

As Jacob fled from Esau his brother to the land of Paddan Aram, God promised, “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” (Genesis 28:15 NIV) While in Paddan Aram God had blessed Jacob with children, prospered him materially, and, as especially seen in this passage, watched over him to protect him.

I. *Understanding the narrative*

In verse 21 the River probably referred to the Euphrates.

Gilead was a region just east of the Jordan river from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea and about 500 km distant from Paddan Aram.

To say neither good nor bad (v 24) is probably best understood as God telling Laban that there was nothing he should say for or against Jacob’s departure or a possible return (*cf.* Genesis 24:50). Consequently Laban did not accuse Jacob that he had left but how he had left, i.e., deceptively and having stolen his “household gods” or “teraphim”.

In this context the “teraphim” are significant as a probable evidence of inheritance rights.

By hiding them in her saddle and sitting on them (vv 34-35), Rachel not only concealed them but made their presence under her unthinkable to Laban because of the defilement it would have caused them.

Jacob’s closing statement in his accusation against Laban reveals the intent of this narrative (v 42).

The “Fear of Isaac” (v 42) is best understood as “The God whom Isaac feared”.

Laban’s suggestion of a covenant implies a fear that Jacob could return and in some way do harm or lay claim to Laban’s inheritance. Their mutual distrust is confirmed especially in the name “Mizpah” given to the pillar and heap of stones set up to mark the covenant. God was being invited to occupy a lookout tower to watch against potential enemies. Neither would go past that pillar and heap of stones to harm the other.

II. *Understanding God’s watchful presence*

1. *Evidence of the emphasis in these chapters:* the angels of God (32:1-2); Jacob’s conclusion to Laban (v 42); God’s words (v 3), “Go back I will be with you.”; Jacob’s conviction that God had been with him, blessing him (vv 5, 7); the witness stones calling for God’s continued watchfulness.
2. *The method of God’s watchful protection:* God used angels though unseen (*cf.* 32:1-2; Heb 1:14), direct revelation to Jacob and to Laban (31:24), natural processes, and even Rachel’s theft of the “teraphim”. (Laban may have wanted the treaty to assure that Jacob would not appear later with the “teraphim” claiming inheritance rights.)

God can be using even the sinful actions and beliefs of others for our good. “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28 NKJV).

3. *The character of God’s watchful protection:* God’s watchful protection does not mean a comfortable or “good” life, as the life of Jacob reveals.
 - God was behind both the births and the barrenness.
 - God protected the flocks against miscarriage but not from theft and wild animals (31:38-39).
 - God protected against Laban harming him (v 7) but not against abuse, i.e., changed wages (v 41), unfair recompense (v 39) and wrong attitudes (*cf.* vv 1-2, 43).
 - God did not remove Jacob from having to work hard and endure the discomfort (v 40).
 - God did not spare Jacob the stress of pursuit.

God watches over us for His good purposes and not for our desires. God’s purpose in working all things together for good is to conform us to the likeness of His Son (Rom 8:29). If Jesus learned obedience through suffering (Heb 5:8), how much more must should we expect suffering. The believer’s life within the love of God contains many extremes. “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:38-39 NIV)

III. *Understanding the response to God’s watchful protection*

Our challenge – as was Jacob’s – will be our response to God’s promise of watchful protection.

1. Jacob despite God’s promise still feared (v 31).
2. As a result of fear Jacob sought to protect himself by fleeing secretly, a wrongful act of deception (v 20). This is a problem with fear. Fear often arises from a lack of belief and often leads to sinful action. Remember God’s promise to be with us and His greater plan. Commit ourselves into God’s hands. Pray. Give Him thanks. And God will give peace (Philippians 4:6-7).
3. Despite his fear Jacob acknowledged God’s protection (Gen 31:42). It is good and right to acknowledge God’s protection, giving Him due credit.

God had promised to be with Jacob and to accomplish His purposes for Jacob. He has promised to be with us and watch over us. God’s watchful protection does not exclude hardship or persecution or difficulties or challenges. God uses such things to conform us to the likeness of Jesus. He has begun a good work in us and He will complete it.

Ultimately the best fear to have is the Fear of Isaac. Fear God and not men. Live in awe and respect for God. It is more important to please Him than anything else.