

A Story of Grace/Week three notes/ Genesis 29:21-30:43

Always Watchful, Always Working Grace

Review God's promises to Jacob in Genesis 28:13-15. God's grace is always working. He never takes His watchful eye off of Jacob. The same is true for us. God is always, always, always at work in our lives....by grace.

GOD PROVIDES. Genesis 29:21-43 is filled with unusual details. I suggest reading it from the New Living Translation or The Message. After the birth of Joseph, Jacob becomes restless. He wants to go home to his father's house. He has been away for 14 years. He tells Laban that he wants to leave. Laban has become wealthy because of Jacob's hard work and because the Lord has been with Jacob. Laban does not want Jacob to leave. Jacob, however, wants to build his own wealth to take care of his large family. Jacob proposes a plan of payment and Laban agrees. Jacob will take the lesser animals of Laban's flock... the "throw aways", the ones that would not normally be used for breeding. But Jacob will also look after Laban's good, solid-colored sheep and goats. Verse 35 says, "But that very day..." deceitful old Laban removes all the "throw away" sheep and goats, gives them to his own sons, and they move the flock three days journey away. Jacob is left with only solid-colored animals, which belong to Laban. But God is working. Jacob uses methods for breeding thought by some to be superstitious, but it seems to me his methods are simply ancient remedies that today's science tells us are worthless. Regardless of method, God increase Jacob's flocks. The solid-colored animals of Laban produce spotted, speckled, and stiped animals that will belong to Jacob. Jacob uses this breeding pattern of increasing his own flock for six years, amassing a fortune in livestock. God is watching over Jacob, blessing him for the future care of a huge, growing family. God is keeping His promise to Jacob, blessing Jacob simply by grace.

I have said often that when we study Old Testament believers we must remember they inherited a land. We inherit a life in Christ. God has not promised us real estate in the Middle East. He has promised and given us every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus. Read Ephesians 1-3, and 2 Peter 1: 2-3. Certainly, the Lord is interested in our material and physical needs. Paul reminds us that God will supply all of our needs (Philippians 4:19). However, Paul also reminds us in Philippians 4:11-13, that he has lived with much and also lived with little earthly goods, but in Christ, he has learned to live victoriously in any circumstance. We must be careful not to listen to faulty theology that promises earthly wealth to Christians. That same faulty theology will also say that lack of earthly wealth points to some deficiency in our relationship with Christ. Scripture does not teach this! God says, we have every spiritual blessing and we have been given everything in Christ for life and godliness. If we fall for this faulty theology we will be guilty of diminishing the most valuable blessings that are ours in Christ. Certainly, we are to ask the Father when we have material needs. But we cannot demand that He meet those needs according to our standards. God works in our lives by grace... whatever He does. He is sovereign, wise, and love in His dealings with us.

GOD GUIDES. Jacob has become restless but it will be six years (Gen. 31:41) before that restlessness gives way to an actual move toward home. God is in the restlessness. God works for Jacob's benefit during those 6 years, preparing him for the journey home. Make no mistake. *The restlessness is initiated by God.* When the timing is right, *God speaks to Jacob*, confirming His plans for Jacob. Gen. 31:3, God very plainly tells Jacob to return to the land of his fathers. God reminds Jacob, I WILL BE WITH YOU! Jacob confers with Leah and Rachel. He tells them of a dream God has given him. Verse 13, God reminds Jacob that He is the God of Bethel...the place Jacob met God and made a vow. God is reminding Jacob of the promises God made and the promises Jacob made too. God says again, "return home". Leah and Rachel agree with Jacob, confirming what God has said and acknowledging their willingness to go. *God used their words to give Jacob encouragement.*

God promises to guide us as well. He uses four things when we are making decisions, whether life-altering decisions or daily decisions. *His Word. His Spirit. His people. Our circumstances.*

His Word. Psalm 119:105. God's Word, the Bible, guides us. Daily planting God's Word into our hearts and minds creates a storehouse of truth. The Lord draws upon this storehouse and applies it to your needs. We cannot wait for a crisis to store up good theology. We must abide, live daily, in God's Word. As we make decisions, be careful. Many times we are told to "listen to your hearts". But Scripture says our hearts (our desires, our emotions, our own will) can deceive us. We must listen to God's truth. If our heart desires one thing but God's Word says another, rest assured... our heart is wrong! Scripture is the straight edge by which we evaluate everything.

His Spirit. Last week we talked about being sealed by the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells us in John 14:16-17 that the Holy Spirit is also our helper. John 14:26 says the Holy Spirit is our teacher. John 16:13 says the Holy Spirit is our guide, guiding us into truth. The primary tool of the Holy Spirit is the Word of God. He uses that storehouse of truth we have gathered in our minds and draws upon it to guide us, teach us, and help us. Peace is also from the Holy Spirit (Galatians 2:20). Peace is the greatest indicator that we are moving in the right direction. Lack of peace is also an indicator, urging us to either stop completely or wait for God's timing (remember Jacob waited 6 years before God said to leave). Peace, however, is NOT an emotion. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit. As we walk with Christ daily, we better understand the difference between our emotions and the peace of Christ. Remember, the Lord is gracious toward us. He is not demanding we make perfect decisions with full knowledge of what lies ahead. He is asking that we trust Him daily, listening with discernment and wisdom. We cannot live sloppy spiritual lives and expect to make consistently good decisions. When we make decisions, trusting and listening to the best of our ability and knowledge, we can rest in God's grace to guide us.

His people. God used Leah and Rachel to affirm Jacob's decision. Proverbs 19:20 tells us to get all the godly wisdom and counsel we can. God still uses Godly people to help us make wise decisions. However, we are responsible for discerning if their words are indeed wise and godly. If we are abiding in God's Word, creating that storehouse of truth, but another person's words contradict God's words, we know it is not godly wisdom. Even if another person gives us wise counsel, their words cannot have the last say in our decisions. We must evaluate what is wise advice, and then prudently apply it to our circumstances with a keen awareness of peace.

Our circumstances. God uses Jacob's circumstances to press Jacob, to create a restlessness in him. God will use our circumstances to do the same. Restlessness does not mean an immediate jump into action. If we sense a restlessness and we have no clear direction of which way to move, what job to take, who to marry, where to live... whatever the decision... then we must simply do the next thing... do what is right in front of us, obeying the Lord in this day and this moment. In His time, He will open and shut doors. He will confirm or warn us. He will guide us by grace.

GOD KEEPS. God promised to keep Jacob in Genesis 28:15. God does not promise to shield Jacob from difficult circumstances. In fact, God speaks to Jacob and intervenes at every major crisis in his life. *To keep* means to put a hedge around. God will never abandon Jacob, and God will never forget His promises to Jacob. Genesis 31:1-3, God sees the change in Laban's attitude toward Jacob and tells Jacob it is time to leave. God's watchful eye over Jacob never sleeps. Gen. 31:5 Jacob tells his wives that God has been with him. Genesis 31:7 Jacob acknowledges that God has not allowed Laban to harm him. Jacob leaves in secret, deceiving Laban again. When Laban discovers the family is gone, he rounds up his kinsmen and goes after them. For seven days he pursues Jacob, but *God warns Laban not to harm Jacob.* (Genesis 31:29). When Laban catches up with Jacob there is quite a stir. Laban wants his household idols back. Jacob doesn't know Rachel has stolen them. After Laban searches every tent, Jacob unloads on Laban (31:36-42). Reading these verses lets us know life for Jacob has been difficult and God has NOT shielded Jacob from difficulty...but God has never left him. God is keeping Jacob in His care, not because Jacob deserves it but because God is faithful. Genesis 31:43-55 the two men make a covenant which

includes a boundary neither of them is to cross. After Genesis 31:55 Laban is never heard from again. God has dealt with Laban on Jacob's behalf.

God is faithful to His children. If you know Him through Jesus Christ, He promises to never leave or forsake you. He will not abandon you. He will complete the good work of salvation in you, maturing you. He is preparing a home in Heaven for you (John 14:6). God keeps us. He does not shield us from difficulties. He does not heal every disease. Jesus says we WILL experience in trials in this life but this world is not our home, it is not the last stop. Paul reminds us in Romans 8:18 that the suffering of this life is not worthy to be compared with the glory to come. Romans 8:38-39 triumphantly declares nothing can separate us from the love of God which in Jesus Christ our Lord. Sorrows, sadness, difficulties, and suffering are a part of this fallen world, but God does not abandon us in the midst of these things. He keeps us and He keeps our salvation. Nothing we suffer in this life has any eternal consequences on our salvation. Do not embrace false doctrine that says good health and ease are indicative of a right relationship with God. Suffering is part of the Christian life, in fact, it's a part of every life in this world. BUT GOD keeps us. He is faithful to His eternal plan. He is faithful to His promises. He is faithful to His children.

GOD REFINES. Jacob, like all of us, is a work in progress. God is patiently working in Jacob's life, using difficult things to refine and mature Jacob's faith. Throughout this week's narrative, Jacob seems to have moments of great faith but also times of unbelief and doubt. He leans into old habits of deception, fear, and compromise. Genesis 31:20 and 26, Jacob sneaks away from Laban. God told him to leave and God promised He would be with Jacob, but Jacob would rather trust his own schemes instead of God's word. Furthermore, Jacob admits to Laban he left secretly because he was afraid (Gen. 31:31). Even though God had provided for Jacob, guided Jacob, and kept Jacob, Jacob chooses to walk by sight instead of by faith—allowing fear to determine the course. Jacob is also living a life of compromise. Rachel has stolen Laban's household idols. When Jacob discovers she has stolen them, he makes no demand for her to get rid of the pagan idols. In fact, it will be ten more years before Jacob demands his family remove idols. By the time he cleanses his home of idols, the consequences are already severe. Yet in all of Jacob's shortcomings, God is faithful to Jacob and by grace uses all things to refine Jacob's faith.

What does God want from Jacob? What does God want from us? God wants us to live by faith...trusting God enough to obey Him. He wants us to walk by faith and not by sight. Sight will deceive us. Sight will be limited. Faith chooses to abandon living by sight and fully embrace God's infinite wisdom and love. Living by faith will be a lifelong lesson for Jacob. It will be a lifelong lesson for us as well. A life of faith is not a burden or drudgery. It is the greatest life of freedom and peace. For Jacob and for us, God is always working in us, maturing our faith, refining our faith. He will use the difficult things of life to do it. He continues the work of salvation in us...not because we deserve it, but because of His faithful grace towards us.