

Intro: Chicken's Stomach

At the beginning of 2003 I spent a six week placement ministering in Jinja, Uganda with three friends from Bible College. I remember being told by one of our guides that a chicken's stomach was considered the best part of the chicken in Uganda & was always given to a guest & it would be offensive to refuse it when eating in someone's house. I quickly developed a trick whereby if it ended up on my plate I would wait until everyone was engaged in conversation then flick it from the plate onto my lap & quickly slip it into my pocket to dispose of later. As far as I know no one was any the wiser. I was always a bit suspicious about this custom & wondered if we were being pranked in the same way we would prank foreign students in College. For wherever we went I noticed there always seemed to be a bit of conversation & chuckle when it was placed on one of our plates. Milly who happens to be from Uganda confirmed my suspicions were true when I asked her about this one day. She laughed & told me they were *"joking with me."* In essence we got a taste of our own medicine. In our reading today we find Jacob getting a taste of his own medicine & yet once again we can trace God's personal & providential handwriting in the story of Jacob's life.

Philip Eveson comments that; *"After the experience at Bethel. Jacob resumed his journey with a cheerful spirit & a new confidence. This is suggested by the opening words, 'Then Jacob went on his journey', which translate literally as, 'Jacob picked up his feet'.* Jacob's personal encounter with God in his dream at Bethel gave him much needed joy & confidence to continue his journey. My prayer is that we be a house of God where many people find much needed joy & confidence in Christ empowering them to *'pick up their feet'* & continue life with new revelation of God's presence & purpose for them.

This chapter begins with Jacob experiencing a new culture & interacting with new people who just happen to be from Haran where Jacob is travelling to. They are able to answer his questions about his extended family. Jacob points out to his new 'friends'; V7-8 **"Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered together. Water the sheep and go, pasture them."** But they said, **"we cannot until all the flocks are gathered together and the stone is rolled from the month of the well; then we water the sheep."** In other words; *"this is how we do things round here."* This may have been because they did not want to over exert themselves in the heat. It's while Jacob is speaking with them that the beautiful Rachel arrives. At this point Jacob rolls the stone away from the wells mouth & waters Laban's flock. In doing so he showed his willingness to exert himself & also helped make up for his lack of a costly gift. In verses 11-14 we then read of the happy family greeting. One commentator notes how; *"For God's people 'chance' happenings bear witness to a divine had at work behind the scenes."*

In the rest of our reading we see in Jacob the willingness, joy & strength of real love, we also see him getting a taste of his own medicine, & we see him taking life on the chin & getting on with it. These are my three points for today.

1. The Willingness, Joy & Strength of True Love (15-20)

It seemed that Jacob was out to impress Rachel right from the off when he rolled up his sleeves & rolled that stone away for her & then kissed her & wept aloud with joy I assume. Most suggest it was love at first sight. In these verses Jacob is so quick to respond to Laban, you could also say the emotion ignited by love for Rachel clouded his judgement. For he just jumps straight in & offers seven years work for Rachel's hand in marriage without carefully listening to Laban. And there is probably a warning in that – our strength can be our weakness. As verse 18 says; **“Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.”** Laban is very crafty in how he answers. He doesn't fully commit, he just says enough to go along with Jacob; **“It is better that I give her to you than that I give her to another man; stay with me.”** Very non committal. Derek Kidner comments; *“Laban's reply managed to give the appearance without the actual substance of consent.”* Then it simply says; **“So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, & they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.”**

Jacob's **eye** is not on the cost or the amount of work but on the person he has fallen in love with... This I believe teaches us something about the nature of true love. Yes there is a warning in how Jacob allowed his emotions to cloud his judgement & there are always crafty characters in life who will take advantage of us at such moments. However it is the willingness, joy & strength of true love that really shines through for me here. Love motivated Jacob to offer seven years of hard labour on the spot & love put a joy in his heart that made those seven years seem like a few days.

Real love values the person loved more than the work it does for that person... Such love doesn't get caught up in adding up personal cost; instead it gets caught up in joyfully doing whatever it takes to win the prize that has captivated its eye. Imagine what our lives & church would be like if we were filled with this kind of reckless love for the Lord, one another & the lost. What could we achieve together for the purposes of God?

Isn't this also a reflection of the kind of love Christ demonstrated for us & therefore a reflection of the kind of love already ignited in our Christian heart? Whatever it takes kind of love. For the joy set before us kind of love. I seen this quote by Andrew Bonar during the week; *“Love is the motive for working, joy is the strength for working.”* This was certainly true for Jacob & it can be true of us as we experience the superior love of Christ!

2. Tasting Your Own Medicine (21-27)

Philip Evenson writes; *“Unlike his time back at home when his determination to get what he wanted led him to act deceitfully, he learned to wait patiently & was prepared to work honestly for his prize.”* Since his encounter with God at Bethel there seems to be a marked progress in Jacob, but now he gets the opportunity to view life from Esau’s angle – from the angle of the one being cheated. Up until now in the chapter everything seems very carefree but now out of blue he gets a taste of the medicine he dealt his brother. The trickster gets tricked. Now why would God allow Jacob (or us) to have a taste of his own medicine (or why would he give us a bitter pill to swallow)? For the purpose of payback? Or for the purpose of transformation? Transformation is always the answer for the child of God – he disciplines those whom he loves.

Not too long ago after going through some tough stuff I wrote in my notebook; *“I think it’s good for us to feel unfairly judged by others at least once, so that we can pray; “God, may I never make another feel this way.”* I think Jacob had a moment like this here. It was good for him to feel unfairly treated by Laban, so he could understand how Esau felt & so he wouldn’t make anyone else feel the same in future. Notice after his initial frustration he doesn’t dwell on being deceived, he just gets on with it, & to be fair to Laban his trickery was probably to secure Leah’s future. I think Jacob recognised a divine lesson here.

R. T. Kendall writes of this story; *“Jacob needed to be broken. We all need to be broken. What does that mean? It means God has to break us of having a hard heart & walking over everybody. Jacob did not realise it then, but [during these] 20 years, after falling head over heels in love, he would see what it was like to be on the other end of manipulation, because Laban proved to be one of the rudest, most ruthless manipulators the Bible describes.”* Tasting our own medicine, or having to swallow a bitter pill, can be good for our soul WHEN like Jacob we have the promise of God’s presence, for when this is the case even the hardest trails have a way of softening our hearts. This is the grace of severe mercy. It is mercy because it is not God giving us payback for something & it is grace because God bringing the gift of transformation to our hearts.

3. Taking Life On the Chin (26-30)

As I noted, Jacob doesn’t seem to dwell on being deceived, he doesn’t get all bitter about it he just seems gets on with it. He takes the life lesson on the chin which ought to be our approach in similar times in life. Meeting his extended family brought Jacob a mixture of joy & sorrow over this period of 20 years. In Christ we meet an extended family which will bring the same mix & will likely include characters like Laban who treat us unfairly, test our commitment to love & threaten to take our eyes off the prize. Yet Like Jacob, & if we’re honest enough, we will see a reflection of ourselves in these characters & therefore God equally can use what we go through to change our hearts.

Characters might appear in the story of our lives that cheat us or wrong us in some other way. However always remember that none of them hold the pen that writes the story of your life & therefore while they might be able to affect your present none of them have the power to write your future. If you have heard the call of God then it is God who is the author & finisher of your story in Christ & his promise is twofold: 1. He is present on every page. 2. The ending is a happily ever after one! These two things are true even if your present page is one of betrayal or frustration, or rock bottom or even death. R. T. Kendall entitled his book on the life of Jacob *All's Well That Ends Well*. This is as true for the Christian as it was for Jacob. Knowing this enables us to take life's hard lessons on the chin & empowers us to keep our chin up no matter what.

Conclusion: The Grace of Severe Mercy

This is what I call the grace of severe mercy. For the tough things we go through are not Divine payback from God but the opportunity to be led forward in the Divine process of life transformation.

Jacob's strength to stay was fuelled by his love for his much desired bride. In a much more perfect & profound way Christ's power to stay his course to the cross was fuelled by his love for his bride – the Church. He loves us enough to transform us from the inside out... Christ's loving commitment to his Bride – the Church – should also be reflected in every born again heart. For no individual Christian is the Bride of Christ it is only collectively that we become the body, bride & temple of Christ.

Sources used for this sermon

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