

Covenant promises and bad times

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, St. Mark's. Good to, well, I can't see you, but you can see me. Good to be here this morning and to be able, even under the current situation, to gather together remotely and to gather around God's Word, which He calls His people to do at every time.

Well, despite church services not being listed on the government's list of essential services published this week, the truth is what we are doing this morning is an essential service.

It might not seem like it, and it's just as well we can still do it with the current climate through the technology that has been made available to us in the age we live in.

But we must never forget, even if the world doesn't recognize it, that opening God's Word like we're doing and actually listening to it and taking it in and having it explained and applied is an absolutely essential service for human beings.

The reason is, of course, because it's a matter of life and death, and not just this short, fragile life on earth that we find ourselves in and are all too rudely reminded by a microscopic virus how short and fragile our lives can be.

[1 : 1 5] But what we're doing here, what we do as a church proclaiming God's Word and what it actually says is a matter of people's eternal life and death.

But, of course, the world doesn't recognize that. The world doesn't realize that. No matter how much we preach God's Word, no matter how many millions of lives are transformed by it, no matter how many societies are transformed by it over history, the spirit of this world still and always has wanted to shut the Bible up and to shut up the people who preach it, because the world just doesn't want to hear from its rightful creator and ruler.

It never has wanted to. And we see that working itself out in today's world more and more, as more preachers are arrested, even in once Christian countries.

Ridiculous leftist laws being passed that make it illegal even to make someone else feel offended, which is, of course, what the Bible will do, because the truth hurts.

And so I think we're quickly heading into a new age of Christian persecution in our time. And the same state instruments which are being used today to protect us and keep us at home and restrict our movements can just as easily be used tomorrow to restrict our freedom of speech and our freedom of religion for much more evil reasons.

[2 : 4 3] Now, as we consider that and we observe firsthand just how well secular states can control their population if they want to, it can be quite a scary prospect for Christians, especially Christian parents, as we think of the next generation, our children, and the opposition that may come to Christians in the years ahead, as it becomes harder and harder to stand for the truth.

And we wonder whether we and our families will be able to hold out when persecution comes. It's a scary thought. And I know it's not what you wanted to hear this morning.

I know you wanted to hear something uplifting and encouraging, but this is true. And we've got to think about it. We need to hear it. And it's also why we need to hear this story in Genesis 30 about Jacob and his spotted sheep.

I bet you never expected that one. And how on earth can a story about ancient livestock breeding be an encouragement for Christians in the 21st century, let alone remotely interesting and worth spending 20 minutes of Sunday morning thinking about?

Well, I guess that's my job, isn't it? To tell you why this story is in the Bible and why it's actually really vital for us to hear today. But to do that, we need to understand just where this story fits into the Bible story so far, the big unified story of the Bible.

[4 : 11] I mean, no passage in the Bible really makes much sense unless we put it in the context of the Bible as a whole, least of all this story. And so where are we so far?

Maybe you'll be joining us for the first time this morning because we're online and it's a novelty, and you're more than welcome here with us. But we're in the middle of a series in Genesis, and we've been journeying right from Genesis 1, the creation of the world, and how we got into the state.

And we've learned how the world has fallen into sin and what led us to the state we're in today and our rebellion against God, which the world is currently under, his wrath because of that.

But we've also learned that God refrained from destroying us, which he had every right to do when his creation is rebelling against him, the creator.

And yet he didn't destroy us because he has plans. We've also been learning in Genesis not to abandon his world, but to rescue it and to rescue us from sin and death, the results of our rebellion against him.

[5 : 20] And he does that, we've learned since, through things called covenants, arrangements he makes with particular human beings, which are kind of like, you can think of them like lifeboats, covenants are, where God pulls certain people into this saving vehicle, out of the world of sin and death, and says, I'm going to save you now from this world, from sin and death, and I'm going to bring you home.

I'm going to take you to a restored creation one day, the world that I've always intended for you to live in, as long as you stay in the boat. And as long as you believe and live in line with the covenant promises I've given you, that's what a covenant is.

God pulls us into it by no merit of our own, except we now need to believe in those covenant promises. To stay in that boat, we need to hold on to what God has provided for us.

And so we've read about these covenants being formed with human beings, and the Bible really is the history of God's dealings with human beings, and covenants he has made with us to bring us out of the consequences of our own sin.

And we read about the first people that God pulled into his covenant, Abraham and his family, his son Isaac and his son Jacob so far, and how he promised those men that he was going to bless their family.

[6 : 47] He was going to give them a land, and he was going to make them a great people, through whom he would one day bless the whole world, and pull other people into his covenant of salvation.

And to see, of course, how that works out, you need to read the rest of the Bible. But for now, these stories in Genesis are here to show us what it looks like to really believe in God's promises, to really hold on to those promises, and to live in line with them.

Especially what it looks like for flawed, imperfect people to do that, as we've seen Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all are. And especially today, relevant for this morning's story, what it means to believe in God's promise, to keep and watch over his covenant people, which is the promise he made to Jacob we saw last week.

Especially when they're about to face trouble and persecution. The promise was, he said, I'm going to keep you, I'm going to watch over you.

And we knew that Jacob needed to hear that, because he was heading into a really difficult situation. He was journeying into the unknown. And now we pick up that story and see where he went.

[8 : 08] And see what it just means for God to really keep him and watch over him as he promised to do. What does it mean? Well, that's what the story is here to show us.

And so let's see how it goes. Now the whole story, it's actually a big story, this account of Jacob and his journey. It starts in chapter 29, and it spans kind of five chapters right up until chapter 33.

And during this time, Jacob faces two major opponents who set out to bring him down, undermine him. Both, in fact, members of his family.

First Esau, his older brother, who's out to kill him at the moment. And that story only resolves later. But today, we're going to look at another conflict with his future father-in-law, Laban.

Now, if you think your in-laws are difficult, I think you'll appreciate them a whole lot more once you read Jacob's story. Because his father-in-law not only tricked him into burying the wrong woman and conning him through that into a 14-year work contract, but then he also tries to impoverish him by taking away the livestock that he was owed that is rightfully his.

[9 : 21] But as we read through these stories, and Laban sometimes very successfully conning his son-in-law, his future son-in-law, what we discover is that while Laban is looking always for these opportunities to cheat Jacob and to bring him down, God is watching like he said he would.

And at every point, sooner or later, God ends up using what Laban intended for Jacob's harm and turning it around for his good.

And actually even using the things that Laban does in order to fulfill his promises to Jacob. And we see that in each of these stories.

So the first one, the first time we see God doing this is with the weddings. Now, this was quite a con. I almost take my hat off to Laban for how he pulled it off.

You can read it in the second part of chapter 29. Now, the situation was that Laban had two daughters. He had a pretty daughter and a not-so-pretty daughter.

[10 : 30] I'm not being mean. It's what the Bible says. In 29 verse 17, it says, Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful.

Eyes, by the way, in Hebrew could also refer to the whole face. And so Leah was probably a more, how do you say, plain-looking girl. Well, Rachel wasn't.

She outshone her older sister by a long way. And Rachel was also the woman that Jacob had fallen in love with. And he had even worked for Laban for seven years just to marry, just to get permission from him, to marry his daughter Rachel.

He was very much in love. In fact, the Bible has this great little line. It says, to Jacob, it seemed like a few days. That's how much he was in love with Rachel. But then Laban, as the wedding is approaching, he's probably thinking, you know, it's going to be more difficult to marry off Leah.

And seeing that women in ancient weddings were veiled throughout the ceremony, why not just, you know, do a quick switcheroo when no one's looking? Who's going to notice? Well, Jacob certainly noticed.

[11 : 43] But only the morning after, incidentally. Either the lights were very dark or the drink was very plentiful. But he ended up marrying Leah instead of Rachel. And as you can imagine, he wasn't too happy about that.

But there really wasn't much he can do. You know, there's no returns and exchange policy on wives. And so, he has to work another seven years to marry Rachel.

And he has to keep Leah as well. So, it's not the ideal situation. But, something very interesting happens. And you'll need to remember also in this culture that marrying multiple wives was okay culturally.

It's not God's ideal design. We see that later. But it was the norm back then. And because of the rivalry to get children between these two wives of Jacob, between Leah and Rachel, because getting children was the most important thing for a woman in that culture.

It was kind of their whole job. Because of this rivalry in getting children, these women also gave Jacob their handmaidens to marry to get children by.

[12 : 55] And so, he ended up in a house surrounded by women. Which I'm sure was a trial in and of itself. And he ended up getting 12 children out of them.

Far more, I'm sure, than he ever expected. And yet, these 12 children turn out to become the 12 tribes of Israel.

The nations through whom God is going to carry out his saving plans. That he's been planning from the beginning and promising Isaac and Abraham and Jacob.

And so, if you stop there and think about this, do you see what's actually happened? It was Laban's trickery and his deception and his attempt to undermine Jacob and take advantage of him that God ends up using to actually bless Jacob.

And to fulfill his promises to give him many descendants through whom he's going to carry out his salvation plans. And so, God is using the bad situation Jacob finds himself in and turning it around for his good and to fulfill God's promises to him.

[14 : 04] And this is not the last time in the story that it happens. We see it again, years later, when Laban tries to trick Jacob, not with wives this time, but with sheep.

The passage that Jean read for us earlier. So, Jacob eventually, you can well understand, wants to get away from Laban and take his wives and children and go back to his homeland in Canaan.

But then, all of a sudden, Laban turns all nice on him. No, no, no, no, stay here a while, Jacob. It's fine. We like you. It's great having you around.

Actually, it's because Jacob's been looking after all of Laban's assets, his cattle, his sheep, and multiplying them, really successfully making Laban a rich man.

And so, Laban actually offers to pay him to stay, which is tempting, to be fair, because Jacob doesn't really have anything to his own name. And it's probably worth staying on a little bit longer.

[15 : 08] And so, Jacob compromises and says, Well, how about if I tend your flocks a little bit longer, you let me keep some of them when I go back to my homeland eventually.

How about all the spotted and the striped and the dark-colored sheep? Which was kind of a great deal for Laban, because the spotted and miscolored sheep that Jacob specified were quite a small proportion of a flock.

There weren't a lot of them around, typically. And so, Laban says, Well, no problem. It's the least he could do. And so, they shake on it, or maybe they elbow bump.

I don't know how hygienic they are being. But then, get this. What does Laban do? No surprise. Before Jacob actually gets to the flock that he's promised to now look after for longer, Laban goes ahead of him, takes out all of the striped and spotted and miscolored sheep, gives them to his sons, and tells his sons, Just get away from here.

Just go. Three days' journey. They have to go so that Jacob can't even know about these sheep. And so, he now cheats Jacob again, even out of that small amount that Jacob had a right to.

[16 : 24] But then, something interesting happens. Once Jacob gets there, and discovers, of course, that there are no striped or spotted sheep, he has to do something.

Otherwise, he's impoverished. He's got nothing. And so, he uses some very clever breeding techniques, including a very strange use of plants at the animal's water troughs, which we're not actually quite sure about what's going on there.

It may have been a physical effect that these plants by the water had on the sheep and their reproduction, or it could have just been a way that Jacob appealed to God to produce spotted and striped sheep for him.

But either way, the outcome is that the flock ends up having not only a majority of striped and spotted and miscolored livestock, but they're also the strongest ones because of the work that Jacob has done in the situation.

And so, through that, Jacob becomes hugely rich at his father-in-law's expense by technically doing nothing wrong. He's successfully outplayed Laban, even without knowing it.

[17 : 38] And he, of course, later admits, if you read on, that it was actually God all along who made that happen, who sent him a dream about striped and spotted sheep.

So, God was behind that whole thing and his success out of that, out of that bad situation. But do you see again what's happened? God has used Laban's trickery to put Jacob into a situation which ultimately resulted in him becoming far more blessed than he would have been if Laban had just given him the sheep originally.

And so, again, God is turning the bad situation Jacob went through to actually fulfill his covenant promises to him. And that's what this story is here to show us.

What it means for God to be keeping his people in trouble. And this is what it looks like. It doesn't mean, like some Christians think, keeping them away from trouble.

We can see that all too well. Jacob goes through a lot of trouble. We go through a lot of trouble today. And God doesn't promise to keep us from trouble and difficulty and opposition.

[18 : 54] But what he does promise is to keep us while we're in it and to watch over us and to always eventually bring us where he's planned to bring us.

Kind of like my dad used to do when I was learning to ride a bike. When I was a lightie, I would go to the library.

When I was learning to ride, I would ride to the library, which was just around the corner from our house. And I would bumble along on my bike, still learning how to stay on properly and steer properly.

And my dad would kind of walk next to me. Now, like any dad knows, if you're training your children to ride a bike, you've got to let them go through the difficulty of learning to ride.

And let them face that challenge. Otherwise, they'll never learn. And so, yes, I would stumble and fall. And when I rode uphill, it was hard on my little legs. And I thought I would never make it.

[19 : 54] And yet, I carried on. And I didn't worry, because I knew my dad was right next to me. And I knew, therefore, that I would eventually get where I was going.

Because he was keeping me and he was watching me. Well, in the same way, no matter what God's covenant people face in this world, no matter what opposition they encounter, if God is keeping them, he will make sure they always get where he wants them to be eventually.

And like with Jacob, he will make their work effective, even if it's difficult. And he will fulfill his plans for this world through them, even if it doesn't look like it.

And he will eventually bring them home to the land of promise, the new creation. And he will use even the very instruments of their enemies to achieve that. Because that's what he does.

In fact, we see him doing that again and again through the history of his covenant people. For example, later in Genesis, we read how Joseph experienced this after his own brothers sold him into slavery.

[21 : 04] The dysfunctionality of this family just continues. So Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. But that evil act eventually ends up giving him the opportunity to save an entire country from a severe famine.

And so afterwards, after all that is said and done, he tells them in Genesis 50 verse 20, you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

And again and again, we see God using bad situations that his people find themselves in and using, in fact, the very work of their enemies and turning them around into their blessing.

Their blessing as well as their opportunity to bless the world around them. Well, ultimately, of course, we see this on the cross of Jesus. As his enemies take him down, as all of their well-laid plans to capture him and kill him are successful and his disciples despair and think that he's lost and his enemies have won.

And yet, as one of those disciples later reflects when he speaks to the Jewish authorities that killed Jesus in Acts 3, he says this, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus.

[22 : 32] You handed him over to be killed. And then from verse 15, you killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. And that death and resurrection, of course, was for our benefit, as we find out.

God used that death as the ultimate atoning sacrifice to pay for the sins of his people all over the world, the instrument by which he is going to save his covenant people, so that now all who trust in Jesus Christ have the promise of the forgiveness of their sins and eternal life in the restored creation that God made us for.

And so do you see how, again, God, in the gospel of Jesus, used the very tool of the enemy, Satan, even death itself, as the means to defeat that enemy and save his people?

Because that is what God does. He outwits and outplays all of his people's enemies all the time.

And that is what it means for him to be keeping us, his covenant people. Not keeping us from trouble, but he promises to keep us when we're in the midst of trouble.

[23 : 53] And what looks like defeat and difficulty for us now will actually end up being some of our greatest victories, as has been the case throughout the history of God's people.

I mean, just one small example currently of how that might be happening now is churches facing the difficulties of being in a lockdown, being in a pandemic, not being able to meet and minister like usual during the pandemic.

It's obviously had a great effect on how effective churches are to do ministry. And Satan is probably sitting loving the fact that this pandemic is stopping us from being able to gather.

And yet, if you think about it, what it's forcing us all to do is to find out how to use media to preach the gospel better in ways that we've never done before.

And so, this difficulty, which might look like defeat in a way for the church right now, may end up being a great victory in our ability to make Jesus known in the 21st century way after the pandemic is gone, which we pray it will.

[25 : 10] Well, in the same way, I wonder what difficulties in your own life you're going through now that are going to end up being great victories that you never expected.

Well, if you're in God's covenant and therefore He is keeping you and you can know that He's with you and watching over you because you are a member of His covenant through Christ, then you can be sure that all your defeats will turn out for victories.

You can be sure, as Romans 8.28 says, that in all things God is working for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. And so, like Jacob, don't run away from God's promises in trial, but keep running towards them, even if that's where the trouble is coming from.

And for Christians, often it will be. We will face trouble from the world precisely because we're heading towards God and not away from Him. But we can still head there and we can still face those troubles and head into them with patience and confidence, knowing what we've learned this morning.

And like a ship at sea heading into a storm to ride it out. That, for vessels at sea who are caught in a storm in high seas, the safest thing is actually to turn and point their bows right into the storm to outlast it.

[26 : 31] Well, we're going to face some high seas as Christians in the coming decades, I think. And so when we do, let's remember Jacob and his spotted sheep.

And that we don't need to run away from trouble when it comes. Rather, let's make the most of the bad situations because we know that God is with us and keeping us in them.

And that He will eventually turn them out for our good. And He will make our work effective even if it's difficult right now. And He will bring us exactly where He wants us to be in the end.

Well, with that in mind, shall we pray? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You that You've made amazing promises to Your covenant people to guard us, to keep us, and to bring us into the land of promise, the new creation one day, the land that You made us for, the land without pandemics and sickness and tears and parting and crying and pain and death because it's a land without sin.

And we thank You, Lord, that You have made a way for our sin to be atoned for through Jesus Christ. We thank You, Lord, that You have provided salvation. You didn't have to.

[27 : 56] We don't deserve it. But, Lord, You are merciful. And so, be merciful now to Your people as we go through this time of testing in our country. Be merciful to our land.

Would You help the law enforcement officials to do their job well and to keep people at home. Help us to be disciplined, Lord. Protect our land from this virus and its effects and from violence that might be caused because of economic effects.

But, Lord, would You also be with Your covenant people. Help us to make the most of a bad situation and to continue to head towards Your promises and to proclaim the gospel so that others would be saved and that we would look back on these months to come and these years to come and we would see it as one of our greatest victories.

And so, we commit all this to You in Jesus' name and for Your glory. Amen.