

September 6, 2020
Rick Myatt

ADVICE FOR PLANTING
Genesis 29:1-30

In his book, *What It Means To Be Welcoming*, Travis Collins tells a story of a camping trip he and a friend took a couple of years ago. They were going to camp at a lake. It had been raining, and more rain was forecast, but they thought they could sneak in their outing between storms. They went to the lake, set up camp and Travis was assigned the task of finding firewood. Unfortunately, all the wood around them was wet and would not burn. He decided he would drive the mile back to the ranger station where he could ask the ranger if he knew of any place where he could buy dry firewood. As he was driving through the campground he noticed a campsite where campers had just left to go home. They had a fire and there was still smoke rising from it. He stopped and checked, and found there was one log that had been in the fire that was not totally burned, and it was dry. He picked it up by the cool end and put it in the back of his pickup. Then he got back in the truck and headed for the ranger station. When he got there he opened his door and immediately smelled something burning. He saw smoke and thought the ranger station was on fire. It wasn't. As he was driving the wind had ignited the embers on the end of the log in the truck bed and it began burning. It also caught the lining of his truck on fire. His truck survived, but he still has visible signs of melted rubber and lining in the truck bed. It is a constant reminder that if you make a bad choice you should not be surprised if you get some bad results.

That truth is one of the most fundamental realities of life. It formed a critical part of Laurie's and my efforts to raise our children. Oddly, we sometimes forget it in the heat of the moment. Today as we continue our study I call *Lessons From A Con Man*, we will see that principle play out. And hopefully we will be reminded of this crucial lesson. Let's look at Genesis 29.

JACOB CONNECTED WITH FAMILY

Jacob, needing to get away from his vengeful brother, Esau, left his home to head for Haran, the ancestral home of Abraham, Sarah and his own mother, Rebekah. Rebekah's brother lived there with his family. The plan was for Jacob to find Rebekah's brother, Laban, and his family and stay with them for some time until Esau had hopefully cooled off. This was a trip of around 500 or 600 miles on foot. Back then Google Maps was still unreliable. Even worse there were no maps. In fact, people didn't even have addresses. So traveling to a distant place to find someone in a place one had never been to was not a trivial exercise.

When Jacob reached the general area of Haran he came across a well. That was an important connecting point, because that region is pretty arid and a well is a key community spot. Everyone had to get water. When he got to the well there were a number of local shepherds there waiting to get their sheep some water. Jacob did what people searching for someone would typically do. He asked around. "Hey, do any of you happen to know a man named Laban?"

It turned out that they did know Laban. As luck would have it, Laban's daughter, Rachel, was just arriving at the well with some sheep. I believe Jacob thought he was the smartest man in the room wherever he went. I wouldn't be surprised if he was a bit on the insufferable side. He takes

it on himself to instruct these foreign shepherds on how to do their job. All these sheep were there and no one was giving them water. So in verse 7 he says, “Hey, it’s only the middle of the day. It’s not time to quit, so why don’t you give your sheep water, then take them back out to the pasture. That’s what I’d do if I were a shepherd.”

There was probably some rolling of eyes and people thinking, “Oh, great, this know-it-all foreign tool is here to tell us how to take care of our sheep. Just what we need.” However, hospitality was a crucial component of their culture, so they didn’t tell this clod to get lost. Instead, someone patiently explained the system to Jacob. To keep the water from getting contaminated the locals put a huge stone over the mouth of the well. The stone covering the well was too heavy for a couple of them to move easily. It was way too hard to take it off and put it back on. So the plan was to wait until all the shepherds were at the well, then together they would all lift the stone off the well and get water.

There was a time in the early stages of my relationship with Laurie when I got her to come to a couple of football games I was playing in. I hate to admit this, but in my immaturity and stupidity I foolishly kind of hoped that maybe she would be impressed with my athletic ability and that would be a point in my favor with her. Yeah, guys can be incredibly dumb. The idea was laughable. But I think that kind of idiocy came into play in this incident at the well. In verse 16 we see that Rachel “had a lovely figure and was beautiful.” In other words, this woman was a show-stopper. She caused heads to turn everywhere she went. This description is a bit unusual in the Bible, which doesn’t often refer to a woman’s figure. This suggests that she was an unusually attractive woman. She certainly caused Jacob’s head to turn. I think he was smitten the first time he saw her. He wanted to do something to impress this gorgeous woman. He went to the well and all by himself lifted that heavy stone off of it. This was an impressive feat. I don’t know if it was any more successful in impressing Rachel than my pitiful athletic feats were in attracting Laurie, but it would have caught her attention.

Jacob then began weeping. That would have been surprising to Rachel, but not to us, since he had only a vague idea of how to find his family, but he had located a member of the fam on his first try. Then he kissed Rachel, which no doubt surprised her, but he explained that he was a son of Rebekah. She immediately ran home to tell Laban, her dad, that a nephew of his had arrived in town. Laban welcomed Jacob into his home with open arms.

LABAN CONNED THE CON MAN

Jacob didn’t know it, but Laban was a man cut from the same cloth as him. Con man, meet your con man uncle. Laban was as unscrupulous and devious as Jacob, maybe even more so. After Jacob had been with them a month Laban said, “Hey, I don’t want to take advantage of you just because you’re a relative. You’ve been helping out around the ranch here. I should be paying you for your work. What do you propose as reasonable pay?”

We’ve all heard the expression, “fish and relatives stink after 3 days.” Jacob had been there a month and was giving no hint that he was planning on leaving anytime soon. Laban grew impatient with the situation. But Jacob had two reasons to stay there. He still needed to stay away from home and Esau. Esau was unlikely to have cooled off sufficiently in only a couple of months. But Jacob’s second reason for staying there probably had become more important to him

than even that desire for self-preservation. I can tell you that second reason in one word, Rachel. Jacob was in love, and his strongest urge was to be near her and win her.

Laban makes it sound like he wants to be fair to Jacob. Hey, you're helping out here on the ranch, you should get paid for your labor. But I don't think that's quite what was going on. Laban wanted to change the relationship. As long as Jacob was a visiting relative, any work he did was at his own discretion, just as a way of helping out. Laban thought if Jacob was planning on sticking around, he'd like to be able to control what he did. So he proposed hiring him as an employee. If he's a paid employee, Jacob will have to do whatever Laban says.

There was something Jacob wanted more than money. Hey, he was a man in love. What he wanted more than anything else in the world was Rachel. So he proposed that he essentially work for room, board, and Rachel. He would work for 7 years if Laban would agree to give her to him as his wife. That sounds like Jacob is trying to buy Rachel from her dad. Well, that's kind of how the deal worked back then. When a young woman's father was asked for his daughter's hand in marriage, the dad would essentially say, "What's she worth to you?" The groom or his family was expected to pay a bride price to her family. I am glad that tradition got discarded somewhere along the way. When I asked Laurie's dad for his blessing for us to get married, I was not penniless, but I wasn't far from dollarless. I was asking for a young woman who was, and still is, literally priceless, and I could have come up with maybe \$150 if I was lucky. Oh, wait, I could have sold my car, my 9 year old Opel Kadet. Then I could have paid \$200. Jacob was kind of in my sandals. He was from a wealthy family, but at that moment he had nothing. He didn't even have an Opel Kadet. So he proposed that he work basically without pay in lieu of a bride price. Suppose we calculate his wages at \$15 an hour. Back then they worked 6 days a week, so a 48 hour week. That comes to \$720 per week, which works out to \$36,000 a year. Over 7 years that's \$252,000. That's a tidy sum. Laban ostensibly agreed to that deal.

So 7 years went by. Verse 20 tells it "only seemed like a few days to him because of his love for her." But he was counting the days. The day those 7 years were completed Jacob said, "Give me my wife, I want to make love to her." That brings us to Rachel's sister, Leah. Leah was the older sister. For Laban that was a problem. Having the younger daughter marry before the older one could definitely create some unhappiness.

Laban felt for his older daughter, Leah. Her younger sister was getting married and she had no prospects. Unfortunately, she had to compete with a sister who was supermodel class. Everybody noticed Rachel. How could you not? Leah, unfortunately, was noticed by no one. Leah, verse 17 tells us, had "weak eyes." Wait, you're saying guys weren't attracted to her because she was nearsighted? Was this a "guys don't make passes at girls who wear glasses" thing or something? I'm going to let you in on a secret. My spectacular wife, Laurie, has weak eyes. She's not just nearsighted, she's really nearsighted. As in, without corrective lenses she needs to use sonar to navigate. Do you know how much difference her weak eyes made to me, and lots of other guys? Zero! I've had people who are strangers say to me on countless occasions in stores, restaurants, hotels when we were on vacation, "You are one lucky man. You're wife is gorgeous." In the 41 years we've been married I have never had someone say to me, "Hey, you have my sympathy. Must be tough being married to a woman with such weak eyes."

Was the problem that they didn't have glasses or contact lenses? It would make life difficult because she couldn't see and would be of no use. No, this wasn't about Leah's eyesight at all. Scholars have suggested some explanations but they don't actually don't help very much so I will tell you my theory. I think "weak eyes" was an ancient colloquialism. It was a common expression that had nothing to do with the literal meaning of the words, but it had a widely understood connotation. We have many such colloquialisms today. For instance, when we talk about something in its totality we might use the words "the whole nine yards." The literal meaning of those words makes no sense. We have no clue what the "nine yards" might refer to and it doesn't have any meaning for the thing we are talking about. But everyone understands their meaning. With such colloquialisms our best clues as to meaning come from how they are used in their the context. In the case of Leah, the context is crucial. Verse 17 says, "Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful." The word "but" is pivotal. It says there was a contrast. Whatever the exact meaning of the idiom was, it was used in contrast to being shapely and beautiful. So we can conclude safely that it meant Leah was not beautiful. It was a euphemism for plain or unattractive.

In his compassion for his elder daughter, Laban came up with a terrible plan. The night of the wedding they had a big blast, as so often happens. It was a party to end all parties. Finally Jacob went to his quarters and Laban brought the new bride to him. Jacob and his new bride consummated the wedding, only in the light of day the next morning, Jacob discovered that instead of Rachel in bed with him, there was Leah!

Wait, how is that possible? How could Jacob have not noticed that the wrong woman was in his bed? The most likely explanation is it was dark, she was shy, and Jacob had partied way too much. It's not hard to imagine Laban saying to him, "Jacob, my boy, have some more of this delicious wine. We have to celebrate!" In other words, he was drunk and was only vaguely aware of what was going on. No doubt the next morning when he woke up and saw Leah there in bed, he had the mother of all hangovers. The irony in the situation is delicious. The younger brother who had deviously supplanted his older brother twice, now discovers that the older sister has been deviously substituted for her younger sister. As much as we might feel for Jacob after this dirty trick, there is also a fitting symmetry to what Laban did to him. The trickster had been tricked. Big time.

Jacob was incensed. Well, Con Man, now you know how your brother felt when you cheated him. Laban sort of fixed it. He told Jacob to finish his honeymoon with Leah, then he could have Rachel also. But he would then owe 7 more years of work to Laban. I'm guessing that was one of the worst honeymoons ever.

I feel like that was a cruel thing to do to Leah. She could only conclude that in her father's estimation the only way she could get a husband was by tricking the man when he had no idea what was going on. That had to hurt. It also set up Leah to a lifetime of playing second fiddle, at best. Verse 30 says of Jacob, "his love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah." In fact this set up years of turmoil and competition between the sisters and a lot of heartache for Leah. The inexcusable deceitfulness of Laban also set the tone for the years to follow. For the next 13 years Laban would continually try to scam and rip off Jacob, and Jacob would begin scheming against him.

IMPLICATIONS

What a weird story. In the following chapters it gets even weirder. The two wives jockey for position of favorite wife by having children. Leah got into the competition by having a couple of sons when Rachel was failing to get pregnant. That tells us that while Rachel was by far the more loved, Jacob was clearly giving some of his attention to Leah, otherwise she could not have had kids. Rachel was favored still, but she could not get pregnant, and this caused her to fear that she would be relegated to second string. She became distraught at her inability to have kids. In desperation Rachel told Jacob to sleep with her servant girl, and hopefully get her pregnant, then Rachel could claim that child as one for her side. Jacob thought that was a fine idea. Evidently sleeping with two women wasn't enough for him. Then Leah's baby machine stopped working, so she threw her servant girl at Jacob so she could keep competing. Rachel would eventually have a couple of boys, but in the end, Jacob fathered 12 sons by 4 different women. This was hardly God's ideal. He had said the two should become one. Jacob turned that into the 5 shall become one. Apparently he thought it was about being a basketball team.

What can this weird story say to us? Is the big lesson, "don't get drunk at your wedding party?" I guess that would be one moral of the story, but is there anything a bit more useful for all of us? Yes, there is. Here are some big implications.

WE REAP WHAT WE SOW

Jacob has been, and will continue to be, a schemer, a trickster, a con man, someone who relies on his own deviousness and cleverness to outwit people without regard to what is right, fair and loving. In other words, he paid little or no attention to how God wanted him to live. Other people were merely obstacles to getting what he wanted and he would do whatever was necessary to get around them. That was how he had treated his own family. It is no accident that God saw to it that he would actually run into someone who was just like him. He encountered someone who would play dirtier tricks on him than he had ever played.

Galatians 6:7 says, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." It would have made a huge difference for Jacob if he had paid attention to that truth. Before he tricked his brother out of his birthright if he had thought, "I'm sowing dishonesty, selfishness, deceit and unkindness. Do I want to reap dishonesty, selfishness from others, deceit and unkindness?" I suspect he would have said, "Maybe this isn't a good idea."

I'm a little disappointed that Laurie and I didn't get any grapes from our backyard this summer. I like grapes, but the stores often don't have the really good ones I like. "Oh, I didn't realize you guys had planted grapevines in your yard." "We didn't." "Wait, you're disappointed you didn't reap grapes when you didn't plant any? That's stupid." Yes, it would be. If you plant flowers in your yard expect to get flowers. If you plant an orange tree, you can hope at some point to get oranges. If you plant a plumeria tree like Laurie has, expect to get plumeria blossoms. It is absurd to hope to get something that you haven't planted.

Jacob planted dishonesty, deceit, and unkindness. Should he have been surprised that he got those same things in return? In Numbers 32 Moses gave instruction to some of the tribes of Israel that wanted to stay on the east side of the Jordan. He told them they could, but first they had to

help the other tribes conquer Canaan to the west. In verse 23 he said, “But if you fail to do this, you will be sinning against the Lord; and you may be sure that your sin will find you out.” In other words, your sins will come home to roost. Disobey God, and you will reap what you sow.

We need to be aware of what we are planting in the garden of our lives. We will reap a harvest of whatever we have planted. We will reap what we sow. I read an article last week in which the author described something that happened in their family. They have 3 daughters, the youngest being 6 years old. This was at the beginning of Lent. Mom and Dad decided it might be a good opportunity to teach their girls. So they explained that sometimes people give up something for Lent as a way of drawing closer to God. Mom and Dad explained that they had decided to give up desserts during Lent. They asked the girls what they would like to do. The oldest daughter said she also wanted to give up sweets, and the second child agreed she wanted to do the same. The 6 year old thought about it for a long time, then said, “I want to give up consequences.”

Yes, there are times when all of us would like to give up consequences. Unfortunately, that’s not on the menu. Galatians 6:7 says there are consequences for every decision you make, everything you do. It is as unavoidable as making ripples in a still pond if you throw a rock into the water. All of our choices and actions are causes, and they always have effects.

One of the difficult things about this is that we don’t always know what the effects of our choices and actions will be. My senior year in college one of my professors set up a meeting for me with an executive from a major bank. That exec was there to recruit me to come work in their information technology department, although they didn’t call it that back then. I passed on that job because by then I had decided to go into ministry full time. I really didn’t know how significant that moment was. If I had taken that job my life would have been very different. I likely would have made a lot more money. But I would have missed out on more than 45 years of ministry. And more important, I would never have met Laurie. I can’t even imagine what a loss that would have been. But at that moment I had no idea how profoundly my life would have been affected by that decision.

Our choices can have long lasting, even permanent consequences. When Toby was still in high school he and I would often play catch with a football. He could throw with considerable power. At one point I managed to catch a ball wrong and injured the pointer finger on my left hand. I suspect I broke it. To this day that finger doesn’t bend all the way properly. I picked up playing the guitar this year and found out that finger causes me problems with playing a C chord, one of the most common chords, because it doesn’t bend properly. It never will. The choice to play catch led to a result that is permanent.

I tell that story because we have little idea what effects our choices and actions will have. Many of those are morally neutral decisions whose outcomes we can’t predict. The lesson we can take from Jacob is that we should be more concerned about the moral and spiritual choices we make. We know what kind of consequences those will have. The simple principle we taught our kids in our child rearing was, choices have consequences. If you make good choices you will have good consequences, if you make bad choices you will get bad consequences. Jacob made bad choices, and he got some bad consequences. What this means is that we should strive with all our might to make good choices and take good actions. Do all that we can to do what God says, the way

God says to do it. Obeying God is always a good choice and will have good effects, while disobeying God is always a bad choice, and will have unfortunate and negative effects at some point.

CONDEMNATION IS NOT ONE OF THE CONSEQUENCES

This is not a lesson about. Karma basically says everyone gets what they deserve, which sounds kind of life reaping what you sow. But they are not the same. The Bible simply says there are consequences for actions, but there is a huge difference. Karma is merciless. God is merciful, and that changes everything. Because of that, we don't always get what we deserve. The grace of God changes that equation.

When we hear about our sins finding us out it is natural to think that maybe that means that God might well decide to wash his hands of us. He might say at some point, "Well, that's a bridge too far. Now you've torn it. I'm done with you. You're out of my kingdom for good." We think that because it makes sense to us.

What is amazing to me is that in this story of Jacob, he has been much less than admirable. He has done dirty tricks to people in his own family, people he should have loved. He's been kind of a crummy person. He has experienced, in this incident, some consequences of the way he has been living. But he's still God's chosen person! God did not end his covenant with Jacob. Despite his lamentable choices and the unpleasant consequences of them, God still kept his promises to him. There is a hugely important reminder for us in that reality.

Romans 8:1 is powerful. Paul spent the first 7 chapters of that letter explaining the gospel of Jesus Christ. In those chapters he said that the amazing, astounding truth is that we are rescued by God's grace in Christ Jesus and for no other reason. In chapter 8 he summed up what he had been saying. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." If we put our trust in Christ, then there is no condemnation for us. None. Condemnation is off the table.

Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is death. The consequences of sin is separation from God. It is being cut off from the source of life. But the whole point of Jesus' work in this world is that he took those wages on himself. He died that death. The penalty has been paid. If it has been fully paid by Jesus, then there is nothing left to pay. There is no death to be suffered. It's been done. There is no condemnation! We absolutely do not need to fear that even though we deserve it.

This makes sense when you think about it. Do you remember how Jesus said believers in him should pray? How did that prayer begin? "Our father in heaven." That is how you should regard God. He is your father. The New American Standard translation of Galatians 4:6 reads, "Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba, Father.'" That verse makes it clear. If God is our father, what does that make us? Acquaintances? Cousins? Nephews or nieces? Enemies? No, if God is our father, that makes us his children. John 1:12 says, "To all who did receive him (Jesus), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." If you believe in Jesus, you have been given the right, the privilege, the immeasurably great blessing, of being a child of God.

Children can be disobedient and get some unpleasant consequences as result. But they don't stop being children of the parents. They are still loved even though they get in trouble. A few weeks ago when our granddaughters came to spend a night at our house, Ella informed us that the day before she had not been a good girl. As a result she had gotten some consequences. She had some toys and privileges taken away. But she was still the daughter of Toby and Anna. She was still loved and delighted in as much as ever. She will always be their child and she will always be loved. If you are in Christ, if you believe in his name, you are a child of God, and nothing will ever change that.

Ella's little foray into disobedience resulted in consequences. It impacted the quality of her life. It meant her life was not as enjoyable. It did not affect even slightly the fact that she is a loved child of Toby and Anna. Our disobedience to God will have consequences that will impact the quality of our life in this world. But they will never affect our position as children of God. So we need to decide how full a life we want to have now. If we want to have the fullest life possible, the life with the most love, joy, peace it is possible to have, then we must seek with all our might to do and be what God wants us to do and be.

GOD'S PURPOSES WILL BE ACCOMPLISHED

Jacob's story is full of dysfunction and disobedience to God. Isaac and Rebekah favoring one son over another. Jacob lied and cheated his own family. Jacob married two women, when God had clearly laid down the law on spouses. It was one per customer. Jacob slept with four different women. Laban pulled a really dirty trick on Jacob and Rachel, and really Leah as well. None of those things were even close to doing things God's way. And yet, somehow, God got done what he wanted done.

It was God's plan that Jacob would be God's chosen person, that he would have 12 sons who would form the beginning of the nation that would be God's chosen people. It was his plan that ultimately that chosen people would bless the entire world by being the source of the Savior of the world. That plan got accomplished. Despite all the rampant disobedience that went on, God's plan and purpose was fulfilled.

In Isaiah 46:10-11 God said, "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.' From the east I summon a bird of prey, from a far off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that I will bring about; what I have planned, that I will do." In the context Isaiah was prophesying about the fall of Babylon, something that seemed inconceivable to many. Babylon was the superpower of its day. But God says he has a plan, a purpose, and it will be accomplished. He would bring someone to bring about the defeat of Babylon. That person was a Persian ruler named Cyrus. What God had planned, he did.

This is a very helpful truth for us. As I look back over the years of my life I can see many things I wish I had done differently, mistakes I have made, times when I wish I had done better. The great news is that none of my failures and none of my mistakes and none of my shortcomings are final. They are not the last say. Somehow, even when I have failed, God has been working his purposes in this world and in my life. I have not derailed what God seeks to do. Neither have you.

In this time of covid we might get upset and fearful about what is going on. We can fret over the upheaval in our nation. We can get angry at people making bad decisions. We can get into an anxiety fit over the coming elections. But God's purpose and plan will be fulfilled. Martyn Lloyd Jones said, "There is a plan for every life in the mind of God. We must never regard our lives as accidental." God's plan will be completed. So we can be at peace. We can rest. We can trust and rejoice in the truth that God will finish his work in our lives.

In January of 2019 the Dutch Defense Safety Inspection Agency launched an investigation into an incident involving the Dutch Air Force. One of their F-16 fighter jets suffered serious engine damage when it was hit by 20mm cannon fire during a training exercise. The findings of the investigation were surprising. It turned out that the pilot, during the exercise, had fired a burst of rounds from the Vulcan gatling gun on his plane that can fire more than 6000 rounds per minute. But as soon as he fired, in his air combat maneuvering he accelerated and actually collided with the rounds from his own gun. In other words, he basically shot his own plane down. We can't shoot God's plans and purposes down. But we can shoot our own lives down. We can make choices that lead to painful consequences, even though God still loves us and works his plan in the world. So let's not do that. As God's children, let's obey the Father, and let's trust in his plan that is at work in our lives. Let's be at peace that no matter what people do, God's purposes will be accomplished.