

When Life Does Not Turn Your Way

Genesis 29:15-28

Stories of Genesis: When God Shows Up

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Worship at 9 and 10:45 a.m.

Let us take a moment to pray. In the stillness of these moments as we reflect upon our lives, we note those things that are not going the way that we hoped. We have hopes and expectations that are not being met; we have desires that we do not define; and yet you are in the midst of all, gracious God, and we hunger for a word that you would speak to us to show us the way. We pray this word would come to us now through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

As we all know there are significant moments when life does not turn the way we want. It seems to turn into a direction that was totally unexpected and undesirable. Thomas Jefferson notes some of these moments in some letters that he wrote to a couple of his acquaintances. At the age of nineteen, Jefferson had gone to stay with a friend overnight. He writes this note to another friend about that moment where things didn't turn out the way he hoped: "The cursed rats ate up my pocketbook, which was in my pocket within a foot of my head. And not contented with plenty for the present, they carried away my silk garters and half a dozen new minuets that I had just gotten. Of this I should have not accused the devil because you know, rats will be rats." Jefferson, later on in life when he was living in Paris, received a note of request from a woman he knew to pick up a couple of corsets that she had ordered in Paris. Well, he couldn't find them, so he wrote her this note back, after he had personally gone to purchase them and send them to her: "My dear Mrs. Smith if they are too small, then lay them aside for a time. There are ebbs as well as flows in this world. When the mountain refused to come to Mahomet he went to the mountain." Things sometimes just don't work out the way we have in mind.

You probably this week have even experienced some moments where you had an expectation to do something and it did not go the way you wanted. You know that life has not turned out the way you intended when the life that you have is not the life that you really want. The life that you have is not the life that you planned. For some men at mid-life, they could say that the wife that they have is not the wife that they wanted. You may discover that the family that you have is not the family that you'd hoped for; the in-laws you have are not the in-laws that you were hoping they would be. You may even believe that this church is not really the church you want. Sometimes we may, as parents, think that the kids we have are not the kids we really want – particularly when they reach those wonderful teenage years. But the kids also are probably thinking about the parents: these are not the parents that I really want; when they are in those teenage years. Things are not the way you want them to be; there is dissatisfaction, a frustration, and you are in conflict because those two worlds are not coming together.

Steve Jobs tells the story in his commencement address to Stanford in 2005, that his biological mother had some expectations in life that did not work out. She was an unwed college graduate student and she was hoping that she could have her newborn son adopted by parents who were college grads. He tells the story that she had made a contract with a couple of parents who were college grads and were committed to raising their children to become college grads. But at the last minute they decided to pull out. His mother was very frustrated. Another couple came up, of whom one was a high school graduate and the other had not even finished high school. And for many months, even though they had her child, his mother was not willing to sign the papers off because her expectation was that her child would be a college graduate. Steve Jobs goes on to tell the story that those parents, as little money as they had, did send him to college. But he – in thinking about that, and all that the money they were spending on him in college – decided to drop out and he never finished college. The CEO of Apple and Pixar points out that his mother's expectations were never met; and yet somehow there was a sense that they had been more than met. When life does not turn out the way we want, it's quite possible there's something better down the road if we patiently wait and see what God has.

If you have too little in life and you want more, that's pretty much where Jacob was. Jacob, after all, had been given this powerful promise in his dream that we talked about last week, where God said that he would be, in fact, one of the wealthy patriarchs with many, many children. We see Jacob, in this moment, without anything – in poverty and no possibility of children. If you believe, like Jacob, that you are called to be a wealthy patriarch or matriarch, and you have no money, and no wife, how can you possibly pass on your millions to your minions? It doesn't seem like there is a possibility of it. If you live in scarcity but believe that God has called you to abundance, how would you get there? Jacob has nothing; and yet he is functioning on the basis that God's promise will come true.

Unfortunately in some of our Christian perspectives, we have treated this particular case in point as if God will give wealth and health to everybody, which is not true. But this is true: if you find yourself in life with nothing, or not enough to be able to survive or progress in life, your life is in the hands of God, and God has something better for you ahead. It is not a guarantee, it is a commitment. When life has not turned your way, there are often moments when you feel as though God has disappeared from sight. God has disappeared, and seems detached, and not present for what you need. Someone has called this 'God has absconded' or 'God has disappeared from all visibility.'

It's interesting to note that this particular text in the book of Genesis is found between two major events where God appears. God is present in Jacob's life, with strong evidence. But in this particular passage in chapter 29 there is no mention of God. God's promises seem like presumptions at this point. The grace that Jacob is planning and expecting has no human face. God is silent. And the noise of God's silence is deafening. There are many moments in our lives when God does not show up. God has been there in the past; God will be there in the future; but for right now God is quiet. You may find yourself in a place like that, when God has disappeared. Is God even involved anymore? Jacob has nothing to do except to work on the basis that God will make happen what will happen in the future. And Jacob has discovered the hard way that he cannot make it happen on his own agenda.

Life has not turned your way when you discover that your past, in fact, and your past deeds are undermining your future. Jacob is notorious in his family pattern of treating his older brother with less than high esteem – taking his birthright and taking his blessing. You can be sure that, at some point in the future, your past sins will confront you. This is what happens to Jacob. There's a wonderful flow of justice here, in the confrontation with Laban and Laban's two daughters, Leah and Rachel. There is that wonderful tension between the oldest and the second-born; it's a similar tension that Jacob had with Esau. It seems that Jacob, as the second-born, didn't deserve the birthright or the blessing. But he manipulated and deceived and got it anyway. Now he meets Laban and Laban seems to be able to match his deception. The woman that he wanted, who is the second-born, is not given to him, but in fact, it's the first-born woman that he ends up with.

It all comes around eventually doesn't it? Justice happens. That's part of God's balance in life. If there are things that we have done or behaved in the past, those behaviors will, in fact, confront us in the future – not so much to beat up on us, but to let us know that that's not going to be the way it is.

Jacob has to work for a living now. Laban's deceit matches Jacob's, and he must face the consequences of it. Life has not turned your way when you've lost the upper hand and now you're looking for a helping hand from somebody else, even though you may not have been a helping hand to others. You've lost control and now you are dependent upon someone else to make it happen. Jacob was pretty self-assured that he could make his life the way he planned on it to be. He discovered now, that even though he has worked hard at manipulating and deceiving, he is literally without anything, and without hope.

It isn't long in life that we discover that we can't do it our way. We can't make it happen on our agenda. In fact, we are confronted with the possibility that, the more we push in our way, the less we receive what we hope to get.

What happens when the employee is your boss; or the student is now your teacher; or your child is now your parent. I had a professor in seminary who once said in a classroom, and I'll never forget it: "I'm good to my students because I never know when one of my students will become my boss." It wasn't too many years beyond that, that this man ended up working for me in the seminary and I reminded him of that

statement. And he reminded me: it will turn back on you; watch.

When life has not turned your way and you've lost the upper hand, be careful how you treat people, because those patterns will come back and haunt you. You know the bumper sticker that says, "I've gotten revenge on my children: I've aged." Well, sometimes that's a hard moment when you realize that you are no longer in charge of your own life, and now your children are in charge of your life. One of the hard things of aging is: you'd better have raised your children well, because now it's going to come back to roost. I think many of us at mid-life are dealing with the struggle of what it means to parent our parents in healthy ways. And there's great resistance. I recall what my professor said, "Be careful when it comes around in your direction." We say to both of our daughters, "Help us to prepare for the future so that you don't have to fight with us when we are old."

Life has not turned your way when your friends have become your foes. You know that person that you've been close to in life, but something happens and you become divorced from them. You create a sense of dissidence; the difference becomes huge and you separate. Well, Laban was supposed to have been a family member, but at this moment in time, Laban has become Jacob's enemy. Jacob has made a deal with Laban and Laban breaks the deal. You've probably been in situations when someone with whom you've have had a wonderful relationship has broken the deal – broken the covenant or the contract. And you are literally at their mercy. You can't make it happen and change it. You can't change the dynamic of the relationship. You must find a way to live in that changed relationship, by grace. And so Jacob finds a way to work now with Laban, who's a man of deception.

Life has not turned your way when you've missed reading the small print. You didn't realize there was something missing in this conversation and the contract. Jacob did not realize that: 'Oh, by the way, if this marriage is going to work with Rachel, in our country, you've got to marry the older daughter too.' You've been in that place where you've missed something. You didn't know the rules of the game and they came back and bit you. Laban's statement, 'Oh by the way, Jacob, you don't know this about our world but we've got to marry the first daughter before the second.'

I realized that along in my life, I have striven for first place in a number of things. Like many of you, I want to be the one who wins and makes it. I have ambition. I don't think you are in Washington, DC unless you are a person of significant ambition. But here's what I discovered along the way: people forgot to tell me about the small print. In elementary school, I was striving for the Rotary award and people assured me that I would get it because of my grades and my accomplishments. But yet another young man was given it. And no one told me: 'Oh by the way, his parents were part of the Rotary Club.' No one told me the small print. Or in graduate school, when I was really in line for the graduate award in music and people assured me that I would get the award – no one told me the small print: 'Oh by the way, you need to spend a lot more time with your professors so they get to know you in order to get that award.' Sometimes things don't turn your way because you didn't know the small print.

Life has not turned your way when you've worked hard, you've waited for something, and you've worked, and you've waited, and it's about ready to happen – and you discover it's not going to.

Jacob had worked for seven years for Rachel. He had been patient. The seven years had gone by quickly and he's ready to have her as his wife. It doesn't happen. What happens to you when you've worked hard for something and it doesn't come out the way you want it? The promise is postponed; the delight of the moment is delayed. As our friend, Craig Barnes, has said, the things that we've worked so hard for are often the things that have to be given by God as a gift.

So, Jacob's past is built on getting what he wants, when he wants it. But now he has to wait for something. And he waits, and he works, but he still doesn't get it. It's God's way of bringing a pattern into Jacob's life that hasn't been there – of discipline; of commitment; of persistence; of perseverance. Now he must wait and wait, and work and work – not for seven, but for fourteen years.

I was all ready to be ordained as a Presbyterian, to pastoral ministry. I had done all my work and taken my exams. I was excited about the possibility of sending my Personal Information Form out to literally more than one hundred churches. A year later, after I had received one hundred and nine rejection letters, I

wondered if maybe I had missed something. Now today, I would love to have every one of those letters and send them a little note. Sometimes the postponement is worth it, because all of the hard work I did to try get a job did not compare to the reality of the first call I had, which was much better than any of those letters could have provided.

Life has turned away from you when you've forgotten God. But God remembers you. Do you believe that God has abandoned you, left you alone? God is no longer involved in with your life, or speaking to you, or interested in who you are and what you're doing? It's not true.

The climax of this story is the few words in the next chapter when it says: God remembered Rachel and Jacob. They couldn't have a child; it's the pattern in Genesis. They're barren, not able to produce a child on their own. But God remembers them. You can't make it happen on your own. You don't know where God is. God remembers you. God has a gift of life to give to you that you cannot make happen on your agenda. God opens a new possibility from no possibility. If you believe the door has been closed, it's because God is going to give you an opening that you do not expect. God remembers you even when you do not remember God.

Back in the mid-1980's, I hired a secretary, a lady who was in her late fifties at the time. She was surprised that I hired her because she was not as fast as the younger women who were applying for the job; but she was very competent. She worked in that job for many years after I left. But then she lost her job because she was aging and things were not going as well at the place where she was. She wondered if God had abandoned her. I received a note from her the other day and she said: 'You know in the past few years I've lost my job and I've lost my son; he was killed suddenly.' But she discovered that, in the midst of her losses, where God was very quiet, God gave her the possibility of surprises. She not only got another job in her eighties because she's still so competent, but she found eight boys called the 'lost boys of Sudan.' And they now call her "Mom." God opened up possibilities for her that she could not make happen on her own.

God has possibilities for you today that you cannot make happen on your own. If you feel that you are shut down and shut out, that the world is closing on you, and that God has abandoned you – then pay attention to Jacob. Because God has a word for you here: when you forget God, or think God has forgotten you, God remembers you.

Let us pray. Oh Lord, remember us even when we ignore you and live life without you. Remember us. Open up new possibilities in the midst of our lives that feel so closed down. Help us to recognize that you are there, and that you want us to prosper into the future. May you help us to see Jesus – the One who makes all things new – in whom we pray. Amen.