

Genesis 31 – Jacob and Laban

Background to Genesis 31

Jacob had fled from home, where he had lived with his father Isaac and mother Rebekah. He had fled for his life from his twin brother Esau whom he had cheated out of his father's blessing.

When Jacob lay down to rest on that first night away from home, he had a dream in which he saw a ladder up to heaven and angels ascending and descending upon it. And he saw God at the top of the ladder who said to him:

"I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. 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 28:13-15)

Jacob named the place 'Bethel', the house of God – the place where God was present to him.

Jacob fled to the home of his mother's family – to Paddan Aram where he found refuge with his mother's brother, his uncle Laban. Jacob had met his match at last, for Laban was as big a trickster and cheat as Jacob.

Jacob had wanted to marry Laban's younger daughter, Rachel, whom he had loved at first sight. He had worked for Laban for 7 years to have Rachel as his wife, but when the day came Laban tricked him into marrying his elder daughter, Leah. Jacob was forced to work another 7 years for Rachel – though this time it was 7 years after the marriage.

All this time, Jacob had looked after Laban's flocks of sheep and goats and Laban had done well from Jacob's labour.

During the years following his marriage, ten sons had been born to Jacob:

6 born to Leah

2 born to Rachel's maidservant whom she had given to Jacob

2 born to Leah's maidservant

And then, at long last, Rachel, the wife Jacob loved dearly, bore him a son, Joseph (Genesis 30 – the previous chapter).

With the birth of this child, Jacob wanted to leave Laban and return to the Land that God had promised to him and his descendants. But when he spoke to Laban about leaving, Laban persuaded him to stay:

Laban said to him, "If I have found favour in your eyes, please stay. I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you." He added, "Name your wages, and I will pay them." (Genesis 30:27-28)

Jacob asks only to be allowed to have the speckled, spotted, and black sheep and goats as his own – those that would have been considered less valuable. Laban agrees, but promptly tries to cheat Jacob by removing all such animals and giving them to his sons. Nevertheless, by tricky breeding methods and in the providence of God, the speckled and spotted had multiplied and Jacob had become rich at Laban's expense.

This is where we pick up the story in Genesis 31.

Jacob plans to leave

It was clear to Jacob that Laban's attitude towards him had changed: these two tricky characters had had enough of each other.

God appears again to Jacob and tells him it is now time for him to go:

The LORD said to Jacob, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you." (Genesis 31:3)

Jacob reminds his wives of the deceitful way that their father, Laban, has treated him and yet God has prospered him and has told him:

"I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land." (Genesis 31:13)

God had been faithful in fulfilling the promises he had made to Jacob at Bethel. He had begun to multiply his descendants. God had made him a blessing to Laban and his family. Now he tells Jacob and his family to return to the land he had promised them.

Rachel and Leah agree that they have no reason to stay any longer with their father; yes, they will leave with Jacob.

But Jacob does not want to tell Laban of his plans. When he had previously told Laban of his plans to leave, Laban has persuaded him to stay. So Jacob decides to sneak away secretly. He waits until Laban is away from home supervising the shearing of his sheep, and leaves without a farewell to uncle Laban.

But, unbeknown to Jacob, Rachel got hold of the household gods belonging to her father and took them with her.

What were these gods? They would have been images made of stone or of wood, images of the gods that Laban considered his household gods – the gods that looked after his family. They would have been viewed as lucky charms or talismans – the sign of the gods being revered and promises of the family's protection. Similar to the way in which some have a St Christopher medallion in their car to keep them safe in travel or to the way in which some wear a cross on a chain round their neck, not out of love for Christ and thankfulness for his atoning sacrifice, but as a kind of lucky charm. These were the household gods of Laban, and these were what Rachel had stolen – perhaps in the superstitious belief that these household gods would protect them on their journey.

Laban's pursuit

When, after 3 days, Laban discovers that Jacob has gone, along with Laban's daughters and grandchildren – and his household gods – he sets off in pursuit. No doubt he meant to do Jacob harm, but he is warned not to do so:

God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream at night and said to him, "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad." (Genesis 31:24).

So when Laban, with some of his men, caught up with Jacob he can rebuke Jacob and argue with him, but he knows that he must let Jacob go.

But first he wants to get back his household gods. He searches everywhere in Jacob's camp including the tents of Jacob, of his wives and the tents of their maidservants. Rachel hid the gods in the saddle of her camel and sat upon it, refusing to get up and let her father search it because, she claimed, she was having her period. Rachel's subterfuge is behaviour she has learnt from her tricky father and her equally tricky husband.

Laban can do nothing more, he has simply to give up and to let Jacob, his family and his household gods go. But first he and Jacob construct a pile of stones as a witness of their parting agreement and

a symbolic barrier between them. Laban will return the way he came to his home and Jacob will travel on to his home country. Neither will pass by this pile of stones to approach the territory of the other.

These men, Jacob and Laban, seem so similar. Both are tricky personalities who have sought to get the better of each other. Now they must part and go their separate ways. But there is the world of difference between the two of them – think of it for a moment. Laban has sought the protection of gods that could be stolen from him in a moment. Jacob is protected by the living God: the God of Abraham and Isaac; the God who has made promises to Jacob and who is faithful to his promises; the God who has been with Jacob and promises never to desert him; the God who is leading him back to the land he promised to Abraham and his descendants – now to Jacob and his descendants. There is the world of difference between these two men.

What are we to make of this strange chapter?

The primary purpose of this chapter is to show that God is faithful to his promises.

It may sometimes be difficult to see that God is in control and that his purpose is to bless, but it is true. The story of Jacob and Laban may seem simply to be a story of two tricky characters with the continual question, “Who will get the better of the other?” But that is to miss the key character in this story.

God is never absent from this messy story, and he is working out his purposes in the strangest of ways. He had promised that Jacob’s descendants would be like the dust of the earth. Jacob has eleven sons and he will soon have a twelfth and final son. How did that come about? It was the direct result first of Laban’s deception which gained Jacob two wives and then of conflict in his family which resulted in each wife persuading Jacob to sleep also with their maidservants and raise up surrogate children for them in this manner. It was an unhappy mess. But it was the context in which God was at work to fulfil his promised purpose.

The whole of Genesis, from chapter 11 onwards, is the story of God at work to fulfil his saving purposes and the promises he had given to Abraham, promises of:

- Descendants like the stars in the sky
- Possession of the land God had promised them
- Blessing them and making them a blessing

Now through Jacob God is fulfilling his promises and working out his sovereign purpose: not only despite Jacob’s tricky character but also through it; not only despite the messy situation of his life but also through it.

And so the story will run on with Jacob’s twelve sons, the children of Israel. The mistreatment of this eleventh son, Joseph – the selling him off into slavery by his brothers – will be the very means by which the family is preserved and blessing is brought not to them alone but to the entire nation of Egypt.

Despite the many twists and turns of this very human story of a messy and conflicted family, God is working out his purposes and fulfilling his promises.

But Jacob still has one very important lesson to learn – in Genesis 32. God’s blessing can never be taken for granted. The God who told him to return to possess the land promised to him and his descendants is the God who also stands in his way and says, in effect, “You will not have the promised blessing unless you do business with me!”

We can be sure that God works out his purposes throughout the messy details of human history – through the messy circumstances of our own lives. He even works through the failures and compromises of his own people. He even works through the tricks, betrayal and evil purposes of those who oppose him.

We see this most clearly in Jesus. He was betrayed by one of his own disciples while the best of the others turned tail and abandoned him. His enemies conspired against him and did away with him, crucifying him. What now of God's promises and plans? But God was working through these very things to fulfil his purposes. Jesus' cruel death was the means by which God was reconciling the world to himself. Jesus' resurrection from the dead was the means by which he gives life to a dying world.

And you may be going through difficult and confusing times, perhaps even wondering where God is in it all, feeling abandoned and perhaps all but overcome with doubts. But you need not fear. God is faithful to all his promises and will turn confusion into blessing if you will but trust him. As William Cowper expresses it in one of his hymns:

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sov'reign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

None of this excuses our own sin, compromise or failure – we may need our own fresh encounter with the living God as Jacob experienced in the next chapter. But it should fill us with confidence and set us praying that God would fulfil his purposes through us. Never doubt that God is at work in every situation we face and in every situation faced by others who are dear to us. He is at work to fulfil his purpose of making himself known, establishing his kingdom, saving a people from every nation, tribe and tongue to the end that the world may be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

The key question is, "Do you know this God?" Or is your god a mere talisman or lucky charm that can quickly be stolen from you?

Peter Misselbrook
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