

Genesis 31 - Jacob Flees From Laban to Canaan

A. Jacob's disputes with Laban and his sons.

1. (1-2) Contention with Laban's sons causes Laban to look differently at Jacob.
 - a. **Jacob has taken away all that was our father's**: It wasn't that Jacob had taken *anything* belonging to Laban. Rather, it was that his wealth was increasing in proportion to Laban's wealth. The problem wasn't that Jacob stole, it was that Laban's sons were filled with *envy*.
 - i. Envy will distort the truth. Jacob had not taken anything of Laban's, but envy will lie.
 - b. **The countenance of Laban . . . was not favorable toward him**: The envy of Laban's sons poisoned Laban's heart against Jacob. Before, he was entirely pleased with the agreement.
 - i. Envy is bad not only on its own, but also for the company it keeps: *for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? (1 Corinthians 3:3) For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there (James 3:16).*
 - ii. Instead, *Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy (1 Corinthians 13:4).*
 - iii. God wants to deliver us from envy: *For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another (Titus 3:3).*
 - iv. Is envy a small sin? It put Jesus on the cross: *For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy (Matthew 27:18).*
2. (3) God tells Jacob to go back home.
 - a. **Return to the land of your fathers**: Even if Jacob never knew it, God prepared him for this time. First, God gave him the *desire* to go back home (Genesis 30:25). Then his *present circumstances became unbearable*. Finally, the LORD gave *personal direction* to Jacob. God often leads us in the same pattern.
 - b. **And I will be with you**: This confirmed the direction of God in Jacob's life.
3. (4-13) Jacob explains the situation and his plan to his wives.
 - a. **But the God of my father has been with me**: Even though Laban tried to cheat Jacob, God protected him all the time. We don't have to fear what man can do to us when God is on our side.
 - i. *The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? (Psalm 118:6)*
 - b. **You know that with all my might I have served your father**: This shows Jacob knew his wives were aware of his righteous conduct and Laban's unfair treatment of him.

c. **I am the God of Bethel:** God told Jacob to go back to Bethel, back to the place where he first encountered the LORD in a personal way. This is a way of returning to one's first love and first works (Revelation 2:4-5).

i. **I am the God of Bethel:** it is good for us to remember times and places where the LORD did great works for us, and met us in wonderful ways. As we remember them, God reminds us He is still the same God Who met our needs then and wants to meet our needs now.

4. (14-16) Leah and Rachel support Jacob in his desire to move back to Canaan.

a. **Is there still any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house?** Their support was significant. This is a huge undertaking, moving such a massive family so far. If not for the support of his wives, Jacob perhaps would not have done what the LORD had told him to do.

b. **Whatever God has said to you, do it:** This may be the first time in quite a while when the sisters Leah and Rachel agreed on anything. They can agree in uniting against their father Laban.

B. Jacob's flight from Laban.

1. (17-21) Jacob leaves without saying goodbye.

a. **Jacob stole away, unknown to Laban the Syrian:** God has already told him to go and promised him safe passage. Jacob is clearly acting in the flesh, because he has no need to be afraid of Laban or to sneak away.

i. "He could have announced his departure and gone in the glory of an army with banners. But fear made it impossible to reap the full measure of blessing. He sneaked away into the will of God instead of departing in triumph." (Barnhouse)

b. **Rachel had stolen the household idols that were her father's:**

Rachel took her father's **household idols** (*teraphim*). She may have wanted them because perhaps she worshipped these idols and did not want to be without them. Perhaps she did not want her father to inquire of them, using them as tools of divination to catch them (as he may have previously done, Genesis 30:27). Or perhaps it was because such idols were often used as deeds to property and she thought this she was taking her "inheritance."

i. Perhaps Rachel stole the teraphim simply to get back at her father, whom she felt had mistreated her, her husband, and her whole family. Jewish traditions say Rachel took the teraphim because she wanted to keep her father Laban from idolatry.

c. **Headed toward the mountains of Gilead:** It was nearly 300 miles from Haran to the mountains of Gilead, but the journey was longer and tougher psychologically for Jacob than anything else. He is leaving the place of safety, where he has lived in a comfortable servitude, to go to a place where God has called him, but dangerous enemies abound (like his brother Esau, who swore to kill him).

2. (22-24) Laban pursues and catches Jacob.

a. **God had come to Laban the Syrian in a dream by night:** God's speaking to Laban in a dream shows he had evil intention towards Jacob. God is protecting Jacob.

3. (25-29) Laban meets and confronts Jacob.
 - a. **Why did you flee away secretly:** Laban first tried to shame Jacob with kindness (“We wanted to throw you a party!”). When that didn’t work (we can only imagine the stony faces answering him), he did what most bullies do - he boasted of his ability to harm Jacob.
4. (30-35) Laban accuses Jacob of stealing his teraphim and searches for them.
 - a. **Why did you steal my gods?** Jacob, not knowing his beloved wife Rachel stole the **household idols**, proclaimed his innocence and pronounced a harsh curse on the thief, not knowing actually put a curse on his own wife.
 - b. **Rachel had taken the household idols, put them in the camel’s saddle, and sat on them:** Rachel learned the ways of deception well from her father. She succeeded in deceiving her father about the idols.
 - i. “Amid much that is sad and even sordid in this story . . . amid craft, deceit, and lying on almost every side, we cannot fail to see the hand of God overruling and making even the wrath of man to praise Him.” (Barnhouse)
5. (36-42) Jacob rebukes his father-in-law Laban.
 - a. **Then Jacob was angry and rebuked Laban:** It isn’t hard to see these words building up in Jacob for 20 years. He has practiced this speech over and over again in his mind.
 - b. **What is my trespass?** How faithfully did Jacob serve Laban? It was an ancient custom that a shepherd could bring the torn carcass of a sheep to his owner, as evidence that he was brave enough to not let the wolf devour it or take it away, and thus the shepherd would be excused. But Jacob says he didn’t even do this, and every animal that was attacked, he made good out of his own flock.
 - c. **Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had been with me:** Jacob saw God’s place in all this. Unfortunately, nowhere does Jacob say, “He is my God.”

C. Laban and Jacob make a covenant.

1. (43-50) Jacob and Laban make a covenant.
 - a. **All that you see is mine:** Laban lays claim to all this that is already out of his hand. He says, “It **is mine**, but Jacob, out of the generosity of my heart, I’ll let you have it.”
 - b. **May the LORD watch between you and me when we are absent one from another:** In this covenant, Laban expresses how suspicious he is of Jacob. The idea of **Mizpah** (“watch”) is “If you do wrong, God will see it and may He punish!”
 - i. “In effect, the pillar of Mizpah meant, ‘If you come over on my side of this line, the pact is void and I will kill you.’ The covenant breaker would need God to take care of him, because the other would shoot to kill.” (Barnhouse) **Mizpah** was never meant to be a nice sentiment - despite what your “Mizpah coin” might say.

2. (51-55) A pillar of separation and a parting of their ways.
- a. **I will not pass beyond this heap to you:** The best solution for Jacob's in-law problems is for him to separate from Laban. In fact, they erect a pillar to be a barrier between them.
 - i. There is wisdom in having some separation from in-laws. The Bible does say, *therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife* (Genesis 2:24), though the separation in Jacob's case is indeed extreme!
 - b. **Then Laban departed and returned to his place:** After a proper good-bye, Laban sees his daughters and grandchildren for the last time. "This is the last we hear of Laban in the Bible, and it is good that this is the end of him. Laban is of the world, and Jacob needed to be freed from this world in order to live wholeheartedly for the God of his fathers." (Boice)
 - i. Rather than seeking to follow the truth of God's plan as witnessed by Jacob, he merely resented and coveted the blessing of God on Jacob. He finally ended up with neither. His life constitutes a sober warning to a great host of semi-religious but fundamentally self-worshipping and self-seeking men and women today.

References: The Bible, David Guzik, James Boice, Donald Barnhouse.