

# The Awesome of Isaac

Genesis 30:25-31:55

You are reminded multiple times every day of the power of evil that surrounds you. The Bible teaches us that we have three enemies: Our own sinful heart, the Spiritual forces of evil, and the unbelieving world around us. These are all powerful forces. They are relentlessly working against you to hold you back from enjoying eternal life with God. When our eyes are fixed upon these evils, we can lose hope and often find ourselves on the brink of despair. What is it that will hold us from despair? It is a fresh vision of the greatness of our God!

Today's sermon is called "The Awesome of Isaac". That is not a typo. In verses 42 and 53 of Genesis 31, Jacob will refer to God as "the fear of Isaac". This word fear has a range of meaning. It is that which causes one to tremble or shiver in its presence. It is that which invokes awe and wonder. It describes that which in its truest sense is Awesome!

In today's passage, we learn the events in Jacob's life that bring him to name God "Fear" or "Awe-inspiring" or just plain "Awesome!" What is more, Jacob has not found a new God to give this name. This is the same God that his dad worshipped. Throughout the events of this story, Jacob will come to learn that the God of his dad is the Awesome One of Isaac.

So far, Jacob's life has been anything but awesome. For that matter, we might say the same about Isaac. They are portrayed to us as ordinary, fallen people living in a fallen world. Maybe something like your life. If you had a week like mine, you would not describe it as Awe-inspiring. And yet, for those of us who cling to Jesus Christ, our God is the same God who brought Jacob to call him by this name. In a world that thinks so very little of our God, may "the Awesome One" give us just a glimpse into His Awe-inspiring greatness.

Genesis 30:25-26. (Jacob) We pick up Jacob's life with the birth of Joseph, Rachel's first son. Jacob has 10 sons. Six with Leah. Two with Leah's servant and two with Rachel's servant. But this is his first son to his beloved Rachel. We were told that Joseph's birth was the result of God's covenant love towards Rachel.

**Genesis 30:22** <sup>22</sup> Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb.

The birth of Joseph is the turning point in Jacob's life. Look at verse 25. "As soon as..."

We may not know exactly why, but Rachel's giving birth to Joseph is the spark that sets everything in motion. Jacob immediately goes to Laban asking permission to be sent back to his home country. Up to this point, we have not had any indication that Jacob even desired to go back to his homeland. But with the birth of Joseph to Rachel, Jacob is ready to leave. But instead of telling Laban that he is moving, Jacob asks his father-in-law to send him away. Jacob is asking permission to leave. Why cannot Jacob simply declare that he is leaving. Is he not a free man?

Jacob's freedom is the issue throughout this story. Is Jacob a free man... a lord of his own household? Or is he a servant... dare we even say... a slave of Laban? Jacob calls Rachel and Leah, my wives, and the children, my children. But in chapter 31:43, Laban thinks differently, "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children..." Jacob has worked 14 years hard labor to be able to be able to say, "my wives and my children." But the struggle of whether Jacob continues to be a servant of Laban or whether he is a head of his own household is the issue of this story.

Who exactly is Jacob? And will Laban recognize the truth of who Jacob is? The same question can be asked of you? Are you a slave of this world? Or are you a prince of the Awesome One?

Genesis 30:27-28. (Laban)

Laban has no intention of letting Jacob leave.

He has learned through divination that Yahweh has blessed him because of Jacob. Do not take this as Laban recognizing that Yahweh is his god. In his mind, all gods are localized deities. It is his own pagan religion that has "revealed" to him his need to stay connected to Jacob. Laban is still very much committed to his own family god. In fact, if you want to understand the struggle between Jacob and Laban, you have to see the struggle of the spiritual forces that stand behind each man. We are not told yet who is Laban's god/s. But at the very end of this section, Laban calls his god, the god of Nahor. The struggle is not simply a struggle between Jacob and Laban. The struggle is between Yahweh and the god of Nahor. The question is whether Laban, and the spiritual forces allied with him, will be able to prevent Yahweh from fulfilling his promises to Jacob.

Genesis 30:29-30. (Jacob)

Jacob agrees that up until this time, he has been a servant of Laban. But he also makes his case that Laban should allow to let him leave. If Yahweh has blessed you because I have been your servant, maybe you would receive more blessing from Him by releasing me. Jacob thinks that it is time for him to begin providing for his own

household, not Laban's. Jacob is hoping that Laban will allow him to leave with his wives and kids. At this point, Jacob is not really interested in taking any of Laban's wealth for himself, just his family. But Laban sees Jacob like Jack in the Beanstalk saw the golden goose. He had to have it for himself.

Genesis 30:31a. (Laban)

31 He said,  
"What shall I give you?"

Laban is always thinking about the money. By offering to "give" something to Jacob, Laban is assuming the role as master and provider. Jacob does not want to be indebted to Laban. For one, it might give the impression that Yahweh could not bless Jacob with wealth without the help of Laban, and his gods.

Genesis 30:31b-33. (Jacob)

Jacob does not want any handouts from Laban. But he does have a plan to gain wealth for himself. Up until this time, Jacob has been working for his wives.

That debt has been fulfilled. Jacob is willing to continue working for Laban, but now he wants a different sort of wage: that of sheep and goats.

But Jacob is smart enough to know that Laban would not want to pay him a fair wage. So, he asks for a very unfair wage. Reading the text can be confusing, but it boils down to this. Jacob will work for Laban and his pay will be the speckled and striped animals. The striped and speckled animals are more rare. They have the recessive genes. Just how rare we are not told. Today, it seems to be about 20%. Not only is he giving Laban the better deal, he is setting up a situation where no one can question which animals are his and which ones are Laban's.

Laban likes the deal.

Genesis 30:34-36. (Laban)

Laban may have liked the deal, but it is not beneath him to tilt the tables a bit more in his favor. He basically removes all the speckled and striped animals from the flock and sends them away to his sons.

Suddenly, there are no speckled or striped animals in his herd. It was implied that these animals would belong to Jacob. Jacob does not argue about being cheated. He simply goes about his work of pasturing the rest of Laban's flock.

Sort of...

Genesis 30:37-43. (Jacob)

Jacob employs his own plan to tilt the tables back in his favor. Only his plan makes us scratch our heads. How can this possibly work? Jacob's plan is to place fresh sticks of almond and poplar in front of the animals when they are drinking. Some theologians have tried to demonstrate how Jacob's methods have validity. I am not convinced.

As we will see in just a moment, the superior intelligence or craftiness of Jacob is not the force behind the success of Jacob's plan. I believe we should put "sticks" together with "mandrakes" and "arms covered with goat skins" as Yahweh making the impossible, possible.

Thus, Jacob increased greatly. Not only in his flocks, but subsequently in servants, camels and donkeys.

Read Genesis 31:1-2. (Laban)

As we saw with Rachel and Leah in family affairs, now the sons of Laban are jealous in business affairs. They interpret everything backwards. They believe Jacob has stolen all their dad's wealth. Facts do not matter. They simply see their wealth vanishing and want to place blame on Jacob. Laban feels the same way. He no longer looks upon Jacob with favor. This reminds us again of the true battle. Is it Laban who will bless Jacob? Or is it Yahweh who will bless Jacob in spite of Laban's best efforts?

It is at this time that Yahweh speaks to Jacob.

Read Genesis 31:3. (Laban)

<sup>3</sup> Then the LORD said to Jacob,  
"Return  
to the land of your fathers  
and  
to your kindred,  
and  
I will be with you."

Yahweh speaks to Jacob. Jacob does not discern things by divination. At the same time, Yahweh commands Jacob to return to the Promised Land. (Now called, “the land of your fathers”).

We can see here that it is not Laban that Jacob serves, but Yahweh.

And Yahweh confirms His promise “I will be with you.”

In this case, that means: to protect him from Laban.

Read Genesis 31:4-13. (Jacob)

At this point, Jacob needs to persuade his wives to willingly leave with him. Jacob basically makes a case that Yahweh is better able to bless them than Laban. The God of Jacob’s father has been with him to bless him. But their father has cheated Jacob over and over. And the God of Jacob’s father has not permitted Jacob to be harmed by his cheating. Jacob tells them, “Do you remember my original offer to make my wages the speckled and striped animals? An angel of God told me to do that in a dream.” Before I came here, God spoke to me in a dream at a place I call Bethel.

I still remember that night 20 years ago like it was yesterday. It has been same God that met me that night working all these 20 years. He is the One who has taken away the livestock from your dad. And it is the God of Bethel who is calling me back to the Promised Land. Don’t you want to be with me serving the God of Bethel? Or would you rather be with your father and his god?

I remind you of the issue of “who is Jacob?” If he is only a slave of Laban, then he has nothing of his own. But if he is an heir of the Covenant Promises, then he must have an inheritance. The God of Bethel is working to give him an inheritance.

Read Genesis 31:14-16. (Laban)

Rachel and Leah both agree to side with Jacob over their father. But what is more important, they both on some level, place their hopes in the God of Jacob’s fathers. They are motivated partly by disgust for their dad. Apparently, the labor that Jacob gave for 14 years should have been set aside for them as a bridal price. Instead, Laban spent it on himself. They have no inheritance with Laban. Rachel and Leah have the beginnings of faith. They encourage Jacob to follow whatever God has said.

In terms of the covenant promises, their agreeing to come is huge. God is to bring Jacob back to the promised land with a wife/wives and children. Ultimately, it is God who convinces Rachel and Leah.

Read Genesis 31:17-21. (Jacob)

Jacob leaves without saying goodbye. He is obeying God's command. But he is also somewhat afraid. He is on his way to Gilead. Gilead is the region East of the Jordan River. This is very close to the Promised Land, but not quite in the Promised Land.

We are told that Jacob leaves with "all his property". The ownership of property is not something a slave could do. But Jacob is not a slave. He is becoming a lord of a large household.

Jacob takes everything... and even some things he did not intend to take: Laban's gods. Rachel sneaks them without Jacob knowing. Why she takes them, we are not told. Revenge... wealth... but it was not to worship them.

Read Genesis 31:22-30. (Laban)

When Laban discovers that he has been tricked and Jacob has given him the slip, he chases in hot pursuit. His intent is to overtake Jacob, take back his flocks and daughters and grandchildren, and leave Jacob destitute or dead. It seems that Laban might have done just that, except that Jacob has God as his protector. God shows up in a dream the night before Laban is ready to pounce on Jacob. He basically tells Laban not to touch his boy. Laban is forbidden from laying a hand on Jacob. But Laban is not finished. He tries a legal challenge instead.

When he meets with Jacob, he levels several accusations against him.

1. You have stolen my daughters, as if you conquered me in battle.
2. You have insulted my generosity and kindness by sneaking off in the night.
3. You have wrongfully taken my grandkids.
4. You have stolen my household gods.

How will Jacob respond to these legal charges?

Genesis 31:31-42. (Jacob)

Jacob admits that he left in fear. This does not mean that this was his only motivation. We often have a mixture of feelings present in our decisions. He was primarily acting out of obedience to God's command.

Other than admitting his fears, Jacob ignores all of Laban's charges except the issue of stealing Laban's gods. That charge he must answer. Why? Because if Laban's gods have anything to do with Jacob's blessing, the Awesomeness of Jacob's God will be diminished. God will be robbed of his glory. And Jacob cannot have that. Jacob is absolutely confident that this is a false charge. He makes a vow that if Laban is able to find his gods among them, the person found having them will die. We are told that Jacob has no idea that Rachel stole her father's household gods. Rachel's secret actions and Jacob's vow could potentially ruin everything. Not only could Rachel be put to death, but Laban would have the legal high ground. The truth of his charges would place Jacob once again under his thumb.

In vv. 33-35 Laban engages in an extensive search. As readers we are sweating bullets. Rachel's tent is the last tent that he searches. But he finds nothing because Rachel has hidden the gods under her saddle. This is the one place that Laban would not look because Rachel explains that it is the time of her menstruation. This would make her unclean. This is important for two reasons. First, Laban would not go near her to search for the gods. But more important is the spiritual implication of what is happening. We have said all along that there is a spiritual struggle behind the physical events. At the very moment that we are nervous of Rachel being found out, we see humor in God's absolute triumph over false gods.

Not only do we see that Rachel is not trusting in these false gods. If she did, she would have never hidden them in the way she did. But we also see that the false gods are utterly powerless to expose the truth of the situation. Laban is trusting in gods who are powerless.

On the other hand, Jacob is placing the covenant promises in jeopardy without having a clue. And yet, His God protects him. Jacob may not have known at the time that Rachel had taken and hidden the gods. But he certainly knew afterwards. And the fact that he takes the time to include this in the story tells us that he thought it important. It expresses the truth that Yahweh is a true and living God. One that is able to overcome any obstacles to ensure the fulfillment of His promises to His people.

In no way is Jacob rescued by any power of his own. Yahweh gets the full credit. This fact makes what happens next even more ironic. As soon as Laban's search ends in failure, Jacob takes the moral high ground. He becomes angry. He begins to berate

Laban. Only problem is that we, the readers, know that Jacob does not have a right to this moral high ground.

This is Hebrew humor. We are not so much concerned that Jacob's claims are wrong as we are with the wonderful way in which God controls the entire situation for the benefit of Jacob. Jacob is not truly guilty anyway. He wants nothing to do with Laban's household gods. What Jacob says next to Laban helps us to see the lessons we must take from this whole story.

In vv. 38-41, Jacob recounts the truth of what has happened over the 20 years he has served Laban. He has been absolutely faithful as Laban's servant. He has worked 14 years for Laban's daughters. And he has worked 6 years for Laban's flocks. During this time, God has also blessed Laban because of Jacob being in his service. Even though Laban repeatedly sought to cheat Jacob throughout his years of service.

In verse 42, we see the climax of Jacob's argument.

If the God of my father,  
the God of Abraham  
and  
the Fear of Isaac,  
had not been on my side,  
surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed.  
God saw my affliction  
and  
the labor of my hands  
and  
rebuked you last night."

Jacob has come to the conclusion that the only reason why he has not been overcome by Laban and even now sent away empty handed is because God saw his affliction and sided with him. It is at this point that Jacob points out exactly who this God is: He is...

The God of my father

The God of Abraham

The Fear of Isaac

It is important to see these three names together and then to notice the change in the last phrase. The God... The God... The Fear... Fear is not used as an adjective here. It is a replacement noun for the noun "Elohim".



There is a decided emphasis on this change. Our attention is drawn to the change. We are supposed to ask, “Why did he make this change?” Why not just continue with the use of “Elohim”.

Later on, when God calls Moses out of the burning bush, we see that He describes himself as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” This will be typical throughout Israel’s history. Sometimes it is shortened to, “the God of our fathers.”

But here, in this one place, it is changed to “the Fear of Isaac.” The word “fear” is “Pahad”. Fear is a good translation. But the word can also mean dread or awe. The idea is one of awesomeness invoking holy fear and submission.

It is the story itself that helps us to get the specific meaning. What is it that God has done in this story to justify being given this name? He has trampled on foreign gods. He has been powerful to protect his people. He has prospered his people, even taking from those who were trying to suppress them. He is in the process of fulfilling his specific promises to Jacob. He knows what is going on in every situation and is able to guarantee that nothing will prevent him from doing good to the one who trusts in Him. In essence, God is “The Awesome of Isaac” because He is faithful to fulfill all his promises to his people.

And it is not by accident that Jacob uses this word with his dad. When Jacob left his parents, he could not have had a high view of his dad. Remember, Jacob had been able to fool his dad. In fact, when we consider the lives of Abraham and Jacob, Isaac is a bit of a disappointment. But what is awesome about Isaac is that the awesome has joined Himself to Isaac in covenant relationship. The Bible does not present to us “Isaac the Great”! The Bible presents to us “The Awesome of Isaac!”

Your life may be rather ordinary. But your God is truly awesome. He is working in ways that you do not yet see. He is fulfilling his promises to you. He is producing in you the fruit of His Spirit. It is to His glory that you bear fruit. And He will overcome anyone who tries to keep you from entering your eternal home. God has taken Jacob through 20 years of hard labor, basically working as a slave for his father-in-law. But Jacob’s role as a slave does not truly define Jacob. Jacob is a prince of the Awesome of Isaac!

Not only will God free Jacob from the clutches of Laban so that he can begin building his own household, but God will bring Laban to acknowledge Jacob as a prince! Laban has been struggling all long to maintain Jacob as his servant. But now, Laban has relinquished his control and treats Jacob as an equal, a master of his own household, and a prince in his own right.

Genesis 31:43-44. (Laban)

Laban tries to in some sense save face. He continues to claim rights to Jacob's family and possessions. But he grudgingly must acknowledge Jacob to be independent of him. He seeks a covenant with Jacob. He seeks a non-aggression pact, like the kind that would be made between two princes. Laban recognizes Jacob as a fellow prince of the land. Who has raised Jacob to such an exalted position? Who else? The Awesome of Isaac!

Genesis 31:45-47 (Jacob)

Jacob agrees to the covenant. They eat a meal together to confirm the covenant. And they set up a "heap of stones" as a monument to the covenant and a boundary marker between them. But it is important to see that Laban's new respect of Jacob does not include abandoning his own gods for Jacob's God.

Genesis 31:48-53a. (Laban)

53     The God of Abraham  
          and  
          the God of Nahor,  
          the God of their father,  
          judge between us."

Laban believes that their respective gods will witness the covenant. On Jacob's side is the "God of Abraham". He conveniently does not say "the Fear of Isaac." But on his side is "the God of Nahor". Who is Laban referring to when he says "Nahor"? Laban's father and Laban's great grandfather are both named Nahor. If he is referring to his great grandfather, then he might be adding another name to describe the God of Abraham. But this is not likely. Laban's father, Nahor, is Abraham's brother. That means that Laban is naming his family god as well as Jacob's family god. He recognizes Yahweh as a god, but he does not recognize him as the Only True God, or his God. He still maintains his own trust in his family god, the God of Nahor.

In contrast to Laban, Jacob makes very clear that it is only his God who confirms and witnesses the covenant.

Genesis 31:53b-54. (Jacob)

Jacob swears only by the Fear of his father Isaac. Jacob is learning that his father's God is the only God worthy of fearing. As wonderful as Jacob's confession is, he still refrains from referring to Him as "my God." God is taking him to this point, but is not finished with Jacob yet.

Genesis 31:55 (Laban)

The whole story ends in an odd way. Laban is reconciled to his family and so he kisses them goodbye. But then he adds his personal blessing before departing for home. This may be one more touch of Hebrew humor. After everything that has occurred in the story, is it the blessing of Laban that we are to value? Hardly. It is the blessing of Abraham and Isaac that matters. The blessing of the One true God.

Brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Do you believe in the Awesome of Isaac? This story has been given to help you to believe.

Young people. Respect your parents. Love your parents. But it is not your parents who deserve the title "awesome". But the God of your parents... He deserves that title. As Christians we are on a journey. We are on a journey to know our God as Awesome!

Of course, the greatest act of God's awesomeness was at the cross. It is there that He suffered and died for our sins. It was there that He did His greatest work of redemption. And it is in this work that we must place our faith, submitting to Him as our true Lord.

But I thought I would finish with a declaration of God's greatness from the book of Exodus.

**Exodus 15:11-18** <sup>11</sup> "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? <sup>12</sup> You stretched out your right hand; the earth swallowed them. <sup>13</sup> "You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode. <sup>14</sup> The peoples have heard; they tremble; pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia. <sup>15</sup> Now are the chiefs of Edom

dismayed; trembling seizes the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. <sup>16</sup> Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone, till your people, O LORD, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased. <sup>17</sup> You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established. <sup>18</sup> The LORD will reign forever and ever."

The Awesome of Isaac is worthy of being trusted. And the Awesome of Isaac is worthy of your full devotion and submission!