

“The Lord Sets Jacob Apart”
(Genesis 31)

Is it good to have close associations with the world? Is it good to have close friends who are not Christians? Now I’m not asking whether it’s good to have any kind of associations. We know that we need to interact with unbelievers if we are to have any opportunities of bringing Christ to them. The question I’m asking is whether it is good for us or for our children to have *close* friends who are unbelievers. The Lord tells us again and again that it isn’t. For one thing, those who are close to us are very liable to influence us in a way that isn’t good. The things that they’re interested in will tend to move us away from Christ, rather than toward Him. For another, if we find that we are drawn more to unbelievers for our friends rather than believers, it shows that there is a spiritual problem in our hearts. Who is it that the Christian is to love more than anyone else in the world? Isn’t it Jesus? And who is it in this world that is more like Him than any other? Isn’t it a Christian? But who is the unbeliever more like – is He more like Jesus or the devil? As much as we don’t like sometimes to admit it, he is more like the devil, because the devil is his father. Associations with the world are necessary, but close associations are forbidden in Scripture, because of how the unbeliever will influence us for evil, rather than for good. Just look at the history of Israel, and you’ll find that separation from the other nations, or the lack of it, made all the difference between their following the Lord or abandoning Him.

Now the reason I bring this up this evening is because of what we see in our passage. Jacob, who had gone to Paddan-aram to find a wife, had now been there for twenty years (v. 41). During that time the Lord had blessed him in many ways – He had given him several wives, several children and large flocks and herds. But his time with Laban was also taking its toll on him and his family. Laban, like his fathers before him, was a compromiser. He appears not only to have had some dealings with the Lord, but he also worshipped his household idols. He was not in covenant with God and was clearly an unbeliever. And as we know from the Scripture and from our own experience, believers and unbelievers don’t mix. Sooner or later there’s bound to be conflict between them. And so the Lord now very wisely shows Jacob that it’s time to move on, back to his home, back to the land of promise. This will not only protect Jacob and his family, but also the coming promised Seed, who was yet to come through his loins. The theme of our text is that the Lord keeps His people separate from the world. And what we’ll see this evening are three things: 1) First, how the Lord showed Jacob that it was His will that he return to the land of Promise, 2) second, how the Lord protected Jacob from Laban so that he was able to return to the land, and 3) third, how the Lord brought peace between Jacob and Laban so that Jacob no longer needed to fear him.

First, let’s look at how the Lord showed Jacob that it was His will that he return to the land of Promise (Read vv. 1-21). The Lord showed Jacob that this was His will in three different ways. First, He showed him through His Providence, which means through his circumstances. Jacob saw that the attitude of Laban’s sons was beginning to change towards him because they thought that he had taken away their father’s wealth. Jacob also noticed that Laban was no longer friendly to him, even though he had done

nothing wrong. Sometimes the Lord uses these kinds of circumstances to move His people along. Along these same lines, the Lord also showed him through the unjust treatment he was receiving from Laban that it was time to leave. He had served Laban with all his strength, during the time of his employment – which is what the Lord also calls us to do – but yet Laban had cheated him by changing his wages ten times. Why would you stay where your employer is taking advantage of you, especially if you're not bound to stay? The Lord was showing Him it was time to move on.

Second, the Lord told him directly. While he was watching the flocks, the Lord appeared to him in a dream. He told Jacob that He had seen Laban's unjust treatment, which was why He was causing the flocks to give birth to the kind of animals that would be his. He also revealed Himself to Jacob as the God of Bethel, the God who had appeared to him while he was on his way to Paddan-aram, the same God to whom he had made his vow, and the God who was prepared to fulfill His promise. He told Jacob that he was to get up and leave that land and return to the land of his birth. The Lord directs not only through His Providence, but also through His Word. He even guides us through the vows or the promises we make to God. He reminds us of them and gives us the strength to keep them.

And finally, the Lord showed him that it was time to leave through the consent of his wives. After the Lord appeared to Jacob, he called for Rachel and Leah and told them all the Lord had said. He also told them about Laban and his sons' attitude towards him and the way their father had treated him. After they reflected on these things, as well as their father's treatment of them – having sold them to Jacob for 14 years worth of work – they also agreed that they should do what the Lord, who had protected them and dealt justly with them, said to do. The Lord not only directs us through providential circumstances and His Word, He also does so through the counsel of others, especially those who are close to us. These are the three things we are to consider in the decisions we make. What is He saying in the circumstances we are faced with? Which way are they pointing us? Even though He doesn't speak directly to us today, what principles are there in His Word that we can apply to the situation? Also, what promises have we made? Would the things we're thinking about doing violate any of them? And what do those we counsel with say, especially those who are closest to us? If we consult these three guides and do it thoroughly and conscientiously we won't go wrong very often.

Well having consulted these things, Jacob knew that it was time to return to the land of His fathers. And so he packed up his children, his belongings, gathered his flocks and herds, and set out for Gilead, *without telling Laban*. But there was one other thing that happened – which he was completely unaware of – and that was that Rachel, for one reason or another – perhaps because she couldn't break free from them in her heart, or perhaps because she thought they would give her the ability to have another child – stole her father's household idols, while he was away shearing his flocks.

The Lord showed Jacob that it was His will that he return to the land of Promise. Second, the Lord also protected Jacob from Laban so that he was able to return to that land (Read vv. 22-42).

When Laban was told what Jacob had done on the third day after he left, he was angry and gathered his kinsmen and set out after him. He didn't actually catch up to him until the seventh day – which shows how earnestly he wanted to find him. He would have had an even more difficult time if Jacob hadn't been driving his flocks in front of

him. However, whatever his purposes might have been in chasing Jacob, they all changed when the Lord appeared to him in a dream. The Lord basically threatened Laban, and told him that he was not to speak to Jacob either good or bad, which meant that he was not to say anything to him about his journey, since it was the Lord who had commanded him to return home. When Laban caught up to him, he reproved him by asking why he had deceived him, and why he had taken his daughters and sons without giving him the opportunity to send them off properly. He was angry, and certainly he had every reason to be. Now in other circumstances, he might have sought revenge, but not in this case. He knew there was nothing he could do to Jacob, because the Lord, the God of Jacob's father, was protecting him. And so he changed his tone and began to excuse what Jacob had done because he had longed for and wanted to return to his father's house. But Jacob told him the reason: he was afraid, afraid that Laban would take his daughters and everything he had from him by force. At this point, Jacob didn't have any allies or a very great house. He was no match for Laban by himself. However, this shows us what is often all too true of the believer: he didn't trust in the Lord as he should have. If he had, he wouldn't have had anything to fear. We shouldn't be too critical of Jacob, though. How many times have we done the same thing? We have the same promises given to us, but so often we fail to believe them. But we need to. God's promises will bring such comfort to our souls if we will only trust Him. The Lord will never let anything happen, outside of His perfect will for us.

But now the last thing Laban asked was something that Jacob had no knowledge of: "Why did you steal my gods?" (v. 30). The one thing that had given Jacob peace of conscience to this point is the fact that he had done everything right in the eyes of the Lord and had not been dishonest with Laban. Now Laban was accusing him of stealing, and of stealing his gods, no less! And so Jacob said, "The one with whom you find your gods shall not live; in the presence of our kinsmen point out what is yours among my belongings and take it for yourself" (v. 32). But Jacob didn't know that Rachel had stolen them. One commentator points to this as the possible reason Rachel died while giving birth to her next son Benjamin: because she was the guilty one. The curse of her husband fell on her, and that may be true. We need to be careful what we say. But Laban searched all his belongings and didn't find anything. Rachel had hidden the idols in a saddle, and made up an excuse as to why she couldn't get up. Laban apparently didn't suspect that his own daughter would have stolen them. This is part of that evil influence that I told you about at the beginning, and the reason why the Lord now told Jacob to return to the land of Promise.

Now after Jacob saw that the Lord had vindicated him of doing anything wrong, he then became very bold and rebuked Laban for his many injustices. He also gave glory to God by pointing out that it was the Lord who had defended and protected him. He was the One who had been with Jacob all this time for good, who had vindicated him and blessed him, and who was bringing him back to the land of Promise, as He said He would. And this is to remind us that the Lord always keeps His Word.

I don't think I need to spend much time applying this point, do I? We all know how faithful the Lord is to us. Even when we sin and go away from Him, He still mercifully brings us back into His fold. He even disciplines us to keep us from going astray again, because His love towards us is so great. He has promised that through His Son, He will take care of us in this world. He has also promised that He will continue to

do so, until we arrive safely at home with Him in heaven. We are not called by the Lord to go to an earthly Canaan, but by His grace, through Jesus Christ, He has called us to a heavenly one. All we need to do is to trust Him and His promises, and we can have the greatest assurance that we will arrive safely there. Trust in the Lord, then, at all times, for He has promised to work all things together in our lives for good, if we will only take hold of Him through His Son.

The Lord told Jacob it was time to return home, and He faithfully protected him all along the way. Lastly, I want you to see how the Lord brought peace between Jacob and Laban, so that he no longer needed to fear him (Read vv. 43-55).

Apparently, what the Lord said to Laban had a strong effect on him. He appears to have wanted to take everything Jacob had, as Jacob had feared, and return with them to Paddan-aram, but now he didn't dare. The Lord had given them all to Jacob, and now what could he do? The Lord might also continue to bless Jacob, and one day Jacob might return to avenge himself on him. And so probably out of fear and a desire to preserve himself from danger, he made a covenant with Jacob. Jacob had his kinsmen set up a heap of stones, which they did, and Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me this day" (v. 48). He also said, "May the Lord watch between you and me when we are absent from one another" (v. 49). This is why the heap was named Mizpah, or watchtower. The terms of the covenant were basically that Jacob would not take any more wives besides Laban's daughters and that neither one would pass by that heap to do the other harm. Then Laban called on the name of the God of Abraham, who was the God of Jacob's father, and the God of Nahor, who was the God of his father, even the God who is the God of both Abraham and Nahor's father, to bear witness to the oath. And "Jacob swore by the fear of his father Isaac," which meant that he swore by the God of his father (v. 53). He also sacrificed peace offerings and they ate. Finally, after they spent the night on the mountain, in the morning, after Laban arose and kissed his sons and daughters and blessed them – showing again how important the blessing of a father is to his children – Laban departed. This again confirms to us that what God says elsewhere in His Word is true: if a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, He will make even his enemies to be at peace with him (Prov. 16:7). This doesn't mean that your enemies will love you, but that they will fear you enough to leave you alone. The best way to have peace with our enemies is to draw near to God.

And so we see that the Lord showed Jacob it was time to return to the land of Promise and to separate himself from Laban and his influences. He protected him on his journey home, even as He said He would. And He even subdued Jacob's enemy and brought lasting peace between them. But there was still one more obstacle in his way, one more person that he was afraid of, and that was his brother Esau – the one who wanted to kill him for taking away his blessing. Would the Lord protect him from his brother? The answer of course is yes, even though Jacob again became afraid. This is what we will look at next time as we continue to see how the Lord fulfills His promise to bless Jacob and his seed. Amen.