protect us from ourselves! Yes, Laban was a con artist, but so were Jacob and Rachel. Rachel stole her father's household idols and nearly got herself killed when Jacob stupidly blustered to Laban, "The one with whom you find your gods shall not live"

(31:32). Jacob unknowingly almost lost his favorite wife!

Why would Rachel steal her father's idols? Probably she still mixed idolatry with her worship of the Lord, and she didn't want to go to a strange new land without covering all her bases. The gods may come in handy if Yahweh didn't come through in some future situation. Also, the Nuzi tablets, discovered in that region, dating from about 400 years after Jacob, indicate that the possessor of the father's household idols was the heir to his estate. By stealing the idols, Rachel may have been trying to secure the inheritance which she felt her father had wrongfully taken from her (31:14). This would explain Laban's anger over the matter and Jacob's extreme penalty for the culprit.

The point is, Rachel was acting just like the world. She was about to be separated from Laban, the embodiment of the world; and yet she was trying to take the world's security blanket along on the trip, in case God didn't come through. Before we condemn her, we need to see that when we use God to make us happy, and mingle the world's wisdom, such as psychology, with our faith as if trusting in the living God were not sufficient, we're acting like Rachel.

For his part, Jacob wasn't honorable in the way he left Laban. He should have politely, but firmly, stated his intentions and followed through, trusting God to protect him. While Rachel stole her father's idols, Jacob stole Laban's heart (literal, 31:20, 26). Jacob is still the schemer, trying to pull his own strings and get himself out of another tight situation.

In spite of all this, God graciously protected both Rachel and Jacob. God used this situation to get Laban to initiate a peace treaty with Jacob, which served to estab-

lish a northern border for Jacob, so that he never was tempted to return to Haran. It slammed the door on that part of his life and locked him into the forward course toward Canaan, in spite of his fears of Esau.

When our kids were younger, they enjoyed playing in the waves at the beach. They didn't realize how powerful some of those waves can be. They were so excited with the fun they were having that they were oblivious to the danger. But what they didn't know was that Marla and I never took our eyes off of them. We were always watching to protect them from the waves.

God watches each of His children that way. I think that when we get to heaven, God is going to replay some scenes from our lives so that we will see how, time and time again, He graciously protected us from situations where we could have destroyed ourselves because, like Rachel stealing Laban's idols, we were so much like the world.

So in spite of Jacob's blundering obedience and Rachel's theft and deception, God graciously protected them. You may wonder, "Why?" Donald Grey Barnhouse observes, "If we are perplexed by the blessing of God in the midst of the most sinful environment, we must remember that there would be no blessing whatsoever if human merit were the prerequisite to God's display of power and bestowal of blessing. Here we see the grace of God manifest in utmost splendor. In spite of thievery and deception, God protected His own" (*Genesis* [Zondervan], 2:109).

That shouldn't lead us to tempt the Lord. J. Vernon McGee once told of a man who had become so caught up with the idea of God's sovereign protection of the believer under every circumstance that he said, "You

know, Dr. McGee, I am so convinced that God is keeping me no matter what I do, that I think I could step out into the midst of the busiest rush hour traffic and if my time had not come, I would be perfectly safe." Dr. McGee replied, "If you step out into traffic at rush hour, brother, your time *has* come!" God protects us, but we can't presume on His grace. That leads to the second lesson in our text:

2. God's people need to seek to live separately from the world.

Jacob is slowly learning. His natural tendency, as we've seen, is to trust in his own schemes instead of the Lord. Here, he flees in fear of Laban (31:31), but at least he's going in obedience to the Lord, in spite of his fears of facing Esau once he got back to Canaan. We might call it, "blundering obedience."

If you've walked with the Lord for any time at all, you see yourself here. You've done things which, at the time you would have claimed, were done in obedience. But now as you look back on those times, you realize how blundering you were in your attempts at following the Lord. So even if Jacob wasn't trusting totally, he was attempting to trust God by separating from Laban and heading homeward. Jacob teaches us two lessons about our need to live separately from the world:

- A. Separation from the world requires a decisive break.

Jacob didn't do it in the wisest way, but at least he made the decision and left Laban. I've never known anyone to drift gradually and unconsciously out of worldliness. It takes a decisive commitment and then a prolonged struggle. But it doesn't just happen unawares.

I'm not sure that we teach this well enough to young believers. You *cannot* serve God and Mammon. There can be no partnership between righteousness and lawlessness. Light *cannot* fellowship with darkness (2 Cor. 6:14). When you commit yourself to following Jesus Christ, you must decisively make a break with this evil world.

That commitment should be expressed in baptism. Baptism is like a wedding ceremony, where a couple makes a public commitment to forsake all others and be faithful to one another. That is not to say that there won't be temptations and, in some cases, infidelity. But when that happens, a person must come back to that original commitment and seek to restore the marriage relationship.

It's the same way in following Christ. When you're baptized, you're making a public commitment that says, "I am forsaking this evil world and cleaving to Jesus Christ, who loved me and gave Himself for me." Yes, there will be temptations. There will probably be times when you are unfaithful to Him. But when that happens, remember that you made a decisive break with the world, turn back to Christ, and restore your relationship with Him.

The problem with many Christians is that they've never made that break with the world. They're trying to get the best of both worlds, like Rachel heading for Canaan with her father's idols. But that's like having one foot on the dock and the other on a boat that's leaving. You can only do that for a short while, and then you're going to get wet.

I encounter many professing Christians who are acting like Rachel. They are "using God" to make them happy or help them, but they have not surrendered totally to

His lordship. They keep their stash of idols to pull out in case God doesn't work. But they're actually following self, not Jesus as Lord. But biblical Christianity requires making a radical break from serving self to seeking first His kingdom and righteousness. Whether following Jesus makes you feel good or gets you nailed to a cross, a true Christian daily denies self and follows Jesus because He is the true and living God. It requires a decision to break from the world.

- B. Separation from the world means reverencing God as the only Lord of your life.

There's a humorous contrast here between Laban's idols and Jacob's God. Laban pursues Jacob to retrieve his gods. What good are gods that can be stolen? But in his pursuit to get his gods, the living God appears to Laban in a dream and warns him to leave Jacob alone. That should have tipped off Laban about the value of his idols. But the supreme irony is what happened to his gods--they got sat on, and that by a woman claiming to be on her menstrual cycle! The satire of that would not have been lost on Moses' readers, who viewed such a woman as unclean. And Laban never found them. He had to go home and make some new ones!

The covenant of verse 49 is not, as often used, a blessing for friends who are parting. It shows the mutual distrust between these men. They are calling on God to punish the man who violates the treaty. Laban sanctimoniously puts himself in a position of superiority over Jacob by invoking him not to mistreat his daughters (31:50). Jacob had not been mistreating them in the past, as that implies. It's like the question, "Have you stopped beating your wife?"

When they ratify the treaty, Laban calls on Yahweh to be

the witness between him and Jacob when they are apart (31:49). You may think it strange that Laban, who was looking for his stolen gods, invokes the true God to make good on this treaty. But, it's not, really. The Lord is just one of Laban's pantheon. In verse 53, he invokes the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father. But their father was an idolater who didn't worship the true God (Josh. 24:2). So Laban, the polytheist, is just covering all his bases, invoking all the relevant gods.

But Jacob shines at this point. He doesn't go along with Laban's invocation and swear by all Laban's gods (which included the living God). Instead, he swears "by the fear of his father Isaac" (31:53, see also 31:42). That is a name for the Lord, whom Isaac had always revered. So Jacob is separating himself from Laban's polytheism and affirming that he will reverence the Lord alone. At this point he is beginning to live separately from Laban and all he represents. Jacob is reverencing God as the only Lord of his life.

CONCLUSION

That's the key to living in this world without being of it: To "set apart Christ as Lord in your heart" (1 Pet. 3:15). Instead of using God and whatever else works to make you happy, your focus should be to submit to God in everything, to please Him in every thought, word, and deed, and to die to self. Then, instead of drifting downstream with the American way of life, and even the American *Christian* way of life, you can evaluate it by God's Word and resist it.

I wonder, to which of the three main characters in this story are you most spiritually alike? Some may be like Laban: You'll use God as long as He helps you prosper, but if He doesn't seem to be working, you'll try something else. Self is really your God, and you

need to turn from your idolatry and submit to Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Some may be like Rachel: You may know the true God, but you're carrying your idols from the old life with you. It's kind of hard to tell whether you're in Christ or in the world. You need to make a decisive break with the world and trash the things in your life that you know are not pleasing to God.

Others may be like Jacob: You're seeking to obey God and extricate yourself from the ways of the world. You need to keep growing in the direction of reverencing God as your only Lord, and not go back to the things that formerly enslaved you. At times you'll feel like you're between a rock and a hard place in seeking to live separately from the world. But you'll have the joy of knowing that the God of Jacob is protecting you as you do.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is a list of dos and don'ts not adequate in keeping Christians from worldliness?
2. How can we emphasize the need to turn from sin at the outset of salvation without falling into a works-salvation?
3. Often those who emphasize separation from the world end up being legalistic. How can we properly emphasize separation and yet avoid legalism?
4. Is it possible for a Christian to fit in socially (on the job, in the neighborhood, at school, etc.) and yet maintain proper separation from the world? How?

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