

## ***“The False Hope of Grit and Self-Reliance”***

**Genesis 29** (Series: *Gleanings in Genesis*)

8:15am and 11:00am – morning services

Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA

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### **Introduction**

Just for this Sunday we will be returning to a series I preach in from time to time, where we look at key passages in the book of Genesis.

And today we find ourselves in Genesis 29, where we will read of Jacob’s journey to find a wife. In the previous chapter, God had spoken to Jacob in a vision, promising to be with him and to give him offspring like the dust of the earth.

### **Context**

Now because we will be focusing on Jacob, a little context on this chapter might be helpful. If you recall, Jacob was a twin, the younger brother of Esau. Esau was a mighty and skillful hunter. He was a hairy man (he probably had a great beard), and he worked hard in the field.

Esau was preferred by his father, and Jacob was preferred by his mother. We get the sort of impression that Jacob might have been what we might consider to be a “mama’s boy.”

The Bible describes Esau as “a skillful hunter, a man of the field” ...while Jacob is described as “was a quiet man, dwelling in tents.” [Genesis 25:27]

But here in Genesis 29, we see a different side of Jacob. No longer in his brother’s shadow.

So, with that context, let’s turn to God’s word:

### **Reading of Scripture**

**Gen. 29:1** Then Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east. <sup>2</sup> As he looked, he saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep lying beside it, for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well’s mouth was large, <sup>3</sup> and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place over the mouth of the well.

**Gen. 29:4** Jacob said to them, “My brothers, where do you come from?” They said, “We are from Haran.” <sup>5</sup> He said to them, “Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?” They said, “We know him.” <sup>6</sup> He said to them, “Is it well with him?” They said, “It is well; and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!” <sup>7</sup> He said, “Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered together. Water the sheep and go, pasture them.” <sup>8</sup> But they said, “We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep.”

**Gen. 29:9** While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father’s sheep, for she was a shepherdess. <sup>10</sup> Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother’s

brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother. <sup>11</sup> Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. <sup>12</sup> And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father.

**Gen. 29:13** As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, <sup>14</sup> and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month.

**Gen. 29:15** Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" <sup>16</sup> Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. <sup>17</sup> Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. <sup>18</sup> Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." <sup>19</sup> Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." <sup>20</sup> So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

**Gen. 29:21** Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." <sup>22</sup> So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. <sup>23</sup> But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. <sup>24</sup> (Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant.) <sup>25</sup> And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" <sup>26</sup> Laban said, "It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. <sup>27</sup> Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." <sup>28</sup> Jacob did so, and completed her week. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. <sup>29</sup> (Laban gave his female servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her servant.) <sup>30</sup> So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years.

### *Jacob's Children*

**Gen. 29:31** When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. <sup>32</sup> And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, "Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me." <sup>33</sup> She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also." And she called his name Simeon. <sup>34</sup> Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, "Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." Therefore his name was called Levi. <sup>35</sup> And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will praise the LORD." Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing.

This is the word of the Lord. (*Thanks be to God*).

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord endures forever.

Let's pray together.

## Main Theme

The title and theme of this sermon is “The False Hope of Grit and Self-Reliance.”

And it is my prayer that through Jacob’s life in this passage we would learn **the folly of leaning on our own understanding and the blessing of trusting in the Lord.**

## Details in the Silence

If you have done some flying, you have had to pass through TSA’s security screening and maybe even gone through customs.

A few years ago, while we were living in Colombia, I had to take a quick trip to renew my visa and so I flew to Ecuador. I flew there with just a change of clothes and my toiletries in my backpack. Piece of cake.

But as I went through customs in Ecuador, a very abrasive customs agent pulled me aside. She interrogated me. She unpacked everything in my backpack and examined every pocket in my backpack and every seam. After searching everything, she finally let me go.

What I didn’t know then, but I know now, is that the agents considered me a concern or a red flag because I was probably too relaxed and didn’t have enough luggage. While we might think they are looking for nervous people or sketchy behavior, what I learned is that they are actually looking for is *overly* calm people. People who are not appropriately stressed for being in an airport. People with very little luggage.

These agents are also looking for are people who are excessively yawning, and people who are whistling while approaching the screening process. People who are *too* relaxed.

And the reasoning behind it is that these people are not reacting how most people normally act, the absence of that stress, is a warning sign – a red flag – that something might be off.

Sometimes ***the absence of something*** speaks louder than words.

And as I studied this passage, I noticed that something was missing. Something was off. While this passage tells us a lot about Jacob’s life, his journey, his marriage and his kids. What I find more concerning in this passage is ***what we don’t see***. What is not absent in this narrative.

## Jacob’s Folly

So, what is it that we can’t see? Similar to the “Spot the Difference” challenges, sometimes you can only spot what is missing in one image when you compare it to another similar image.

And so, for our purposes, we will be doing something similar.

We will be comparing two similar passages Genesis 24 (the earlier account) with this Genesis 29 passage (which is the later account). These two texts have very strong similarities. In both passages, a man is seeking a wife in Haran.

Let's take a moment to set the scene.

First, the earlier account:

### ***Genesis 24 – Abraham's servant seeks a wife for Isaac***

In Genesis 24 we read that Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for his son, Isaac.

From the outset, God's name is *everywhere* in the chapter. We even learn of the servant's faith in the Lord. Later in the chapter we read of Rebekah's faith in the Lord and finally we read of Isaac's faith. Even Laban, who makes an appearance in both chapters, here acknowledges that this must be from the Lord.

If that were not enough, the servant repeatedly acknowledges how the Lord had done this. He gives all glory to the Lord who had prepare this union.

The very first verse begins with God, and it then continues to reference him over and over again – a total of ***nineteen times*** in the text!

When the servant arrives at the well, he asks the Lord for a very specific request: He asks that the Lord would make it abundantly clear who was the woman his master was to marry. That he would ask a young maiden for water and that she would not only give him water but also offer to give water to his camels.

The Lord heard his request, and we are told that “before he had finished speaking” Rebekah came and gave him and his camels water to drink.

And *even then*, we read that the servant did not act immediately. He watched in silence to learn if the Lord has prospered his journey or not. [v.21]

### ***Genesis 29 – Jacob seeks a wife***

In the Genesis 29 text, while it initially does not seem all that different, we immediately notice a change in pace. There is less waiting, less deliberating and praying. There is no seeking the Lord's face. In contrast with nineteen times in Genesis 29.

In his passage, Jacob asks the local shepherds about Rachel. And then we read:

“Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel...Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother. <sup>11</sup> Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud.”

Again, in this passage, there is no mention of prayer. Instead, we see a very confident, powerful Jacob proving himself again and again to the shepherds and to Rachel.

Jacob doesn't wait on the Lord or seek his blessing. In fact, he doesn't even wait on the other shepherds to help move the large stone cover from the well. Instead, Jacob heroically moves the stone all by himself.

Moving on from the well, in the earlier account, Abraham's servant falls down and worships the Lord for giving him success. He tells anyone who will listen that the Lord blessed his trip. He is on a mission, and he packs up and leaves almost immediately to return to his master with Isaac's wife.

Jacob, on the other hand, tarries and spends a lengthy amount of time - a month with Rachel's family! He tries to win Rachel by his own hand. He works seven years. When he is deceived, he then works another seven years for his true love. It appears that his life plagued with troubles and problems.

And it isn't until the end of the chapter, v. 31, that we finally hear the name of the Lord mentioned. And the only reason we hear it is because the narrator notes that God had to intervene on behalf of Leah, because Jacob hated her.

So much had happened since Yahweh had spoken to Jacob in the vision back at Bethel. The Lord had promised to be with him and to bless him (Genesis 28:15). But there was no mention of God. No worship, no praising of God for the marriages, no sign of God's blessing.

And then, seven years plus a week later, two marriages later, and one embarrassing scenario later, God reenters the scene. [Hamilton, 265]

While the stories are similar, it is clear that in the first, God is the hero. God is not only part of the story. He is the story from the beginning to the end. It is the Lord who leads the servant, the Lord who answers prayer, the Lord who praised, and the Lord who blesses the journey.

In the second story, Jacob is the hero. He searches and finds his wife, he moves the heavy stone, he works and obtains a wife and is tricked into having a second wife. The Lord is only mentioned by way of rebuke. Jacob is self-reliant. He is a self-made man, reliant on his own grit and power.

### *Asa's Trust and Folly*

When we take time to contrast these two parallel passages, it is not hard to see the ways in which Jacob was a man who was trusting in himself. And that self-reliance only got him into more and more trouble.

But Jacob's story is not unique. King Asa's life shows another helpful parallel and pattern.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Chronicles 16. [July 23, 2023 "Do Not Relax Your Watchfulness," 2 Chron. 16:1-14 <https://www.faithtacoma.org/none/do-not-relax-your-watchfulness-2-chron-161-14> ]

See, at the start of his life, King Asa was a man who was determined to fight for the Lord and for his kingdom. He made tremendous sacrifices and unpopular decisions in order to serve the Lord. He was determined to get rid of false gods, idols and pagan worship. [Selman, 414]

Like King David with Goliath, Asa had a faith in God that enabled him to be willing to face armies twice the size of his own. That was a big deal and was a complete act of faith.

But then his life changed and he turned from the Lord. *What happened?*

In 2 Chronicles 16, we see a huge shift. King Asa, fearing his enemies, instead of seeking help from the Lord, turns to the pagan king of Syria. And not only that, but he went into the house of the LORD and **took out all the treasure** of silver and gold in order to pay for the pagan king's protection. [Selman, 418]

King Asa was not only dipping into the treasures for this pagan king's protection, but he was also *emptying out the Lord's house* (as if God were not even there to notice, or as if God had died in his mind)!

And when at the end of King Asa's life, he became sick, the Scriptures say, "Yet even in his disease he did not seek the LORD but sought help from physicians."

The Scriptures indicate that instead of crying out to God for help and asking him for relief, he sent for the physicians.

Of course, it is not wrong to send for doctors, we should! But the problem was that he sought out doctors *in place* of crying out to God. He put human assistance above divine assistance. [Spurgeon, "A Lesson from the Life of King Asa"]

King Asa refused to turn to the Lord. He literally took the hope he had placed in the Lord and invested it in a pagan king instead.

And while not even close to as obvious as King Asa, we see that Jacob does the same thing. He doesn't seek the Lord's face, he doesn't pray. He doesn't wait on the Lord and instead uses his strength and grit to obtain a wife. And it all goes poorly.

### ***Idolatry – reliance in a false god***

In these accounts, we are able to see the idolatry of self-sufficiency. Jacob is impulsive and seems to want to prove himself. He relies on his own abilities and determination to accomplish his goals, and he does so alone. And it appears to bring him grief and strife.

And while it may be obvious to us how Jacob and King Asa fell, this type of sin is more difficult to perceive in ourselves.

Martin Lloyd Jones argues that self-confidence is more dangerous than some of the other sins of the flesh because it is more subtle and hard to discover. God gives man good gifts, and then man begins to treasure and rely on these good gifts. As he relies on his good gifts, he begins to

believe that he no longer needs God. Pride and self-assurance are a constant danger to the Christian. [Martin Lloyd Jones: “Why Does God Chastise”]

And that is a message we need to be reminded of today. Any reliance we have in anything or anyone other than God is idolatry.

*What do you rely on? Who do you rely on?* To find the answer, we might take a moment to consider these questions:

“Look at your most uncontrollable emotions. Your most painful emotions, especially those that never seem to lift and that drive you to do things you know are wrong.” [These can help you see some of your idols.] “If you are angry, ask, ‘Is there something here too important to me, something I must have at all costs?’” [You can do the same thing with strong fear or despair and guilt] “Am I so scared, because something in my life is being threatened that I think is a necessity when it is not?” [Keller, 169]

When you answer some of these questions, you can quickly find your idols.

And it is important to understand what our idols are because, as Tim Keller argues, “idolatry is always the reason we ever do anything wrong.” [Counterfeit Gods, p. 165-166]

In other words, when we sin, it is because we make something more important in our hearts than God himself. If we lie, we do it because we value our reputation, or someone’s approval, more than we value God’s view of us.

Martin Luther adds that when we do not put our hope in God and instead try to earn God’s favor through our own work, we break the first commandment which is “You shall have no other gods before me” and practice idolatry. [Ex. 20:3]<sup>2</sup>

He says this because to put your hope in anything other than God is to put other gods before him.

As we can see, idolatry is not only dangerous, but it is everywhere – a constant temptation.

As I was writing this sermon, I found Psalm 33 to be quite helpful for those struggling with these false and counterfeit gods:

Psalm 33:

“The Lord looks down from heaven; ... he who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds.

The king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue.

Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death ...” [Psalm 33:13-21]

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpts from Martin Luther, *Treatise Concerning Good Works* (1520), Parts X, XI.

As we examine our own lives and the lives of King Asa and Jacob, these words from Psalm 33 remind us that it is not about our efforts. It is not our grit that saves us or that prospers us in life. It is the Lord and the Lord alone.

The perfect job and the ideal house will not protect us. The best GPA will not guarantee a perfect future, having the most well-rounded family or the perfect relationship or marriage will not ensure happiness. Even the most advanced degrees, the most abundant finances, and even the best doctors cannot deliver us.

As Psalm 33 says, it is not about having the greatest army, or being the warrior with great strength, the war horse is a false hope for salvation. They cannot protect us. They cannot shield us. No, it is God who sits enthroned in heaven – he made us and knows our hearts – only he can save us. He is our hope and shield.

And that is why we should place our trust in him and not in ourselves or in our own understanding.

### **Trust in the Lord with all of your heart**

#### *Heavy Burdens*

A while back I remember a friend, who was wrestling with many deep struggles in his life, was challenged to carry a backpack full of heavy rocks in it. Each rock in his bag represented one of his many struggles. He was instructed to carry that bag around for a long period of time and at the end of that time, when he took off that backpack, he shared with me that he wept. Carrying those heavy rocks gave him a real sense of how his deep struggles were burdening him, and how foolish it was for him to be carrying those all around on his own.

Our burdens are heavy, and even though Jesus calls us to lay them at his feet, we often foolishly keep carrying them on our own.

You see, as strong, independent Americans, we get this. We are helpers. We get involved, we want to work hard, and we want to solve problems. We love to help others. But where we struggle most is probably in receiving help.

We are self-reliant, we are proud, and we want to carry our own burdens. We want to solve our own problems. We don't want to seem weak or needy. We are embarrassed and we think we are the only ones who have burdens in our lives.

We fear people's opinion of us so much that we would rather die under our own burdens and struggles, and break down our health and mental well-being, than to admit that we are fragile, broken, sinners.

Why do we do this? Why don't we open our hearts to the Lord and to each other?

It is idolatry.

We are proud and self-reliant. We still somehow believe that we have achieved what we have. We live in the illusion that we have somehow created the lives that we have, not realizing that all we have, everything that we are, is entirely a gift from the Lord. We owe it all to God.

### *The Lord's Wisdom and Offer*

But as we see in this passage, being the self-made woman or man is not the Lord's wisdom. Wisdom is humbly admitting that we come into this world with nothing, and it is Jesus who clothes us.

The Lord's wisdom tells you that you are a creature and you have limits and needs. God's wisdom tells you that you are not enough and that no one is enough. That we need someone greater than us.

You see, God calls us to himself for freedom, but idolatry enslaves us. It keeps us coming back to the same idols over and over again, convincing us that if we just try harder the next time, and do a little better, then we will have success.

But the Lord teaches us something more devastating and yet more liberating than that. The gospel teaches us to lean into the fact that *we will never be enough*. We will never be good enough. We will continue to fail, and we will continue to struggle on this side of heaven.

I have often heard people say, "I don't know if I'll be a good husband or a good wife, or a good parent." And I give them the gospel truth and tell them emphatically, "*you aren't and you won't be!*" You won't be a good parent or spouse. You will fail. You will make mistakes. The gospel teaches us that we are not enough, and that we will fail, and that we need help – help from above. The gospel doesn't call you to muscle through hardship and be a hero. It tells you to bring that hardship to Jesus. Jesus came to save sinners, not saviors.

And Christ came to free us from our sin and to lift our burdens - which includes our idolatry.

And part of being free from that idolatry means that "Jesus must become more beautiful to your imagination, more attractive to your heart, than your idol." [Keller, 172] He must become our greatest treasure.

That means that we must take our eyes off of ourselves and begin to grasp who Jesus is again.

And we do that best through worship – through praying, reading and rejoicing in the Lord. As we examine his word and meditate on his glory and remember the beauty of what he has done for us, and continues to do for us, we begin to see the treasure we have in Christ.

So, if you want peace, and you want joy, we must remember that we can never find those ultimately in family, in work, in health, or in riches. We can only find them in Jesus.

For it is Christ “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” [Col 2:3] It is Christ who is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found... and then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. [Matthew 13:44]

### Conclusion

So, brothers and sisters, cast off your pride and your idolatry, and know Christ for who he is. Cast aside all false idols and find your greatest joy in your greatest treasure. For as you do, you will find that you will long to trust in the Lord and not lean on your own understanding. Amen.

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