

“BLOOM WHERE YOU’RE PLANTED” **(Genesis 30:25-43)**

Today I want to talk to you about blooming where you’re planted. My dad tells of a time when he and a friend of his named Russ were deer hunting up in the mountains, and as they were driving along a logging road, my dad suddenly stopped. Russ got all excited and said, “Do you see a buck?” “No,” my dad said pointing to something out the window. “What does that look like to you?” What does what look like? My dad said, “That looks like a tomato plant.” A tomato plant – what are you talking about? They were way up in the mountains – several miles away from where anyone lived – but as they got out of their truck to investigate, sure enough it was a tomato plant. They even picked a couple of tomatoes off and ate them. Most likely a logger or someone was eating a tomato and tossed it aside, and the seed of the tomato somehow found its way into the ground and up grew the plant.

It's fascinating how things can grow in the strangest places. Have you ever seen a flower growing up out the crack of the concrete? How does that happen? It only has a sliver of an opening but somehow makes it way up through it and blooms. Sometimes you’ll see a tree or shrub out in the middle of nowhere. How did it grow in such barren conditions? The constant temptation in life is to say, “If my conditions were better, if I was planted in a different place, in a different environment, I could really take off.” But God’s Word teaches just the opposite. The Bible says that growth can blossom in any location or circumstance. What’s more, it is often adverse conditions that bring forth the greatest growth.

We come to a great example of this principle today in Genesis 30. We’ve been looking for several weeks now at the life of Jacob, and we’ve seen how he was chosen by God to play an important role in God’s plan to rescue the world from sin. God’s plan started with Abraham back in Genesis 12, where God called Abraham to leave his family and homeland in Mesopotamia and go to a land God would show him. That land turned out to be Canaan, and would later be referred to as Israel or the Promised Land.

God promised Abraham three things: I will build from you a great nation with many descendants... I will give you this land upon which you can build my nation... and I will bless the world through your people. We now know that the ultimate blessing God was talking about was Jesus – the direct descendant of Abraham who blessed the world with the gift of salvation.

Genesis tells the story of how sin entered the world and the plan God enacted to save the world through Abraham’s family. The promises given to Abraham were passed on to his son Isaac, and then to his son Jacob. Jacob, you’ll remember, was forced to flee from the Promised Land to escape the vengeance of his brother Esau after Jacob deceived him, and altogether Jacob would be exiled from the Promised Land for twenty years.

Jacob travels some 500 miles to his Uncle Laban’s home, and in Laban he meets someone as cunning and deceitful as he was – and Jacob would learn the painful lesson of reaping what you sow. One of Jacob’s goals in going to Laban was to find a wife among his daughters – a wife from his own people, someone unlike the pagan Canaanites back home. He sets his eyes on Laban’s youngest daughter Rachel, and agrees to work seven years for her hand in marriage. That’s when Laban pulls a switch-a-roo and gives Jacob his oldest daughter Leah. Laban also gives Rachel to Jacob, but he’s forced to work another seven years. During the next fourteen years Jacob’s wives and their servants give birth to eleven sons and one daughter. A twelve son will later be born, making what will be known as the twelve tribes of Israel. God promised Jacob many descendants, and that promise is fulfilled in quick order.

As we pick up the story in 30:25, Jacob has now been working fourteen years for Laban and he gets the itch to go back home. It's time. But he's going to have to wait another six years to free himself from Laban's control before he can return home. Yet despite all the opposition and adversity Jacob faces, God causes him to prosper and flourish.

Verses 25-26 says... After Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Send me on my way so I can go back to my own homeland. Give me my wives and children, for whom I have served you, and I will be on my way. You know how much work I've done for you." Joseph, whose story will dominate the last fourteen chapters of Genesis, is the first child born to Rachel. Rachel was loved by Jacob, but was unable to have children – while Leah was unloved by Jacob but was able to bear many children.

When Rachel is finally able to have a child – probably near the end of Jacob's fourteen years of labor – he says, "It's time to go home." He says to Laban, "I've served you faithfully for all these years, and I have fulfilled my obligations to you. I'm ready to go home." By rights Jacob could have just left, but he's fearful of Laban and wants his blessing.

Verses 27-28... But Laban said to him, "If I have found favor in your eyes, please stay. I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you." He added, "Name your wages, and I will pay them." For all of his flaws, Jacob was a hard, productive worker and because of Jacob Laban has become very wealthy, so he naturally doesn't want Jacob to go. So, true to his nature, Laban tries to strike yet another deal with Jacob. He starts by flattering him and crediting his success to God. Laban was a polytheist who believed in many gods, and used divination to foresee the future and gain an advantage. Aside from any co-called divination, Laban could see through observation that God's hand of blessing was on Jacob, and he doesn't want him to leave.

Like a good negotiator, he says to Jacob, "Name your wages – what do you want?" After working fourteen years for Laban, Jacob doesn't have any wealth of his own – it all belongs to Laban as part of his dowry – and Jacob sees an opportunity to build up some economic capital before he returns home.

Verses 29-33... Jacob said to him, "You know how I have worked for you and how your livestock has fared under my care. The little you had before I came has increased greatly, and the Lord has blessed you wherever I have been. But now, when may I do something for my own household?" "What shall I give you?" he asked. "Don't give me anything," Jacob replied. "But if you will do this one thing for me, I will go on tending your flocks and watching over them: Let me go through all your flocks today and remove from them every speckled or spotted sheep, every dark-colored lamb and every spotted or speckled goat. They will be my wages. And my honesty will testify for me in the future, whenever you check on the wages you have paid me. Any goat in my possession that is not speckled or spotted, or any lamb that is not dark-colored, will be considered stolen."

In a nutshell, Jacob says, "Laban, I'll keep on raising your flocks – as I have for the last several years – but from now on whenever a sheep or goat is born, I'll let you keep the most common, normal-looking ones – all the animals with solid colors – and I'll keep the animals that are less common and fewer in number – the ones that are speckled or spotted or dark-colored." Jacob's proposal is a great deal for Laban. It would be like going to a used car lot and offering \$5000 more than the asking price. Jacob must have a plan up his sleeve.

Laban doesn't even give a counter-offer. Verses 34-37... "Agreed," said Laban. "Let it be as you have said." That same day he removed all the male goats that were streaked or spotted, and all the speckled or spotted female goats (all that had white on them) and all the dark-colored lambs, and he placed them in the care of his sons. Then he put a three-day journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob continued to tend the rest of Laban's flocks.

Even with this great deal, Laban cannot resist a little chicanery. Laban does two things... He immediately goes out and removes all the spotted, speckled animals from his flock – the ones Jacob would start out with – but he takes them away and puts them in the care of his sons which leaves Jacob with nothing to call his own. He then separates the multi-colored animals from the solid-colored animals so that there's no chance of inter-breeding. Laban is not a good guy – he's not your favorite uncle – and he makes Jacob start without a single sheep or goat to his name.

Now the story gets really interesting, and what happens next is a bit of a head-scratcher. Let's read what happens and then try to unpack what it means. Verses 37-43... Jacob, however, took fresh-cut branches from poplar, almond and plane trees and made white stripes on them by peeling the bark and exposing the white inner wood of the branches. Then he placed the peeled branches in all the watering troughs, so that they would be directly in front of the flocks when they came to drink. When the flocks were in heat and came to drink, they mated in front of the branches. And they bore young that were streaked or speckled or spotted. Jacob set apart the young of the flock by themselves, but made the rest face the streaked and dark-colored animals that belonged to Laban. Thus he made separate flocks for himself and did not put them with Laban's animals. Whenever the stronger females were in heat, Jacob would place the branches in the troughs in front of the animals so they would mate near the branches, but if the animals were weak, he would not place them there. So the weak animals went to Laban and the strong ones to Jacob. In this way the man grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks, and female and male servants, and camels and donkeys.

It's hard to make sense of what's going on here, but the bottom line is that Jacob was somehow able to breed the sheep and goats from Laban's flock so that they produced that kind of multi-colored animals that he would get to keep. Today there is a breed of speckled-colored sheep known as Jacob's sheep.

The big question is: How was he able to pull this off? I have looked at every resource I could get my hands on, and the answer is that nobody knows for sure. It would seem like after years of experience as a shepherd, Jacob knew a thing or two about the mating habits and breeding of animals. He takes some branches off of poplar, almond, and plane trees and peels the branches off. He then puts the peeled branches in the water troughs of his flocks, and the implication is that this somehow caused the animals to mate with other animals that shared similar genes to produce multi-colors. Jacob then separated his multi-colored animals from Laban's solid-colored animals, so that his flock grew stronger and Laban's flock grew weaker. What role the peeled branches played in all this we don't know, but the real reason for Jacob's success is revealed in the next chapter.

In 31:10-12 Jacob recounts what happens to Leah and Rachel and says... In breeding season I once had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the male goats mating with the flock were streaked, speckled or spotted. The angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob.' I answered, 'Here I am.' And he said, 'Look up and see that all the male goats mating with the flock are streaked, speckled or spotted, for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you.

Jacob apparently received inside information – divine knowledge from God – as to which animals should mate with which. And based on the knowledge he received from God, he used his experience as a shepherd to bring about the results he was looking for. As to what part the peeled branches played, we simply do not know. If you find a good answer, be sure to let me know. What we do know is that God caused Jacob to be successful, so much so that 30:43 says... In this way the man grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks, and female and male servants, and camels and donkeys.

In chapter 28, as Jacob was leaving the Promised Land, God appeared to him in a dream and promised to be with Jacob wherever he went, to watch over him, and bless him. And that's exactly what God does. During most of these years Jacob did not sense God's blessing – they were tough, rugged years spent reaping the bitter consequences of what he sowed. But God had Jacob right where He wanted him and used his harsh conditions to break him and make him into the man He wanted him to be.

It would be easy for Jacob to think that these were wasted years – years that could have been spent back in the Promised Land, building a nation for God. God's plan, however, was to build Jacob's family in adverse conditions – and it was in these conditions that Jacob's family flourished. God promised him many descendants, and in this foreign land God blessed Jacob with one son after another. In the midst of adversity, God was growing His nation.

When Jacob fled from the Promised Land, he didn't have a penny to his name, and after fourteen years he still didn't have anything, but in God's providence Jacob became wealthy and prosperous. And although Jacob still has some rough edges God needs to remove, Jacob's time away from home humbled him and caused him to grow less reliant on himself and more reliant on God.

It's easy to read this passage and get fixated on the peeled branches and sheep breeding, but the main lesson of the story is that God wants us to bloom where we're planted. The original purpose of the book of Genesis was to teach the people of Israel their history and heritage. Moses wrote Genesis in the time period following Israel's exodus from Egypt – some 400-plus years after the time of Jacob. Israel had just endured 400 years of bondage and affliction away from the Promised Land, and Moses wanted to reconnect them with their past in order to strengthen their confidence in God for their future. The story of how God was with Jacob away from the Promised Land would have a profound effect on how God would be with Jacob's descendants as they were now returning to the land. The parallels between the two stories are remarkable.

- Jacob left the land with nothing, just as the Israelites went down to Egypt during a time of famine with nothing.
- Jacob was a slave to Laban; Israel was a slave to Pharaoh.
- Jacob arrived in Harran alone, but returned to the Promised Land with a large family; Israel arrived in Egypt with a total of 70 people, but Exodus 1 says their number multiplied and increased greatly – so much so that Pharaoh became fearful. Their growth took place under intense suffering.
- Jacob arrived with nothing and left with great wealth; Israel arrived in Egypt with no food, but after the ten plagues, the Egyptians willingly gave them their gold and silver and clothing so that they left Egypt with great wealth.

It's almost as if Jacob's story in here in Genesis 30 was a dress rehearsal for what would happen with Israel over 400 years later. Just as God caused Jacob to prosper in adverse conditions, God caused Israel to bloom where they were planted in Egypt. In the midst of adversity it may not feel like you are blooming, but God is faithful to watch over His own and bring great good out of hardship.

The same thing happened centuries later when Israel was carried away from the land by Babylon and spent seventy years in captivity. Among the captives was Daniel and three young Hebrews named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Like Jacob, they find themselves in a foreign country, in adverse conditions, and yet they prospered. They grew in wisdom and knowledge and character, and caught the notice of the king who gave them important positions in his kingdom. Even when they were thrown in the fiery furnace, God was with them and delivered them, and the king promoted them.

Daniel also flourished in Babylon – so much so that the king was set to make the administrator of the entire kingdom before Daniel's enemies framed him and he was thrown into the lion's den. When he escaped unharmed, Daniel received his promotion and the king recognized the true God of Daniel. Daniel and his three friends were taught the story of Jacob in their youth, and remembering how God was with Jacob no doubt gave them courage to bloom where they were planted.

Can I give you yet another example? I love this one. In the book of Acts, soon after the church was born, Stephen is martyred in chapter 7. Right after his death, in chapter 8, a great persecution breaks out against the church. Enemies of the church go house to house, dragging Christians off to prison. The church was forced to leave Jerusalem and scatter. But in these adverse conditions, the church took off. They flourished under persecution, and their scattering actually turned out to be a good thing as the gospel message spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth.

We could go on and on with other examples like Paul being put in prison. Rather than this be the end of his ministry, Paul used the opportunity to witness to the Roman guards, who in turn spread the message throughout Rome.

Jacob's flourishing in adversity ultimately serves as a picture or preview of Jesus. Just as Jacob left the Promised Land of blessing, Jesus left the glory of heaven to come to a sinful, fallen world. He was seated in glory at the right hand of the Father, but voluntarily surrendered his right and privileges to come to earth and fulfill God's plan of redemption.

Jesus arrived in the world with nothing. He said, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." Jesus did not even have the comforts that foxes and birds have. On earth Jesus lived the lowly, humble life of a servant, and His life from start to finish was filled with suffering, hardship, and adversity.

Just as Jacob suffered at the hands of Laban, and Israel suffered under Pharaoh, Jesus willingly suffered at the hands of Pilate and the Roman soldiers.

Yet it was in the midst of adversity came the world's greatest blessing. 2 Corinthians 8:9 says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." Jesus left heaven with power and glory and honor, yet set it all aside in order to die a humble death so that we might be saved. The result of His poverty is that you and I have become rich – we are saved from condemnation and blessed with abundant and eternal life. In Christ we are blessed with every spiritual blessing.

Jesus arrived to the world in poverty, but He left with great wealth. Just as Jacob's family multiplied in adversity, and the children of Israel multiplied in bondage to Egypt, Hebrews 2:10 says that through His death Jesus brought many sons and daughters into glory. The fact that millions of worshippers are gathered in churches around this globe this morning speaks of how God's kingdom has grown, expanded, and flourished.

Jacob would return to the land of blessing, and after His work on earth was done, Jesus returned to His glory in heaven and was coronated a king with all honor, power, and authority. He is the ultimate example of flourishing in adversity, and of God working all things together for good.

Conventional wisdom says that if your conditions could change, if you could just be placed in a different environment or location, you just were born into a different family, is you just didn't have this or that disadvantage, then you would soar in life. But the life of Jacob, the life of the children of Israel, the life of the early church, and the life of Jesus teaches just the opposite. God wants you to bloom right where you are planted, and rather than adverse conditions holding you back, they can actually produce the greatest fruit.

Where are you planted today? What less-than-ideal conditions do you find yourself in?

- Maybe it's a difficult marriage or stress with children or with parents.
- Maybe your single and waiting for the right person to come into your life
- Maybe your adversity is in the area of health or financial strain.

God wants you to know that He can work through your adversity to bring about long and lasting growth. And you can trust Him that when you come out on the other side, you will be richer, stronger, and blessed.