

“Estate Theft—Wealth and the Future”
 Sermon for 19 April 2020
 Texts: Genesis 31:22-55; Isaiah 8:11-14a, 19

Why in the world did Rachel steal Laban’s household gods? The theft occurs in the midst of the departure account of Jacob’s return to the Promised Land. Does she do this to hurt her father? Is she being vengeful? Is she practicing ancestor worship, or divination with them? And if not, why would she want to possess them? *What earthly good could they do for her?* I hope to show that she is perpetrating “inheritance theft.” She is trying to lay claim to the estate of her father—property and wealth that ought to have gone to Laban’s first-born son *and not his second-born daughter.* Rachel is like her aunt Rebecca who deceived her husband *to have the estate go to Jacob*, her favorite son, instead of Esau, the rightful heir! If “inheritance theft” were not a major theme of scripture, Rachel’s caper could be written off as a minor sub-plot of some sort. Yes, that, or it is a major theme. Satan usurped the estate of Adam, arranging his death and diverting the inheritance of Adam to himself for his own profit and use. First he coveted, then he stole. Satan sought to take it all despite having no claim to it. He is a thief, the first and original thief; not created the lord of creation, nor an heir.

In the incisive parable of “The Absent Landlord,” or “The Wicked Tenants,” found in Matthew 21:33-46, Jesus sets forth “inheritance theft” as critical to understanding the Last Judgment, the future divine judgment on human rebellion and sin. Two thieves died with Jesus—many more will perish when he comes in glory to judge the quick and the dead! *The last judgment is an act of criminal justice? It vindicates the property rights of God.* The vineyard, Jesus says, is **the Kingdom of God**, God is the rightful owner and **the wicked tenants** are the “chief priests and Pharisees,” who perceive that this parable **was about them.** (v.45). They get it and knew what they were doing. Verse 38 reads: **This is the heir** (the owner’s son!). **Come let us kill him and have his inheritance.** **Estate theft is the road map for their rejection of Jesus, his murder and their unlawful attempt to seize his inheritance**—God’s people. Jacob, an estate thief, will understand this utterly. These Jewish leaders were just “securing their future” because they were walking in **the fear of man** (the Romans, the populace) rather than in **the fear of God.** They, in particular, were murderers and thieves; and their scheming and plotting demonstrates whose camp they were actually in. The question for us is this: are we walking in the fear of man, or the fear of God these days? I pray we all choose the latter—there is safety, security and peace in that direction.

Was Rachel “prudently securing title” to another’s estate (her brother’s), or stealing? Is she acting out of *financial insecurity and claiming what she thinks is “rightfully hers?”* Is she justifying her theft? Or, was she just as greedy as her husband Jacob, who connived with his mother earlier to steal the estate of Esau? Who instilled the fear of the future in him?! And, most importantly, if “estate theft,” is the controlling sin in Jacob’s life, are we witnessing his renunciation of that sin (of taking by stealth what does not rightfully belong to him—and prospering himself at someone else’s expense)? **Is Genesis 31 actually about Jacob moving away from the fear of man that feeds selfishness and greed and towards a fear of God which issues in faith and trust?** You should be able to make up your own mind on these several questions by sermon’s end. Yes, “Why did Rachel steal Laban’s household gods?” is just a starting point for exploration. Laban’s rage over their theft should tip us off to something being significant

about the heist. Remember the suspicion of Jacob is wrapped up in allegations of thievery—it is not as if Jacob wasn't known for estate theft! Securing estates, and adding estate to estate, and all that thievery is vanity.

In preparing for this message I was struck by the enormous overlap between Psalm 31, Genesis 31 and Isaiah 8:11-14 on **fearing God** in uncertain times and social insecurity. Social security is more than a monthly benefit and coronavirus has compellingly confronted us with how tenuous our security is.

Actually, **The Fear of Isaac** in Genesis 31 tipped me off to this business! Here's part of what I began to see: from Psalm 3:1: **In you, O Lord, do I take refuge . . . vv. 21-22 Blessed be the Lord, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was in a besieged city. I said in my alarm, "I am cut off from your sight."** This declaration is false: nothing is able to cut us off from God—not disaster, calamity, disease, nor even death itself. **But you heard the voice of my pleas for mercy when I cried to you for help.** AND Isaiah 8:13-14a chimes in with: **It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And he shall be your fear. And he shall be your dread.** v.14a **Then** he shall become a sanctuary . . .

When shall the Lord become our sanctuary?

When he is our fear and our dread.

Now about this *fear* and *dread*, written in verse 13. These affections are linked with *regarding God as holy*. And not with fear as **panic** in the streets, or with terror in the quarantine of lockdown! Do not be preoccupied, Isaiah, with paralyzing and disabling fear *but with reverence and worship . . . and with love of God*. Psalm 31:23, which follows **when I cried to you for help** (in v.22) reads: **Love the Lord, all you saints! The Lord preserves the faithful . . .** Fear the Lord means to reverence, worship and love him and not be terrorized by his majesty, might, power and holiness—or by our circumstances! The Lord who is to be our fear and our dread is our refuge, sanctuary, place of security and safety at all times, including in perilous times . . . *when under siege such as the state we find our world in these days, when under a pandemic.*

I said in my alarm, "I am cut off from your sight." Psalm 31:22. And that is exactly the problem with fear, **with public panic**¹. It paralyzes us, blinds us, it disables us, it spawns insecurity and worse, unbelief. Isaiah stood up *to a city in panic*. We are called to stand up to a nation, and a world in "alarm."

Do not fall in with their dread, says the Lord. Do not succumb to fear of disease, or even death, turn to me instead. *Cut off from each other* is hardly comparable to being **cut off from God**—social distancing has accomplished the first, but the second, being cut off from God can never happen. God is not man that he should do so. **God never panics, God fears not.** Rather, **I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love,**

¹ The entire meaning or quarantine has shifted. Traditionally, it is the sick who are quarantined; but what we have seen is that those who are not sick have been induced to seclude themselves. It is reminiscent of the Boston Bomber scenario—the whole city of Boston was "locked down" to capture the terrorists. As if an armed citizenry was incapable of dealing with two murderous cowards. As it turns out, it was citizens who led to the capture and arrest!

because you have seen my affliction . . . known the distress of my soul . . . you have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy; instead you have set my feet in a broad place. (vv.7-8) Trust in God is always an option, even in a pandemic.

We are waking up to a new world these days, a world reshaped by *the panic (I said in my alarm—as in a besieged city)* over COVID-19—or the Corona-virus. And as we watch the news and view empty streets and shuttered buildings, we realize how the world has changed since, in times past, we first took to walled cities and fortresses for safety from invading forces, raiders, or hostile armies and warfare. We can hardly relate to **a besieged city**—it is so historically remote. ***But we can be under siege without a walled city!***

Who needs armies, supply lines or troops if we have lethal microbes to do our “military” conquering for us? Slaying thousands without firing a shot, or dropping a bomb. All we have to do is infect the world’s travelers, and presto, there’s your shock troops. No soldiers at risk, limited fatalities *provided you can contain the contagion and not get swept up in the plague.* The infectious diseases we can weaponize are assisted by the fear and disorder sown by the resultant confusion and panic of a pandemic. Biological warfare has arrived whether war has been declared or not. Every person becomes a danger and a potential threat to every other person —suspicion and distrust erupt and spread like a wildfire! Commerce screeches to a halt, there is no *business as usual* as everyone shelters from the threat of death. Biological warfare is like eco-terrorism except that microbes are utilized instead of chemicals and poisons or fire. Globalism makes mass warfare simple to accomplish but only at the risk to total self-destruction..

What is there to do except to cry out for mercy to God? And how blessed we are that our only recourse is the best recourse! **When we fear God, when we dread God . . . then *he shall become a sanctuary.***

Yes, even in the midst of a viral pandemic! This idea, of a reverent fear of God issuing in safety, refuge and protection—our hope in our time of affliction!—has its roots in Genesis 31, among other places. Jacob’s “The Fear of Isaac” is an expression of the **fear** and **dread** of our **holy God** *commended to us* in Psalm 31 and in Isaiah 8:13.

So we come to Genesis 31: 42 and 53: **The Fear of Isaac!** One of the least used names of God in Christianity! How are we to understand this *name* of God? Isaiah 8:11-14, alluded to above, is one of many passages on *the fear of the Lord in scripture*; it is particularly instructive for us in this moment of time. This will require a deeper dive into the text of Isaiah 8, let’s go:

Isaiah 8:11 **For thus the Lord spoke to me with mighty power and instructed me not to walk in the way of this people, saying,**¹² **“You are not to say, ‘It is you are not to fear [their fear, or] what they fear or be in dread of it.**

Do not fear annihilation by foreign forces, or extinction by disease, pollution, the greenhouse effect or even global warming—simply don’t live in dread as if there is no God anymore! Unbelief has immense blinding power, so avoid it. Remember the

faithfulness of God, dwell on his promises. If you are going to fear anything, fear the Lord!

13 **"It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy.**

Sanctify him not your insecurities, or your fears. Choose trust over distrust.

And He shall be your fear,

And He shall be your dread.

Fear God and fear no man, fear not God and fear every man. Always and forever.

Verse 13c&d ties in directly with God as **the Fear of Isaac in Genesis 31**. God is to be feared in such a way that he becomes our sanctuary. See for confirmation Psalm 31:1 **In you, O Lord, do I take refuge. . . Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me (v.2c). . .for you are my refuge (v.4c) . . . O how abundant is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you (v. 19a&b) and worked for those who take refuge in you (v. 19c) from the plots of men . . . from strife of tongues (20c&d) . . . In the covering (a tent, or pavilion? under your wings?) of your presence you hide them (those who take refuge in you). . . you store them in your shelter(v. 20a&c).** Psalm 31 fits Isaiah 8 like a glove²!

14 **"Then He shall become a sanctuary**³; (continued)

Now by the numerous allusions to this passage in the New Testament, we are given to understand that this passage is a messianic prediction/prophecy! It is Christ in the flesh who is referenced as "sanctuary" here.

And, of course, unbelievers, like the Sadducees in charge of the temple and civil government (being the monied, liberal class) in Jesus' day would misconstrue this, reject the Messiah and, perpetrating estate theft, come into great difficulties as a result (things like the destruction of Jerusalem and, later, after great slaughter dispersion in the second century A.D.).

God in Christ is our sure refuge, or "sanctuary" for all who truly fear him—all who are drawn to him *to trust fully in him!*

The actual word "sanctuary" here is better rendered "a sacred thing" (i.e. **He will become a sacred thing**) which is precisely the term used by Gabriel in his annunciation to Mary: **the child to be born will be called "holy"—the Son of God** (Luke 1:35) **and you shall call him Jesus** (v.31); **for that which is conceived in her (that "holy thing") is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call him Jesus for he will save his people from their sins** (Matt. 1:21).

But to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over, And a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

² Even down to the use of "snares" imagery in both Isaiah 8:14 and Psalm 31:4. Albeit with differing applications—an escape for the psalmist versus a stone of stumbling for unbelievers in Isaiah. Quite astonishing.

³ He who stands upon the stone which forms the threshold of that sanctuary has gained asylum. Ellicott's English Commentary on the Bible.

Of course, Jerusalem, the seat of solemn worship, where all the means of knowledge and grace abounded, where the wisest, best and most learned of Israel dwelt, that would be the epicenter of Christ's rejection. How odd that those who knew enough to inform King Herod about the time, place and occasion of Christ's birth should become so ignorant of his origins, name and mission when push came to shove in the city! They, unbelievers, were stumbled even as believers were saved.

This Isaiah 8 passage is also instructive on the matter of prophecy, on how it transpires through divine inspiration. Isaiah is suggesting that when "prophecy" occurs, it can be experienced as if "God makes up one's mind for himself." It grabs you, takes hold of you forcefully—over-riding your mental processes. The language behind the phrase, **with mighty power**, is "**with a strong hand**" (while **the Hand (of Jehovah) grasped (me)** points to something of an altered state of consciousness, such as a prophetic trance—described in several other places scripturally. This suggests that the translation, **with mighty power**, is very weak.

The prophet, Isaiah, is **subjected to** "a true view of the aspects and issues of the (current) situation" (**and the Lord spake unto me—and instructed me, that is *warned me sternly!***) The Holy Spirit penetrates Isaiah's mind "with *irresistible* force:" Do not join in their panic, or in the the public fear! This infused divine "understanding" *establishes* the prophet, secures and fortifies him **against the prevailing, disturbing influences of social opinion—their pervasive fearfulness**. The result of panic is that every man ends up suspecting and fearing every other man. Fear-mongering becomes "a great social evil."

The "opinion-makers" (yes, even they existed in Isaiah's day, too) had, as it were, the "wrong end of the stick." They were generating rumors *as if they were truth!* They were filling the people with debilitating dread, fear and *uncertainty* regarding the safety of God's people—alarmed by the united armies of their adversaries—a Syro-Ephraim-ite alliance. This means that the Assyrians and the Northern Kingdom of Israel combined forces to attack and destroy Jerusalem. They would all die in this conquest.

The prophetic word was, in the face of this threat, "Don't fear them—mere men! Rather fear God." Remember Moses' counsel in Deuteronomy 10, an amalgam of "fear, obedience, love and service:"

"And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good?" (Deuteronomy 10:12–13)

Jesus concurs with Moses' counsel along these same lines.

"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28)

["Both Moses and Jesus command us *to love God supremely* (See Deuteronomy 6:5; and Matthew 22:37), and both of them command us to fear God supremely. They're not mutually exclusive commands; they're two sides of the same coin." . . . Trusting God is safe; fearing man is not (Proverbs 29:25). God usually teaches us this through the hard lesson of obeying in spite of feeling afraid. For then we learn to trust God's promises more than our perceptions and reach the place where "we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?'" (Hebrews 13:6) "The person to whom we ascribe most authority is the person we fear the most."

-Jon Bloom <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/lay-aside-the-fear-of-man>]

So, in his day of national crisis, Isaiah was enabled, empowered to stand alone. His message wasn't *his idea*; rather it was God speaking through his prophet to his people. Specifically, Isaiah was not to confuse the people with more hype about **a conspiracy!** A conspiracy?! Has anyone heard of any conspiracies regarding COVID-19, the coronavirus pandemic? The opinion-makers, in the 8th century BC media, were terrifying the nation back then: putting out various conspiracy theories, false rumors etc. . . abnormal, bizarre prognostications. Forecasts of dire calamity and utter destruction—which expressed unbelief, or stoked a terror that God had *defaulted on his promises* undermining faith in God!

No wonder then that God spoke up and instructed his prophet: do not **walk in this fear**, do not join in their dismay . . . **I am still on the throne**, I will defend and deliver my people. You will go into exile, but I am *hiding* my people there. I will lead my people in and lead them back out again. *I will restore, rebuild and you, my people, will return*. Of course, this is not a word for Americans in the 21st century—but it could well serve Christians as an encouragement for God's people living in the midst of America. The pandemic has done nothing to eliminate the promises of God. We should minister to the sick, the dying and the grieving as bravely and sacrificially as we can for the glory of our Risen Lord. People will die. We need to insure as many as possible will live *again* live to reign with him.

Remember now, with me, Genesis 31:22-55 which ends with Jacob alluding to and swearing by **the Fear of Isaac** (v.42), or **the Fear of his father Isaac** (v.53). The same God who self-identifies as **the God of Bethel** (v.13) and is alluded to as **the God of my father, the God of Abraham** (v. 42 more fully). Laban even adds to the list: **the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father**. Seven distinct titles in all! The number isn't as significant as their occurrence is. ***This marks the turning point, the beginning of a new phase in Jacob's spiritual journey.*** After twenty years of no prayer, no praise and no conspicuous worship, Jacob not only calls upon the Lord but relates (witnesses to!) how God has kept, protected and provided for him all this time—just as he had promised him at Bethel. But no credit whatsoever is given to the household gods of Laban which he may or may not have consulted for divination!

This raises the question: So why did Rachel steal the household gods of Laban? Gen. 31:19 There are several scholarly hypotheses⁴ and I shared this one in an earlier sermon: that she was still attached to the *idol worship* that plagued Nahor's family. The basis for that assertion is found in the Bible, and in the Passover Haggadah ("my ancestors were **wandering Arameans**, and **idolaters**"). That is a fairly strong indication of idol worship. However, the text does not specifically indicate that Rachel worshipped these tiny clay figurines as Archeology from this time strata postulates they might have been. Another hypothesis puts forward the notion that these figurines assisted in ancestor worship. Again, this is not improbable; but it is not established from the text! So idol worship and ancestor worship are offered as test hypotheses for motivation. We cannot consult Rachel, the text is silent on everything but the fact of the theft. Is there a scientific way forward? Is there anything more known, that we can utilize to discover the unknown (meaning Rachel's motivation)?

Well, actually there is: according to the Nuzi Tablets, so-called, and transcribed from their ancient script: "the person who is in possession of the 'household gods'

⁴ They are 1. divination, 2. ancestor worship (both forms of pagan idolatry) and 3. matters of inheritance (a patriarch's estate). This latter is thematically present in the whole Jacob cycle—Jacob steals the birthright and blessing of the firstborn *in order to procure the estate of Isaac/his wealth, or inheritance*. This is an end run around the rule of primogeniture (the majority of the estate goes to the first born son) which is viewed as "oppressive" and advantageous by any and all subsequent siblings. The tenth plague, the death of the first born in Egypt, was very disruptive of family continuity and property rights! And this is apparently the situation in Jacob's milieu, in Mesopotamia. Jacob is an ambitious, conniving estate thief. And, as it turns out, he marries one in Rachel—who by stealing Laban's "household gods" positions herself to lay claim to Laban's estate. If the purpose of Gen. 31 is to lay out for us the *renunciation* by Jacob of his thieving ways, as a sign of moral reformation and spiritual maturation (imperfect and incomplete though it be) **which I take the chapter to be**, this maneuver by Rachel signals how tenacious a pattern of deception and thievery can be—the break is messy, not clean. It is highly ironic that Jacob invokes a death penalty on the theft of the "household gods" especially seeing that the thief is his beloved Rachel! (It certainly builds dramatic tension and interest.)

So, hypotheses 1. and 2. are "speculative" in nature and they lack scriptural backing. There is nothing suggesting that Rachel practiced the divination confessed to by Laban! And there is nothing to explicitly connect Laban's divination with said gods! Again, there is no indication that Laban's family, or his two daughters indulged in ancestor worship. Scripture charges them with **pagan idolatry**—in an open-ended and vague manner which doesn't exclude ancestor worship, but certainly doesn't name it. *If we ask what is the source, or authority for either 1. or 2., very legitimate questions to ask; we come up empty-handed.* So, the basis for preferring 3. to either 1. and 2., lies in two things; demonstrable thematic continuity (we are talking about circumventing inheritance rules here!) and, we have this verse in the passage under study (v.14): **Then Rachel and Leah answered him (Jacob) and said to him: "Is there any portion, or inheritance left to us in our father's house? . . . v.15 . . . for he has sold us (seven years at a pop!) and he has devoured our money** (taken by some as the dowries due to them upon their marriages! Meaning Laban didn't give them anything to start their married life.) v. 16 **All the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children.** Both wealth and inheritance are in view.

The first principle in interpreting scripture is thematic in nature. The second principle brings in the action, language and concepts in the passage itself. Thirdly, we take under advisement other related passages in scripture—the whole bible, both prior and subsequent material. Then we might consider contemporary material, such as the Nuzi Tablets (or the code of Hammurabi) for a broader view—which in this case is very content specific and, apparently, relevant.

at the time of a patriarch's decease has legal claim to the whole estate (at the time of death)." The household gods served as a title, or, *legal claim* (as in "last will and testament") to the estate! This adds a "mercenary incentive" to the theft of Laban's property. The scriptures detail, at some length, the conniving greediness of Laban. He is incensed at the loss of his household gods, and in that rage sets out in hot pursuit of Jacob. The accusation of thievery has already been leveled at Jacob. **He has taken all our father's wealth** groused the disgruntled sons. Laban steals, Jacob steals, *everyone is "fleecing their neighbors"*⁵ *causing rage, threats and violence* . . . is Rachel anything but her "father's daughter" when she joins in the family practice of thievery? Of the three hypotheses advanced so far (idol worship, ancestor worship and the claim to Laban's estate), we may ask: which one has the greatest scriptural attestation. I vote for the fiduciary one!

On what basis? On the basis of the weight of scriptural evidences. What we know about the thievery rampant in Laban's and Jacob's dealings outweighs what we know about ancestor worship, or idolatry in that same family history. Of course, Rachel's motivation may be a combination of any and all motivations but when what we do know is used to figure out what we don't know, we are on recognizable "scientific" grounds. We are acting "reasonably." Marvin Olasky, in a recent interview with Jon Meachem, an American historian and a Christian, asked Jon, "Has reason ever betrayed you?" His reply was, "Six times this morning." I appreciated the humor. We need to be careful that "reason" is not elevated to the status of "final authority" if, for no other reason than that our "reason" is quite as "fallen" as the rest of us!

There is one final, fascinating piece: these "household gods" end up discarded, put in the trash, buried beneath an oak—*the promises of God won out*.

Gen. 35:3 Then let us arise and go to Bethel. I will build an altar there to the God who answered me in my day of distress. He has been with me wherever I have gone." 4 So they gave Jacob all their foreign gods and all their earrings, and Jacob buried them under the oak (the terebinth tree) **near Shechem. 5 As they set out, a terror from God fell over the surrounding cities, so that they did not pursue Jacob's sons. . . .**

Among other things, this action by Jacob suggests a renunciation of any, and all claims on the property of Laban, or, his estate, the "legacy of the east." This abandonment is not unexpected: Jacob had stolen the birth right and the blessing of Esau *and walked away*. Jacob walked away from all of Isaac's wealth (it went, we assume, to Esau) as well.

⁵ In discussing this sermon, by way of preparation, I was reminding to the psychological terms "Adverse Conditioning," a form of negative reinforcement such as inflicting pain, or an electrical shock to shape behavior. I wondered if God's plan in injecting Jacob into such a family as Laban's (detailed for us a treacherous, deceptive, greedy and thieving man who is all about wealth) might not be therapeutic—inoculating Jacob by a long exposure to a worst case scenario? Jacob may have arrived at the same grating conclusion as did the Almighty when he commanded us not to steal in the Decalogue. Theft erodes familial and social trust drastically. It is a violation.

God amply supplied all the wealth that Jacob obtained lawfully by way of his provision. It is best to take these renunciations as indications that Jacob had **grown beyond greed and deceit**—he was becoming a *worthier, more moral* figure among God's people. He grew content with the promises of God as one outcome of spiritual maturation and moral development. And he grew discontent with his self-centered attempts to drive the process. Genesis 31-2 records a remarkable time of spiritual re-alignment in Jacob's life. That is most encouraging.

The constancy of divine promises in our evolving lives.
I wonder if we can identify the same dynamics in our lives.

Jacob's flight from Laban, we recall, is laced with **the fear of man**. And with good reason, Laban is in a rage over his losses: his daughters, grandchildren, flocks, his son-in-law (his source of income!) and his stolen household gods. *What else could we expect of someone who lives so near and for this world?* He is traveling fast, with armed men and, no doubt, has plans of avenging himself on Jacob who has outfoxed, deceived and eluded his grasp. It is within his power to attack Jacob, dispossess him and "settle the score." And, no doubt that is what he might have done if God had intervened and issued a stern warning not to try anything of the sort. *Laban apparently feared God!* But none of that cancels the dread that Jacob felt regarding Laban—nor even the fear he felt about facing Esau after twenty years of separation over the theft of birthright, and blessing of the firstborn. Last he knew Esau wanted to kill him for his greed/thievery. So, in the face of all this threat and danger, what did Jacob have going for him? **The Fear of Isaac** and **The promises of God**. That was it, and that was enough.

These promises held firm regardless of Jacob's changing circumstances. *The same holds true for us!* By circumstances, I mean to address internal and external factors—matters of personal growth, matters of family dynamics and matters of relationship with the outside world. At ninety-six Jacob was a different man from the man who came to Paddan-aram looking for a bride! He had not been idle in his twenty years of exile from the Promised Land. He had fourteen years as an indentured servant and six more years of private enterprise under his belt: raising sheep and livestock. Twenty years without prayer, praise, or even mention of worship, yet God held fast to his promises to Jacob.

Now that's some measure of constancy. And yet in Genesis 31, it is acknowledged seven times what God had done! All of that—pragmatic atheism, neglect of worship, constant work and marriage, family and offspring . . . and God's faithfulness formed the crucible of Jacob's existence. *God has made him scrupulous and honest in his business dealings!* The visible and the invisible hands engaged have to be considered; or we will have little idea of how we have arrived at a turning point. Jacob was learning to **fear God**. I hope that we are learning that as well.

Amen.