

PUSHING AGAINST A ROCK

SERIES: KINGDOM WORK



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Genesis 31

Final Message

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Genesis 31

God sees Jacob; Jacob sees God

There's a fable that goes like this:

A man was sleeping in his cabin when the Savior appeared. The Lord told the man that he had work for him to do. He was to push on a large rock in front of his cabin with all of his might. So he did this day after day for many years. Each night he would return to his cabin sore and worn out, feeling that his whole day had been spent in vain.

Seeing that the man was showing signs of discouragement, Satan decided to put thoughts into the man's mind, such as, "You have pushed against that rock for a long time and it hasn't budged. Why kill yourself over this? You are never going to move it."

This gave the man the impression that the task was impossible and that he was a failure. These thoughts discouraged and disheartened the man even more. "Why kill myself over this?" he thought. "I'll just put in my time, giving just the minimum effort and that will be good enough." The man planned to do this very thing.

Have you ever felt as if, in your vocation, the work that the Lord has for you to do, you were pushing against a large rock and not making any progress, much less having any impact? Do you feel that way now? Have you ever thought about just putting in your time and giving just the minimum effort? Do you feel that way now?

Jacob was a strong man. When he arrived in Haran, he pushed a large rock that covered a well out the way all by himself. But Laban managed to trick him and trap him, and Jacob ended up working for Laban, an exploitative tyrant, for twenty years. Laban was like a large rock that Jacob couldn't push out of the way.

Eventually, Jacob became successful in Haran despite oppressive working conditions. In Genesis 31, Jacob reflects on his years of toil. Jacob, then, grants us a perspective on vocation that we in the Silicon Valley sorely need.

Genesis 31:1-16:

Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, "Jacob has taken all that was our father's, and from what was our father's he has gained all this wealth." 2 And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before. 3 Then the Lord said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you."

4 So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was 5 and said to them, "I see that your father does not regard me with favor as he did before. But the God of my father has been with me. 6 You know that I have served your father with all my strength, 7 yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times. But God did not permit him to harm me. 8 If he said, 'The spotted shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore spotted; and if he said, 'The striped shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore striped. 9 Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me. 10 In the breeding season of the flock I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream that the goats that mated with the flock were striped, spotted, and mottled. 11 Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am!' 12 And he said, 'Lift up your eyes and see, all the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted, and mottled, for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. 13 I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred.'" 14 Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, "Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house? 15 Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has indeed devoured our money. 16 All the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, whatever God has said to you, do."

Laban's sons, who are no doubt worried for their inheritance, express concern that Jacob has become wealthy at their father's expense. Jacob hears their words, and he also sees that Laban, who had eagerly entered into the agreement regarding the flocks, is literally not "with him" any longer. The jealousy of Laban and his sons causes Jacob to move in the direction of God's leading. After Jacob hears and sees this family's unfavorable disposition toward him, the Lord says to him, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you." When Jacob was on his way to Haran, the Lord told him, "Behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land" (Genesis 28:15a). Jacob's desire to return to his own place and his own land is affirmed by the Lord.

The Lord has fulfilled his promises; he has been with Jacob, and he has kept him. Now he wants to make good on his promise to bring him back to the land of Canaan. Jacob's vow—to make the Lord his God if the Lord fulfilled his promises—looms in the background.

Instead of describing Canaan as Jacob's place and land, the Lord describes it as "the land of your fathers" and literally to "the land of your kindred." Jacob's place and land are inhabited by an unloving father whom he tricked and a vengeful brother whom he usurped. At this point, it seems that the Lord's promise to bring Jacob back to the land will face some stiff opposition. When the Lord first issued the promises, Jacob insisted that the Lord return him to his father's house in safety (Genesis 28:21).

Laban has not been "with" Jacob, but the Lord is with him. If the Lord is with Jacob, it doesn't matter who is not with him.

Having seen the Lord in the workplace, Jacob for the first time takes the initiative in his marriages, calling his wives to his flock in the field. He wants them to see his flock, the evidence of God's blessing, and he wants to meet with them in private, where they can't be overheard.

His brother Esau was a man of the field. (Genesis 25:27). Jacob, after years of working for Laban, has also learned to be a man of the field. Once again, "the field" provides a stage in the narrative, indicating that some kind of transaction is in the works. In this case, Jacob persuades Rachel and Leah to leave their father and go with him. In doing so, Jacob tells them about the God of his father. He contrasts his wives' father with the God of his father. Laban has been against him, but God has

blessed him. Jacob acknowledges for the first time that the Lord, who promised to be with him many years ago, has kept his promise.

Jacob says he has served Laban with all his strength—and he has a lot of strength, as evidenced by his moving the stone from the mouth of the well (Genesis 29:10). Although Laban cheated Jacob and changed his wages, God has seen that Laban has not been able to hurt him. In fact, Laban's schemes have backfired. His efforts to limit Jacob's wages actually resulted in an increase. Jacob sees the hand of God in this. Laban's sons' interpretation was that "Jacob has taken away all that was our father's." Jacob's interpretation, offered to his wives, is that "God has taken away your father's livestock and given them to me." God has not only prevented Laban from harming Jacob; he has used Laban's efforts to harm Jacob as a means of blessing him. Jacob attributes his amazing success not to his breeding program but to God.

At some point, the Lord gave Jacob a dream in which abnormally colored goats were mating. Regardless of whether it occurred before or after Jacob's request for the abnormally colored animals, the narrator's point is that the Lord is responsible for Jacob's prosperity.

Jacob "saw" what Laban had been doing to him (Genesis 31:2, 5). When he lifted up his eyes in a dream, he saw that God had been involved in his world. God "saw" Leah and "gave heed to" Rachel, the two oppressed women, and blessed them with children (Genesis 29:31, 30:22). God later told Jacob, the oppressed worker, "I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you," and he blessed him with livestock. For many years the Lord had seen Laban oppress Jacob; only recently did he act to overturn Laban. Jacob "saw" Rachel but not Leah, and he was insensitive to Rachel's plight (Genesis 29:10, 30:2). He works for many years for a man who sees things differently from him and who is insensitive to his needs. Again, Jacob has reaped what he has sowed so that he may get a good look at himself. Jacob is like Rachel, who had to watch other women bear children before the Lord opened her womb.

The Lord identified himself as the "God of Bethel," reminding Jacob that at Bethel he erected a memorial pillar and made a vow to make the Lord his God if the Lord fulfilled his promises. When he was on his way to Haran, Jacob had taken a stone and used it as a pillow and spent the night alone in Bethel, which means "House of God." The Lord revealed himself to Jacob in that place, and Jacob took the stone and turned it into a pillar. The difficult place of transition became for him a place of worship.

The Lord has appeared to Jacob once again in a difficult place, this time in the land of Haran, where Laban had enslaved him. The difficult place of servitude also becomes a place of worship, for the God of “The House of God” is there. The Lord reminded Jacob of his vow to make the Lord his God upon his return to the promised land. So he commanded Jacob to leave “this land,” which is not his home, and return to the “land of your birth,” which is where he and his people belong.

Jacob has seen the Lord in his place of work, and it has shaped his faith. It has helped him emerge as a man of faith, who obeys the Lord and shares the Lord with his wives.

Rachel and Leah agree

Rachel and Leah respond to Jacob with one voice. Earlier, they were at odds with each other. Evidently, once they began talking to each other, they were able to reconcile their differences (Genesis 30:14-15).

Laban’s treatment of his daughters now works against him. They recognize that they have no “portion or inheritance” in their “father’s house.” Whatever inheritance they have is with Jacob, with the God of his “father,” with the God of the “House” of God (Genesis 31:5).

Laban has treated Rachel and Leah not as daughters but as foreigners, with no rights. He sold them to Jacob, who paid for them with fourteen years’ worth of labor. It was customary to transfer part of the purchase price to the brides themselves. The women, then, should have benefited from Jacob’s work for Laban. However, Jacob was not even able to provide for his family (Genesis 30:30). Evidently, the women see Laban’s oppression of Jacob as total consumption of the purchase price. Rachel and Leah agree with Jacob’s interpretation of the transfer of wealth. They do not believe that “Jacob has taken away all that was our father’s,” as their brothers believed (Genesis 31:1), but that “God has taken away from our father what belongs to us and our children.”

The women, therefore, tell Jacob to “do whatever God has said to you.” Jacob has told his wives about God’s involvement in his life, and they believe him. Their future is not in Haran but in Canaan, not with Laban but with Jacob. Their future is with the family of God.

God is sovereign

God is sovereign over both employers and co-workers, over both Laban and Laban’s sons. Employers and co-workers may seek to harm us, but really, they can’t touch us. God uses every harmful intention to form us for himself and his purposes. The jealousy of co-workers may even move you in the direction of the Lord’s leading, as it moved Jacob. What they intend for evil, God intends for good.

God promises to be with us

And what is it that the Lord promises us in our vocations? He promises us the same thing he promises for every aspect of our lives: He promises to be with us. For some, that may mean riches. For others, that may mean poverty. For all of us, that means the Lord is committed to his relationship with us and to accomplishing his carefully crafted purposes for each of us. Therefore, look for the hand of the Lord in your vocation—how he works things together for good in ways beyond your anticipation. If the Lord is with us in our vocations, it doesn’t matter who is against us. “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).

God shapes us

All the while, our vocations stretch us, and we become something we weren’t before, just as Jacob became a “man of the field.” See if you can ascertain whether the Lord has honored his promise to be with you in your vocation—always remembering that he will probably make his presence known in unexpected ways.

See that God sees

It’s easy to see what the Labans of this world are doing to us. It’s not as easy for us to “lift up our eyes” and understand that the Lord sees everything that the Labans are doing. We see this world, but the Scriptures, as the Holy Spirit illuminates them, give us eyes to see a different world—a heavenly world that has invaded this world. Lift up your eyes and see—see that God sees, that God cares, that God is involved. God has seen everything that has happened in your workplace. And he will right all wrongs. Much of our workplace angst is rooted in our propensity to look for meaning, riches, or advancement without looking to the Lord.

The workplace is a crucible

The workplace is often a crucible in which our faith issues with God become visible. It's a place of spiritual discipline. We may endure harsh working conditions for many years as God shapes us. With this perspective, it is possible to work hard and even effectively in an oppressive environment.

God reveals himself in hard places

Most importantly, God reveals himself to us in your vocation. Often, the workplace is a hard place. God specializes in revealing himself to men and women in the difficult places of their lives. He revealed himself to Jacob in Bethel, when he was on the run, and in Haran, where he toiled for years. He thereby transforms those places into places of worship. The "God of the House of God" is in your vocation, which makes it, of all things, a temple. When we see the Lord in our workplace, it shapes our faith, and we emerge as men and women of faith who are more bent toward obeying the Lord. We also, in the manner of Jacob, emerge with stories of God's faithfulness to share with others.

Different visions

Once upon a time, I worked as the editor of a weekly newspaper and for a publisher who didn't share my vision for the paper. She wasn't an exploitative tyrant in the manner of Laban, but working for her did have its challenges.

One afternoon, she called me into her office, just as she had done on other occasions. It turns out this wasn't just another occasion. After walking into her office that afternoon, I walked out without a job. I was fired.

Was God accomplishing his carefully crafted purposes for me? Was he working things together for good in ways beyond my anticipation? Was he stretching me, making me something that I wasn't before? Was he making his presence known to me an unexpected way? If this was a wrong, would he right it some day? Was he revealing himself to me in a hard place?

I didn't know. All I knew is that I had just joined the ranks of the unemployed.

Jacob flees from Laban

Genesis 31:17-21:

So Jacob arose and set his sons and his wives on camels. 18 He drove away all his livestock, all his property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac. 19 Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods. 20 And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee. 21 He fled with all that he had and arose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.

Against all odds, Jacob became wealthy in Haran, in the land of Paddan-aram. He plundered Laban, just as his descendants would plunder the Egyptians when they left for Canaan (Exodus 12:35-36). Now Jacob, in obedience to the Lord, leaves Haran for Canaan, in the manner of his grandfather Abraham (Genesis 12:5). He is returning not just to Canaan but to "his father Isaac." He will once again have to face a father who withheld from him the love he craved. Jacob's connection will no longer be with his wives' father, Laban, but with his own father, and with the God of his father.

Before leaving, Rachel, Jacob's wife, steals her father's household idols. Her father has stolen her husband from her and her share of the purchase price, so she steals his idols from him. Although she has told Jacob to do what God has told him, she is not ready to cast her lot completely with the God of Jacob's father, especially with a difficult journey in front of her. Rachel's stealing the idols from her father echoes Jacob's stealing the patriarchal blessing from his father, though, of course, the idols will profit Rachel nothing.

Laban is identified as "the Aramean" for the first time since Jacob's arrival in Haran. Although at first he called Jacob "my bone and flesh," Laban's place is not with the family of God (Genesis 29:14). Just as Jacob fled from Canaan to Haran, he now flees from Haran to Canaan (Genesis 27:43). In each case, he fled from someone who meant him harm, first Esau and then Laban. Jacob, it seems, isn't safe wherever he goes.

When he crosses the Euphrates River, he has three hundred miles of desert ahead of him. He sets his "face" toward the familiar hills of Gilead, which border the promised land. Haran has forced him to face into

himself. Now he sets his face, and he turns his heart, toward home. Before he gets there, he will have to cross another river, the Jabbok, where he will see the “face” of God before seeing the “face” of his brother (Genesis 32:22, 30; 33:10). Hope and fear will be his companions for the long journey home.

Laban pursues Jacob

Genesis 31:22-35:

When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, 23 he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead. 24 But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, “Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.”

25 And Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen pitched tents in the hill country of Gilead. 26 And Laban said to Jacob, “What have you done, that you have tricked me and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword? 27 Why did you flee secretly and trick me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre? 28 And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? Now you have done foolishly. 29 It is in my power to do you harm. But the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, ‘Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.’ 30 And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father’s house, but why did you steal my gods?” 31 Jacob answered and said to Laban, “Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. 32 Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsmen point out what I have that is yours, and take it.” Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.

33 So Laban went into Jacob’s tent and into Leah’s tent and into the tent of the two female servants, but he did not find them. And he went out of Leah’s tent and entered Rachel’s. 34 Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel’s saddle and sat on them. Laban felt all about the tent, but did not find them. 35 And she said to her father, “Let

not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me.” So he searched but did not find the household gods.

When Jacob fled Haran, he set his sights on the hill country of Gilead, east of Canaan (Genesis 31:21). He’s some three hundred miles from Haran and only a few miles from Canaan when Laban catches up to him. From the hill country of Gilead, he’s close enough to see the land of Canaan, which the Lord promised to him and his descendants. He’s close enough to touch his dream of freedom, but the twenty-year nightmare reaches out and pulls his hand back at the last minute.

Unbeknownst to Jacob, God had warned Laban in a dream. The idiom involving not speaking to someone “either good or bad” means to bring no harm to the individual (Genesis 24:50, 2 Samuel 13:22). The Lord is intervening to prepare the way for Jacob’s return.

Tension builds as the two men camp next to each other in the hill country. Will there be war? Will Laban bring Jacob back to Haran? Or will Laban obey the Lord and leave Jacob alone?

Every sentence in Laban’s complaint up to verse 29 reveals his hypocrisy. Laban says to Jacob, “What have you done ... ?” echoing Jacob’s words to Laban when Laban substituted Leah for Rachel (Genesis 29:25). Laban accuses Jacob of carrying away his daughters like “captives of the sword,” but Laban had held his daughters and Jacob captive and at this time threatens force (Genesis 31:14-16). Laban accuses Jacob of deceiving him, but Laban made a habit of deceiving Jacob. Laban intimates that he would have sent Jacob away with a party, but the last party Laban threw for Jacob resulted in Jacob’s captivity (Genesis 29:22). Laban complains that Jacob did not allow him to kiss his family, but such a gesture on Laban’s part would have been a hollow one, for he viewed his daughters as commodities. Laban would very much enjoy doing to Jacob everything that Jacob has done to him. Laban accuses Jacob of acting foolishly, but Laban is the one who is beginning to look foolish.

Finally, Laban brings his dream out in the open. He claims he has the power to harm Jacob, but he yields to the Lord, whose greater power he has come to acknowledge.

After recognizing the Lord, Laban appears somewhat sympathetic, acknowledging that Jacob longed to return to his father’s house. He even arrives at something that has the appearance of a legitimate complaint—the theft of his idols. The verb “steal” in verse 30 closes Laban’s

complaint. Literally, Laban in verse 26 said to Jacob that “you stole my heart” by carrying off the women.

First, Jacob says he left with his wives without telling Laban for fear that Laban would take his daughters “by force.” Second, Jacob knows he didn’t take the idols and invites Laban to go through his belongings. In fact, Jacob is so certain that Laban won’t find the idols that he invokes the death penalty for anyone found in possession of the idols.

The narrator informs us that Jacob was unaware that Rachel had stolen the idols. Jacob, the master of deceit, is deceived by his wife. He had worked seven years for Rachel. He was lured into twenty years of servitude by his love for her. Now Jacob, because of his rashness, is in danger of losing her, though he does not know it. As readers, we know more than either Laban or Jacob and are thus drawn into the story, anxious about the outcome. The tension builds as Laban rifles through Jacob’s tent, Leah’s tent and the tents of the two maids. Finally, he enters Rachel’s tent. Only now are we informed where Rachel had been keeping the idols. She had put them in the saddle of her camel and was sitting on them.

The search through Rachel’s tent is reported as being more painstaking. Laban “felt” through everything. Years earlier, Isaac “felt” Jacob, but Jacob succeeded in deceiving his father (Genesis 27:22). Now Rachel is deceiving her father, who is feeling for the truth. Rachel remains seated on the camel, concealing the idols and claiming that she can’t get down because she’s having her period. The story makes a laughingstock of Laban’s “gods.” First, they are stolen. Second, they are impotent to make themselves known. Third, in being relegated to the status of a sanitary napkin, they are desecrated.

The God that Jacob is coming to know can’t be stolen, for there is no image of him to steal (Exodus 20:4). He makes himself known, both in judgment and in salvation (Exodus 6:7). People “find” him when they “search” for him with all their hearts (Jeremiah 29:13). No matter how men and women respond to him, he remains holy.

Three times the narrator tells us that Laban “did not find” the idols. Laban comes off as utterly foolish, his gods as utterly impotent.

Jacob’s triumph over Laban

Genesis 31:36-42:

Then Jacob became angry and berated Laban. Jacob said to Laban, “What is my offense? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me? 37 For you have felt through all my goods; what have you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two. 38 These twenty years I have been with you. Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. 39 What was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you. I bore the loss of it myself. From my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. 40 There I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. 41 These twenty years I have been in your house. I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. 42 If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night.”

Jacob, feeling vindicated by Laban’s dream and by his failure to find the idols, vigorously defends himself. Jacob “became angry.” Having little choice as Laban’s “slave,” Jacob has kept it all inside for twenty years. Now, sensing for the first time that he has the advantage, Jacob unloads.

First, Jacob says, Laban’s accusation that he stole the idols has been proved false. Second, Jacob recounts his meticulous and above-and-beyond service in Laban’s behalf. Custom dictated that a shepherd was not responsible for losses among his flock attributable to attacks from wild beasts, but Jacob nevertheless incurred such losses himself (Exodus 22:10-13). Jacob was also accountable for theft during the night, which was considered a less serious matter. Third, Jacob bore tremendous physical burdens in caring for Laban’s flock. Fourth, Laban changed Jacob’s wages. Jacob says, in so many words, “You’re the one who has stolen from me.”

Jacob's response culminates neither with a defense nor an accusation but with a theological observation that summarizes his twenty years in Haran. With verse 42, the Jacob-Laban story reaches its climax.

Jacob recognizes the Lord's faithfulness to the promise of Bethel to be with him (Genesis 28:15). The "Fear of Isaac," a unique title for the Lord, evokes the worship that he deserves. It also relates to Jacob's encounter with the Lord at Bethel, where Jacob "was afraid" and said, "How awesome is this place" (Genesis 28:17). (The word translated "awesome" stems from the verb translated "was afraid.") In the current setting, Laban's "fear" of the Lord is preventing him harming Jacob.

Laban indicated that if Jacob had been forthright about his departure, he would have sent him away with a party. Apart from the Lord's intervention, Jacob says, Laban would have sent him away "empty-handed." The Mosaic Law demanded that Hebrew slaves be set free after six years and that they not be sent away "empty-handed" (Deuteronomy 15:12-13). Because God has been for him, Jacob did not leave Haran empty-handed.

God, in helping Jacob become prosperous in Haran, had told him in a dream that he had "seen all that Laban has been doing to you" (Genesis 31:12). Jacob now acknowledges that God has "seen my affliction and the toil of my hands" and that he has responded not only by helping him become prosperous but by rendering "judgment last night" in Laban's dream.

In surveying twenty years of affliction in Haran, Jacob says that God has seen him and acted on his behalf. He, therefore, understands affliction differently. He can say, "God has been for me." For Jacob, as he finally extricates himself from Laban, that seems to be enough.

Experience in the workplace tells you what you believe

Like Jacob, many of us feel that we're not safe wherever we go, especially in the workplace. On the one hand, we're afraid of losing a job. On the other hand, we're afraid of getting stuck in a job.

A career is a magnet for dreams. Anyplace where dreams are gathered, there will you find your heart: what you really believe. Your experience in the workplace, then, is telling you something about yourself.

Haunted by the past

Even if we manage to extricate ourselves from the Labans of this world, an uncertain future awaits us. We wonder: will something, or someone, from our past come back to haunt us? Will the nightmare reach out and pull our hand back at the last minute? Will some hole in our resume, or some mistake or some reference from a hypocritical employer catch up to us? Will someone else's mistake under our watch, like Rachel's theft of the idols, taint us? Will our own rash promises do us in? Will someone rifle through our social media posts, including the ones we now wish we hadn't posted? We feel the tension of the Jacob story in our own lives as we wonder what will happen.

The Lord intervenes

Forces outside your control—be they capricious employers or the fluctuating economy—seem to dictate your destiny. The Lord, however, has been intervening in the affairs of your life, perhaps without your awareness. That means that the Labans of this world, contrary to appearances, don't have the upper hand. God has the upper hand. He has the only hand that matters. He raises up and overthrows the Labans to accomplish his purposes in your life. God even, as in this story, overcomes the mistakes of close associates and our own rash decisions to get us where he wants us, even if we must live with certain consequences. In the end, the Labans will come off as foolish and their gods as impotent.

Unloading

Have you ever wanted to unload on a supervisor? Have you at least daydreamed about it? Have you rehearsed your speech in your mind? But you didn't go through with it, did you? You held back for two reasons: first because your supervisor can make things most unpleasant for you; and second, you think you're supposed to be nice to people. But maybe one day, after the tables of power have turned, the first reason is no longer a factor, and the second reason . . . well, you just forget about the second reason. You let him have it:

"These twenty years I have been with you. Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. What was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you. I bore the loss of it myself. From my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. There I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. These twenty years I have been in your house. I

served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times.”

Feels good, doesn't it? Are you finished? If you are, you're one verse short of a speech. What happened to verse 42? You failed to recognize the point of the Jacob-Laban story. You failed to recognize God's sovereignty.

Here's what you need to recognize: God has been faithful to you in your vocation, even if it's been oppressive for twenty years. You have not left empty-handed. God has seen your affliction and the toil of your hands, and he has come to your aid. You can say, "It was hard, but God was with me." And you can watch for the opportunity that God creates for you to tell your story to others

Priceless

So, here's my story.

At first, after being fired from my job as an editor, I was bitter, but months later as I began to see that God was using my dismissal for good, that he was opening new vistas for me. God led me into a deeper relationship with him through six months of unemployment. He led me to a better job working for a better newspaper. He led me to a church where I became involved in ministry for the first time. There is much more to the story, but in short, being fired as an editor opened the door for me to become a pastor. I lost a job, but what I gained was priceless.

Indeed, God was accomplishing his carefully crafted purposes for me. He was working things together for good in ways beyond my anticipation. He was stretching me, making me something that I wasn't before. He was making his presence known to me an unexpected way. He was disciplining me. He was revealing himself to me in a hard place.

God was intervening in the affairs of my life. He raised up the publisher in part in to accomplish his purposes in my life. He got me where he wanted me. He was faithful to me in my vocation, giving it a new emphasis. He came to my aid.

Therefore, I can say, "It was hard, but God was with me."

The covenant of Mizpah

Genesis 31:43-55:

Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day for these my daughters or for their children whom they have borne? 44 Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I. And let it be a witness between you and me." 45 So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. 46 And Jacob said to his kinsmen, "Gather stones." And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. 47 Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. 48 Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me today." Therefore he named it Galeed, 49 and Mizpah, for he said, "The Lord watch between you and me, when we are out of one another's sight. 50 If you oppress my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no one is with us, see, God is witness between you and me."

51 Then Laban said to Jacob, "See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me. 52 This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, to do harm. 53 The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us." So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac, 54 and Jacob offered a sacrifice in the hill country and called his kinsmen to eat bread. They ate bread and spent the night in the hill country.

55 Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned home.

Laban ran down Jacob, but now Jacob—or, more accurately, the Lord—has backed Laban into a corner. Pitifully, Laban continues to assert that his daughters, the children, and the animals belong to him but realizes he can't do anything about it. All he can do is propose a covenant, in this case, a treaty of non-aggression, which is tantamount to acknowledging Jacob's superiority (Genesis 21:22-24, 26:26-31). Jacob takes a stone and sets it up as a pillar, and he orders his kinsmen to gather other stones into a heap. The pillar and the heap

memorialize the covenant, act as witnesses to it, and serve as boundary markers. Significantly, stones re-enter the Jacob narrative.

When Jacob camped at Bethel, on his way to Haran, he took a stone and used it for a pillow. After his encounter with the Lord that night, Jacob “took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar” (Genesis 28:18). The Lord appeared to him in a hard place of transition, as he was leaving the promised land, and Jacob memorialized the event by converting the stone, which had represented the difficulty of his position, into a pillar that commemorated the Lord. When he returns to the promised land, he will once again set up a pillar (Genesis 35:14).

When Jacob arrived in Haran after a difficult journey, he removed a large stone from a well in order to make time with Rachel (Genesis 29:10). Although by all appearances the Lord had led Jacob safely to Haran and Rachel, Jacob neither acknowledged the Lord nor converted the stone into a pillar.

Haran was every bit the difficult place that Bethel was—and more so because it lasted twenty years, not just one night. It also deserved a pillar that memorialized the Lord’s presence. Jacob missed the opportunity to recognize the Lord at the beginning of his sojourn in Haran. Now, on the verge of returning to the promised land, and having seen that the Lord has been with him in his conflict with Laban, Jacob once again takes a stone and sets it up as a pillar.

Laban and Jacob have the same name for the place, Jegar-sahadutha and Galeed, which mean “heap of witness” in Aramaic and Hebrew, respectively. Another name, “Mizpah,” is attached to the place. It is a play on the word “watch,” which features prominently in Laban’s appeal that the Lord monitor the agreement: “The LORD watch between you and me, when we are out of one another’s sight.” Of course, the Lord has been watching all along, and he has ruled in favor of Jacob.

Laban warns Jacob against mistreating his daughters or taking additional wives, which would have diluted their and their children’s inheritance. Once again, Laban comes off as a hypocrite, for he mistreated his daughters and forced Jacob to take two wives (Genesis 31:14-16, 29:27).

Laban, a polytheist, most likely is invoking a multitude of gods. The word used for “god” (elohim) can be singular or plural. In this case, it’s most likely

plural. Laban mentions the gods of Abraham and the gods of Nahor, which are further identified as gods of their fathers. (Before Abraham entered into a covenant with the Lord, he and his father, Terah, most likely worshiped pagan gods.) Jacob, on the other hand, swears by only one God, the God of Abraham, who is once again identified as the fear of Isaac. For Jacob, who left the land of Canaan with a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the Lord, there is now only one God: the God of his father.

The two men consecrate the covenant with a traditional sacrificial meal.

As Jacob was leaving the promised land, he “spent the night” alone in Bethel, encountered the Lord in a dream and set up a pillar the next day (Genesis 28:11, 18). Twenty years later, near the end of his return trip, he sets up a pillar and spends the night just outside the promised land, this time with a family. A lonely man on the run, with no apparent future, returns as the patriarch of the family that will bless all nations.

Laban kisses and blesses his daughters and grandchildren, as tradition called for, but nothing in the narrative would lead us to believe these gestures carry any meaning for him. Just as Jacob “arose” to leave Laban, Laban arises to leave Jacob (Genesis 31:17). When Rachel bore Joseph, Jacob wanted to return to his own “place,” his own country. Laban, who detained Jacob for another six years, now returns to “his place.” Jacob’s twenty years of exile have come to an end.

Make a pillar

The place of your vocation, like Jacob’s Haran, deserves a pillar. At first, like Jacob, you didn’t think so. God was there, but you didn’t see him. At first, you thought you could push all the stones out of the way and get what you wanted. At some point, you came up against a Laban-sized stone that wouldn’t budge. When you needed God to be there, you saw that he was there. Your workplace deserves at least a mental memorial to God’s presence.

Employers may swear by a multitude of gods, with the almighty dollar leading the pantheon. From their perspective, anything that serves those gods may be accepted without question. We may enter the workplace, like Jacob, with a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the Lord, but as he reveals himself to us and acts on our behalf, we know that for us there is but one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We swear allegiance to him

and him alone. As we do so, we have something to offer the world, a new perspective and a new way of working that places Jesus Christ at the center of what we do.

This story tells us that God is with us and for us in our vocations. It also reminds us of Paul's words in Romans 8:31-39. "If God is for us, who is against us?" It does not matter whether Laban is against us, for nothing "shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

You are a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, and when you go to work, even if you're working for Laban, you're working for Jesus. Therefore, God is watching over you to vindicate you in the end. You will not leave this place empty-handed; you'll leave with a faith more precious than gold, which, though tested by your vocation, will be honored by God (1 Peter 1:7). And you will inherit the entire new creation, where, in the imagery of Revelation 21, the streets are paved with the gold that this world values.

Today it may seem that you're working for Laban, even though in reality you're working for Jesus. One day, there will be no confusion. Laban will return to his place, and you will arise to serve your Lord in the new and better place.

The rest of the story

Remember the fable about the man who was asked by the Lord to push against a large rock? Remember that he was discouraged and that he was planning to put in his time and give just the minimum effort? Listen to the rest of the story:

One day the man decided to make it a matter of prayer and take his troubled thoughts to the Lord. "Lord," he said, "I have labored long and hard in your service, using all of my strength to do that which you have asked. Yet, after all this time, I have not even budged that rock half a millimeter. What is wrong? Why am I failing?"

To this the Lord responded compassionately:

My friend, when long ago I asked you to serve me and you accepted, I told you that your task was to push against the rock with all of your strength, which you have done. Never once did I mention to you that I expected you to move it. Your task was to push. And now you come to me, your strength spent, thinking that you have failed. But, is that really so?

Look at yourself. Your arms are strong and muscled, your back sinews are brown, your hands are callused from constant pressure, and your legs have become massive and hard. Through opposition you have grown much and your abilities now surpass that which you used to have. Yet you haven't moved the rock. But your calling was to be obedient and to push and to exercise your faith and trust in my wisdom. This you have done.

I, my friend, will now remove the rock.

Endnotes

- ¹ Shiff, Blair. "The history of San Francisco's landmark Golden Gate Bridge as it turns 80." *ABC News*. abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/history-san-franciscos-landmark-golden-gate-bridge-turns/story?id=47657315. Accessed July 2017.
- ² Jethani, Skye. "Response to: What's The Connection Between Faith And Work?" *quideas*, quideas.org/videos/work-for-the-common-good/. Accessed July 2017.
- ³ "Internet pornography by the numbers; a significant threat to society." *Webroot*, webroot.com/us/en/home/resources/tips/digital-family-life/internet-pornography-by-the-numbers. Accessed July 2017.