

The Amazing Grace Race: A Go Forward God

Genesis 29.15-31
FBC Monahans 9/19/21
Chris Powell, Senior Pastor

Introduction

Last week we began our new series, The Amazing Grace Race. In a race, direction is always important. It does not matter whether it is the Amazing Race, a track event, a car race, or a couple of kids racing each other on the playground. If the runner is going the wrong way on the track there is no way that they will win. If a NASCAR driver is going the opposite direction from the other drivers, he will not win, and will cause a lot of trouble for the other drivers. If two kids are racing on the playground, and when the race starts one runs forward and the other runs backwards, we can easily see who will win the race. Another problem in a race could be sitting still. If the pistol is fired, and the runner just sits in the blocks, they will not win. If the car dies and will not go around the track they lose, or if the kid gets distracted and misses the, "On your mark get set go," they will fall short. Just sitting at the finish line, will create an immediate disadvantage.

In the show, The Amazing Race, the contestants are only successful in the game when they are moving forward toward the goal. When contestants play the Amazing Race, they are striving to move forward. They will follow the clues all over the world and complete the required task so that they can continue their journey. The contestants do not find a clue and then decide to just sit on it, they do not decide to stop the race, and they don't head back to the previous pit stop, but they continue the journey. Part of the excitement is seeing who can move forward next. While it seems obvious to us that in a game or a race that we want to move

forward, it is not always as clear cut in life. There are many people who arrive a point in life and just stop. They stop growing, they stop changing, they stop moving. When we stop moving in life, we die. Physically, muscles begin to atrophy and waste away if we are not moving. Mentally, if we are not pushing our minds, they will become weak. Spiritually, if we simply stop growing, we are not standing still but we are moving backward just like the kid running in the wrong direction. There are far too many people who fail to see the need to go forward with God.

I have found that in our dealings with God many stop at a certain point. For some people, they accept Christ, and then never move forward. They prayed a prayer, but never grew in a relationship. For others it was a “mountain top” experience, they experienced Christ in a powerful way, but then simply want to stay on that mountain. They want to keep turning out that same experience over and over. They spend their time trying to manufacture that experience. Maybe they want to bottle it so they can open it later. After Peter experienced the power of God on the mount of Transfiguration, he wanted to just stay there and build shelters. Jesus however, led him forward.

Still for other people life has gotten tough, and they simply want to retreat. They decide they want to go back to a place where things were good and skip the struggles.

But the truth is we serve a God who is a go forward God. He calls us to be ever changing and evolving in our relationship with him. He calls us to experience him new each day, and he has a mission he is calling us to participate inside, but we will not be able to accomplish the mission if we do not join him on the Amazing Grace Race.

Last week we began our series on the life of Jacob, and we saw his beginnings and the conflict he experienced with his brother, but then we saw him begin his Amazing Grace Race, and he encounters God at Bethel. God affirmed to him the covenant that was made with Abraham and Isaac, and he promised to make him into a great nation. After this theophany, Jacob built an altar there and worshipped God, but we also see that he continued his race. Chapter 29 verse 1 says, "Then Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the Eastern People." Jacob did not stop, he did not say "Well this is all there is to my encounter with God." He did not go back home, but he continued the journey. I believe Jacob discovered that God is a go forward God.

When he arrived in Paddan Aram, he stopped at a well and met the beautiful Rachel. Let us pick up the story in verse 10.

Genesis 29.10-20

When Jacob arrives, he is embraced by his family, his Uncle Laban kisses him, hugs him, and is excited to hear news about his sister Rebecca. He takes him home and gives him a place to stay. After a month of staying with Uncle Laban, the question of pay is brought up by Laban. He says it is not right for you to just work here and not receive any pay, and Jacob has an idea.

He is completely in love with Laban's daughter Rachel. I am sure that Laban already had an inkling about this romance. But the scripture tells us there were two daughters, the Older was Leah and the younger was Rachel. We are told that Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form and beautiful. The phrase "weak eyes," was telling us that Leah was not real attractive; she was the ugly older sister. Jacob says, I will work for you seven years if you will give me the hand of your beautiful daughter Rachel.

Jacob is now betrothed to Rachel, so he thinks. In the ancient Near East, the betrothal was enacted by paying a marriage present or bride price. According to scripture a maximum amount of the bride price would have been fifty shekels, but Jacob agrees to work 7 years to cover his bride price. He is willing to go above and beyond for the hand of the beautiful Rachel. An average pay for a worker of this type would have been close to one shekel per month so Jacob is willing to pay eighty-four shekels to marry Rachel. Everyone agrees to the proposition, and Jacob works the seven years, and we are told that it only felt like a few days because he was so in love.

I believe that in these seven years, we see character development in Jacob. He patiently served Laban working as a shepherd, which was not easy work. This is a new development for Jacob, in his dealings with his brother and father he was always looking for a way to get something for nothing, but here we see him working hard. He allowed God to transform him into the man he needed him to be.

I believe we can learn something about the race here, it is not always fast moving, it is not always exciting, but God is continually moving us toward his goal for our lives and his purposes. God is always transforming us from one degree of glory to the next. Paul tells the church at Philippi, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:12-14) The lesson that Jacob is learning in his seven years, is the same truth that Paul is sharing, and one that we

continually need to be reminded. Paul is using athletic imagery here, and he understands that the runner that is constantly looking backward over the ground already covered will slow his progress down. What Paul is speaking of is his progression in development as a Christian.

We are not there yet, but God is continuing to take us in the right direction. We must strain toward what is ahead. We must allow God to transform us as he carries us forward in his mission.

Genesis 29.21-30

The Deceiver is Deceived.

We find an awkward scene; Jacob has now finished his seven years and he must go to Uncle Laban and demand his wife. So, on his wedding night, when Jacob is possibly not seeing well from too much drinking at the wedding party, Laban pulls a classic bait-and-switch, and sends Rachel's older sister Leah, the ugly one, no doubt well veiled, into the wedding tent, and Jacob doesn't realize that he went to bed with "Ugly Betty" until he sobers up the next morning.

At that point, Jacob confronts Laban, who brushes his trick off by saying "This is not done in our country — giving the younger before the firstborn." There is a poetic justice in that statement. It's as if Laban is saying, "You may have stepped ahead of your older brother where you came from, but that kind of thing is not done *here*."

Laban then says Jacob can have Rachel as well; Jacob can marry her as soon as the one-week honeymoon with Leah is over, but he will have to work another seven years to pay the second bride-price, another eighty-four shekels. Jacob finishes his honeymoon week with Leah, and then marries Rachel, has a honeymoon week with her, and then begins 13 years of

hardship and conflict, not just with Laban but with his wives and their maids. I would imagine struggle with himself as well.

In Jacob's case, the Scripture does not tell us how Jacob felt about the two maids, Zilpah and Bilhah, but it clearly states that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. What we find is one big messed up family. The scripture tells us that the two sisters are warring, that they are jealous of one another, that they keep having children to gain more affection.

Laban must have congratulated himself on the success of his scheme. But what we can see is that even as this mess unfolded God was using the situation according to his plan. Does it mean that God desired Jacob to have all this trouble, that God wanted him to have four wives, I don't think so, but God's mission moved forward. I can hear Proverbs 21.30, "There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the Lord." God was moving forward. Jacob's son Joseph would say many years later, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good." Laban was working for himself, but God took his actions and worked them for the good. Romans 8.28 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

The biblical account tells us that we have a go-forward God to help us. In the Bible, God takes Jacob's messed-up situation and through it drives ahead his covenant with the people of Israel and ultimately, with the people of the world. And we have no reason to doubt that God can accomplish his will with us, too, no matter where we started or what is going on in our life. Where are our eyes focused? Are we pointed in the right direction? Are we running the race that God has laid out for us? Sometimes the race will be a marathon, and sometimes it will be a sprint, but we must listen to his voice, and we must strain forward.

Allow the Go Forward God to guide us as we run the amazing grace race.