

## “God Has Seen Your Affliction”

Genesis 31:22-42

February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Don Stratton enlisted in the US Navy in September 1940. In October, he was assigned to one of the most feared and renowned ships in US naval history. The ship housed over 1,500 officers, sailors, and Marines, about the population of Don’s hometown - Red Cloud, Nebraska.

Don and crew were aboard that ship – the *USS Arizona* - docked at Ford Island in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on Sunday, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941. That fateful morning, 1,177 of the crew of the *USS Arizona* were killed when the ship was blown up by aircraft of the Japanese Imperial Navy. Mr. Stratton is one of five remaining survivors of the crew. He and Ken Gire recently wrote an important book, *All the Gallant Men: The First Memoir by a USS Arizona Survivor*.

Though he survived, Don Stratton suffered serious burns to much of his body. He was hospitalized for 9 months, recovering from his injuries before he was discharged from the Navy.

Sometime later, he married his wife Velma and God blessed them with 4 children. As if Don hadn’t suffered enough affliction, consider the lot of his children:

- 1 - **Robert**, the oldest, born in 1951. He died in 2007. He had served in Vietnam, and died of complications from hepatitis C and Agent Orange exposure.
- 2 – **Randy**, their second child. Born in 1954; died in 2013 of a heart attack. Fortunately, he didn’t stay dead. He had called 911, but by the time paramedics reached him, his heart had stopped. They revived him.
- 3 – **Gypsy Dawn** was their third child. She came into the world not completely developed and lived just three days.
- 4 – **Roxanne Jo** was their fourth child. She lived 5 years.

Affliction is a byproduct of life in a fallen, sin-wracked world. Sickness, injury, betrayal, divorce, death of loved ones, inability to have children, financial ruin, birth defects, terminal illness diagnoses, imprisonment, unmet goals, unrealized dreams, prodigal children – all these and more characterize some of the trials of this life.

None of us is exempt from affliction; each of us has endured afflictions, whether or not you are a believer in Jesus Christ. Nowhere does the Bible teach that Christians are protected from hardships. In fact, a good case can be made that Christians are ensured of increased opportunity for affliction and suffering.

Jacob knew something about affliction. We are privy to some of it as we peer into God’s holy Word this morning. Jacob has left his uncle’s control and is on his way back to his homeland with his wives, Leah and Rachel, and their 12 children. But, affliction, in the person and works of Laban, follows after Jacob.

### **Genesis 31:22-42:**

“<sup>22</sup>And Laban was told on the third day that Jacob had fled. <sup>23</sup>Then he took his brethren with him and pursued him for seven days’ journey, and he overtook him in the mountains of Gilead. <sup>24</sup>But God had come to Laban the Syrian in a dream by night, and said to him, “Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.”

<sup>25</sup> So Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the mountains, and Laban with his brethren pitched in the mountains of Gilead.

<sup>26</sup> And Laban said to Jacob: “What have you done, that you have stolen away unknown to me, and carried away my daughters like captives *taken* with the sword? <sup>27</sup> Why did you flee away secretly, and steal away from me, and not tell me; for I might have sent you away with joy and songs, with timbrel and harp? <sup>28</sup> And you did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters. Now you have done foolishly in *so* doing. <sup>29</sup> It is in my power to do you harm, but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, ‘Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.’ <sup>30</sup> And now you have surely gone because you greatly long for your father’s house, *but* why did you steal my gods?”

<sup>31</sup> Then Jacob answered and said to Laban, “Because I was afraid, for I said, ‘Perhaps you would take your daughters from me by force.’ <sup>32</sup> With whomever you find your gods, do not let him live. In the presence of our brethren, identify what I have of yours and take *it* with you.” For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.

<sup>33</sup> And Laban went into Jacob’s tent, into Leah’s tent, and into the two maids’ tents, but he did not find *them*. Then he went out of Leah’s tent and entered Rachel’s tent. <sup>34</sup> Now Rachel had taken the household idols, put them in the camel’s saddle, and sat on them. And Laban searched all about the tent but did not find *them*. <sup>35</sup> And she said to her father, “Let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women *is* with me.” And he searched but did not find the household idols.

<sup>36</sup> Then Jacob was angry and rebuked Laban, and Jacob answered and said to Laban: “What *is* my trespass? What *is* my sin, that you have so hotly pursued me? <sup>37</sup> Although you have searched all my things, what part of your household things have you found? Set *it* here before my brethren and your brethren, that they may judge between us both! <sup>38</sup> These twenty years I *have been* with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried their young, and I have not eaten the rams of your flock. <sup>39</sup> That which was torn *by beasts* I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it. You required it from my hand, *whether* stolen by day or stolen by night. <sup>40</sup> *There* I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes. <sup>41</sup> Thus I have been in your house twenty years; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. <sup>42</sup> Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the labor of my hands, and rebuked *you* last night.”

I’ve structured this message according to three questions of application:

**MP 1 – What is Pursuing You?**

**MP 2 – What are You Pursuing?**

**MP 3 – What is God Saying to You?**

Jacob had spent 20 years, hundreds of miles from home, working as a shepherd for Laban. Jacob worked the first 7 years to earn Laban’s daughter Rachel’s hand in marriage. But, Laban deceived Jacob and instead gave his oldest daughter Leah to him. Jacob then worked another 7 years for Rachel because he loved her so. After that time expired, Jacob agreed to work another 6 years for the purpose of building up Laban’s flock.

Three days had passed since Jacob had saddled up his family members on camels and began the long trip back home (that was the end of the text we studied last Sunday – verses 17-21). As our text today opens, Laban gets word Jacob had left. He and his entourage then chase after Jacob in hot pursuit, catching up with them in the mountains of Gilead four days later. We know that Laban isn’t trying to catch up with Jacob to give him something he left behind. Rather, from his words in verses 26-30, we know that Laban is miffed!

1 – (v. 26) Laban is upset because Jacob had “stolen away” unknown to Laban, and “carried away” his daughters as if they were captives.

2 – (v. 27 & 28) Laban is upset because he didn’t have the chance to throw a going away party , and he didn’t get to kiss his daughters and grandchildren good-bye.

3 - (v. 30) The real reason Laban is upset is Jacob’s apparent theft of Laban’s missing household idols. In fact, the search of Jacob’s entourage didn’t turn them up, though we are told Rachel was sitting on them.

**This brings us to consider our first question** – *What is pursuing you? Who or what is following after you, dear ones?* Allow me to present 4 answers:

1 - Unless you turn from your sin, repent of it, and seek God in faith, your sin and its consequences pursue you. Consider:

\* **Numbers 32:23** – “...you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out.”

\* **Proverbs 13:21** – “Evil pursues sinners, but to the righteous, good shall be repaid.”

2 - The devil is pursuing you. **I Peter 5:8** – “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” Satan seeks those souls that God does not and troubles the elect even. But, Christians possess the power to overcome because “He who is in you (Christian) is greater than he who is in the world.” (**I John 4:4**)

3 - God pursues those whom He has chosen in Christ. Poet Francis Thompson called God, “the hound of heaven” in his well-known poem of the same name. John Newton wrote of God’s pursuit of His elect in his classic hymn, *Amazing Grace* – “I once was lost, but now am....found.”

4 - Your heritage pursues you. *What will be the legacy that follows your life? How are you pouring yourself into the lives of others, especially your children and grandchildren if you have them? If you are a member of this church, how are you engaging with the younger people in the church?* Last Sunday, we were challenged to pray for three of our junior and senior high youth. Some of us have been doing that for some time. But, if you haven’t been, *have you begun to do so this week?* Let others know you’re praying for them. It makes a difference!

Whereas **Laban pursued Jacob**, we see that **Jacob was also pursuing** a new life back home away from captivity to Laban. From verse 31, we know that Jacob was pursuing safety from Laban. Laban had not treated Jacob well those 20 years. Jacob’s speech in verses 36-42 reveals that he was pursuing justice in leaving the affliction he’d experienced at Laban’s hands. Human attempts at justice are always flawed, even if judgements are properly arrived at. But, God’s justice is always right. Closely related to God’s justice is righteousness. Consider **Psalm 97:1-2**:

“The LORD reigns;  
Let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of isles be glad!  
<sup>2</sup>Clouds and darkness surround Him;  
Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.”

God’s desire for us is that we pursue righteousness. **Proverbs 11:19** – “As righteousness *leads* to life, so he who pursues evil pursues *it* to his own death.” **Proverbs 21:21** teaches, “He who follows righteousness ... finds life, righteousness, and honor.” In his first letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul wrote words that should direct us as we pursue righteousness (**I Timothy 6:11**), “But you, O man of God...pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness.”

**Let us now consider our 2<sup>nd</sup> question** – *What are you pursuing? What spurs you on to action? We’ve just seen that God’s people are to pursue righteousness. Well, are you? What do your life habits say about your pursuit?*

Some pursue money – they are working hard to improve their financial portfolio. And, in itself, that could be a good thing...unless such pursuits regularly take you away from your family and church responsibilities.

Some are pursuing the applause of the world – fame, popularity. If this is you, your reputation or standing among others could be your driving concern. You may be compelled to improve their standing; such people are overly concerned how others perceive them. So, they may be tempted to think of their spouse, if married, as a barrier to reaching a certain image. They (you?) may be ashamed of family or church, so they don’t invite others to attend worship or other church gatherings.

Some are pursuing the right body image or weight. So, it could be that you are spending an inordinate amount of time getting the look just right. There is a cost if this is the path you are on. *Is your soul also being fed and exercised? Are you sacrificing a more intimate relationship with Jesus in order to achieve something lesser?* **I Timothy 4:8** reads “For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.” Paul is saying that physical fitness isn’t bad, but it pales in comparison to spiritual fitness! *How much time do you spend reading and meditating upon God’s Word? Do you have anything at all to do with God’s people between Sundays?*

There’s so much discontentment among people, and even God’s people are afflicted by it, though they profess love for Jesus. *(If you have Jesus, what else, pray tell could you realistically need? Isn’t He and His grace sufficient?)* I fear, at times, that I look out over a congregation populated with people who’d rather be in a different marriage, or married instead of single, or single instead of married – or living someplace else, or working in a different job. When such temporal things take precedence in our lives, we will NEVER rest in contentment!

I submit that **I Timothy 6:6** ought to be what you are aiming for instead – “Now godliness with contentment is great gain.” We must pursue Jesus and His righteousness! Nothing – or no one else satisfies!

**There's one more question for us to consider.** *What is God saying to you?* We see in today's text that God spoke to Laban in a dream. Look at verse 24 – “But God had come to Laban the Syrian in a dream by night, and said to him, “Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.”

Friend, do you realize that every time you read God's Word, you have opportunity to hear God speak to you. *What is He saying to you? What have you been reading in His Word the past few days? How has His Word impacted you?*

Some of you attend the women's Bible study Tuesday mornings. We've been in I John. This week, we studied **I John 4:7-11**. *What did God say?* “<sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” That's the voice of God speaking to you friends!

At Bible Bunch Thursday, I sat in with Danny and his students as they considered **Deuteronomy 6:18**, and they heard God say this – “And you shall do *what is* right and good in the sight of the LORD, that it may be well with you...” *Do you remember that kids? We must do right in God's sight!*

Many of you spend time daily in God's Word and prayer. Several of us read *Tabletalk* devotional magazine. Among the many Scriptures offered during the daily devotionals this past week was this from **Romans 1:24-25** referring to those who don't live to God's glory: “...God ...gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator...”

If you profess to be a follower of Christ, then take steps to remove sin from your life! Don't continue to live in sin! To do so is to prove your profession of saving faith a sham! You must be careful, beloved, for God may turn you over to your sin!

We could say much more, but time is short. I strongly encourage you to give serious consideration to your answers to these three questions:

**MP 1 – What is Pursuing You?**

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