

## Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church

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DHW

### LESSON 24

#### THE BOOK OF GENESIS

#### CHAPTER 31

#### INTRODUCTION

Jacob had served Laban for twenty years -- fourteen years for Rachel and Leah, and six years for an agreed wage. Moses, the writer, reported that Jacob had *increased exceedingly, and had much cattle, and maidservants, and menservants, and camels, and asses* (30:43). The last six years were probably the most significant for we will notice a changed Jacob, the deceiver and schemer. Without doubt, the LORD had blessed him. He came to Padan-aram alone and almost had nothing with him. But now he had two wives and eleven sons and a daughter, and was very rich. He decided to return to his father Isaac and to his native land Canaan. One of the spiritual lessons we can learn from this chapter is the principle of discerning God's will in our lives. Was it God's will for Jacob to return

to Canaan? Why now and not earlier when he had told Laban to send him away so that he could return to his native land?<sup>1</sup>

God's providential care of His people is illustrated in His dealings with Jacob. Jacob was no match to his cunning and conniving uncle, but in the end he was more blessed in many ways than his uncle. While we may not approve of Jacob as one who schemed and deceived his brother Esau, we must admit that his integrity and industry in Haran, where he worked for his dishonest and selfish uncle, was impressive. Even in his relationship with Leah and Rachel there was a change. In the beginning he was like a pawn used by his wives, but now he assumed his rightful role as the head of the family. In our places of work, we do encounter people like Laban but we must learn to trust our good LORD and to conduct ourselves in a manner befitting our calling as God's people.

The following outline helps in our study of the chapter:

- 1) Jacob's reasons for returning to his native land (31:1-16);

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 30:25 *And it came to pass, when Rachel had born Joseph, that Jacob said unto Laban, Send me away, that I may go unto mine own place, and to my country.*

- 2) Jacob secretly left Padan-aram with his wives and all his possessions (31:17-21);
- 3) Jacob was pursued and confronted by Laban (31:22-35);
- 4) Jacob defended his actions (31:36-42);
- 5) Jacob agreed to Laban's proposal of a covenant between them (31:43-55).

### *STUDY THE WORD*

#### **Jacob's Reasons for Returning to His Native Land**

Six years ago Jacob had expressed his desire to return to his native land. Laban succeeded in persuading him to continue working for him for a wage which Jacob had proposed. But now Laban and his sons were not quite happy with Jacob and even hostile to him. Jacob heard Laban's sons complaining that he *had taken all that was our father's* (v.1). Their statement was an exaggeration. Surely Jacob had not taken all of their father's cattle and wealth although Jacob had prospered exceedingly in the past six years. How typical for people to justify their complaints by exaggerating the faults of others.

Such people are always blind to their own faults.

Jacob saw that Laban treated him not as affectionately as *my bone and my flesh*. The LORD directed him to leave Haran and to return to his own country and people. Jacob wasted no time. He sent for Rachel and Leah to the open field where their conversations could not be heard. Jacob shared with Rachel and Leah that their father was no more a friend and kind to him but *God of my father hath been with me* (v.5). Observe that Jacob testified of God's presence and protection of him. Jacob continued by telling his wives that he had served their father well but their father had changed his wages ten times *but God suffered him not to hurt me* (v. 7). Once again, Jacob acknowledged God's protection of him. He had kept to the agreement of the payment of his wages in regard to the speckled and spotted cattle and sheep. Watch, Jacob attributed that his increase of his cattle and sheep was due to God rather than his own ingenuity (v. 9). Jacob then shared that he had a dream in which the Angel of God told him to lift up his eyes and he saw that *all the rams which leaped upon the cattle were ringstraked,*

*speckled, and grised* (v. 12). The Angel of God moreover comforted him and said that *I have seen all that Laban doeth unto thee* (v. 12b). God reminded him of the time at Bethel before he came to Padan-aram. There he made a vow to God. And now God told him to leave Padan-aram and to return to the land of his own people (v. 13). So the reason to leave ultimately was at God's directive and not actually Jacob's decision. We see a change in the heart and mind of Jacob. He had been walking close to the God of his father. He now openly acknowledged God and His presence, protection, and provision.

Rachel and Leah fully supported their husband. They too expressed to Jacob that their father had not treated them fairly and well. They saw no future with him. They had been treated as strangers. He had sold them to Jacob, and embezzled whatever was due to them (v.15). Rachel and Leah too recognized God's providence towards Jacob. So they encouraged Jacob to do whatever God had told him to do (v. 16). For the first time, the two striving sisters were united in spirit and mind. Observe that in the twelve verses (vv.5-16) of the

conversation among the three of them, the name "God" was mentioned seven times (vv. 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 16x2)!

### **Jacob Secretly Departs From Padan-aram**

Jacob then acted accordingly and began packing his belongings, and set his sons and wives on camels to leave. This report of setting his sons and daughters on camels is significant because it indicates that Jacob wanted to leave Padan-aram as fast as he could. It was definitely faster to travel by camel than by foot. It was also the most opportune time for Jacob to leave. Unsuspectingly, Laban had gone to shear his sheep. Shearing sheep was a big job that required many days with large flocks. Laban being away shearing his sheep, a three days journey away from where Jacob was, gave Jacob the perfect timing to escape. Rachel, on the other hand, before leaving stole his father's *images* (v.19b). These images were small human figurines, which are called *teraphim* (in Hebrew). Laban had used these *teraphim* for divination. Did Rachel steal her father's idols because she believed in her father's practice of divination? No reason is

given. But one can surmise that she stole them so that her father could not consult them to find out where Jacob and his family had gone. This could be possible because Rachel disdained the idols by sitting on them when she was menstruating. This was what she told her father when he came to search for the idols which he charged Jacob for stealing them.

The reason why Jacob went off without informing Laban was that he was afraid that Laban might use force to take his daughters from him and hence deterring him from leaving. It seems that Laban was more powerful than Jacob. Jacob was in his territory. This was what Jacob feared (v.31)<sup>2</sup>. One can understand his fear, and Laban was probably capable of doing just that, but if he had more trust in the LORD he should not have gone away secretly. The LORD had directed him to leave Haran and had promised to be with him (v.3).<sup>3</sup> He would prevent Laban from doing harm. Jacob set the course of his

journey south eastward towards the land of Gilead which was very near to Bethel and Beersheba.

### **Jacob Pursued and Confronted By Laban**

After Jacob had travelled three days away from Padan-aram, Laban was told by one of his men that Jacob had fled. On hearing this, Laban summoned his brethren and pursued after Jacob. After seven days of chasing Jacob, naturally on camels, they managed to overtake Jacob and his entourage in the hills of Gilead (v.23). That night when Laban rested and slept, God appeared to him in a dream. Interestingly, the divine writer now referred to Laban as *the Syrian* and not as Jacob's uncle. He had not been a good guardian to his ward – a selfish and greedy person who cheated and exploited his nephew. He did not deserve the title of being Jacob's uncle. God knew him, and warned him that he should not speak *either good or bad* to Jacob. Laban was under God's warning to be fair and just to Jacob. He should not resort to any form of injury against Jacob. God was faithful to His promise to protect Jacob, His chosen vessel.

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 31:31 *And Jacob answered and said to Laban, Because I was afraid: for I said, Peradventure thou wouldest take by force thy daughters from me.*

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 31:3 *And the LORD said unto Jacob, Return unto the land of thy fathers, and to thy kindred; and I will be with thee.*

Jacob had pitched his tent in the hills of Gilead. Laban also pitched his tent there. Laban confronted Jacob and threw a series of questions, one after another (vv. 26-28a): *What hast thou done, that thou hast stolen away unawares to me, and carried away my daughters, as captives taken with the sword? Wherefore didst thou flee away secretly, and steal away from me; and didst not tell me, that I might have sent thee away with mirth, and with songs, with tabret, and with harp? And hast not suffered me to kiss my sons and my daughters?* Laban's accusations of Jacob were unfounded. He was blind to his own faults and mistreatments of Jacob, while the latter was in his employ. Jacob left without telling him was sensible because the unscrupulous Laban could have stopped him from leaving. He referred to Rachel and Leah as his daughters and possessions instead of the wives of Jacob, who had served him fourteen years for their hand. It was a lie that Jacob had used force in taking Rachel and Leah to go with him. He concocted this idea in order to justify his complaint. His expression that he might have sent Jacob off with a warm and merry

rousing feast was hypocritical. In addition, Laban boasted that he had the ability and power to hurt Jacob, but quickly admitted that God had warned him the night before not to hurt him. Indeed, Laban's ability and power to hurt God's chosen man was limited to the providence and will of God.

Laban's next charge against Jacob was the theft of his gods (v. 30). Before he pursued Jacob, Laban discovered that his gods were missing. This led him to think that Jacob had stolen them. At this juncture of Laban's tirade, Jacob interrupted him. Jacob admitted that he left secretly was because he was afraid that Laban would prevent his two daughters from leaving with him. That would frustrate his plan to leave. After saying this, Jacob in ignorance made a precarious undertaking. He said (v.32a): *With whomsoever thou findest thy gods, let him not live.* Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the idols. If Rachel's theft was found out, Jacob would have a terrible decision to make, that is, Rachel had to be killed and the whole escape plan would be in great jeopardy. Laban began his search for his *teraphim*. He went into the tents of

Jacob, Leah, and the two maids, Bilhah and Zilpah. He did not find his *teraphim* simply because they had not stolen them. Then he entered Rachel's tent. Now Rachel had hidden his father's *teraphim* in the saddle-seat of her camel. And she sat on it while Laban was searching for the *teraphim*. She told her father that she could not rise up from the camel's saddle-seat because *the custom of women is upon me* (v. 35, she was menstruating). Laban's search failed to find his lost *teraphim*. Why would Rachel steal his father's gods? Was she polytheistic by believing in the God of Jacob and also the gods of his father? The reason is not given. But the fact, that Rachel sat on the *teraphim*, when she was menstruating, a condition, which made her ceremonially unclean, shows that she had no respect for Laban's gods. She would not have hidden the *teraphim* in that manner, would she? It means that she did not believe in the powers of his father's gods.

### Jacob Defends His Actions

When Laban was unable to discover his *teraphim*, Jacob expressed his righteous anger and chided him for the false accusation

against him (v.35). Jacob then gave Laban a summary history lesson. He had served Laban twenty years and he had shepherded the latter's flocks of sheep and cattle honestly, and *the rams of thy flock have I not eaten* (v.38). Jacob had acted honourably by replacing the lost of any sheep and cattle that was either killed by beasts or lost with his own. He had worked very hard and spent sleepless nights shepherding the flocks. In the twenty years he had served Laban, he served fourteen years for the hand of her two daughters, and another six years for his flocks of sheep and cattle, and changed his wages ten times. Then Jacob openly acknowledged that if it had not been for the presence and providence of the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac with him, Laban would certainly have sent him away empty handed. But God had seen his suffering and even had warned Laban the night before not to hurt him (v.42). Jacob has grown spiritually. He learned this in the hard way but it was worth it. He had increased experientially the faithfulness of God and now openly acknowledged and testified of His

goodness and greatness before Laban and all the people.

### **Jacob Agrees to Laban's Proposal of a Covenant**

Laban stubbornly expressed to Jacob that his wives were his daughters, their children were his, Jacob's cattle were his, and claiming that they were all his – his way of face-saving after Jacob's history lesson of his honest and compliant service. Laban admitted that he could do nothing, even if he wanted to because he had boasted that he had the means and the power to hurt Jacob. He could not because God was with Jacob, and Laban would hurt himself more if he had ignored God's warning to him. How wonderful it is to have God on the side of His children!

Laban proposed a covenant to be made between them. Jacob built a pillar or a heap of stones as a memorial of the covenant. Laban called it Jegarsahadutha (Aramaic), which means "Witness Heap". But Jacob called it Galeed (Hebrew), which has the same meaning, and also Mizpah, which means "a watch-tower" - *the LORD watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another*. Laban stipulated

the terms of the covenant. He pronounced a curse upon Jacob if he did not treat his daughters well or take other wives, invoking the name of God as his witness. Next, he wanted to ensure that Jacob would not cross over into his land to attack him. Laban swore by his multiple gods. But Jacob offered sacrifice unto his God, and called his brethren to eat before God. This sacrifice and feasting was an expression of thanksgiving before God.

The next day, rising early in the morning, Laban bade his grandchildren the customary kiss of farewell, and he blessed them. Laban departed and returned to his homeland.

### **PRACTICAL VALUE**

One clear and comforting spiritual lesson we learn is that God always protects and provides for His children. This is illustrated in the twenty years of Jacob in Padan-aram when he served under the unscrupulous and unprincipled Laban. Jacob learned to trust and believed in God. His spiritual life grew and became a changed person, who had previously thought of himself as being confident and capable. He met his Waterloo in Padan-aram, and learned to trust the

God whom he had met at Bethel and the vow that he made with Him. It is therefore important for us to make sure that God is with us, for when He is with us no one and nothing can have the advantage over us. And to ensure God's presence, protection, and provision, we must walk in His ways. Seek the righteousness of God and His kingdom first, and all these things shall be added unto us (Matthew 6:33).

One clearly defined principle of finding God's will for our lives is illustrated in this episode of Jacob's life. When we are not sure whether a course of action is God's will or not, we can follow three guidelines. First there was a strong desire in Jacob's heart to return home. He had felt this after fourteen years of service (30:25)<sup>4</sup>. That desire became intense after another six years of working for Laban. The first principle in finding God's will for our lives is a definite conviction in our hearts that God desires us to take a certain course of action. David wrote,

*Delight thyself also in the LORD;  
and he shall give thee the desires of  
thine heart. (Psalm 37:4).*

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 30:25 *And it came to pass, when Rachel had born Joseph, that Jacob said unto Laban, Send me away, that I may go unto mine own place, and to my country.*

Then circumstances play the next part. Jacob was perturbed by the changed attitude of Laban and his sons towards him (31:1,2)<sup>5</sup>. His desire to leave was the wisest thing to do. The second principle in finding God's will is the development of circumstances. Paul wrote,

*All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not. (1 Corinthians 10:23).*

Thirdly there was a clear word from God.<sup>6</sup> God gave Jacob a clear directive and promised to be with him. The application of this principle necessitates prayerful care and diligence. Although God can if He wills to give us His directive just as He gave to Jacob, He has not chosen to do so because He has given to us His inspired, infallible and authoritative Word, the sixty-six books of the Holy Scriptures. It behoves us to prayerfully and

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 31:1 *And he heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, Jacob hath taken away all that was our father's; and of that which was our father's hath he gotten all this glory. 2 And Jacob beheld the countenance of Laban, and, behold, it was not toward him as before.*

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 31:3 *And the LORD said unto Jacob, Return unto the land of thy fathers, and to thy kindred; and I will be with thee.*

diligently search the Word, waiting upon the LORD to speak to us through His Word. One given guideline is that while we are waiting on God for His guidance, “some special word from the Scripture which is suited to our case and which the Spirit bringing it manifestly to our notice is plainly a message from God to our individual heart.” As we do all these and wait upon the LORD to show us His will, we need to pray without ceasing. Tell the LORD our problems and our need for a clear direction from Him so that we can avoid making mistakes.<sup>7</sup> Paul, writing to Timothy, exhorted,

*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)*

The LORD our God knows our weaknesses. The methods that He employs may not always save us from pain and suffering. Jacob suffered a lot. But he was patient and strong. Sometimes the LORD really chastens us and the experience can be bitter. But know this: God

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<sup>7</sup> A.W. Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis*, (Grand Rapids: Moody Press, 1922), 278. These three principles were propounded by Pink.

always has our best interests at heart. No good thing would he withhold from those whom He has bought with the precious blood of His Only Begotten Son, the LORD Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> AMEN

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<sup>8</sup> Psalm 84:11 *For the LORD God is a sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.*

Romans 8:31 *What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? 32 He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?*