

Genesis 31 – Jacob flees Laban

CHAPTER 31

THEME: Jacob flees from Haran; the Mizpah covenant.

In this chapter we find that Jacob leaves Laban without giving notice. They don't even have a farewell party for him. Laban takes out after him and overtakes him. Finally, Jacob and Laban made another contract, this time not to defraud or hurt each other. Then they separate in an outwardly friendly manner.

We will see that God wants to get Jacob out of that land. He recognizes that the influence of Laban's household is not good for Jacob and his growing family. The boys are going to be heads of the twelve tribes of Israel, and God is anxious to get them out from that environment and back into Abraham's country, the country which He had promised to Abraham.

We are in a section of the Word of God which God has given to minister to our needs. It deals with a man who is a very sinful man in many ways and a man whom God would not give up. You and I can take courage from this. The Lord will never give us up as long as we keep coming back to Him. He will always receive us. If He will take a fellow like Jacob and a fellow like I am, He will take you, my friend.

You will recall that Jacob has had a pretty sad ordeal of twenty years with Uncle Laban. Uncle Laban has really given him a course in the college of hard knocks, and poor Jacob is beginning to wince because of all the pressure he has been under. However, since the new deal which he had made with Laban regarding cattle breeding, Jacob is now getting more than Uncle Laban is getting. Uncle Laban doesn't like it, nor do his sons like it. – McGee

Gen 31:1-3 Now Jacob heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, "Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and from what was our father's he has acquired all this wealth." And Jacob saw the countenance of Laban, and indeed it was not favorable toward him as before. Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you."

God called Jacob to leave, and so he is now preparing to do that. He calls Rachel and Leah to meet him in the field because he is afraid to talk this over at home for fear some servant or possibly even Laban or Laban's sons might overhear him. He doesn't want them to see him plotting with Rachel and Leah. – McGee

After **Jacob** discovered that **Laban** and his **sons** were growing jealous and resentful, the **LORD** told him that the time had come to **return to** Canaan. – Believers Bible Commentary

Do you take a hint that conditions are changing and listen for God?

Gen 31:4-7 So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to the field, to his flock, and said to them, "I see your father's countenance, that it is not favorable toward me as before; but the God of my father has been with me. And you know that with all my might I have served your father. Yet your father has deceived me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not allow him to hurt me."

That is one thing upon which we can agree with Jacob and say to his credit. He had worked hard, but I'm of the opinion that we ought to give Laban credit for that. I believe that Laban got his money's worth out of anyone who worked for him. Notice that ten times in those twenty years old Laban had changed his wages! Poor Jacob. But when he was perplexed and frustrated, not knowing where to turn, God intervened. - McGee

Gen 31:8-10 If he said thus: 'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flocks bore speckled. And if he said thus: 'The streaked shall be your wages,' then all the flocks bore streaked. So God has taken away the livestock of your

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father and given them to me. "And it happened, at the time when the flocks conceived, that I lifted my eyes and saw in a dream, and behold, the rams which leaped upon the flocks were streaked, speckled, and gray-spotted.

Jacob is explaining to Rachel and Leah that it is God who has blessed him, to the extent that Laban and his sons have become very jealous of him; in fact, they hate him. Now Jacob tells the actual reason why he wants to leave—

Gen 31:11-12 Then the Angel of God spoke to me in a dream, saying, 'Jacob.' And I said, 'Here I am.' And He said, 'Lift your eyes now and see, all the rams which leap on the flocks are streaked, speckled, and gray-spotted; for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you.

You probably thought that in the previous chapter I was not giving a satisfactory answer for what had taken place in the breeding of cattle. I was waiting until we came to this portion of Scripture, because God says, "I did it!" We don't need to look for natural explanations, although I am confident that God used one of them. However, since God didn't tell us which one it is, we simply do not know. There are several explanations, and you may take the one you want, but I like this one: God says, "I saw what Laban was doing to you, and I blessed you." – McGee

Gen 31:13 I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed the pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now arise, get out of this land, and return to the land of your family.' "

"I am the God of Beth—el." God goes back to the time He appeared to this boy when he was running away, that first night away from home which he spent at Bethel.

"Now arise, get thee out from this land, and return unto the land of thy kindred." God wants him to leave Haran because he has at this time eleven boys who are growing up, and they are already beginning to learn some things which they should not be learning. God wants to get Jacob and these boys away from the place of idolatry just as He got Abraham out of a home of idolatry.

Gen 31:14-16 Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, "Is there still any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house? Are we not considered strangers by him? For he has sold us, and also completely consumed our money. For all these riches which God has taken from our father are really ours and our children's; now then, whatever God has said to you, do it."

They are saying that certainly, as the daughters of their father, they should receive some inheritance, and that ought to keep Laban from being so antagonistic. But, friend, old Laban cannot be trusted.

Unfortunately, there are many Christians today who demonstrate in the way they handle their own money and the money of others that they cannot be trusted either. This is, I feel, a real test of an individual. I could tell you some stories that would make your hair stand on end. Christians, and Christian leaders, do things with money that ought not to be done. - McGee

First he **called Rachel and Leah** and discussed the matter, rehearsing how Laban had cheated him and **changed his wages ten times**, how God had overruled so that the flocks always bred in his favor, how God had reminded him of the vow he had made twenty years earlier ([Gen 28:20-22](#)), and how the Lord had told him to **return to Canaan**. His wives agreed that their father had not dealt honestly and that they should leave.

Griffith Thomas points out several interesting principles for discerning God's guidance here. First, Jacob had a desire ([Gen 30:25](#)). Secondly, circumstances necessitated a change of some sort. Thirdly, God's word came strongly to him. And finally, there was confirming support from his wives, despite their natural ties to Laban. . . . Note that the Angel of God (v. 11) is the God of Bethel (v. 13). – Believers Bible Commentary

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Do you have a biblical lens like this to confirm God's will in your life or be sensitive to the signs? Sometimes, the process is not straightforward, because the enemy will be trying to thwart the plans and discourage you from following God's Will.

Gen 31:17-21 Then Jacob rose and set his sons and his wives on camels. And he carried away all his livestock and all his possessions which he had gained, his acquired livestock which he had gained in Padan Aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan. Now Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel had stolen the household idols that were her father's. And Jacob stole away, unknown to Laban the Syrian, in that he did not tell him that he intended to flee. So he fled with all that he had. He arose and crossed the river, and headed toward the mountains of Gilead.

Here is a revelation of something that is quite interesting. Jacob rises up and leaves posthaste again. You remember that this is the same way he left home when he was escaping from his brother. Now he is leaving his uncle—but it is not all his fault this time. It is obvious that he is prepared for this. He has all the cattle and the servants ready to march.

“Rachel had stolen the images that were her father's.” I told you that they were in a home of idolatry. God didn't want Jacob's boys to be brought up there. But, you see, Rachel had been brought up in a home of idolatry, and she wanted to take her gods with her. What a primitive notion she had! Even Jacob had thought that he could run away from God when he left his home as a boy. But at Bethel God appeared to him. He found that he couldn't run away from God. In fact many years later David wrote: “Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell [sheol], behold, thou art there” (Psa_139:7-8). That is, death won't separate you. “If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me” (Psa_139:9-10). You won't get away from God by even going to the moon. You simply cannot get away from Him.

“And Laban went to shear his sheep.” Jacob waited until Laban went out to shear sheep. Probably Laban went quite a few miles away from home because the sheep grazed over a very large area in that day. They still do, for that matter, because it takes a large area to feed them. While Laban is away from home, Jacob just “forgets” to tell him that he is leaving. – McGee

They have come within sight of Mt. Gilead, which is just east of the Jordan River. They have covered a lot of ground.

Gen 31:22-24 And Laban was told on the third day that Jacob had fled. Then he took his brethren with him and pursued him for seven days' journey, and he overtook him in the mountains of Gilead. But God had come to Laban the Syrian in a dream by night, and said to him, "Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad."

Laban really had been traveling fast to overtake him. You may be sure that Laban doesn't mean any good as far as Jacob is concerned. I am of the opinion that he is angry enough to kill him. But God intervened— In other words (God Said), “You be very careful what you say and do.” - McGee

Gen 31:25-27 So Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the mountains, and Laban with his brethren pitched in the mountains of Gilead. And Laban said to Jacob: "What have you done, that you have stolen away unknown to me, and carried away my daughters like captives taken with the sword? Why did you flee away secretly, and steal away from me, and not tell me; for I might have sent you away with joy and songs, with timbrel and harp?"

Listen to Uncle Laban. He's a clever rascal, by the way. He's been coming, breathing out fire and brimstone, and wanting to recover all the possessions which Jacob had taken. He probably wanted to kill Jacob and take back the two daughters and their children.

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How clever Uncle Laban is, how diplomatic! He tries to make Jacob feel guilty for depriving his family of wonderful send-off party. He would have had a great celebration and a fond farewell. That's what he says, but I don't think that is what he would have done. Then he goes on to appeal to sentiment. – McGee

God protects you, but remember what we talk about the enemy. Obviously, Laban is trying to thwart God's will. Does this happen to you? That when you take a stand, the resistance from the enemy comes?

Gen 31:28-29 And you did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters. Now you have done foolishly in so doing. It is in my power to do you harm, but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.'

v.28 These "sons" would be his grandsons. They are destined to be very prominent as far as the history of this world is concerned. – McGee

Laban lets him know that he didn't mean good by him but that God had prevented him from doing bad.

Had Laban turned toward God think of the legacy he could have had?

Gen 31:30-32 And now you have surely gone because you greatly long for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?" Then Jacob answered and said to Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I said, 'Perhaps you would take your daughters from me by force.' With whomever you find your gods, do not let him live. In the presence of our brethren, identify what I have of yours and take it with you." For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.

Now he asks about the stolen gods. Actually, Jacob didn't know that Rachel had stolen the gods. When he answers Laban, he is answering about his running away without letting him know.

Jacob knew that Laban wouldn't have let him take his wives and his family and that which belonged to him. Now he replies to the charge of the stolen gods—

He is sure no one would have stolen them from Laban. You see, Jacob didn't believe Laban. But if you think that Laban believed Jacob, you're wrong. They had absolutely no confidence in each other. It's been a nice, pleasant twenty years together, hasn't it? - McGee

Gen 31:33-35 And Laban went into Jacob's tent, into Leah's tent, and into the two maids' tents, but he did not find them. Then he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's tent. Now Rachel had taken the household idols, put them in the camel's saddle, and sat on them. And Laban searched all about the tent but did not find them. And she said to her father, "Let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is with me." And he searched but did not find the household idols.

He really expected one of his daughters to have them. Rachel is quite a clever girl herself, isn't she? She is the daughter of her father! She had taken them and put them in the camel's furniture, which is the box that went on the camel's back. Then she sat down on them and excused herself to her father. She said she couldn't get up because she didn't feel well that day. All the while, she is sitting on them. What a realistic picture we get of this family!

Rachel's taking the teraphim from her father was probably much more serious than we had imagined. The possession of those household gods implied leadership of the family, which meant that Jacob was going to inherit everything old Laban had! That is the reason Laban was so wrought up over it. He surely did not want Jacob to get his estate—he felt he had gotten too much already.

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Jacob gets a little confidence now. They can't locate the images, and Jacob is sure that they aren't anywhere around. He wants to rebuke his father-in-law who has come after him.- McGee

Gen 31:36 -39 Then Jacob was angry and rebuked Laban, and Jacob answered and said to Laban: "What is my trespass? What is my sin, that you have so hotly pursued me. Although you have searched all my things, what part of your household things have you found? Set it here before my brethren and your brethren, that they may judge between us both! These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried their young, and I have not eaten the rams of your flock. That which was torn by beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it. You required it from my hand, whether stolen by day or stolen by night.

Now Jacob voices his complaint. He has passed the course in the college of hard knocks, and now he is getting his degree. He didn't even get his meals. He had to pay for those. He couldn't even get any insurance. When a lamb was stolen or killed by a wild animal, Jacob had to pay for it. Believe me, this Laban is a hard taskmaster! - McGee

Gen 31:40-41 There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes. Thus I have been in your house twenty years; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times.

He didn't get a vacation in the summer. When the weather grew cold, he still had to stay out with the sheep and with the animals. Many nights he had to watch to protect the flock.

This is what has happened to Jacob. Here is the man who is clever, who thought that he could get by with sin, but God didn't let him get by with it because God has made it very clear that whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap. Jacob refused submission to God at home; so he had to submit to his uncle. Jacob came to receive a wife in dignity, but he was made a servant because God respects the rights of the firstborn. Jacob had deceived his father; so he was deceived by his father-in-law. Jacob, the younger, became as the older. Then he found out that he was given the older when he thought he was getting the younger. He revealed a mercenary spirit that displayed itself in the way he got the birthright, allowing his mother to cover his hands with the skins of kids of goats. Later on, we will see that his own sons will deceive him in very much the same way. They killed a kid and in its blood they dipped Joseph's coat of many colors. He deceived his father about being the favorite son, and he will be deceived about his favorite son, Joseph. Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap. - McGee

Gen 31:42-50 Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the labor of my hands, and rebuked you last night." And Laban answered and said to Jacob, "These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children, and this flock is my flock; all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne? Now therefore, come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me." So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. Then Jacob said to his brethren, "Gather stones." And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there on the heap. Laban called it Jegar Sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. And Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me this day." Therefore its name was called Galeed, also Mizpah, because he said, "May the LORD watch between you and me when we are absent one from another. If you afflict my daughters, or if you take other wives besides my daughters, although no man is with us—see, God is witness between you and me!"

Laban avoided the issue by lamely protesting that he would not harm his own daughters, grandchildren, or cattle, then suggested that they should make a pact. It was not a gracious, friendly covenant, asking the Lord to watch over them while they were separated. Rather, it was a compact between two cheats, asking the Lord to make sure that they did what was right when they were out of sight from one another! It was, in effect, a nonaggression treaty, but it also charged Jacob not to treat Laban's daughters harshly nor to marry other wives. Laban called the pillar of stones marking

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the pact Jegar Sahadutha, an Aramaic expression. Jacob called it Galeed, a Hebrew word. Both words mean "the heap of witness." Neither man was to pass the stone-heap to attack the other. – Believers Bible Commentary

Gen 31:51-55 Then Laban said to Jacob, "Here is this heap and here is this pillar, which I have placed between you and me. This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. The God of Abraham, the God of Nahor, and the God of their father judge between us." And Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac. Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his brethren to eat bread. And they ate bread and stayed all night on the mountain. And early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons and daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place.

Laban swore by the God of Abraham, the God of Nahor, and the God of their father, Terah. The capitalization of God in the NKJV (also Moffatt, NIV, etc.) indicates that the translators felt Laban was referring to the one true God that Abraham came to know. However, since the Hebrew does not have upper and lower case letters, we can't tell if Laban might have been referring to the pagan gods which these men had worshiped in Ur. Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac—that is, the God whom Isaac feared. Isaac had never been an idolater. Jacob first offered a sacrifice, then made a banquet for all those present and camped all that night on the mountain.

Early in the morning, Laban kissed his grandchildren and daughters goodbye and left for home. – Believers Bible Commentary