

“Turning the Tables” (Genesis 30:25-43)

Coming home from work, a woman stopped at the corner deli to buy a chicken for supper. The butcher reached into a barrel, grabbed the last chicken he had, flung it on the scales behind the counter, and told the woman its weight. She thought for a moment. “I really need a bit more chicken than that,” she said. “Do you have any larger ones?” Without a word, the butcher put the chicken back into the barrel, groped around as though finding another, pulled the same chicken out, and placed it on the scales. “This chicken weighs one pound more,” he announced. The woman pondered her options and then said, “Okay. I’ll take them both.”

This humorous account reminds us that honesty is still the best policy.¹ Unfortunately, in our world there are very few truly honest people. In Gen 30:25-43, we are going to read a story about Laban dishonestly turning the tables on Jacob. Fortunately, God has Jacob’s back and He is able to protect and provide for Jacob in the midst of challenging times. The narrative can be divided into two sections. The first section (30:25-34) is entirely dialogue; the second section (30:35-43) is entirely narrative report.²

Our story begins in 30:25-26: **“Now it came about when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, ‘Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my own country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me depart; for you yourself know my service which I have rendered you.’”** After the birth of Joseph, Jacob recognized that it was time to leave town. So Jacob called up all his courage and approached Laban, asking to be released from his authority. Unlike today, Jacob could not simply pack his bags and leave. The authority structure in this Eastern, extended family was far more complex and restrictive—as it is even today, some places in the Eastern culture. There was a shared ownership even of Jacob’s wives and children. To leave without his father-in-law’s permission and blessing could lead to outright war within the family clan.³

Jacob had been living with Laban in Paddam Aram for 20 years (cf. 31:38). For 14 years he had worked for Laban, keeping his agreement in exchange for Laban’s two daughters (cf. 29:30; 31:41). Then another six years had elapsed before Jacob finally made the break. During this time, eleven sons and one daughter were born. It was time to leave. This town had become too small for both Jacob and Laban. Besides, Jacob is anxious to see God provide for his family. He was looking forward to the promised blessing of land. This flawed man has always had faith and been committed to the promise of land and to the God of Abraham (see 28:4, 13; 31:13).⁴

At any rate, you’ve got to hand it to Jacob. He waited until God moved him (31:13). He was willing to hang in there with Laban. This points to the inner strength of Jacob. Most of us would have left town in a huff a long time before Jacob did. He persevered for 20 long years. Many of us would have persevered for 20 months, at most.

Today, like Jacob, you may be in a difficult work environment. Have you ever considered praying that the Lord might give you greater patience to endure your circumstances? Since you can’t change your boss or your coworkers, why not pray for the Lord to change you? This principle can also apply to your marriage. Only God can change your spouse; so why not let Him do His work in your loved one? Instead of worrying about your spouse, worry about yourself. There is plenty in each one of us that needs to be improved. I also see this principle as applicable in our commitment to the local church. Many Christians are dropping out of the local church because of disappointment or frustration. Those that remain devoted to the local church are all too comfortable leaving their home church at the drop of a hat. They do not take seriously God’s call on them to remain at the church He led them to. Some even become members and sign church covenants only to leave when their needs are not met or they become disillusioned with the decisions of the leadership.

All of these examples are quite tragic. When we opt for the easy way out by leaving our work environment, marriage relationship, or church, we're never able to fully develop patience and endurance in ourselves. God sovereignly uses trying circumstances and exasperating people in our lives to make us into the people He wants us to be (Rom 8:29; 1 Pet 1:6-7). If your work environment, marriage relationship, or home church is not what you want or expect them to be, that's not necessarily a bad thing. God may be refining you and growing you in your dependence upon Him. I challenge you today to suck it up and persevere. May the Lord grant you grace to look to Him to see what He is teaching you.

In 30:27-31a, Laban responds to Jacob, **“If now it pleases you, stay with me; I have divined⁵ that the LORD has blessed me on your account.’ He [Laban] continued, ‘Name me your wages, and I will give it.’ But he [Jacob] said to him, ‘You yourself know how I have served you and how your cattle have fared with me. For you had little before I came and it has increased to a multitude, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now, when shall I provide for my own household also?’ So he [Laban] said, ‘What shall I give you?’”** In 30:27, Laban says, **“If now it pleases you, stay with me.”** Literally, he says, “If I have found favor in your eyes, stay with me.” Laban is kissing up to Jacob. Why? Laban claims to have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed him because of Jacob. Of course, the means were not proper but the truth was correct. Crafty Laban could see that he had a good thing going for him. He knew where his bread was buttered, so he wasn't all that anxious for Jacob to go. Sadly, Laban was averse to Jacob's leaving not because he loved his nephew, or son-in-law, but because he knew his prosperity was dependent on Jacob's presence. He observed that the blessing of heaven rested on Jacob and that his stock was significantly increased under Jacob's management. So Laban says to Jacob, “What will it take for you to stay? Just give me a price.” What a typical business tactic! Laban was all about money and manipulation.

Amusingly, in 30:29-30, Jacob let Laban know rather candidly that it didn't call for an act of divination to discover why he had experienced material prosperity. Rather, it was fairly obvious that it was a combination of factors—Jacob's faithfulness and hard work and, I would add, especially God's favor and blessing resting upon him.

Before we go on, this principle deserves some elaboration. Clearly, Laban was an ungodly, ruthless man. And Jacob, for all his moral weakness, is a man of deep faith in God. Both men agree on a remarkable fact: God has blessed a bad man because he had a good man working for him (cf. 12:3; 39:2-6). Laban's increase came on Jacob's account. This concept occurs several times in the Bible. We see it when God promised to spare Sodom and Gomorrah if ten righteous men could be found in the city (Gen 18:16-33). We see it when God prospers Potiphar because Joseph is part of his household (Gen 39:1-6). Even 1 Cor 7:12-14 contains a fascinating discussion of the problem of mixed marriages, where one partner is a believer and the other is not. In such a case, the unbelieving partner and any children that may be involved are “sanctified” through the believing partner. This means that the unbeliever(s) is blessed on account of the believer. The unbeliever experiences God's protection and provision because he/she is yoked with the believing partner. The same thought is also behind Jesus' allusion to believers as “the salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Matt 5:13-16). Salt purifies, preserves, and slows the process of decay, while light illuminates, dispels darkness, and uncovers reality.

Taken together, these passages illustrate the concept that Jacob and Laban are discussing in Gen 30. God blesses the people of the world because the people of God are nearby. If you are a believer, your marriage is different (and better) because you are there. If you are a believer, your workplace is different (and better) because you are there. If you are a believer, your school is different (and better) because you are there. If you are a believer, your family is different (and better) because you are there. The truth is: God wants to bless His children so much that He will even bless the deceitful people of the world through them.⁶ Truly our God is a gracious God. “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” (Jas 1:17).

So how would your family describe you? Your boss? Your neighbors? Your fellow students? As believers, we should be a blessing wherever we go and in whatever we do! Is your world a better place because you're in it? Seriously, is Emmanuel a better church because you're a member? Is your family a better family because you're in it? Is your workplace better because you work there? Is your school better because you're enrolled? Lord willing, your life exudes blessing.

In 30:31b-33, Jacob responded to Laban's open-ended offer with these words: **“You shall not give me anything. If you will do this one thing for me, I will again pasture and keep your flock: let me pass through your entire flock today, removing from there every speckled and spotted sheep and every black one among the lambs and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages. So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come concerning my wages. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, will be considered stolen.”** It's obvious that Jacob had thought carefully about what to say and how to say it. It seems clear that he spent time going over the possible responses and counter responses. Jacob asked for the speckled, spotted, and dark sheep. Why the speckled and spotted? It was a foolproof way to distinguish between the flocks of Laban and Jacob. It appeared to favor Laban since goats in the Middle East are generally black or dark brown (Song 4:1b) and the sheep were nearly always white (cf. Ps 147:16; Song 4:2; 6:6; Dan 7:9). It gave Jacob an opportunity to put his trust in God. And as we'll discover in Gen 31, Jacob selected the spotted and speckled because of the Lord's instruction (31:10). Furthermore, Jacob's dream from God ensured him that the Lord would protect him from the dishonesty of Laban. This was a fine act of faith on Jacob's part. He cast himself wholly upon God's mercy.⁷

From every angle it was a great deal for Laban. There were no loopholes. He could not lose! So in 30:34, **“Laban said, ‘Good, let it be according to your word.’”** Likely, when he got out of Jacob's sight he began to smile, then chuckle, and then roar with laughter. He tried not to look smug but he could not help it. He inwardly sneered at the fool Jacob.⁸ He then stacked the deck against Jacob (30:35-36). Moses writes, **“So he removed on that day the striped and spotted male goats and all the speckled and spotted female goats, every one with white in it, and all the black ones among the sheep, and gave them into the care of his sons. And he put a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob fed the rest of Laban's flocks.”** Laban makes sure that Jacob does not cheat. However, in doing so, he also gives God the perfect opportunity to shine in an impossible situation.

In 30:37-43, Jacob counters with a plan from God: **“Then Jacob took fresh rods of poplar and almond and plane trees, and peeled white stripes in them, exposing the white which was in the rods. He set the rods which he had peeled in front of the flocks in the gutters, even in the watering troughs, where the flocks came to drink; and they mated when they came to drink. So the flocks mated by the rods, and the flocks brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted. Jacob separated the lambs, and made the flocks face toward the striped and all the black in the flock of Laban; and he put his own herds apart, and did not put them with Laban's flock. Moreover, whenever the stronger of the flock were mating, Jacob would place the rods in the sight of the flock in the gutters, so that they might mate by the rods; but when the flock was feeble, he did not put them in; so the feebler were Laban's and the stronger Jacob's.”** Jacob is the first genetic engineer in history. I realize the first technique he utilized cannot be found in the *Journal of Modern Agriculture*.⁹ It was generally believed that by placing such “visual aids” before the animals as they were mating, it was possible to influence the appearance of their offspring.¹⁰ Interestingly, the Hebrew words for **“poplar”** and **“white”** are puns on the name Laban, which means “white.” Jacob is practicing some “white magic” (pardon the pun), but it all comes from the Lord.¹¹ The second technique—mating the stronger stock with weaker stock in order to produce a stronger stock—makes sense. But Jacob eventually had to admit that his success was not due to his brilliance as a genetic engineer, it was simply due to the goodness of God in his life (cf. 32:10).¹²

Our story closes in 30:43, with these words: **“So the man became exceedingly prosperous,¹³ and had large flocks and female and male servants and camels and donkeys.”** Again, the blessings that Jacob has received have *everything* to do with God. It was *all due* to God’s good hand upon him. God blessed Jacob because God is committed to fulfilling His promise (cf. 31:9).¹⁴ As He often likes to do, God used seemingly foolish means to bring about His sovereign purposes. There was nothing magic in the striped sticks. Jacob acted in faith by doing what God told him to do, no matter how absurd it seemed to the natural mind (31:9-13). This wouldn’t be the last time God would instruct his servants to do unusual things: e.g., putting a bronze serpent on a pole to heal people of snakebites; defeating Jericho by having the people march around the city seven times; and having men and women be forgiven of their sins simply by putting their faith in Jesus Christ who died on the cross 2000 years ago to pay the penalty for sin. This passage reminds us that God uses the weak and foolish things of this world (1 Cor 1:20-21). Thus, it’s very important that you and I recognize that when God blesses us, when things go right in our lives, when in our ministry there is success, it’s *not* because of *our* planning, *not* because of *our* brilliance; it’s because of God’s grace.¹⁵

This concluding verse reminds us that God can overrule wicked people and the “normal” course of events. When God wants to bless a man, He will bless him regardless of the circumstances!¹⁶ If God is on your side, it doesn’t matter if the deck is stacked against you. If God is on your side, it doesn’t matter if you are dealing with unscrupulous people. If God is on your side, He can take the solids of life and turn out a thousand speckled sheep. He can do it because He is God!

There are essentially two ways to approach life as a believer: with a superficial belief in God that requires you to take control of your life or with a deep faith in God that permits you to yield absolute control of your life to God. Everyday we are faced with a decision: the decision to enjoy God’s peace, joy, and contentment or to experience anxiety, anger, and disillusionment. We must daily make a choice.

Do you remember the movie *The Karate Kid*? In that movie Mr. Miyagi (played by Arnold, of Arnold’s Drive-in in the *Happy Days* TV series) is asked to teach Daniel Larusso karate. Daniel has been the victim of the bullies in the neighborhood. He wants revenge so he is eager to learn. So, in their first lesson Mr. Miyagi has Daniel paint the fence. In the next lesson, he has him wax his car (“wax on, wax off”). Daniel gets frustrated. While others are learning kicks and jabs, Daniel has painted a fence, waxed a car, swept a floor, and tried to catch a fly with chopsticks. Daniel feels that he is being cheated. “It’s not fair!” he says. But, as we learn, Mr. Miyagi had a plan. He was teaching Daniel basic Karate moves by these exercises and was teaching him to concentrate. In the end (it is Hollywood), Daniel comes out the champion.

We sometimes face situations like Daniel Larusso. And we may feel that God has turned a deaf ear to us. We cry for justice and God tells us to “paint a fence.” “It’s not fair!” we cry. And we mope around and complain. Yet, God is up in heaven saying, “Remember, my son or my daughter, don’t draw conclusions until the story is over.” The reality is that our pain and frustration comes from our inability to see the big picture. In those ‘unfair’ times we must trust that the hand of God is working in unseen ways for our ultimate good! He is shaping us so that we will be more useful to Him and others.

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Notes

¹ Preaching Today Citation: Clark Cothern, Tecumseh, Michigan. *Leadership*, Vol. 15, no. 4.

² Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988 [2002 ed.]), 518.

³ Gene A. Getz, *Jacob: Following God Without Looking Back* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 103.

⁴ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 418.

⁵ Davis notes, "This verb occurs on only eleven occasions in the Hebrew Scriptures. In its strongest sense, the word indicates the practice of supernatural divination with the assumption being that the practitioner has the power to be able to learn secret things. The method of divination implied by this word is that of hydromancy, i.e., the discernment of hidden things by the appearance or motion of water (usually in a cup). The term also refers simply to the observation of signs and omens. Whichever meaning that Laban intends the word to mean, the practice of divination is strongly condemned in Scripture (Lev 19:26; Deut 18:10)." Barry C. Davis, *Genesis* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Biblical Seminary unpublished class Notes, 2003).

⁶ Ray Pritchard, *God's Catfish: Genesis 29-31*: <http://www.calvarymemorial.com/sermons/SMdisplay.asp?id=332>.

⁷ Jacob trusted God for his prosperity. There were no retirement programs in these pre-Christian centuries. There were no Social Security taxes or benefits. But Jacob had something better than either of those. Jacob had God, and God is faithful to His promises. James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis 12-36 Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985 [1998]), 797.

⁸ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 384.

⁹ By crossing the heterozygotes among themselves, Jacob would produce, according to the laws of heredity, twenty-five percent spotted sheep. Thus he multiplies his flock. Jacob has displayed ingenuity; he has not practiced deception. Jacob's knowledge of zoology is far from primitive. But perhaps such knowledge has been given him by God, just as his son's capacity to interpret dreams was a gift from God. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50*: NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 284. Cf. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Vol. 2: WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 257.

¹⁰ See NET Study Notes.

¹¹ Contra to this view, Youngblood suggests Jacob's scheme was saying, in effect, "I'll give Laban some of his own medicine!" Jacob had tricked his brother Esau (Edom, "red") by offering him some red stew; he would now attempt to trick his uncle Laban ("white") by making use of white branches. He writes, "In many ways, Jacob and Rachel were two of a kind. She had bargained for some mandrakes, superstitiously hoping that by eating them she would become pregnant (30:14-15). God honored her desire—but in spite of, not because of her foolish superstition (30:22-23). Similarly, God honored Jacob's desire for large flocks, but—again—in spite of his superstitious maneuvering and not because of it (31:4-10)." Ronald F. Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 226. Whether Jacob sinned or not is disputable.

¹² Woodrow Kroll, *Getting Ready to Leave Town*: <http://www.backtothebible.org/radio/today/24734>.

¹³ The Hebrew verb means "to break out," the same verb used in God's promise at Bethel (see 28:14), showing that the promise has been fulfilled. Waltke, *Genesis*, 420.

¹⁴ Sailhamer writes, "Although the writer does not specifically state it within the narrative, the passage is surely to be read as an example of the Lord's promise in chapter 28 to be with Jacob during his sojourn in the East. Jacob's clever use of the peeled poplar branches was not so much intended to demonstrate his resourcefulness as it was to further the theme of God's continued faithfulness to his word. The clue to the meaning of the passage is the last verse of the chapter (v. 43), where a summary of the whole narrative is given. The summary recalls quite clearly God's blessing of both Abraham (12:16) and Isaac (26:14) and thus puts the events of this chapter within the larger context of the themes developed throughout the book, namely, God's promise of blessing and his faithfulness to that promise. Jacob's wise dealings with Laban then are an example of the way God caused him to prosper during this sojourn. Further confirmation that such is the sense of the narrative comes from the words of Jacob himself in the next chapter. Looking back he told his wives that it was God who had taken Laban's herds and given them to him (31:9)." John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*: EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), Electronic ed. Cf. Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 518.

¹⁵ Ross writes, "Success comes from God. How a believer competes with a nonbeliever is important to the faith. It is not a matter of fighting fire with fire, playing his or her game, or turning the tables. Rather, it is a matter of the acknowledging that the true source of success is God and then engaging in practices that are compatible with that belief." Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 522.

¹⁶ Pritchard, *God's Catfish*.