

Obeying God in the Face of Injustice

Genesis 31:1-55

Intro: Obedience is Hard

The most basic duty of a Christian is to obey God. But let's be honest, sometimes its hard. And I don't just mean because of our own hearts. I mean because we are often in situations that make obedience difficult! Situations where it would be much easier to *disobey*. Like when you're slandered, cheated, wrongfully attacked, misunderstood, overtaken by one who is against you.

All these things happen to Jacob in this passage. Remember he fled the promised land because he cheated his brother Esau out of the blessing that Esau, as the first born son, was supposed to receive from his father (Isaac), but their mom (Rebekah) overheard Esau saying he intended to kill Jacob...so she told Jacob to flee to Haran where her brother Laban lives, and there he could find a wife. But instead, he got two wives because Laban tricked him into marrying the first. (Sounds like a Soap Opera!)

Jacob serves Laban faithfully for 20 years, after being deceived and cheated again and again. So finally, it's time to go home. And that's the driving command from God to Jacob in this account: Return to the promised land. But it wouldn't be easy because greedy, manipulative Laban has a grip on him through false accusations, cheating, twisting the truth. And even when Jacob tries to flee, Laban pursues.

This is a story that many of you can relate to. You ever been falsely accused? Cheated? Misunderstood? Wrongfully attacked? At work, in your home, among friends? You know how it feels? Hurtful. Feel betrayed, vulnerable, exposed.

That's how the original readers of Genesis were feeling in their situation as they read this story. The people of Israel who were on the way to the promised land, after having been slaves in Egypt, could relate to Jacob. They were cheated, falsely accused, exploited, and wrongfully attacked by the Egyptians.

And they needed to know how to obey God by returning to the promised land even in the face of such injustices. It's far easier to act in the flesh rather than in the Spirit when you wrong is done to you. Lash out. Return evil for evil. Lie. Take control into your own hands.

So what must we do? Let me offer five practical principles from this passage on what you can do when you face injustice.

Principle #1: When you are falsely accused, obey God because he promises his very presence. Notice how lies were spreading about Jacob. [v1] Why would they say that? In ch30, Jacob wanted to leave, but greedy Laban urged him to stay and name his price for continued labor in overseeing his flocks.

So Jacob told Laban to let him have all the spotted/speckled/dark sheep that were bred, which were far rarer. And Laban thought this was a great deal! But he tried to deceive Jacob by removing all the current spotted/speckled sheep from his flocks so they couldn't produce more of the same.

That didn't deter Jacob. He did some fancy work (that seemed like superstitious magic) where he placed spotted/speckled sticks in front of the pure colored sheep while they were breeding. And guess what kind of sheep came out? Spotted and speckled! (The Lord was behind this, as we'll see.)

So Jacob became wealthy. **[30:43]** The Lord blessed him greatly in his time in Haran. BUT lies were spreading from Laban's sons, no doubt out of jealousy. "Jacob got rich from taking our dad's stuff." When, in reality, he simply followed the deal set up with Laban, but it didn't turn out in Laban's favor.

And this rumor reaches Jacob's ears, alerting him of Laban's displeasure, which means Jacob could be in danger. **[v2]** That literally reads, "The *face* of Laban was not with him." Contrast that with that God says to Jacob in **[v3]**. "The face of Laban was not with him," but God says, "I will be with you." That promise is what compels Jacob to obey. It's exactly what God promised when Jacob fled FROM the promised land TO Haran in ch28.

He said, “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” You know how badly he needed to hear that again, as he’s about to head on this long and dangerous journey home? It’ll be hard enough to escape the clutches of Laban. But even more, remember who’s back that way, waiting to kill Jacob? His brother, Esau!

So for Jacob to obey God, he needs to cling to the promise of his presence. That’s what Israel needed as they headed to the promised land. God said to them, again and again, “I will be with you.” Think of why that specific promise of God’s presence is vital for you to obey God when you’re faced with injustice.

God will be with you. God will take care of. God will guide you. All that means for God to be God will be available to you to help you no matter what you’re going through. *What more do you need???*

Let me encourage you, if you're in the thick of it—and I know many of you are; you've told me of the hardships you're facing, and the injustices your experiencing—if you're in the thick of it, play this promise over and over and over in your head: “I will be with you. I will be with you.” “God, you said, you'll be with me in my job, among my friends, with hostile family. I believe you.” *When you are falsely accused, you can still obey God because he promises his very presence.*

Principle #2: When you are made to look a fool, obey God by looking for his provisions.

Jacob, now resolved to go back home, calls his wives to tell them what's going on. [vv4-5] Notice that! “Has BEEN with me.” He doesn't merely say, “He promises he WILL BE with me on this journey.” He points out the fact that God HAS BEEN with him this whole time. Jacob *notices* that! He's been looking for that! What has he seen that proves God perpetual presence? [vv6-7a] That phrase “ten times” is an idiom for “again and again and again.” And the word cheated literally reads, “made a fool of me.”

“Laban made me look like an idiot. He exploited me, deceived me, tricked me, cheated me. He made a fool of me.” There’s a humiliation you feel when someone dupes you, especially when it happens more than once. *You know the saying, “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.”* “How could I be so stupid? How could I have trusted him?” Ever been there?

But where’s Jacob’s focus. **[v7b]** Laban’s cheating efforts ultimately fell short because God intervened. How? **[v8]** That’s an interesting interpretation of what happened! Jacob did that superstitious thing with the sticks, and yet, here, he gives God all the credit for the results. **[v9]** That’s very different than what Laban’s sons accused Jacob of. They said in v1, “JACOB has taken all that was our father’s.” But Jacob says, “GOD has taken Laban’s livestock and given them to me.”

Jacob interprets these events as God’s intervening provision for him. And then he adds something that we didn’t know happened. **[vv10-13]** So Jacob made that deal

with Laban and did what he did with those sticks because God, through an angel in a dream, told him he was gonna give him all the spotted/speckled sheep.

So as he recounts the injustices that Laban unleashed on him, Jacob interprets them in light of God's intervening provision. He's not whining about what happened to him! He's not just venting to his wives, "Your dad is the worst! He's done this, he's done that! We gotta get outta here!" No, he saying, "Though Laban sought to make a fool of me, God protected me. And therefore, we can obey him when he says, 'It's time to go home.'"

Can I encourage you in that? It's so easy to be consumed with the wrong done to you that you lose sight of all the ways God has taken care of you through the wrong done to you. When you're made to look a fool, look for God's provision! Jacob's wives agree. **[vv14-16]** They've lost all trust for their dad, as well! He clearly used his own daughters for his own selfish purposes by marrying them off to Jacob to get Jacob to be his slave for 20 years.

AND he took everything Jacob earned and didn't set anything aside for them. So they agree with Jacob, "GOD has *taken away* all this stuff away from our father and given it to us." Which, interestingly, *taken away* is the same verb used in Exodus 12:36 to describe how Israel *plundered* the Egyptians when they escaped from slavery. They TOOK AWAY from the Egyptians the stuff they accumulated as slaves there. So the original readers would've felt comfort in reading this account: "God provides for his people when they're made to look a fool by their oppressor. He did it for Jacob; he did for us!" And he'll do it for you.

So Jacob's wives are just as resolved to go with him to Canaan NOT merely because they don't trust their dad anymore but seemingly because they also trust God. That's why they say those amazing faith-filled words in **[v16b, "Whatever God has said to you, do."]**

That's a good wife! (I get there are two wives here. It's a messed-up situation.) But application to the wives in our church remains: You must be more committed to

your husband's commitment to the Lord than you are committed to your own comforts! Even when it's gonna be a hard road ahead (as it would be for Jacob and his family), you can find rest in that, if your husband is pursuing/obeying the Lord, then you're safe to follow!

Husbands, make your leadership in the home *safe to follow* because of your wholehearted devotion to the Lord. That's a secure home... when the man is TOTALLY devoted to the Lord! Such that, the wife can say with great freedom, "Whatever God has said to you, do."

I remember years ago when I wasn't sure if I was the best pastor for this church, and we were in between homes at that time, we sold our house and were waiting for the new one to be built, we had five little kids....My wife said to me, "If you think the Lord wants you to step down, even though you don't have another job lined up, DO IT."

It was a statement of resolve of a woman who learned to observe God's provision in her life. That's what's going on with Rachel and Leah.

They have confidence to obey the Lord
BECAUSE they've seen his provision, even
when Laban cheated them again and again.
You been there? Been made to look a fool? It's
tough to obey the Lord because you're
tempted to take matters into your own hands
and do something stupid. Which leads us to...

**Principle #3: When trust has been broken,
don't break your trust in the Lord. [vv17-18]**

Clearly, he is urgently obeying the Lord. The
way it's told is that his doing this fast; he's
getting out of there! And he's leaving at a time
when Laban is preoccupied. **[v19a]** Sheep
shearing was a very involved process that
required "large numbers of men working at
great distances from their homes for an
extended period of time." (Waltke, 427)

So this allows Jacob and his family and all his
servants with all their livestock and stuff to get
ahead a three-day journey (as we'll see in v22)
from Laban. AND it also gives Rachel the
opportunity to do something she shouldn't
have done! **[v19b]** Why'd she do that? In the
ANE, these household gods were likely little

figures that represented whatever god one worshipped and were kept in the home because (it was believed) they provided protection and blessing. Why, then, did Rachel steal them? She just confessed great faith in the one true God, and now she takes these little false gods!

It's hard to say why she did this, but at the very least, she seems to be doing it out of spite...to get back at her dad. But it's also possible that she isn't fully free from her pagan polytheistic beliefs. She just so confidently said to Jacob, "Whatever God has said to you, do." And now, she steals these household gods, perhaps for a sense of security for the journey.

Beware of this. When trust has been so broken down with people you love—in this case, it's Rachel's dad—it is really easy to start losing trust in the Lord. You feel like you gotta control your situation. That's why people have idols—it's little gods they can control and manipulate and carry with them when they're faced with hardship. It's much harder to trust in the God we can't see, feel, or touch.

BUT it is so much better! Because HE is not confined to a little space, like your pocket! He is the God over all things and therefore, he is worthy of our trust.

And even Jacob may have fallen into the trap of not trusting God because of his lost of trust in Laban. Look what it says in **[v20]**. The word “tricked” literally reads “stole the heart,” which is a Hebrew idiom for outwitting someone. So both Rachel and Jacob stole from Laban. Rachel stole his source of comfort and security, while Jacob stole his sense of awareness of what’s going on.

They get a good distance away before Laban even realizes what happened. **[v21]** Isn’t that fascinating? He passes through a body of water to head toward the promised land, *just like the Israelites did*. And what happened as they crossed the Red Sea? The Egyptians pursued behind. Guess what happens here? Laban pursues! This leads us to...

Principle #4: When you are overtaken, trust God to take over. Look what Laban does

when he catches wind of what happened.
[vv22-23] Seven days, he's right behind them about to capture them. Sounds similar to the Exodus, doesn't it? In Exodus 14, the Egyptians are just about to take over the Israelites, and the Israelites are freaking out. And Moses says to them, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent."

God intervened for the Israelites just when they thought they were going to be overtaken. Look what he does with Laban. **[v24]**
In other words, "You better tread lightly, buddy!" God's warning implies that Laban intended harm. But this intervention from God causes Laban to take an entirely different approach. **[vv25-28]**

Do you see how manipulative he is? He's not actually upset because he wanted to throw Jacob a party on his way out! He didn't want an opportunity to say bye to his daughters and

grandkids. He wanted to keep them! He wanted to keep using Jacob for his own selfish gain, as he had for last 20 years! So why is he coming across as a victim, throwing a little pity party to get Jacob to feel sorry for him?

He is not an honest man. BUT remember, he was intending to harm Jacob, until God intervened. Look what he says in **[v29]**. Catch this: Though Laban didn't have a true change of heart and character, he did change his approach from aggressive to just *passive* aggressive. But that change, brought about by God's intervention, kept Jacob safe!

God can do it that way, you know? When you are overtaken, you need to trust God to take over, even in ways you wouldn't expect. And that continues to happen. Notice what Laban brings up to Jacob. **[v30]** Uh oh. He found out. But Jacob doesn't know anything about it. **[v31]** In other words, "That's why I fled without you knowing." But then addresses the household gods. **[v32]** He's so confident that no one took these gods that he tells Laban, "If anyone has them, that person will die."

That's a problem because Rachel has them! And so, the tension thickens as Laban starts looking for them. **[v33]** You can feel the tension. She's busted, right? **[v34]** You visualizing this? She's in the middle of the tent, sitting on top of the household gods, while her dad, who was just given permission to kill the person who has them, is snooping all around the tent, while Rachel is watching.

And then he approaches here. Look what she says in **[v35]**. That's sneaky because she knows no dad is gonna make demands of his daughter when she's on her monthly cycle! This was smart! AND it was sinful. She lied to him. But as we've seen, repeatedly in Genesis, the Lord uses even the sinfulness of man to accomplish his purposes, and his purpose was to protect Jacob and his family.

Though God may protect you through unlikely way, he WILL protect you, if you're one of his. *When you are overtaken, trust God to take over, even in ways you might not expect.*

Principle #5: When you are misunderstood, strive for a peaceful understanding. After Laban comes back to Jacob empty-handed, Jacob lays into him. **[vv36-41]** He's laying into him! He's laying out all the injustices he experienced at the hand of Laban. But notice where he gives credit for his protection. **[v42]** Laban's response, though, reveals he still doesn't get it! He twists fact. **[v43]**

He still doesn't get it! "Those daughters are mine. The grandchildren are mine. The flocks are mine. Everything you're taking with you is mine." No it's not! What's he talking about? His daughters are not his anymore! He handed them over to Jacob long ago. The grandchildren are not his! They're Jacob's kids. The flocks aren't his! Jacob rightfully acquired them from the agreed deal Laban made with him.

How can he possibly think otherwise? What makes him so delusionally entitled? It's the same thing we've seen from him before. He is a man full of greed. Greed makes you entitled to what is not actually yours.

So, knowing he's not getting what he thinks is his, he proposes to make a covenant with Jacob, as if he's making a deal to give all of it over to Jacob, even though it's all Jacob's anyway.. **[vv44-50]** So there's his expectation: "Take care of my daughters." Which is totally hypocritical because he didn't take care of them himself.

And then they come an agreement not to harm each other **[vv51-53a]**. The original language is plural, "the gods of Abraham and the gods of Nahor." Laban thinks this is a pact between his gods (maybe those household gods he couldn't find?) and Jacob's gods—even though Jacob believes in one God. But it just shows how much Laban doesn't get it!

And yet, Jacob still makes this covenant. But notice before whom he makes the covenant. **[vv53b-54]** Even though Laban was out to lunch regarding what was his and what was Jacob's, and even though he was out lunch theologically, Jacob still made this peace treaty with him because Jacob did it before his

God, the only true God, the one whom his father Isaac revered and he now reveres.

This covenant creates relational peace. **[v55]**
“So far as it depends on you, if possible, live at peace with everyone.” (Rom. 12:18) *Even when you continue to be misunderstood, if possible, strive for a peaceful understanding.*

Conclusion: You’re in good company

Have you been falsely accused? Been made to look fool? Been wrongfully attacked and even overtaken? Been misunderstood? You’re in good company, you know?

- No one was falsely accused worse than Jesus Christ, who was lied about to such a degree that it landed him on a cross.
- No one was made to look a fool more than Jesus Christ, who was stripped of his clothes and mocked and died a death only deserving of criminals.
- No one was wrongfully overtaken more than Jesus Christ, who, like a lamb led to the slaughter is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

- No one was misunderstood more than Jesus Christ, who is indeed God in the flesh, but treated like a slave.

No one faced worse injustice than Jesus Christ. And he faced it head on for you. As Peter says in 1 Peter 2, “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.”

You struggling in the face of injustice? Look to one who faced it head on for you, so that, when you are faced with similar injustices, you might die to sin and live to righteousness. Obey God in the face of injustice.