

**“The Great Escape”**  
**Genesis 31:1-21**  
**January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

Growing up, one of my favorite movies was the 1963 classic, “The Great Escape.” Among the stars featured were Steve McQueen, Charles Bronson, James Garner, and James Coburn. Set in 1943, the movie opens with the Nazi authorities moving escape risk Allied POWs to a new, high-security prisoner of war camp.

The movie focuses on the plans of the POW’s to attempt the greatest escape ever tried – a break out of 250 prisoners. A lengthy tunnel was dug by the POWs with the last part completed on the night scheduled for the prison break. As it turns out, the tunnel was 20 feet short of the nearby woods. Knowing there were no other options, the escape went ahead. 76 prisoners dashed for the woods, one or two at a time: however, one tripped while exiting the tunnel and the escape was discovered.

Only three POWs made it to safety: two of them stole a rowboat and headed downriver to the Baltic Coast, where they sneaked aboard a Swedish merchant ship. The third POW slipped through the countryside on a stolen bicycle before hiding aboard a freight train to France, where he was guided by the Resistance into Spain.

For some time now on Sunday mornings, we’ve been working through the Bible’s first book – Genesis. Since Genesis chapter 12, we’ve studied how God promised His servant Abraham that He (God) would bless Abraham with many descendants, a land, and blessing from all people of the earth through Abraham. That study has revealed God is most faithful to His Word, and an heir was born to Abraham – (*His name?* Isaac.) Isaac eventually fathered twin sons by Rachel, and the younger of those sons, Jacob, would continue the line of God’s promised Seed.

In recent weeks, we’ve learned that Jacob had been the servant of his mother Rebekah’s brother Laban for 20 years. Jacob worked hard for his uncle as a herder of sheep. While Jacob was in charge of Laban’s flocks, God prospered Jacob’s efforts to the point where first Laban, and then Jacob, gained much wealth in terms of livestock and servants (**Genesis 30:45** said as much – “Thus the man became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks, female and male servants, and camels and donkeys.”)

Today, we move into chapter 31, where we see Jacob and his family begin to make their way back to Haran, where his immediate family resided. This, as we’ll note, was in accord with God’s will for Jacob and his family.

**Genesis 31:1-21:**

“Now *Jacob* heard the words of Laban’s sons, saying, “Jacob has taken away all that was our father’s, and from what was our father’s he has acquired all this wealth.” <sup>2</sup> And Jacob saw the countenance of Laban, and indeed it *was not favorable* toward him as before. <sup>3</sup> Then the LORD said to Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you.”

<sup>4</sup> So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to the field, to his flock, <sup>5</sup> and said to them, “I see your father’s countenance, that it *is not favorable* toward me as before; but the God of my father has been with me. <sup>6</sup> And you know that with all my might I have served your father. <sup>7</sup> Yet your father has deceived me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not allow him to hurt me. <sup>8</sup> If he said thus: ‘The speckled shall be your wages,’ then all the flocks bore speckled. And if he said thus: ‘The streaked shall be your

wages,' then all the flocks bore streaked. <sup>9</sup> So God has taken away the livestock of your father and given *them* to me.

<sup>10</sup> "And it happened, at the time when the flocks conceived, that I lifted my eyes and saw in a dream, and behold, the rams which leaped upon the flocks *were* streaked, speckled, and gray-spotted. <sup>11</sup> Then the Angel of God spoke to me in a dream, saying, 'Jacob.' And I said, 'Here I am.' <sup>12</sup> And He said, 'Lift your eyes now and see, all the rams which leap on the flocks *are* streaked, speckled, and gray-spotted; for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. <sup>13</sup> I *am* the God of Bethel, where you anointed the pillar *and* where you made a vow to Me. Now arise, get out of this land, and return to the land of your family.'"

<sup>14</sup> Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, "Is there still any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house? <sup>15</sup> Are we not considered strangers by him? For he has sold us, and also completely consumed our money. <sup>16</sup> For all these riches which God has taken from our father are *really* ours and our children's; now then, whatever God has said to you, do it."

<sup>17</sup> Then Jacob rose and set his sons and his wives on camels. <sup>18</sup> And he carried away all his livestock and all his possessions which he had gained, his acquired livestock which he had gained in Padan Aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan. <sup>19</sup> Now Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel had stolen the household idols that were her father's. <sup>20</sup> And Jacob stole away, unknown to Laban the Syrian, in that he did not tell him that he intended to flee. <sup>21</sup> So he fled with all that he had. He arose and crossed the river, and headed toward the mountains of Gilead."

In today's text of Scripture, God compelled Jacob to take his family and livestock back to the home he had left 20 years beforehand. In those 20 years of servitude to Laban, Jacob had grown as a man of faith in God. Notice the three means God uses to convince Jacob of God's will for him

- MP 1 – The Inner Witness of the Heart;**
- MP 2 – The Outward Circumstances of Life;**
- MP 3 – The Truth of God's Word.**

The first means – **the Inner Witness of the Heart** - had already taken place in the previous chapter. Six years before, God had put the desire in Jacob's heart to return to his own country. Look back to **Genesis 30:25**. Jacob had completed his two 7-year terms of service for Laban's daughters Leah and Rachel. He was ready to go home. That was settled in his heart and mind – in other words, he had experienced the inner witness of the heart.

There is significant difficulty with relying only upon an inner witness alone, and that is that our fallen, sinful hearts are the seat of great sin and wickedness. You'll remember how the prophet Jeremiah put this – **Jeremiah 17:9**: "The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" A human heart that hasn't been changed by God the Holy Spirit is a terrible thing! We must carefully exercise discernment, but the Lord often begins to speak to us in that way.

But, God, who knows us full well, is able to plumb the sinful human condition. The very next verse – **Jeremiah 17:10** reads, "I, the LORD, search the heart, *I* test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings."

If I might use a personal example of how this worked in my life. I didn't grow up with a desire to become a Christian pastor. But, as my family and I ministered among our friend at First Presbyterian

Church in Prattville, Alabama (teaching a young adults' Sunday School class, leading Sunday evening worship, and teaching a Bible study during the week), I began to gain a strong appreciation for Reformed Theology and wanted to know more and more about God's Word. The witness of my sanctified heart was to pursue gospel ministry.

But, the **inner witness of the heart** is often reinforced by **the outward circumstances of life**. As **Genesis 31** opens, Jacob noticed his in-laws weren't as friendly – this is from verse 1 and Laban's sons are speaking, "Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and from what was our father's he has acquired all this wealth." Then, verse 2 tells us, "Jacob saw the countenance of Laban, and indeed it *was not favorable* toward him as before."

Through the accusatory words of Laban's sons against Jacob, and Laban's unhappy demeanor (circumstances apart from the inner witness of Jacob's heart), God was impressing upon Jacob that some other place would be more pleasant (*safe?*) for him and his family to settle down. With verse 4 and following in our text, we see Jacob relating all that has happened with his wives, Leah and Rachel. Their answer is found in verses 14-16 – "Is there still any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house? Are we not considered strangers by him? For he has sold us, and also completely consumed our money. For all these riches which God has taken from our father are *really* ours and our children's;"

Circumstances aren't always the finger of God pointing out His way, but they can be significant indicators of God's will for us. When God wants to move us, He occasionally makes us uncomfortable and "stirs up (the) nest." (**Deuteronomy 32:11**)

I was thrilled to accept a call from the Session of our church in Alabama to serve as Assistant Pastor upon finishing my final term on active duty with the Air Force. I loved Alabama (still do) and the people in our church there. We had lived there for 6 years at that point, and I thought we'd be eating boiled peanuts, black-eyed peas and collard greens for the rest of our lives! Mm mm!

But, a month into serving in that capacity, the church secretary, a long-time member of the congregation (our next door neighbor!), abruptly quit. She was also the financial secretary, and all the administrative and financial duties were dumped on me! Over the course of the next few months, I hired a pastoral secretary, as well as a financial secretary, and I was thinking life would improve.

But, it was time to nominate elders, and it became obvious some unhappy people were imposing their will on the congregation to stack the membership of the Session. The senior pastor was pressured to retire, and a pastoral search committee was formed to find his replacement. I'll not go into any more details, except to say that there I was, the acting Senior Pastor, with little hope of remaining on staff after a new pastor was called and installed.

About that time, we took some time off to visit family in northern Illinois. For Sunday worship, we decided to drive to Aledo to worship with Trinity Presbyterian Church. As a pastoral courtesy, I called ahead to let the church know we were planning to be in worship. I was asked if I'd consider preaching the service and administer the Lord's Supper, since the church was without a pastor. The rest, of course, is history.

God had stirred up my nest to move me out of Camelot!

So, God sometimes reveals His will through an **inner witness**, and He often accompanies that with complementary **outward circumstances**. A third means God reveals His will for us is the **truth of His Word**. This is the best and most objective method. To know what God desires of us, we must know His Word.

We see this happening for Jacob in verse 3 – “Then the LORD said to Jacob, ‘Return to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you.’” In verses 11-13, Jacob reveals to his wives the dream God had given to him. It culminates in verse 13 with these words God said to Jacob, “I *am* the God of Bethel, where you anointed the pillar *and* where you made a vow to Me. Now arise, get out of this land, and return to the land of your family.”

While I was serving as a deacon at First Pres, Prattville, I participated in a Bible study for the deacons and elders. Among the passages of Scripture we studied was the “Parable of the Talents” in **Matthew 25:14-30**. Before a landowner departs on a long trip, he leaves three servants in charge, giving one five talents, a second two talents, and a third one talent. They were to invest those talents and bring increased profit for their master. The one with five talents did and increased his master’s talents by 100% (five more). So, did the servant with two talents. But, the servant given one talent was afraid of his Master and buried the talent in the ground. The Master was most unhappy, casting out the wicked servant.

Up to that point, I had spent much of my Air Force career in education, training, and development. God was impressing upon me that to take those skills and abilities anywhere but the pastoral ministry would be burying them in the ground. I had the truth of God’s Word to lean on in pursuing seminary and later ordination as a pastor.

*So, how does this apply to all of us?* Let’s look briefly at two Scriptures from the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonica. **I Thessalonians 4:3-5** reads, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God;” When faced with life choices of various kinds, we must remember that God’s will for us is to be unstained by sexual immorality. This refers to sexual activity of any kind outside the bond of holy matrimony! As Christians, we are no longer Gentiles (unbelievers who chase after such behaviors). God desires purity for His people in our relations with each other.

One chapter later in **I Thessalonians 5:16-18**, we read, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Those are words of God to His Church. It is God’s will for His people that we are joyous at all times! We must be a people of regular prayer to God! And, we must be a thankful people, resisting the temptation to be whiners and complainers!

“The reason for defeat in so many Christians’ lives is not that they do not understand the will of God, but that they do not do what they understand.” (Boice, 802) Our passage today closes with Jacob gathering up his family, putting them on camels, and heading out of Padan Aram and back to Canaan. We, like he, must KNOW – and DO – God’s will.

If you are not a Christian, your life does not reflect what God expects of His people. You must first become a Christian in order to please God by fulfilling His will for your life. Turn

away from your selfishness, turn to God in Christ, confessing your sins to Him, receiving His great grace, and you, dear one, would become my brother or sister in Christ.

Believer in Christ, immerse yourself in the life of Christ's Body, the Church. Get to know more people, pray for them, love them, and be prayed for and loved by them. Stop trying to be a lone ranger – you may be able to struggle through this life on your own, but you cannot obtain the next one on your own. You must trust Jesus with every part of your life. Heed His words to us in **Matthew 11:28-29**, "Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

**MP 1 – The Inner Witness of the Heart;**

**MP 2 – The Outward Circumstances of Life;**

**MP 3 – The Truth of God's Word.**

I began the message referring to the Great Escape. I'll close it with another reference to perhaps the greatest escape artist of all time, Harry Houdini.

Houdini once referred to his Milk Can feat as "the best escape that I have ever invented." In the act, assistants locked a handcuffed Houdini inside a cramped metal milk can filled to the brim with water. Before entering the can, Houdini asked the audience to hold their breath along with him as he attempted to escape. Two minutes later, he was out, and his audience out of breath.

Another of his trademark escape acts involved a straight-jacket. Having his hands restrained inside the jacket meant that Houdini could not escape nearly as easily as he could from handcuffs, and instead relied on his whole body to obtain slack and wiggle free. Houdini learned to escape so skillfully that he began performing the act for audiences while hung upside down and bound at the ankles...in just 3 minutes!