

Genesis 31:22-55, No. 52
"If God had not been with me..."
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Text Comment

- v.22 We don't know that the seven days began immediately upon Laban's hearing that Jacob had decamped. It was 400 miles from Haran to Gilead. If the journey had been completed in ten days, Jacob, traveling with his flocks and herds made forty miles per day. That is too fast. So if the three days and ten days are literal days, and not symbolic numbers indicating significant periods of time, as 3 and 7 so often are, there must have been a break between the three and the beginning of the seven as Laban prepared to get underway. [cf. Sarna, 217]
- v.24 The Hebrew "either good or bad" means, "don't do *anything*" to Jacob. Laban, of course, with "his kinsmen" had the numerical superiority to force Jacob to accept whatever terms he chose to dictate. The dream, with the Lord's stern warning, intervened.
- v.25 The scene is of small forces camped opposite one another as if preparing for battle.
- v.26 This is, of course, the gigantic hypocrisy we have come to expect of Laban. "What have you done?" are exactly the words Jacob used when Laban deceived him (29:25). The biter had been bit. The fool still seems to think his daughters would stand with him.
- v.28 This, again, is outright hypocrisy. Laban had no intention of letting Jacob go. But, then, Laban was an inveterate liar.
- v.29 "I could harm you but God won't let me." This was a petulant Laban getting in his last licks, but condemning himself by his own testimony. This is so true to life. The world is chock full of people who strike the most earnest moral poses while remaining totally unaware of their own immorality, even when they as much as admit it with their own words.
- v.30 The irony went unnoticed by Laban: his gods apparently couldn't take care of themselves, while the living God took care of Jacob!
- v.32 Theft of such property could be a capital offense in the ancient near east. Jacob, unaware of what Rachel had done, was happy to have his integrity put to the test. But, of course, this heightens the drama for the reader, who knows what Jacob did not know. His favorite wife had the stolen gods in her possession.
- v.34 Laban is here made to look more than faintly ridiculous; so anxious to find his gods. See him opening every box, crawling on his hands and knees, feeling under every rug.
- v.35 Menstruation brought ritual impurity in the ancient near east. No one would have imagined anyone bringing the gods into contact with such impurity. This shows the narrator's contempt for idols! [Sarna, 219]

- v.39 In other words, Jacob did more than was required by ancient near eastern law. The shepherd was not ordinarily held responsible for losses to wild beasts, but he was for stolen animals and, of course, Laban demanded payment for those. [Waltke, 432] Jacob was an ideal shepherd. He not only did Laban no wrong, he did more than required, even while suffering hardship from Laban's injustice.
- v.42 Laban was made to look ridiculous by his own daughter who deceived Laban as she had seen him deceive others. The result was that he made a charge, couldn't back it up, and so lost all credibility. This finally gave Jacob the freedom to vent his anger and let Laban have it with both barrels.
- “God has seen my hardship” is another link to Israel's history in Egypt (Exodus 3:7 and Deuteronomy 26:7 are the only other uses of the phrase in the Pentateuch and both refer to Israel's oppression as slaves in Egypt). The Israelites, for whom this narrative was first written, would not have missed the similarity between the circumstances of their ancestor and their own!
- “The Fear of Isaac” is appropriate as a name for God here; for he is a God who causes others to fear – Laban in particular.
- v.43 Laban conveniently ignored the fact that he had made a contract with Jacob which Jacob had fulfilled.
- v.44 Laban wasn't happy about it, but felt he must protect himself by making a covenant with a man whom God clearly had favored and would always protect. As the Philistines had made a covenant with Abraham and Isaac, as inferiors to a superior, even though the numbers were on their side, Laban was forced to do the same.
- v.47 The two names meant the same thing. Jacob identified with his homeland by using a Hebrew name; Laban used the language of his homeland, Aramaic. Laban wasn't a Promised Land sort of man! The different languages reveal the great gulf between the two men.
- v.50 Again we have irony here. It was Laban who had made Jacob a bigamist.
- v.53 Jacob swore by one God; Laban was a polytheist. God of Abraham and God of Nahor are two gods in Laban's mind. The verb “judge” is in the plural.
- v.54 It was customary to conclude a covenant with a sacrifice and a communal meal. This was, in effect, a non-aggression pact. Jacob had no need for it, but Laban felt the need. He lived in suspicion of what others might do to him. Laban had been treating Jacob as part of his clan. The treaty is formal recognition that he was not; he was his own man with his own family. [Sarna, 221]

Now this material completes the account through which we have been making our way the past several Lord's Days. And, in truth, it is simply more confirmation of the great lessons we have already drawn from this material describing Jacob's sojourn in Paddan Aram, chiefly, of course, the Lord's faithfulness to him, keeping the promises he had made to Jacob at Bethel through the thick and thin, mostly thin, of Jacob's twenty long years under the boot of his uncle Laban.

Jacob returned to the Promised Land a much tougher man, a man of sturdier faith, and it is faith that he confesses here, especially in the climactic verse 42. Jacob knew that it was God who had protected him from Laban's evil intentions; it was God who had prospered Jacob despite all of Laban's efforts to profit himself at Jacob's expense, and, now, finally, it was God who had intervened to prevent Laban either from doing Jacob harm or from seizing him and his family and property and forcing them to return to Paddan Aram. Laban and his entourage were more powerful than Jacob, humanly speaking, but they were no match for the Almighty! "If the God of my Father...had not been with me..." everything would have turned out differently and to my harm instead of my blessing." That was Jacob's confession and it is given special emphasis by all of the detail, and especially by the long speeches of Laban and Jacob which alternate here.

And Jacob, being an example, a model of the Christian in the world – not a model necessarily in the sense of someone who is to be imitated in all things – we've pointed out how honest the Bible is about Jacob's foibles and failures – but a model in the sense of one whose life is like the lives of other believers in many ways – what he says in v. 42, we must say as well. *What was true of him is true of us.* We are as much in debt to the faithfulness of God, to his watching over us and providing for us as Jacob was. And it is as important for us to remember that and confess it as it was for Jacob. It is as much a mark of spiritual maturity and as much the proper way of practicing our faith for us to confess God's faithfulness as the foundation of our lives, our salvation, and our happiness as it was for Jacob to do so.

But it is also just as difficult for us to see God's hand supporting and protecting us as he promised as it was for Jacob to see it. He saw it clearly in retrospect, but it was a struggle for him to see it during those long and disappointing twenty years working as a slave for the insufferable Laban! We have already seen how the greatest things eventually came unexpectedly to Jacob from what would have seemed at the time to be the tragedies in his life, not least his twelve sons, born as they were out of Laban's deception and the sisters' mutual hatred and jealousy that had so darkened Jacob's home. That is why *the story* of Jacob's life is so important and is told in so much detail. It enables us to see what we often do not see: God's faithfulness at work in, under, and through our circumstances. The narrative enables us to see that every promise God made to Jacob had been kept, wonderfully and generously kept; indeed Jacob had received through all the pain more than he had ever thought or asked. Sin made everything more complicated, but here he stood, a wealthy man at the border of the Promised Land.

I love this from Henry Alford, the 19th century English bishop, biblical scholar, and hymn writer:

"Look at the foundations of the spiritual life. Where are they? Just where the foundations of the natural life are. If you or I were allowed to superintend every beating of our own hearts, if we were allowed to watch over every one of the processes so necessary to the [support] of our natural life, who could ever live and work in the world? [In other words, you would

have no time for anything else.] Now just so it is...with regard to the spiritual life. Its foundations are deep: they are not always affected by that which goes on upon the surface. The dejection of the Christian and the exaltation of the spirits of the Christian may be compared very much to that which goes on upon the surface of the great deep, when we know that the depths below are unmoved. And even so, we may say, the Lord is carrying on his great work in us.” [You see his point: even in a great storm, it’s only the top number of feet of the ocean that are disturbed. The miles below are unmoved.]

You and I, brothers and sisters, *have no idea* how much of God's faithfulness and provision we have consumed over the years of our lives or how utterly different our lives would be if God had not, all the while, been at work in us and for us, keeping his promises to us.

“O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord. You hem me in -- behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. ... How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you.” [Psalm 139:1-6, 17-18]

That comprehensive oversight of our lives, this is knowledge high above us. We cannot see what God has done for us until he has done it and even then we don’t fully realize all he has done, what he has given or how he has cared for us. Nor could Jacob during the long reaches of those twenty years. But he learned in time that all the while God had been with him and was keeping him, protecting him, and blessing him in the ways that mattered most for time and for eternity. Nothing better communicates that fact and the glory of that fact than simply the story of Jacob’s life when read by an interested and thoughtful reader. And nothing today impresses that same conviction of God’s faithfulness and his working in our lives than just the same kind of story of a life that reveals in retrospect the blessing of God behind, beneath, and before.

So, I propose to tell you a story this morning, a true story, just one among millions of stories of God’s faithfulness like the story of Jacob. It is a story of God's faithfulness undergirding a human life and bringing one of his children – a woman this time – through the trials of life to the full conviction of the divine love, provision, protection, and blessing that had been with her all along, though neither understood nor even noticed.

Some of you have read *A Severe Mercy*, the autobiographical account by Sheldon Vanauken of his marriage to Jean Davis – Davy as she was known to everyone – their coming to faith in Christ while studying in Oxford, in part through the influence of C.S. Lewis in the early 1950’s, and then her sickness and death just a few years later. It is a great book, indeed, in my opinion, one of the comparatively few Christian books of our generation that will still be read with profit by Christians and non-Christians alike two hundred years from now, if Christ has not yet come. The book works on several levels – as an account of a beautiful love and marriage, as an argument for the Christian faith in our secular world, and as a description of faith on trial, bloodied but finally unshaken. If you haven’t read it, by all means get the book and read it. You’ll be glad you did, and some of you who have read it may want to read it again.

But there was part of the Vanaukens' story that was not told in the book. Before she ever met Sheldon, when she was just fourteen years of age, two years after her father, a Methodist minister, had died, leaving behind his wife and three children, Davy, running a bit wild, found herself pregnant. There was nothing to do but to tell her mother, who, of course, stood by her. In due time she bore the child, a little girl she was to remember all her life as blue-eyed and beautiful. She named her Marion. After a brief few days with her daughter she gave Marion up for adoption; adoption, it was specified, by a Christian family. Davy went on with her life, to prep school, to love and marriage, to Christ and salvation, and then to her death at 40 years of age.

She told Sheldon, soon after they had fallen in love, of the skeleton in her closet and after their marriage spoke from time to time of Marion, whom she still loved, if only from afar. Sheldon and Davy, those of you who read the book may remember, had decided not to have children, so as to permit nothing to come between them, nothing to compete with their love for one another. This was before they were Christians, a decision Vanauken later admitted was wrongheaded, but soon after they became Christians and might have thought differently, Davy was dead.

After her death, Sheldon thought from time to time that Marion, if she could be found, might be happy to know about her mother. So he began to look for her. He found the agency that had handled the adoption and talked with officials there. He told them that he was not asking, necessarily, to meet Marion himself, only to write her an account of her mother's life and perhaps give her a few things of her mother's, some jewelry and perhaps a few of Davy's paintings. At first the agency seemed sympathetic, on the verge of telling him, but then it stiffened, refused, and he gave up.

Years went by and then came the book. When it was published and had become a best seller, Sheldon again wondered if Marion might have been one of the book's readers and, if so, whether she knew enough about her mother to recognize her in the book's account of Davy's life. There was even a picture of Davy on the back of the dust-jacket. Might she recognize herself in her mother's picture? And what would she think reading an account of her mother's youth, of her mother in love, getting married, loving to sail, traveling to Oxford, becoming a Christian, and all the rest. Few of us really know our parents as full rounded individuals, especially when we are young. We think of them as Mom and Dad, not as young people who were young as we are young, who fell in love and found their way as we must find our way. But young people by the thousands and hundreds of thousands and then by the millions loved *A Severe Mercy* for its portrait of young love and faithful marriage and the rich life together of a man and a woman. He wondered what Marion would think, seeing her mother in that way.

As it happened, Marion had been adopted by a childless Christian couple. The adoptive father was a Reformed minister; the mother was, like Davy, short. Marion – though she had a new name, she knew that she had been named Marion – was short herself. But when she was five, her adoptive mother died and when she was twelve – the same age as Davy when she lost *her* father – her adoptive father died. She learned what it was like to be unwanted. She overheard a conversation in which the family discussed what to do with her. Her father's wealthy brother and his wife refused to take her because, they said, she might turn out badly. But cousins of her adoptive mother spoke up, saying that *they* loved the little girl and would be happy to take her. So Marion, loving them, went to live in the country, on a dairy farm with horses, dogs, and woods. Perhaps because of her parents'

death and all the unsettling changes that had overtaken her, through these years she had longed to know her birth mother.

When she graduated from high school, she became, as she had promised her father she would, a nurse, graduating with high marks to the pride and joy of her cousins on the farm. Then in due course she met and married a young surgeon. Children came, a boy and two girls, and the family crossed the continent to settle in the Bay Area, where they prospered. Interestingly, given Sheldon and Davy's love of sailing, Marion's husband took up yachting and their son grew up to be, not only an architect, but a blue-water sailor and ocean racer. All through these years Marion wondered about her birth mother.

There was another curious link between mother and daughter. When Davy and Sheldon first saw *Gone with the Wind* they were struck by the resemblance of Olivia de Havilland (who played Melanie) to Davy herself. And when Marion saw the movie she saw so much of a resemblance between de Havilland and herself that she seriously wondered if the actress might be her mother. But she was never bold enough to write to ask. Several times she was on the point of attempting to find her mother, especially when the movement to put adopted children back in touch with their birth parents began, but she always drew back. Perhaps her mother would not want to know her; perhaps she would be cold and hard; an alcoholic or a drug addict. Perhaps it was better not to know.

Sheldon was himself aware of that movement in adoption circles and contacted a woman who headed up one such organization that reunited adopted children with their birth parents. He sent her a copy of *A Severe Mercy*. She, in turn, tried to convince the agency that had handled Marion's adoption, and when turned down at first, persuaded a woman at the agency to read the book. That official, moved by the book, then phoned Marion, one day, to say that she was looking at a picture of her mother on the back of book that had been written about her; that her mother was beautiful, an artist, and was dead, but that her husband was searching.

And so, one spring day in 1988 Sheldon, who had never remarried, received the phone call he had been waiting for. Marion had been found and he was given her present name and address. He put the phone down wondering if he should call or write. Two minutes later the phone rang; Marion herself, wild with excitement. Not quite Davy's voice, but familiar. Having been told of the book, she had run out to the bookstore, found a copy, and her eyes were now boring holes in the back cover, staring at the picture there of Davy, her mother, who had sheltered Marion in her womb and held her in her arms when she was first born. "Found at last!" she wrote later. "Incredible, choking joy! Thanksgiving. Yet sadness also – ...that I could not touch her, hold her, and be held. Smiling with tears on my cheeks."

Then, of course, she devoured the book. "At once thrilling and scary!" she wrote Sheldon later:

"My heart pounding. Almost breathless with discovery, unable to sleep till I'd read every word. Excited beyond belief, sobbing, my pillow wet with tears. Seeing my *mother* as a young woman loving the things I loved – beauty, dogs, sails in the wind, music. ... I loved her love for you and your sharing and the incredibly wise things you did to protect your love. And the piercing beauty of Christ coming into your lives."

She came to visit sometime later, in the autumn, the Virginia colors at their height. Sheldon found her short, like her mother, with a similar personality – warm, bright, eager. They talked for days, prayed in the church where Davy had prayed, met people who had known and loved Davy, drove the winding back roads in the old convertible that her mother had loved. Before she left, Sheldon gave her some things that had been her mother's, including an old and lovely Caucasian rug on which Davy, as a child, had skidded across the parsonage floor. Marion slept that night with that rug in her arms. It was, as she put it, "God's answer to my prayer, the completion of a life-time of longing for my *mother*, and growing closer to her God and mine." [Taken from *New Oxford Review* (May, 1990), 12-17.]

Now what is that but just one more true story, like the one we have read of Jacob in Paddan Aram, and like the one that might be written about *your life*, if you are a Christian man or woman, boy or girl. A story of God's faithfulness, provision, protection, care, and blessing, through the thick and thin of life. More dramatic perhaps, but the same story; and, if we knew all the facts, perhaps no less dramatic. A divine providence we can see only occasional demonstrations of – like Jacob, Marion lived many years wholly unaware of how God was going to resolve various important matters in her life – but looking back it all became clear. She could see as we can see how our heavenly Father has brought her all along the way he ordered for her in this world, preserved her in Christian faith and love to the end. Troubles and sorrows and difficulties, to be sure. Jacob had those; Marion had those, in spades. But God's faithfulness more, much more. And here Jacob was at the last, unharmed by anything that Laban had planned to do to him, wealthy at Laban's expense, standing on the border of the Promised Land.

We too can say, must say, and will say, as Jacob said to Laban, "If God had not been with me...if God had not been on my side..." All those long years, even when I often forgot that he was with me, even when I acted as no one should act who is walking with God, even when I sometimes searched for the sight of God's hand and could not see it, he was with me, to bless and care for me. "If God had not been with me... if God had not been on my side..." it would have been another life I led, and another journey I took, a journey that would never have deposited me finally at the very gates of the heavenly country.

Say it yourself, ten times a day: "If God had not been with me... if God had not been on my side..."