

## **“WHEN THE CHICKENS COME HOME TO ROOST”** **(Genesis 29:1-30)**

There are certain laws that God has woven into the fabric of the universe to guide and control things in our world, and these laws work whether you believe in them or not. For example, if you went up on the roof of the church and stepped off, you would experience the law of gravity. Whatever goes up must come down. You may say, “I don’t believe in gravity.” Well, it doesn’t matter because it’s a law regardless of what you believe. It’s cool in the movies to see superheroes fly and defy gravity, but life in the real world doesn’t work that way.

There is the law of thermodynamics or entropy that says that everything left to itself has a tendency to deteriorate. Have you noticed that? If you ever bought a new car and driven it off the lot, you’ve witnessed entropy. You’ve lost several thousand dollars as soon as you’ve driven it off the lot because things have a tendency to deteriorate on their own. Your child’s bedroom is another example of entropy. As soon as they clean up their room it begins to deteriorate back to its original state. The law of thermodynamics is a constant law whether you believe it or whether you are even aware of it.

Then there is the law of sowing and reaping. Everyone is familiar with this law, and we have a number of common ways we express it... What goes around, comes around... If you do the crime, you do the time... It’s time you get a dose of your own medicine... and the chickens have come home to roost. Even people unfamiliar with the Bible idea of sowing and reaping. We don’t like the law of sowing and reaping, and do whatever we can to avoid it, but as with gravity and entropy, there’s no getting around the law of sowing and reaping.

The principle of sowing and reaping is seen several times in the Bible.

- Pharaoh gave orders that every firstborn son be drowned. Pharaoh’s army was later drowned in the Red Sea.
- When King Ahab killed Naboth the dogs came and licked up his blood. When Ahab died the dogs came and licked up his blood.
- In the book of Esther, Haman was hanged on the same gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

Some call this “poetic justice,” but it is simply a matter of God saying, “You reap the natural consequences of what you sow.” And nowhere in the Bible is this principle better illustrated than in the life of Jacob. We’ve been looking at the life of Jacob for several weeks now, and his life can be defined in three stages.

- The faking of a man.
- The breaking of a man.
- The making of a man.

In chapters 25-28 we’ve seen Jacob fake his way through life – scheming and deceiving to get what he wants. And for the most part, it’s worked for him. He got his father’s blessing he long coveted, but in doing so he incurred the wrath of his brother who he took it from him, and he’s forced to flee to Harran – 500 miles away – to get away from Esau.

Now in chapters 29-32 we see the breaking of Jacob. God is going to bless Jacob greatly and make him the man He wants him to be, but He first must break him. Jacob is spiritually immature and self-reliant – he’s full of himself – and in these chapters, God is going to use the school of hard knocks to break Jacob of his self-destructive patterns and teach him to rely on Him. The breaking of Jacob will go on for some twenty-years, but when he comes out the other side, he will be a much different person.

God takes each of us through the same process of breaking us in order to make us who He wants us to be, and as we come to chapter 29, we see a big idea of the passage emerge: Even as we experience God’s blessing on our life, God allows us to reap the consequences of our sin so that we become aware of areas of life that need to be changed.

In verses 1-14 we see God’s hand of blessing on Jacob. In chapter 28 God promised Jacob in a dream that He would use him and his descendants to bless the world, and He promised to be with him on his journey and watch over him. In the first 14 verses we see God providentially guiding the steps of Jacob in three ways. First, **He leads Jacob to the right place.** Verses 1-5... Then Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the eastern peoples. There he saw a well in the open country, with three flocks of sheep lying near it because the flocks were watered from that well. The stone over the mouth of the well was large. When all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone away from the well’s mouth and water the sheep. Then they would return the stone to its place over the mouth of the well. Jacob asked the shepherds, “My brothers, where are you from?” “We’re from Harran,” they replied. He said to them, “Do you know Laban, Nahor’s grandson?” “Yes, we know him,” they answered.

Jacob did not have a map or a GPS – he had no idea how to find his Uncle Laban, but God led him to a certain well where some shepherds were gathered with their flocks. He says, “Where are you guys from?” which was a way of asking “Where am I?” They said, “We’re from Harran.” Harran... that’s where I was going... Do you know a man named Laban? “We sure do.” Hallelujah – I’ve come to the right place – my journey is over.

Verse 6... Then Jacob asked them, “Is he well?” “Yes, he is,” they said, “and here comes his daughter Rachel with the sheep.” Part of Jacob’s reason for traveling to Harran was to find a wife among Laban’s daughters, and lo and behold, here comes one of Laban’s daughters. What are the chances? God not only leads Jacob to the right place, but secondly, **He arranges to have Rachel come to the well at the right time.**

The same thing happened years earlier when Jacob’s mother Rebekah came to a well and providentially met Abraham’s servant who was sent to find a wife for Isaac. It also happened with Ruth many years later who just so happened to be working in the field that Boaz owned, and she became part of the line through which Jesus would come into the world. All these stories show how God works very quietly and subtly behind the scenes to providentially bring about His will. He doesn’t drop a big blueprint down from heaven detailing everything, but tells us to step out in faith and He will direct our steps.

God leads Jacob to the right place, He arranges to have Rachel arrive at the right time, and then **He orchestrates the right response.** In verses 7-8 Jacob talks to the shepherds... “Look,” he said, “the sun is still high; it is not time for the flocks to be gathered. Water the sheep and take them back to pasture.” “We can’t,” they replied, “until all the flocks are gathered and the stone has been rolled away from the mouth of the well. Then we will water the sheep.”

This is kind of funny because Jacob is the consummate businessman, always looking for ways to get ahead, and he can't help but notice the shepherds are being kind of lazy. "Why are you waiting to water the sheep – you're right here at the well, water them and take them back out to the pasture." If you're the shepherds, you're thinking, "Who is this guy, this newcomer, who's telling us how to do our business?" Their answer is, "That's not the way we do things around here. We wait until all the flocks of the area are gathered, then all the shepherds from the various herds roll the heavy stone off the mouth of the well and then we water the sheep. So bug off, Jacob."

The real reason, perhaps, Jacob wants them to get a move on is because he sees a lovely young lady coming and wants to be alone with her. "Let's step it up, guys, get to work!" Whatever the reason is, verse 9 continues... "While he was still talking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherd. When Jacob saw Rachel daughter of his uncle Laban, and Laban's sheep, he went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered his uncle's sheep" (9-10). A large stone was placed over the well when it wasn't being used to protect it from contamination and unauthorized use. When Jacob sees Rachel coming, he gets a bolt of adrenalin and pushes the stone away on his own – he's shows off his muscles – and then in an act of chivalry, he waters her sheep.

Verses 11-14a... Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud. He had told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and a son of Rebekah. So she ran and told her father. As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he hurried to meet him. He embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his home, and there Jacob told him all these things. Then Laban said to him, "You are my own flesh and blood."

Everything is falling perfectly into place for Jacob. God leads him to the right place to find his Uncle Laban, and God arranges that Rachel come to the well at just the right time. After traveling 500 miles and all the uncertainty of how things would end up, all of his emotions come pouring out. He weeps out loud and gives Rachel a kiss. "You have no idea how glad I am to meet you." The main thing Jacob feels is relief that his journey is over.

Rachel hurries to tell her father about their long-lost relative, and he fully embraces his nephew as his flesh and blood, and takes him into his home. At this point all that is needed for Jacob to live happily-ever-after is to marry Rachel, go back to Canaan, and have lots of kids. But if that happened, Jacob would be unchanged – he would continue to live arrogantly and deceptively. He's not yet broken, and he's about to enroll in the school of hard knocks for the next twenty years, and it begins a month after he arrives in Haran.

Verses 14b-15... After Jacob had stayed with him for a whole month, Laban said to him, "Just because you are a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be." At this point Laban comes off as a great guy – generous and hospitable – but as the next few chapters show, he's a shrewd customer. He's cut out of the same cloth as Jacob – he's a schemer and deceiver – always looking for an angle. And Laban is going to be the one to teach Jacob the law of sowing and reaping.

He's no doubt noticed that Jacob is an asset – he's smart, industrious, and someone who would increase his profits. He's says, "Hey, let's work out a deal... you've been working for me the last month – what kind of wages do you want?" As a preview, wages will become a huge theme in Jacob and Laban's relationship over the next twenty years. Jacob says, "What kind of wages do I want? I'm glad you asked." Verses 16-18... Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel."

Ever since Jacob laid eyes on Rachel walking up to the well, he was hooked. She's the one. And he says to Laban, "I'll work seven years for you if I can marry your daughter." He doesn't start the negotiations off with a year or two – he goes right to seven. He's in love and no cost is too much for Rachel's dowry.

We're told that Laban has two daughters – an older daughter Leah and a younger daughter Rachel. Leah and Rachel were different, both in looks and personality. Leah had weak eyes. We're not told exactly what this means, but since Rachel is said to have a lovely figure and was beautiful, it means in some way that Leah was not her equal in that category. She didn't have the same sparkle in her eye that Rachel did. Some think it carried over to their personalities, and that Leah was tender and delicate, whereas Rachel was fiery and energetic. Whatever the differences were, Jacob was madly in love with Rachel, and said, "I'll work seven years for your *younger* daughter."

Verses 19-20... Laban said, "It's better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me." So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her. I often quote this verse to illustrate motivation. There are a lot of reasons we do things, but the most powerful motivation in the world is love. As the song says, "I would do anything for love." Jacob was so in love for Rachel that working seven years for her hand seemed like a few days.

In 2 Corinthians 5, some people thought Paul and his companions were crazy for putting their lives in danger and suffering pain by preaching the gospel. Paul says, "We're not crazy – the love of Christ compels us." Whatever we do for God or others is not going to last long without being motivated by love. If what we do is done merely out of duty, we get tired and grumpy and frustrated. But when love for Christ fills our hearts, serving Him will not be a burden, but a delight. Our love for Christ is what compels us and motivates us to serve Him.

Seven years fly by, and verse 21-25 says... Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her." The Bible is not shy in talking about sexuality. It says it like it is – Jacob's ready, and after seven years we would be too. Now comes the plot twist of all plot twists... "So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her. And Laban gave his servant Zilpah to his daughter as her attendant. When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?"

Unbelievable... Instead of giving Jacob Rachel, Laban gives him Leah. He doesn't figure this out until the morning... he rolls over to give Rachel a kiss and his head snaps back... "Leah... what... you're not Rachel!" The question that has been debated for centuries is: How did Jacob not know it was Leah? How is that even possible? Three theories have been set forth, and I think the answer is probably a combination of all three. First, it's dark, there's no lamp and you can't see much. Second, Leah is wearing a traditional wedding veil which further hides her identity. And third, Jacob is most likely inebriated. The wedding feast that Laban threw was not a Baptist potluck with coffee and Kool-Aid, but there's lots and lots of wine flowing, and it makes a lot of sense that Jacob was above the legal limit and not fully aware.

Jacob makes a beeline to Laban and says, "What is this you have done to me? Why have you deceived me?" You know who else said that? Esau did. After Jacob deceived his father into thinking he was Esau and giving him the family blessing, Genesis 27:36a says... Esau said, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? This is the second time he has taken advantage of me: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!" Jacob, the deceiver, becomes the deceived. He experiences the universal law of sowing what you reap.

Verses 26-27... Laban replied, “It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish this daughter’s bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work.” In order to rid Jacob of his manipulating ways, God uses a master-manipulator in Laban to give Jacob a dose of his own medicine. Just as it was the cultural custom of the day for the firstborn son to receive his father’s blessing, so it was the custom in Laban’s neck of the woods for the firstborn daughter to be given in marriage first. Jacob’s thinking, “I wish you would have told me that seven years ago!” Laban says, “Tell you what... I will also give you my younger daughter Rachel in exchange for another seven years of work.” Jacob is so in love with Rachel that he agrees to do so, but altogether he will give Laban fourteen years of free labor.

In verses 28-30 the story concludes by saying, “And Jacob did so. He finished the week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. Laban gave his servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her attendant. Jacob made love to Rachel also, and his love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years.”

As you might imagine, all this drama sets up even more drama in the chapters to come. You have two wives, and each wife comes with a servant that becomes part of the story. And then you have the fact that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. Jacob’s school of hard knocks is just beginning. He has a lot more to learn, and God will see to it that he does.

The overall theme of this passage is that while God’s people can have God’s blessing – they can be in a right relationship with Him and enjoy all the blessings of salvation – God allows us to reap the consequences of our sin so that we become aware of areas of life that need to be changed.

What happens to Jacob illustrates three important laws of sowing and reaping that we dare not miss. Number one, **we reap the same in kind as we sow**. If you plant corn, you harvest corn – if you plant squash, you get squash. What Jacob planted earlier in life comes back to haunt him.

You can’t help but notice the similarities between Jacob’s deception of Isaac and Laban’s deception of Jacob.

- Jacob deceived Isaac in darkness, and Leah deceives Jacob in darkness.
- Jacob pretended to be the older brother, and Leah pretended to be the younger sister.
- Jacob used props to deceive – wearing goatskins to pretend he was hairy like Esau – and Leah wore a veil to pretend like she was Rachel. Jacob reaps the same in kind as he sows.

The second principle of sowing and reaping is that **we reap in a different season that we sow**. Jacob may have thought he has gotten away with his lying and deception, but just as a farmer does not harvest his crop immediately after planting, Jacob does not reap the consequences of his actions right away. The book of Numbers says “Be sure your sin will find you out.” It may take several seasons for the reaping of consequences to come, but in due time it will come.

And we should be glad it does. We want to live in a just world where injustice is held accountable. The law of sowing and reaping reflects the justice and holiness of God. And we can be glad not just that God holds other responsible, but that He holds us responsible. If Jacob had been allowed to get away with his sinful patterns, he would never have grown into the man God wanted him to be. In love, God sees to it that we reap the natural consequences of our actions so that we will stop doing them. It’s that simple.

If you get a speeding ticket, it should motivate you to obey the speed limit. If you don't care and keep getting tickets, you eventually get your driver's license taken away. God wants to spare us the pain that sins brings, and uses the natural consequences of our choices to grow and mature and become more like Christ.

The third principle of sowing and reaping is that... **We can't do anything about last year's harvest, but we can do something about this year's harvest.** All of us are probably reaping the consequences of something we've done in the past, and as they say – what's done is done. Once a seed is sown in the ground, it will eventually come to harvest. We don't get to be like Bill Murray in Groundhog Day and get a do-over. The enemy would love for you to wallow in guilt over your past sins, and to play back in your mind all the things you wish you had done differently, but there's not a single thing you can do to change the past.

We need to adopt the attitude of the Apostle Paul who said, "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13b-14). Paul knew that if he thought too much about his failures, it would crush him. Paul had a very dark past, including violence against Christians. He referred to himself as the "chief of sinners." But he also relished in the knowledge that he was a forgiven sinner and that God no longer held his sins against him.

Part of forgetting what is behind is accepting the consequences of our choices. Since we can't go back and undo what we've done, it's important that we start over with God, and that begins with acknowledging our failures and our sin. If we confess our sin, 1 John 1:9 says, God will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In other words, he wipes the slate clean. He remembers our sin no more and we get a fresh start.

But this doesn't mean that the natural laws of the harvest are cancelled. A person in prison may find new life in Christ, but still have to serve the remainder of his sentence. If someone abused drugs and alcohol for years, they may have to live with the physical effects of those choices. If a husband hit his wife and she divorces him, he may have to suffer the pain of those choices. If you gossip and spread rumors about someone, you may have to suffer the natural fallout that comes with that action.

This doesn't mean that life is over – you confess your sins, you make amends with people as best you can, you accept God's forgiveness, you learn from your mistakes, and you commit yourself to serve God. The Apostle Paul went on to be used of God in great ways. I think of someone like Chuck Colson, who went to prison for his role in Watergate. In prison he came to Christ and repented, and after serving his sentence, God used him to start a nationwide prison ministry to help others to repent, find Christ, and become better people.

Jacob would go on to accomplish great things for God after years of reaping. After going through the school of hard knocks, he graduated a better person and better equipped to handle life. We can be very thankful that His story is included in the Bible, both as a warning and an encouragement. And with God's grace we can learn the law of sowing and reaping, and become the people God has made us to be.