

I. ISN'T THERE SOMEWHERE ELSE YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE? (31:1-16)

- Has God ever said that to you? *“Isn't there somewhere else you're supposed to be?”* God has been saying that a lot around here lately. He said it to Adam and Ann and they'll soon be moving to Brooklyn, NY. In fact he's said it to more than 10 of our VCL households in the last few months. He's said it to at least four people here I can think of who have been forced to look for other jobs. He said it to a fellow I know named Jack whose health problems necessitated his retirement before he expected. He said it to a friend some years ago whose irrational anger made him tackle a great hurt he had ignored for too long. He said it to someone forced to take on heavy responsibilities she never expected. Sooner or later God says that to everyone who follows him, about their circumstances or relationships or even just the geography of the heart. *“Isn't there somewhere else you're supposed to be?”*
- When we left Jacob, that's what God had said to him. Turn to **Gen. 31**. Jacob had spent 20 years far from his home hiding out from the anger of his brother Esau. For all those 20 years he had worked for his shifty uncle Laban. Jacob had loved only one woman, Rachel, but had been tricked into marriages to both Rachel and her sister, Leah, along with their two maidservants. They had borne him 11 sons and a daughter—part of the God's promised blessing. Then God had blessed Jacob with prosperity, in spite of Laban's efforts to outfox and swindle him. But now God said to him, *“Isn't there somewhere else you're supposed to be?”*
- It was time for Jacob to leave Padam Aram and return to Canaan, the land of his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham—the land God had promised to him. In that life-changing dream Jacob had of the stairway to heaven, God had promised that he would bring Jacob back to that land. And now it was time. **There was somewhere else Jacob was supposed to be.**

- A. God will make it clear when it is time for you to be somewhere else. For Jacob there were three signals, which are still among those God uses today:
1. **You are no longer settled or safe where you are.** **Gen. 31:1-2...** It was clear Jacob wasn't welcome there anymore. For you, it may be an inner agitation, a growing pressure against your desire to stay put. You may get laid off. You may simply sense that God is closing a chapter in your life.
 2. **God clearly tells you to go.** That's what happened to Jacob. He called Rachel and Leah and explained what had been happening, culminating in **v.13...** God has lots of ways of speaking to people. Scripture, dreams, godly counsel, a growing sense of direction as you pray.
 3. **Others confirm your direction.** Jacob's two wives, who weren't that great at teamwork, agreed that they were ready to leave. They say as one, in v.16, *“So do whatever God has told you.”* God almost always uses others to confirm the direction he wants us to go.

My examples imply that God's movement is always a matter of changing geography or location, but there are also times where the movement God wants you to make is all within the confines of your own heart. Moving from resentment to forgiveness, from fear to boldness, from strong demands to generous grace. These journeys are every bit as difficult as any move from Chicago to Africa.

- B. When God tells you it is time for a change, rest assured he is moving you to a place of greater blessing. Not an easier life, necessarily, but greater blessing. In Jacob's case it was a deeply significant move—back to the land of promises, the homeland of the God-blessed life. God never moves his people but that they are brought closer to him. Thus, wherever God moves you *is* a place of blessing. Oh, it may not be easy or pleasant, but if it brings you closer to the Lord, it is surely a land of promise, a place of blessing. So, back to the question God asks, *“Isn't there somewhere else you're supposed to be?”*

In our story, Jacob prepares to leave: **vv.17-21...** There's this strange thing about the journeys God sends us on to his blessings: they are almost always hair-raising adventures.

II. THE JOURNEY TO THE PLACE OF GOD'S BLESSING ALMOST ALWAYS COMES WITH RISKS (31:17-35)

- A. There are always enemies between us and the God-blessed life. In this story, that is Laban. Even though the terms of Jacob's employment were all in Laban's favor, God had prospered Jacob immensely, and now Laban was ticked off. And it really steamed him when he heard Jacob had made a run for it! **V.22-**

31... The relatives Laban had with him were more like Don Coreleone's family than yours, if you know what I mean. They were muscle. Did you catch the restrained menace in Laban's words? "*I have the power to harm you,*" he says. And Jacob admits he was afraid Laban would take his daughters back "*by force.*" **What is it with God, journeys and danger?!**

For us, danger can come from three places: the world, the flesh or the devil. The mindset and values of **the world** around us are constantly trying to press us into that mold. Serving the Lord as your life's work, for example, makes little sense to the world. Wrestling with the demands of forgiveness won't be encouraged by people who are worldly. Giving away significant amounts of your income to serve Jesus will always seem ludicrous to the world.

The flesh is the enemy within—that old self-serving, proud part of us that resists washing feet, being least, going where no one may notice.

The devil is always lurking about, seeking to deceive or destroy us. The Enemy of our souls will stop at nothing to keep us from drawing nearer to God. Try anything great for the Lord and see if there are not obstacles thrown in your paths. Illness or injury. Confusion or controversy. Emotional turmoil or relationships that go awry.

- B. There is the risk of faithlessness and false gods. Here, Rachel is our mirror. **V.19** says "*Rachel stole her father's household gods.*" Picture small idols that could fit on a mantel. Rachel probably stole them for a little extra protection on this trip, but Laban wanted them back. Jacob doesn't know anything about those gods. This was Rachel's secret. So he says in **v.32...** This scene is full of tension. Jacob has just unwittingly pronounced a **death sentence** on the only woman he has ever loved. He has given Laban a **search warrant**, and there just aren't that many places in a tent where you can hide some stone gods. Tension builds as we go from one tent to another: **v.33-34...** There's only one place left to look, and Rachel is sitting on it. Rachel is a chip off the old block, as wily as her father: **v.35...** *Whew! That was close!*

As long as we bring the world's gods along for a little extra security, we're vulnerable. Laban's one legitimate claim against Jacob, whether Jacob knew it or not, was that he had Laban's gods. That is how the devil lays hold on us, too. *You have what is mine!* They money we're depending on, the fallback plan, the resume declaring what we're really worth. It is possible that if you can finish the sentence, "*If all else fails, at least I'll have...*"—what you have is an idol in the saddlebag! And that brings us to this:

III. GOD WILL TAKE YOU WHERE HE HAS CALLED YOU

There are some things we must remember when God sends us on a journey.

- A. I know we'd rather slip out of Rachel's tent with the blushing Laban, but we're meant to notice something here. Why is this little incident even mentioned? Nothing actually happens, so what is it here for? Later God would tell Jacob's descendants, "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" Rachel believed the gods would give her and her household an edge on this dangerous journey. One can't have too many gods in one's corner! But this story is 'dissing' these false and empty gods. Did those gods protect Rachel? No, because when she was in danger they were... well, *indisposed*. They were hidden and a woman who was ceremonially unclean was sitting on them. In contrast to the Lord, whose warning to Laban stopped him dead in his tracks. They were impotent. God is mighty.

Trust that the LORD is the only God you need. God will protect you. God will bless you. He will forgive you and restore you. He will delight you and provide all you need. He will be your sun and North Star, your shade by day and pillar of fire by night. His faithfulness will never leave you.

- B. Trust that God is working for you in ways you cannot see. We are given a glimpse behind the scenes here in **v.24...** That dream changed the whole outcome of this story and Jacob wouldn't have known about it if Laban hadn't told him in **v.29**.

When we're facing a threat, we feel so vulnerable, so ill-equipped. It is hard to grasp that God is moving behind the scenes. He frustrates the plans of the wicked. He confuses the thinking of the shrewd. I know it seems there is no way you'll be considered for the job. But God may be working. I know that there seems to be no way you can raise the funds for school. But God works in ways we cannot see. I

know there is no way you can defend yourself against that awful accusation, but God has his secret ways.

Illus.: David Jeremiah tells the story of **Burleigh Law**, a missionary pilot in Congo, who was once trapped in a deadly sky by a storm that seemed to come from nowhere. Burleigh lost his bearings as thunderclouds surrounded him on every side. Here and there openings appeared in the clouds, and he kept turning his plane toward those openings, following little patches of blue like a needle through fabric. Finally he saw a little landing strip beneath him, and he landed with a sigh of relief.

Suddenly a vehicle came racing up to his plane. A nurse ran to him, saying, "I don't know where you came from, but I know you are an answer to our prayers."

A missionary couple had been isolated on this remote mission station. The roads were impassible and the bridges were out. The wife had become seriously ill with a high fever. Early that morning the Christians in the village had gathered in earnest prayer for help. God responded by arranging the storm clouds in the sky to direct Burleigh Law's little plane to that very spot of earth.

- C. Trust that the Lord is the same yesterday, today and forever. The key verse in this whole story is **v.42**, *"If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, you would have surely sent me away empty-handed. But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you."* Jacob didn't have nearly as much information about God as we do. He had no Bible, and he didn't know Jesus. But he knew how God had worked in the lives of his father and grandfather. He knew God had made promises he would surely keep. He knew God was mighty enough to defend his people and to destroy whole cities, as he had Sodom and Gomorrah. He knew about angels and how God can keep seemingly impossible promises.

Did you notice that unusual name he gives God: *the Fear of Isaac*. He uses that name again in v.53. These are the only places in all the Bible where that name is used. You might remember that Isaac had an experience with God no one else ever had, except Jesus. God had demanded his life as a sacrifice and things went as far as Isaac tied and lying on the firewood with his father's knife poised over him before God stopped the proceedings and pointed out the ram substitute in the thicket. No wonder God was *the Fear of Isaac*. One thing Isaac learned—and I assume passed on to his son, Jacob—was this: **my life is totally in God's hands.**

Jesus has reinforced that truth to us. He has put his own Holy Spirit within us. He has given us countless stories of God's protection and blessing. **Heb. 13:6-8** says, *"So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?' Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."*

- D. Now look at Laban's last gasp in **vv.43-50**... His claims that the daughters, children and flocks were his was simply bogus. Jacob had earned all he had. What's so interesting is how Laban makes the claim, but then immediately gives up on it, by making a covenant with Jacob, a covenant which in essence cedes all rights to Jacob. God is at work in that, in a foreshadowing of what he does for us.

Sometimes when we head into a great faith journey, our sin nags at us; our past track record haunts us. Satan whispers that we can run but we cannot hide; that he owns us. He's as full of hot air as Laban was. Trust that God can cancel any claim against you. Paul told us in **Col. 2:13-14**, *"When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircum-cision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross"*

- E. Let's finish the story: **vv.51-55**... God was the witness that Jacob and Laban would never see each other again. Neither would ever cross into the other's territory. That was doubly good for Jacob—for **God made it clear he would never again have to cross into that land of empty promises, and that his old nemesis would never come after him again.** When Israel left Egypt and Pharaoh, in a story very much like this one, God laid down boundaries behind them. And when you and I came to Christ, God put a boundary around us. Never again must we cross into that foreign land of empty promises, and never again can the world lay claim on us. God is taking us on faith journeys that always have points of no

return along the way. Perhaps an old lying temptation will be left behind forever, or a long bondage, or a time of great silence, a debilitating fear or memory.

SUMMARY: God will take you where he's called you. The journey seems to always come with real risks—pursuers and conmen, accusers and attackers determined to stop us or hurt us or take back what God has given us. But trust that the God who called you will take you all the way to the blessings he has promised.

Illus.: I read somewhere what the Celtic Christians called the *Caim*, the Encircling. “It is said that when the Celtic saints were troubled by evil or attacked by enemies, they drew the *Caim* around them. Sometimes they actually made a circle around themselves using a stick or their index finger. This was not magic, but an expression of the reality of the Presence of God... The circle was said to accompany the person on his journey and keep him from dangers.” They did this to make vivid the very thing this passage teaches. Let us recite what they would sing:

Circle me O God

Keep hope within; despair without.

Circle me O God

Keep peace within; keep turmoil out.

Circle me O God

Keep calm within; keep storms without.

Circle me O God

Keep strength within; keep weakness out.

The Mighty Three, My protection be, encircling me.

You are around My life, my home,

Encircling me, O Sacred Three

[*Caim*,#3834; source unknown; see web]