

Sanctified by Suffering

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[0:00] Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's word to you this morning. We're continuing our series in the book of Genesis. You'll remember the book of Genesis is the first book in the entire Bible tells the origin story of God's people Israel.

And this summer, we're in the story of Isaac and Jacob, mostly Jacob, found in chapters 25 through 36. If you were here with us last week, you heard the story of the sheep that Laban promised to Jacob.

Jacob would receive every sheep that was striped or spotted or speckled, which turns out to not work out so well for Laban, because suddenly all the healthy sheep, many of the sheep, are striped and spotted and speckled.

So Jacob gains a lot of wealth. Laban loses wealth, which sets us up for the tension of this story that's before us in chapter 31.

Now, we have one whole chapter before us right now, 55 verses. And so, as I say sometimes, I'm going to tell you something, not everything. We are going to spend more time on the first part of this story, less time on the second part.

[1:09] And we're not going to talk about the stealing of the household gods. So we just have to cut here and there to be able to make it through 55 verses. What we are going to look at is this, how God has used suffering to shape and grow Jacob.

And God using suffering to shape and grow Jacob points to our hope in suffering as well. And so it's with that, I invite you to turn with me to Genesis chapter 31, starting at verse 1, which you'll find on page 6 of your worship guide.

As we come to this story, remember that Proverbs chapter 30, verse 5 tells us, Every word of God proves true. He's a shield to those who take refuge in him.

Which is why we read now, Genesis chapter 31, starting at verse 1. 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.

And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before. Then the Lord said to Jacob, Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.

[2:26] So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was, 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. You know that I have served your father with all my strength. Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times.

But God did not permit him to harm me. 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.

Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me. 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.

Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, Jacob, and I said, Here I am. And he said, Lift up your eyes and see all the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted, and mottled.

[3:37] For I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. 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.

Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house? Are we not regarded by him as foreigners?

For he has sold us and he has indeed devoured our money. 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. Verse 17. So Jacob arose and set his sons and his wives on camels.

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.

[4:38] Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods. And Jacob tricked Laban the Aram man by not telling him that he intended to flee. He fled with all that he had and arose and crossed the Euphrates and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.

When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead.

But God came to Laban the Aram man in a dream by night and said to him, Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.

Verse 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.

And Laban said to Jacob, What have you done that you have tricked me and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword? 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?

[5:51] And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? Now you have done foolishly. 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. And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house.

But why did you steal my gods? Jacob answered and said to Laban, Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force.

Anyone with whom you find your God 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.

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.

[6:51] 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. 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. Verse 36. 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? 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.

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.

[8:04] 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.

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.

Verse 43. 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?

Come now, let us make a covenant you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.

So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. And Jacob said to his kinsmen, Gather stones. And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap.

[9:15] Laban called it Jechar-Sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galid. Laban said, This heap is a witness between you and me today. Therefore he named it Galid and Mizpah, for he said, The Lord watch between you and me when we are out of one another's sight.

If you oppress my daughters or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no one is with us, see, God is the witness between you and me. Verse 51.

Then Laban said to Jacob, See this heap and the pillar which I have set between you and me. 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.

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

[10:34] I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we come again grateful and thankful that you speak to us in your word, that you haven't left us to figure things out alone by ourselves.

And so we ask that you would do that again this morning, that you would use an ordinary man on an ordinary day and an ordinary time to instruct your people with your words, to show us the great mercy and grace that you have offered us, given us in Jesus Christ, that you grow our love and affection and obedience to him.

And we ask all of these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. I think that many of you, if not most of you, know that last week the elders of this church went on a two-night retreat to Florissant, Colorado, and we had some homework to do.

So one of our sessions, there were some questions to prepare beforehand, and this was a session for us to sort of name and celebrate the ways that we've seen God at work in our church over the last couple of years.

You know, there's lots of business that we have to do as a church, but we don't want to forget, hey, there's all these good things that are happening in the midst of that. And so one question was this, list the people in our church that you have seen God really transform over the last two years.

[12:01] And it sounded a little bit like this. Now, I've changed names to protect the innocent, but this is how the session went. Okay, Nicholas, his life has turned around 180 degrees in the last two years.

And someone else says, yeah, you know, Nicholas actually really went through it the last two years. He's had a tremendous amount of suffering. We've noticed in Joseph's life, he's kinder and gentler with people than he was two years ago.

And then someone else would say, yeah, Joseph's really been through it the last two years. Olivia, the joy that she has, you can see it and you can tell that it's larger than it was two years ago.

Oh yeah, you know, it's been a really tough year, two years for Olivia. And so for many of the names, there's this straight line between suffering and the image of Christ being formed.

Now, if you're a cynic, you might be thinking, okay, well, who do these elders think they are? Kind of looking down their noses to see who's changed. Don't say that so fast, because the last question was this.

[13:02] How has God changed you over the last two years? And it sounded like this. Elder one, here's how I suffered. And God used that to grow me in humility.

Elder two, here's how I suffered. It led me to have greater trust in God's providence and his plan.

Elder three, here's how I suffered. Now I have greater focus and clarity in my life.

So on and so forth. And so almost to a man, there's this connection between growth and suffering.

And by the way, the question did not include that. The question was not, how have you suffered?

The question was, how have you grown? How has God changed you to make you look more like Jesus? But suffering showed up again and again.

So I walked away from that session thinking, well, that's so interesting. God's been using suffering in people's lives in all sorts of different ways in our lives to change us. Now, it's not an accident.

[14:06] If you were with us last year, you remember we looked at Romans chapter five, which says this, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope.

And hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. The point is this.

God works through trials and tribulations to change us. God uses the soil of suffering to bring out really rich fruit in our lives.

And that is exactly what is going on in Genesis chapter 31. Jacob, as he says multiple times, has been suffering under the hand of Laban for 20 years.

Seven of those years were working for Leah. Seven were working for Rachel. Six then to work for the flocks. And those 20 years have brought about this beautiful fruit in Jacob's life.

[15 : 26] You remember last week, God blessed Jacob. Jacob has Laban's sheep now and he has them fair and square. He has them the way that the deal was made, that he would have the spotted, the speckled, and the striped.

And so verses one and two, we're getting into the story now. Verses one and two, Laban's sons and Laban himself are not happy. Laban's sons have lost their future, the great inheritance they were looking forward to.

Laban himself has lost his present. He's lost the great wealth that he had. Things are not going well relationally, which prepares Jacob to hear the command that God has for him.

This is verse three, return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred and I will be with you. So Jacob receives that.

His next job is to go to Rachel and Leah and convince them that it is time to go. That takes us to verses four through 13, which is what I'm going to call Jacob's but God speech.

[16 : 29] This is his extended speech to Rachel and Leah to say, look, it is time for us to go. So track with me. Verse five, he says, Laban doesn't like me anymore, but the God of my father has been with me.

Verses six and seven, Laban has not treated me well. He's cheated me and changed my wages 10 times. Verse seven, but God did not permit him to harm me.

Now remember the accusation of Laban's sons in verse one. They say, look, he's taken all of Laban's wealth. He's taken our father's wealth and we don't have anything else. Jacob says, you know what?

That's correct. I did take all of Laban's wealth. And you know why I did that? You know how I took all his good sheep, all the healthy sheep and left him with the sick sheep, the weak sheep?

That was God. Verse eight, if he said the spotted shall be your wages, then all the flock bore spotted.

[17 : 39] And if he said the stripes shall be your wages, then all the flock bore striped. Verse nine, thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me.

God plundered Laban for me. It is God that caused the strong sheep to be striped and spotted and speckled, not the silly trick with the sticks.

No, it was God at work. It was God who did all of these things. And so he goes on. Now I want to go back. Verse five, remember that. Go back to verse five for a second.

But the God of my father has been with me. What does that remind you of? Remember all the way back to chapter 28.

Chapter 28 was the story of the ladder that goes from earth to heaven. And it wasn't just a ladder. God in that story makes Jacob two promises. Promise one, he says, I will be with you.

[18 : 54] Okay, and that's what Jacob has just said. Verse five, but the God of my father has been with me. And he makes a second promise. Back in chapter 28, I'm going to bring you back home.

Well, that's the rest of the speech. He's saying, look, I had this dream. This is verses 11 through 13. The angel of the Lord appeared to me and said, it's time to go home.

Verse 13, I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Bethel's talking about the very end of chapter 28.

That anointed pillar, that was Jacob's response to the blessing and the promise of God. So he's reminding him, look, remember what happened 20 years ago. I'm that same God.

I've now done exactly what I promised you that I would do. And it's time to come back home. It's not simply or merely or just, though, that God has kept his promise, but that Jacob now knows it deep down in his bones.

[20 : 11] Jacob has never, he has never given God this kind of credit and praise for the success in his life. And yet, what do we see now in this speech? Again and again, he's saying, look, I've had all the success and protection and blessing because and only because of God.

Remember, we've talked before about the family motto of the Abraham family, the story that they live in, this narrative that they tell themselves, which is this, it is all up to me. My schemes, my tricks, my plans, that's what matters. I protect and provide for myself, no one else. And finally, finally, over 20 years, two decades, Jacob knows that's not true. God has used two decades of Jacob's suffering under the hand of Laban for him to finally admit, no, it's actually God who is in control.

Jacob knows the family motto is a lie. Jacob finally realizes God is the one in charge after years of trickery and deception.

[21 : 40] Jacob finally comes to know that protection and blessing come from God and God alone. Jacob is finally willing to give all credit and honor and praise and glory to God because he knows it now deep, deep down.

He's experienced it over and over again. the Jacob that we met in Genesis chapters 25 and 28 was proud and arrogant.

The Jacob of chapter 31 is humble and grateful and thankful. it has taken two decades for God to bring that humility about in his life.

It hasn't come easy. If you've been paying attention, you know that this process for Jacob has been brutal. It's been back-breaking work but it has come.

Year by year, month by month, week by week, two decades, God has been at work. He's been at work using suffering to transform the character of Jacob from the inside out.

[23 : 18] The point is this.

God uses our sufferings. God uses the consequences of our sin to change us.

Now, the specific change in this story is the change of humility. It's the change of Jacob finally being willing to give credit where credit is due.

How is it that we learn that every good and perfect gift comes from above? We learn that through suffering.

How is it that we learn that we are not as smart and gifted and talented and exceptional as maybe we flatter ourselves that we are?

[24 : 24] We learn it through suffering. How is it that we learn that God actually is in charge of all things?

We learn it through suffering. how do we learn as we talked about last week that God really does hold the whole world in his hands?

We learn it as we suffer. It is when our legs are actually cut out from under us that we have to trust God.

It is when the bottom falls out that we do learn experientially deeply all the way down to the bottom that God's promises are true and he will do exactly what he said he would do.

if you're a Christian and you're honest you are going to have to come to a place in your life where you do give all credit to God.

[25 : 53] If you really understand what it means that all gifts come from God that God's the one who's arranged circumstances and events and relationships to lead you to where you are if you really know how desperate your need is for God's grace and that without it you have no hope there is no one else to give the honor and the glory to but God alone.

1 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 7 says this what do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

Christian what do you have that you did not receive? Can you point to anything in your life where you say yeah I'm a self-made man I'm a self-made woman?

no no that's God's grace and mercy and provision in your life are you still thanking yourself congratulating yourself for your skill and your wisdom and your intelligence self-congratulation if you are something is off something is deeply wrong spiritually something in your heart is twisted and pointed in the wrong direction self-congratulation reveals our immaturity it tells us spiritually we are infants now you might be thinking well that's that's good I actually have really low self-esteem so I don't need to worry about that got bad news for you the flip side of self-congratulation is anxiety the anxiety that drives poor decisions because both of those things say

God is not in charge self-congratulation says God's not in charge I'm in charge anxiety says the same thing God's not in charge I'm in charge I have to make it happen both of those things lead to the same grasping for control the same belief that it is all up to me and since both of those things

have the same root they have the same solution which is this recognizing the absolute sovereignty and control of God over all things there is nothing outside of God's rule and reign now if you've been in the church long enough you've learned the right things to say and you know it's polite right when someone says to you wow you did such a great job you can say oh yeah you know thank God and his grace that's what brought it all together right

[29:11] God did it and there are people who know to say that and there are people who do say that and then what do we do the next moment we're thanking ourself don't be a person who talks about God's care be a person who believes it be a person who believes it deep down you know how God's going to bring that about in your life suffering suffering will cause us to believe more and more the words of Jesus in Luke chapter 12 are not five sparrows sold for two pennies and not one of them is forgotten before

God why even the hairs of your head are all numbered fear not you are of more value than many sparrows do you believe it do you believe that you are of more value than many sparrows can you agree with the psalmist the last verse of psalm 124 our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth do you believe it or have you just learned the right words to say Jacob has learned Jacob has learned the hard way that his help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth we're going to move on to the second half of the story briefly but I just want to point out one more thing about the

Jacob story which we've sort of already said which is this God plays the long game God plays the long game year after year after year he has shaped Jacob he's worked over two decades he hasn't worked over two months that's how God brings his sanctification to bear in our lives that's how he makes us to look more and more like Jesus in other words there is actually no two day shipping on sanctification no there's a long process God at work slow steady persistent unstoppable that's how God's been at work in the life of Jacob that's the way God works in your life as well month month by month year by year decade by decade we're going to talk very briefly about the second half of the story this is a long passage as I mentioned 55 verses part one

Jacob recognizes! He celebrates God's faithfulness in the past he finally realizes God is the one who has done all things and man it would be great if we could leave it there there is a problem which is that Jacob is actually going to have to keep trusting God he has not arrived he's not finished he's going to have to trust God's faithfulness not just see it in the past he's going to have to trust it in the present he gives this speech as we've discussed and in verses 14 they leave without telling Laban so in modern parlance we would say they ghost Laban Laban pursues them Laban is extremely upset that they would leave without saying goodbye he doesn't like the Irish goodbye apparently and there's this language here of military action it sounds like he's tracking them the way the hunter tracks an animal this is verse 23 pursued we should gather what we already know since you read the passage his intent is not great but

God appears to Laban in a dream this is verse 24 and says you know what Laban keep your mouth shut keep your mouth shut and say nothing either good or bad so Laban comes in knowing this he has this warning from God he then gives all these accusations against Jacob this is verses 25 through 32 and says you kidnapped my daughters and you took my household gods and this is the kicker verse 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 don't miss it don't miss it God is still protecting Jacob God is still watching after him he is still providing for him his protection and provision it's not just past tense everything that

[34:57] Jacob has said up to this point has been past tense here's what God did for me God's protection continues God is still doing for Jacob and what Laban here says says is correct Laban has Jacob outmanned and he has him outgunned there is no trick that Jacob can run at this point there is nothing he can do to save himself there's no lie he can tell to get himself out of this problem but God has told Laban in a dream to keep his mouth shut and so Laban knows that Jacob cannot be touched and so he gives God praise again verse 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 it is not just that Jacob sees everything that God has done in the past it is also that Jacob has to trust God in the present the life of faith never ends you will never come to a place as a Christian where you don't have to keep trusting God and how is it that you're able to trust God and his provision and protection and

blessing and mercy and grace in the present it is by remembering his provision and mercy and grace and blessing in the past because of what

God has done in Laban's life because of how the way he's protected Jacob Jacob can have that unshakable trust and confidence and belief are you still trusting God or do you believe you've arrived that you figured it all out as a Christian many many years ago when I was first starting at this church I think this was probably 2018 I went and I got breakfast some of you all will remember Ken and Nancy O'Connell who of our church for many years Ken and Nancy some of the founding members of our church and so Ken and I got breakfast at Chick-fil-A on Nevada and I think Ken wasn't sure why I'd asked to meet with him so at one point he said Matthew what can I do for you and

Ken had been with our church since 1996 and there had been some moments if you know the history of our church you know that there was times I think our church almost closed and Ken and Nancy and David and Paula Johnson decided no this church is going to stay open and so Ken said Matthew what can I do for you and I said Ken I just need you to tell me that God has been faithful to our church in the past and that he is going to be faithful in the future that is what I need for you I need you to help me remember God's protection and provision so that I know that I can have faith moving forward as we lead this church now that was back in 2018 2019 some of you all were here for our congregational meeting in 2023 and remember we were up against a loan renegotiation our interest rate was going to go up and we needed to raise money to pay off our building debt and while we're in the middle of all this conversation and questions and talk David Johnson stands up and if you were there hopefully you've never forgotten this

David said look you all need to calm down David said it nicer than that said you all need to calm down I've been at this one more time he said we're going to be amazed by how God will work that's looking at God's faithfulness in the past and moving forward in the future David was right God was faithful Christian we look back more than anything else to God's faithfulness to us in Jesus Christ that he came he lived the perfect life that we should have lived credited!

[39 : 54] If he did that will he not be faithful in everything else we look to what God has done in the past to give us hope for the future we give him all praise and honor and glory and we remember not just Jesus death and resurrection the very last sentence of Matthew chapter 28 Jesus says this and behold I am with you always to the end of the age what does that sound like sounds like God's promise to Jacob I'll be with you I'll protect you I'll care for you I'll bring you back home so that's why we sing by faith we see the hand of God in the light of creation's grand design in the lives of those who prove his faithfulness people like

Jacob people like you who walk by faith and not by sight let's pray our father in heaven we praise you and thank you for the great mercy and grace that you've shown us in Jesus Christ we ask that you would remind us of it again and again that you'd stir up our hearts with it that it would cause us to have an unshakable trust and confidence and belief in you we ask all of these things in the mighty!

name of Jesus Christ amen I invite you to stand for our closing hymn