

# **BENEDICTUM**

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**In 1959 I began a journey, not thinking that the next fifty years of my life would be spent traveling this road. And it has not come to the end of the way yet. There have been several stops and pauses, even more directional changes than a hound dog has fleas! Here we are near the end of the journey, awaiting another change of direction: on September 1 I plan to make my home in Easley, S.C. at the Foothills Retirement Community. “At ease in Easley surrounded by family” is my theme for the next phase of the journey.**

**The pastor of my youth often drove us to rallies and other youth events. Before he put the car in gear, he would always say, “Let us have a prayer together asking God to watch over and protect us as we travel.” It is recorded in Genesis 31 that two other men, had a prayer as they went their separate ways:**

**“May the Lord watch between me and thee,  
while we are absent, one from the other.”**

**You probably have not noticed, but this Mizpah plays a central role in Matthew’s Gospel. When Jesus spoke those**

beautiful words in 18:20, that “*where two or more are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them,*” he was actually paraphrasing that old Hebrew Mizpah.

Now, to understand what Jesus was getting at, you have to know that the word *Mizpah* means *watchtower*.

And the image that the Bible is trying to give us is this: two people – *me* and *thee* – and standing between them – like a *watch tower* – is the Lord . . . towering between us.

*“May the Lord watch between me and thee. . .”*

Or, as Jesus put it, “*Where two or three are gathered in my name . . . there I am in between them.*”

Now, let’s go a little deeper. This old Mizpah is not about what most of us think it’s about. It is not really a pleasant little benediction praying for God’s watchful care over us when we part for a while – even if it involves two battle scarred men. No, this little Mizpah is about something else altogether.

Do you remember the story of Jacob? After cheating his twin brother Esau out of the family inheritance, Jacob has to get out of town in a hurry. So he goes to a faraway land to live with his unscrupulous uncle Laban. And Laban has a beautiful daughter named Rachel. Well, Jacob falls head over

heels in love with Rachel and wants to marry her. Uncle Laban gives his blessing to the marriage, so long as Jacob first works for him for seven years. So Jacob works for seven years to get Rachel. And at the end of the seven years the wedding day comes. Well, on the big day, Laban gets Jacob to have a little too much rum and coke to drink and the next morning Jacob wakes up in his wedding bed only to discover that it's not Rachel he's married, but her older, homely sister Leah! Uncle Laban has tricked him! You talk about "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" being a funny story! This takes the cake?

So Jacob goes to Laban and complains. Laban says, *"Hey, it's not the custom in our country to let the younger girl get married before the older. You shoulda known that, so tough luck, pal!"* But – Laban offers – if Jacob will work another seven years, he can have Rachel too! So Jacob agrees. And finally, Rachel is his. She must have been a pretty hot number, huh?

Well, that's not the end of the story. Some years later, Jacob . . . still nursing the resentment of how his uncle cheated him – goes to Laban and says he wants to take his wives and children and return home. So they design a golden parachute for Jacob. As a reward for his long service, Jacob gets to exercise some stock options – literally. He gets some of

**Laban's sheep and goats. And then, by some amazing talent Jacob had at animal husbandry, Jacob's flock grows big and strong while Laban's flock becomes small and weak. Laban sees that He has been tricked now, and sets out to kill Jacob. So Jacob rents a U-Haul truck into which he puts his wives, children, goats and sheep, and hot tails it out of town. But finally, Laban catches up to Jacob at a rolling roadblock near all the construction on I-64. And the two men have it out.**

*“You cheated me over Leah and Rachel and all the years I had to work for you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you, and would kill you if I could!” says Jacob.*

*“Yeah? Well you cheated ME out of the choice goats and lambs, and now I've got to hire Merrill Lynch to restore my earnings! I'd love to kill you, too! Says Laban.*

*“You cheated me first!” “No, you cheated me first!” “Did not!” “Did too!” “You're the biggest jerk in the world!”” “I know you are, but what am I?*

*Well, his is obviously a family in distress. Sort of like some of our families. Jacob and Laban cannot agree on anything. They're both done things that make it impossible to trust the other. And they'd love to kill each other.*

*But they chose to make another course instead. Do you know what they do?*

*There in the desert they agree to disagree. They acknowledge that they'll probably never get along. And so they build a big pile of stones, almost as high as a watch tower. And as they walk away from each other to their separate ways, this is what they say, "May the Lord watch between me and thee, while we are absent one from the other."*

**Genesis tells us this watchtower they built – this Mizpah representing the presence of God – was erected as a buffer between these two extremely conflicted and estranged people. And this is how they described the meaning of the Mizpah in Genesis 31:52: "I will not go past this watchtower to your side to harm you, and you will not go past this watchtower to my side to harm me."**

**This is what it means when you say, "May the Lord watch between me and thee."**

**Contrary to popular belief some relationships can never be reconciled. Some injuries can never be healed. Some divisions can never be bridged. Some offenses can never be purged. At least, not on this side of heaven.**

**Too often, Christian people live under the illusion that forgiveness means looking past the harmful realities of such broken relationships. We think we are supposed to always "turn the other cheek," and let people off the hook. We think**

**there's a cure for everything. But there isn't. Not on this side of heaven. Sometimes the wounds are just too deep.**

**There is another more familiar word of importance, we need to consider briefly – “benediction.” From earliest time Christian worship services have concluded with the benediction as pronounced by the official leading the worship. He or she represents the Triune God in blessing the worshiper as he or she departs for service.**

**It is my wish and prayer today that God will continue to bless each one of us beyond all measure. God has blessed us in the past. May God continue to pour out on each of us God's greatest benediction.**

**What then can we do in the case of people we cannot be reconciled. Erect a watchtower between the two of you. Place Jesus between yourself and the other! *“There I am in between you.”***

**In a few days I shall be moving to a new home after calling this my home for over fifty years. These will be bitter and sweet times for me == bitter in that I shall be leaving friends that mean so very, very much to me. They will be sweet because I will be nearer to the place of my birth where the red clay colors life and covers loved ones who have entered their eternal rest. Opportunity to make new friends, to read**

**the State Paper and to enjoy bowls of nice, white rice.**

**Remember, too, wherever you and I are, wherever, wherever,  
we will remain together in God's presence.**