

What Goes Around, Comes Around
Genesis 29-31
8-10-2025

A far too common complaint is how busy everyone is. There never seems to be enough time in the day to see the end of our to do list. As someone put it, we have people to see, projects to complete, emails to read and emails to write, calls to answer and calls to make, and then more calls to call back those who have called us and left a message. Henry Nowen compared our lives to overstuffed suitcases that are bursting at the seams. One of the phrases people sometimes use to express their feeling that they have far too much to do is, "I'm really under the gun this week."

Dennis Waitley said we are misusing the original meaning of that phrase. Originally it didn't refer to busy schedules but to facing the consequences of our own actions.

He said it originated in the mid-1700's when the American colonies were in rebellion to England. There was a young naval officer on the HMS Intrepid in route from England to the colonies. The ship was to deliver a batch of guns and munitions to the Crown's government in New England. This young ensign was given a special assignment that involved transporting a large canon from Portsmouth, England, to Boston. His orders were to ensure its safe passage and delivery to the proper authority.

After two days at sea, the Intrepid encountered heavy weather and was soon running before a northerly gale. This young ensign hastened to lash the huge canon to the deck and get quickly below where he could find some dry clothes and a mug of hot soup. In his rush to get out of the rain and the wind, he reasoned that since it didn't seem like much of a storm, the ropes he used should be adequate to secure the cannon.

He then went below to get dry and warm but after only a few minutes the storm suddenly increased in intensity. The cannon came loose and rumbled across the deck. When he heard cries of warning from the men on watch above, he was horrified by the crashing sound of splintered wood. He leaped on deck just in time to see the great gun rolling out of control, heading back from the starboard rail to the port side, bearing down on two sailors who were frantically trying to work with some sails that had become fouled in the roaring winds.

Without a moment's hesitation, this young ensign threw himself in front of the mighty gun and somehow stopped it before it reached his two shipmates. Both his legs were broken under the tremendous weight of the cannon's wheels, but he saved the day by literally throwing himself under the gun.

The next morning, he was on crutches and in a lot of pain as he made his way to the quarterdeck for a special ceremony in his honor. The entire crew assembled to watch the captain bestow on this young ensign his country's highest award for heroism. A great cheer went up as the captain pinned on the medal. But it soon fell to absolute silence as he finished his presentation by stating that for placing the ship and all his shipmates in dire peril and being guilty of dereliction of duty, the ensign was sentenced to die before a firing squad to be carried out immediately.

Excusing ourselves by saying we are really under the gun is not to our credit when we created the problems in the first place by our busy schedules, stressed out living and strained relationships.

In fact, if we are being honest, aren't many of our problems and difficulties really merely the result of our own making?

We find ourselves under the gun and working hard to deal with things which we have broken?

Or as someone has put it, if you could kick the person most responsible for your troubles, you wouldn't be able to sit down for a week.

As we look again at the life of Jacob, the heel grabber, the schemer, and deceiver, we find him confronted by the problems he had created in the first place.

As Jacob fled his home to avoid his brother's wrath, he was a broken man, but he didn't know it. It took 20 years of looking in the mirror for him to see who he really was and how he treated others.

In many ways chapters 29-31 are a counterpart to chapters 27-28, the parallels are in fact quite striking. It was there that the tables were turned and his eyes opened to see what he was guilty of and discover what it feels like to be treated the same way he had treated others.

This awareness of his character flaws, becoming aware of his sin and how he treated others, was critical for his transformation represented by a new name God gives him.

No longer will he be Jacob the heel grabber, but Israel, the one who wrestled with God.

That is just as true of us.

Until we are willing to confront our sin, confess and acknowledge our failures, repent of our hurtful behavior, transformation into a greater likeness of Christ will be severely limited.

Elizabeth Sherrill wrote, "All living tissue is constantly being broken down and reformed. This applies not only to our bodies but to the perpetual Christian emphasis on brokenness. Repent! Confess! Acknowledge your sinfulness! Just as living tissue is continually being torn down and rebuilt, as long as our relationship to God is alive, this tearing down process will be part of it. The confession of sin, the admission of guilt, will go hand in hand with renewal...There can be no growth without pruning, no rebirth with death."

After fleeing from his brother, chapter 29 begins with his arrival in Haran, the home of his family, in search of a wife, just as the servant of Abraham had done so many years earlier to find a wife for Isaac.

And like Abraham's servant many years before him, when he returned to Haran in search for a wife for Isaac, Jacob stopped at a well for water.

And just as the servant met Isaac's future wife Rebekah at the well, it was there that Jacob met Rachel.

And like the servant, he was invited home to meet the family.

Beginning in verse 14 it says,

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." 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." 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. Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her." 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?" 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." 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." (Genesis 29:14–30)

Despite having fled his brother Esau's wrath for cheating him out of his birthright and blessing, he hadn't changed when he laid down for the night in Bethel and had the vision of the stairway to heaven. In his dream, the Lord appeared and reaffirmed his promise he had first made to his grandfather Abraham then again to his father Isaac. The promise of land and a family through which the world would be blessed.

But he was still Jacob the heel grabber and deceiver who immediately tried to set conditions and bargain with God, stating in 28:20-22, "if you will take care of me, if you will keep me safe, if you feed me, if you clothe me if you bring me back, then I will accept you as my God and worship you and I'll even tithe."

as he arrives in Haran in search of his uncle, his true character once again comes out

verses 9-10 gives this away when it says, "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." (Genesis 29:9–10)

not only was Rachel beautiful and have a lovely figure, according to verse 17, but when he saw the sheep, he realized her daddy was rich

But this time in Laban, Jacob the consummate schemer and con artist, the one who all his life had gotten his way through trickery and deceit, finally meets his match in Laban and his sins catch up to him. As I said, the parallels between chapters 27-28 and chapters 29-31 is quite stark

Proving at least the partial truth to the old adage that what goes around comes around

In that day, marriages were legal arrangements made not just between the couple but between families. The bride was given to the groom in exchange for a dowry, in essence they were property being sold. After staying with Laban for a month he asks to marry Laban's daughter Rachel in exchange for 7 years of working for him.

Then after serving those seven years, at his own wedding, Laban pulls a fast one and switches brides.

That may sound strange to us, how do you not even know who you are marrying?

Traditionally, brides wore a veil which covered their entire face throughout the entire ceremony and celebration, that along with all the activity going on, he would not have been able to tell if it was Rachel. And because it was a community affair with abundant wine, it would not be uncommon for the groom especially to get drunk which is what the passage seems to imply happened with Jacob and when the party ended it was too dark and he was too drunk to realize that it was Leah in his tent and not Rachel.

By morning, when he saw who it was next to him, it was too late.

What goes around comes around

Or as Paul put it in Galatians 6:7, we reap what we sow

The deceiver who tricked his father by masquerading as his brother in verse 18-29 of chapter 27, was deceived by Laban the father who tricked him by having his daughter masquerade as her sister.

verse 18 says Jacob was in love with Rachel, so he agreed to work another 7 years for her to become his wife.

only this time he insisted that they be married before he started the work but here again, Laban got the better of him.

Jacob originally agreed to work for seven years in exchange for Rachel.

To our ears this may sound a bit crude, but because such arranged marriages were basically financial transactions, if you just consider it by the numbers.

A shepherd, the work Jacob was being hired to do, typically made around 10 shekels per year.

From ancient texts we know that a typical dowry or brides' price was 30-40 shekels.

so basically, the going price of a bride would have been the equivalent of 3-4 years of work, half of what Jacob agreed to.

By deceiving him and substituting Leah in Rachel's place, not only was Laban able to get Jacob to work for twice as long but all of it at twice the price.

What goes around comes around, we reap what we sow

In the end, the one who cheated his brother out of his blessing in chapter 27, is himself cheated by Laban who was able to get him to work for 14 years, paying the equivalent of 4 times the going rate for the only bride he really wanted.

Then in chapter 31, while Laban and his sons were away, he packed up his wives and children and all his possessions and fled without saying a word.

He justifies it in verse 5 by saying Laban had cheated him by changing his wages 10 times.

What goes around comes around as he reaped what he sowed

The one who cheated his own brother out of his birthright and his blessing now complains about being cheated by his father-in-law.

But it wasn't just Laban that proved the truth of the words that we reap what we sow

In that day, children were highly valued and the more a woman could have, the more she was esteemed by others and her husband

chapters 29-30 recount a state of competition between Leah and Rachel to see who could have the most children

Leah in the hope of finally winning Jacob's love, and Rachel who couldn't bear the thought of her sister coming out on top.

They even get their servants involved when they literally give them to Jacob as concubines because whatever children they might bear would be credited to their mistresses.

At one point, in 30:1-2, Rachel tries to pull Jacob into the middle of it saying, give me children or I will die. And Jacob understandably becomes angry saying Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?

Some might call Leah and Rachels rivalry poetic justice.

because remember, Jacobs early years were defined by his sibling rivalry with his brother Esau they were in a constant state of competition to see who would come out on top

From their mother's womb, chapter 25 Rebekah had a difficult pregnancy because he and Esau were already wrestling within her

At birth, Jacob was reluctant to let Esau be first and grabbed hold of his heel as they came out of the womb

And throughout his early years, he found ways to get the best of his brother, taking his birthright and then his blessing

what goes around comes around, we reap what we sow

The one who's early life was characterized and shaped by his sibling rivalry with his brother has to watch the sibling rivalry play out in his own home between the two sisters

And then in the midst of their rivalry, verses 14-18 of chapter 30, says:

"During wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, 'Please give me some of your son's mandrakes.' But she said to her, 'Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?' 'Very well,' Rachel said, 'he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes.' So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him. 'You must sleep with me,' she said. 'I have hired you with my son's mandrakes.' So he slept with her that night. God listened to Leah, and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son. Then Leah said, 'God has rewarded me for giving my servant to my husband.' So she named him Issachar." (Genesis 30:14-18)

While the particulars are very different, this story mirrors a story from Jacobs early days in Genesis 25:19-34, where he used food to get what he wanted from his brother, exchanging a bowl of stew for his brother's birthright

But again, what goes around comes around, we reap what we sow

Now Jacob becomes the unwitting recipient of another food exchange
The one who bought his brothers birthright for a bowl of stew, is now basically rented out for the night by his own wife for a mandrake.

Jacob's life does seem to fit the words of the person who said, looking back, my life seems to be one long obstacle course, with me as the chief obstacle

And certainly, for him, what goes around did come around
Or as Moses told the people of Israel in Numbers 32:23, be sure your sin will find you out

Before Jacob would be ready to meet God in chapter 32, he had to confront his sin, his life of deception and scheming and self-reliance and how he treated and abused people in order to get what he wanted
All the things which kept him from becoming useful to God and fulfil God's purpose for him as the one through whom the promise to bless the world would come

It may have taken 20 years in the house of Laban, but through his experiences there, God did finally break through and told him in 31:3

"Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you."

He was now ready to start the transformation from Jacob the heel grabber to Israel the one who wrestled with God, as he is renamed in chapter 32

Charles Steinmetz was said to be a genius of an electrical engineer that worked for General Electric at the beginning of the 20th century. One time after his retirement, when all the other engineers at GE were baffled by the breakdown of a complex of Machines, they finally contacted Steinmetz and asked him to come back to see if he could pinpoint the problem. After spending only a few minutes walking around the machines, Steinmetz took a piece of chalk out of his pocket and made a cross mark on one particular piece of one particular machine.

To their amazement, when the engineers disassembled that part of the machine, it turned out to be the precise location of the breakdown.

A few days later, the engineers received a bill from Steinmetz for \$10,000—a staggering sum in those days. This seemed extremely exorbitant, so they returned it to him with a request that he itemize it. After a few more days, they received a second, itemized bill:

**Making one cross mark: \$1.00
Knowing where to put it: \$9999.00**

The hard part of transformation from what we are to what we can be, is to know where to place the mark, what needs to change

It may have taken 20 years to get through to him, but when he returned home, he was a different person, no longer Jacob but Israel

That is the point of confession and repentance

Change is necessary if we are going to follow Jesus

But we have to know where to begin

identifying the problem and placing the mark so we can begin to take the steps needed to change

the tearing down so that we can be rebuilt

the New Testament has a variety of ways this is expressed such as,

we are to die to self in order that we may live for Christ

buried with him in order that we might be raised with him in the newness of life

we are to take off the old self so that we can put on the new

sown perishable yet raised imperishable

Confronting and acknowledging our sin and where we fall short so that he will not just forgive but transform our lives to become more like our Lord

repentance is not primarily behavioral change though it does result in behavioral change

It begins in our minds and thoughts which is why John the Baptist said we are to produce fruit or behavior which is in keeping with repentance

Only then, before God, will we not reap what we sow

Until we can identify our sin we won't confess it.

If we can't identify and confess it, we won't repent and turn from it.

And the change and transformation needed for our lives to reflect the image of our savior will be severely stunted

But if we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness

CS Lewis said, the Christian has a great advantage over other people, not by being less fallen than they, nor less doomed to live in a fallen world, but by knowing that he is fallen man in a fallen world.

And it is that recognition which forms our starting point in understanding the journey to know God.