

## Chapter 9: The Flight of Jacob

*Genesis 31:1–21*

When Jacob left Canaan, he demonstrates a paradoxical pattern in life. From one perspective, Jacob sought after the things of God in a way that his brother, Esau, did not. From another perspective, Jacob was brash, arrogant, and unscrupulous. To his credit, Jacob pursued the birthright that his brother Esau despised (Gen. 25:34) and the blessing that his brother Esau forfeited through marriage to Hittite women (Gen. 26:34–35). To Jacob’s shame, however, he exploited his brother’s desperation to gain the birthright, and he manipulated and deceived his blind father to secure the blessing (Gen. 27:1–29). In contrast to Esau, Jacob has desired the right things all his life. Nevertheless, he has been willing to trespass even the closest, familial boundaries to gain them.

After Jacob’s two decades of service under Laban, Jacob’s heart has significantly changed. No longer does Jacob rely upon himself in the way that he did in the past. Instead, he has become increasingly dependent upon God, who has been with him at every step of his journey. When Jacob now prepares to flee from his bondage in Laban’s house to return to this homeland in Canaan, God reveals more fully how his providential grace has been at work in the life of Jacob. Jacob, then, does not depart for Canaan according to his own desires, but according to God’s word to him (Gen. 31:3, 13). Where Jacob departed from Canaan a selfish man who lived by his own scheming, he returns to Canaan as a humbled man who lives by faith in God’s promises. In this story of how Jacob and his family prepare for their exodus out of bondage and into the promised land, we see a type of how God calls his church out of the corruptions of this world (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1). In our case, God does not call us to depart out of this world entirely (cf. 1 Cor. 5:10). Instead, God calls us out of the world’s way of living in order to make us into a royal priesthood and a holy nation in front of the watching world (1 Pet. 2:9–12). As Jacob proclaims God’s word to his family, urging them to follow God’s call by faith, Genesis 31:1–21 reminds us that *God calls his church out of this world into his holiness.*

### **Purpose: We Come for God’s Inheritance (Gen. 31:1–3)**

As the Lord prospers Jacob in the midst of his oppression under Laban, Jacob’s new prosperity does not sit well with his oppressors:

[1] Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, “Jacob has taken all that was our father’s, and from what was our father’s he has gained all this wealth.” [2] And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before. (Gen. 31:1–2)

When Jacob first arrived in Paddan-aram, we only read of Laban’s *daughters* (Gen. 29:6, 16).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Laban’s sons have been keeping Laban’s sheep for the past six years (Gen. 30:35), and

during that time they have seen Jacob's flocks increase, while Laban's flocks have decreased (Gen. 31:1). Their charge against Jacob overlooks the fact that their father has gained much wealth from Jacob's unpaid service during the previous fourteen years (Gen. 30:27–30).<sup>2</sup> From their perspective, they can only see what is happening now: Jacob is increasing while their father is decreasing.

### Laban's Sudden Disfavor

Laban too does not look upon Jacob with the same favor as before. Previously, Laban eagerly negotiated to keep Jacob under his employment, since he knew that the Lord blessed him because of Jacob (Gen. 30:27–28). Laban believed, however, that he could continue to swindle Jacob as he did for the previous fourteen years. Rather than disguising daughters, this time Laban put Jacob's off-colored goats and lambs under the charge of his own sons while Jacob continued to care for Laban's flocks (Gen. 30:34–36). Inexplicably, the livestock belonging to Jacob increased greatly (Gen. 30:43), making Jacob very wealthy at Laban's expense (Gen. 30:43). Laban finds his plans frustrated at every turn, and he begins to view Jacob as a liability rather than an asset.

The Hebrew draws out Jacob's shock to realize that his situation has changed in two ways that are not as clear in English translations. A more literal translation of Genesis 31:2 more clearly brings out the sudden change in Laban's demeanor: "And Jacob saw the face of Laban, and *behold!* it [Laban's face = i.e., his favor] was not with him *as yesterday, [or] the day before yesterday.*" Notice the two differences that I have put in italics. First, Genesis 31:2 incorporates the word *behold* in a way that the ESV leaves untranslated.<sup>4</sup> Second, the phrase "as before" paraphrases what literally describes a very short period of time: one or two days. All of a sudden, Jacob realizes that Laban's face was not favorable toward him, a stunning transformation. Only one or two days' previously Jacob had his uncle's favor, but now (behold!) Laban's favor has turned to disfavor toward Jacob. In the previous generation, it was Isaac's wealth that made the Philistines envious (Gen. 26:14); now Jacob's wealth draws the envy of his kinsmen: both Laban's sons and Laban himself.<sup>5</sup>

### Returning to the Land of Jacob's Fathers

If Jacob's had a better experience with his extended family, he may have never left. After all, the Lord has been blessing him significantly in Paddan-aram, so that he has become increasingly wealthy (Gen. 30:43–31:1). The Lord, therefore, uses the disfavor of Jacob's kinsmen to prepare the way for calling Jacob to return to Canaan:<sup>6</sup> "Then the LORD said to Jacob, 'Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you'" (Gen. 31:3). At Bethel, God promised that he eventually would bring Jacob back (lit., "cause you to return") to the land of Canaan (Gen. 28:15).<sup>7</sup> Now, God is fulfilling his promise by sending Jacob back to the land of his fathers.

The word *father(s)* is important in this passage, appearing twelve times in Genesis 31:1–21 (Gen. 31:1 (x2), 3, 5 (x2), 6, 7, 9, 14, 16, 18, 19). In this passage, the frequent use of the word *father(s)* sets up an important contrast between the inheritance that the children of Laban stand to gain from their father (Gen. 31:1, 14–16) with the inheritance that Jacob stands to gain from his own fathers back in Canaan.<sup>8</sup> In Jacob's previous life, he purchased his older brother's birthright (Gen. 25:29–34), and he stole his father's blessing (Gen. 27:1–29). Because of this, Esau determined to murder Jacob (Gen. 27:41), so that Jacob must face great risk if he wishes to return and claim his inheritance. Nevertheless, Jacob's deteriorating relationships with Laban and Laban's sons mean that Jacob will not fare much better with Laban. Jacob recognizes, then, that he has no inheritance to gain from

Laban, and that his only hope rests in the promises that God made to his fathers in the land of Canaan.

As Jacob prepares to return, the Lord promises him “...and I will be with you” (Gen. 31:3). In this promise, we should notice the subtle, yet clear, contrast between God’s promise to be *with* Jacob (Gen. 31:3) and Laban’s favor (lit., “face”), which is no longer *with* Jacob (Gen. 31:2).<sup>9</sup> Also, we should remember that God promised this very thing to him earlier at Bethel: “Behold, I am with you” (Gen. 28:15). Thus, the Lord’s promise to be “with” Jacob has been the consistent theme on Jacob’s journey, from the beginning all the way up to now, as Jacob prepares to head back to Canaan.<sup>10</sup> God has been with Jacob, and will continue to be with him, just as he promised.

Still, Jacob’s return to Canaan will be different from his departure from Canaan in two important details. First, as mentioned earlier, Jacob left Canaan to flee from the wrath of his brother in the wake of the mess that he created by stealing Isaac’s blessing (Gen. 27:41). This time around, however, Jacob’s disfavor arises with Laban as a result of the Lord’s blessing, not from any deceit on Jacob’s part. Second, Jacob left Canaan at the command of his mother, Rebekah (Gen. 27:43–45).<sup>11</sup> This time, Jacob departs not only to escape the wrath of Laban, but, more importantly, by the direct command of the Lord.<sup>12</sup>

### The Call of Jacob

One other important element in this passage is to recognize that the Lord’s call to Jacob resembles the Lord’s original call to Abram. Allen Ross points out the various links between the two passages:

The episode has a significant parallel with Genesis 12:1–9, in which God called the patriarch to leave his relatives and go to the land that God would show him. In that chapter Abraham took all his possessions and departed for the land of Canaan. In this chapter, the Lord commanded Jacob to return to the land of his fathers and to his relatives (v. 3), and Jacob took all his possessions that he had acquired to go to his father in the land of Canaan (v 18). The parallel use of words such as ...“kindred,”...“possessions,” and...“to the land of Canaan,” establish a connection between the two events. Jacob was thus repeating the obedience to the call that his grandfather had followed, only now the “tribes” of Israel made their journey to the land of Canaan, not just one man with the promise of a great nation.<sup>13</sup>

The Lord called Abram to go to an unknown land, while the Lord now calls Jacob to return to his homeland.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Jacob’s return trip is not without concerns, for Jacob must wonder whether his brother Esau is still alive, and, more importantly, whether Esau still wants to kill him. In both cases, God calls the patriarchs to trust him in the midst of uncertainty as they obey his call to pursue after his promises.

To this day, God calls his church out of the world in the same way. We too come seeking a better inheritance than what we can gain from the world—the inheritance of Christ Jesus himself (Eph. 1:11). As with Abraham and Jacob, our coming is fraught with risk and danger. We do not come because we can see exactly how God will bring us into his glory. Rather, we come because we trust the God who calls us to follow him. The kingdoms of this world are alluring, but they are crumbling. This world offers us no certain hope. Our only hope is in the promises of God in Jesus Christ.

## Ground: We Come Because God is With Us (Gen. 31:4–16)

Jacob cannot return to the land of Canaan alone. To leave, he must have the support of his family, lest his wives betray Jacob to their father, Laban. So, Jacob calls a family meeting to explain why departing now is both “justified and wise”:<sup>15</sup>

[4] So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was [5] and said to them, “I see that your father does not regard me with favor as he did before. But the God of my father has been with me. [6] You know that I have served your father with all my strength, [7] yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times. But God did not permit him to harm me. [8] If he said, ‘The spotted shall be your wages,’ then all the flock bore spotted; and if he said, ‘The striped shall be your wages,’ then all the flock bore striped. [9] Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me.” (Gen. 31:4–9)

Gordon Wenham observes that the speeches of Jacob and his wives in this passage “are long by biblical standards, indicating the great importance of this discussion.”<sup>16</sup> Through this section, Jacob never refers to Laban by name, but only as “your father” (Gen. 31:5, 6, 7, 9), in contrast to “my father” (Gen. 31:5).<sup>17</sup> By calling Rachel and Leah into “the field where his flock was” (Gen. 31:4), it may be that Jacob is seeking to ensure that their conversation will not be overheard (cf. 1 Sam. 20:11).<sup>18</sup> Additionally, we see Jacob’s careful tact in this conversation in two ways as he tries to secure the support of his wives. First, Jacob says nothing about Rachel’s and Leah’s brothers, but only their father.<sup>19</sup> Second, Jacob avoids the touchy subject of how Laban cheated him by giving him Leah instead of Rachel after his seven years of work.<sup>20</sup> Instead, Jacob focuses only on Laban’s treachery with the livestock that Jacob has earned as his wages for the previous six years of work.

### Laban’s Cheating and Changing of Jacob’s Wages

We should not overlook the flock that Jacob is with *his* flock (Gen. 31:4), rather than Laban’s flock (Gen. 30:35–36).<sup>21</sup> One of Jacob’s main complaints through this passage is that Laban has changed his wages ten times, and the fact that Jacob is with his own flock may provide some evidence of a changed arrangement. Alternately, this may simply refer to the division that Jacob himself put between his own, strong flocks and the feeble flocks of Laban (Gen. 30:40).

Regardless, Jacob goes to great length in his speech to describe all the ways that Laban has mistreated him. Each time, however, Jacob describes how God has faithfully protected him no matter what Laban has done. Jacob states this explicitly in three back-and-forth comparisons between Laban’s unfaithfulness and God’s faithfulness in Genesis 31:5–9.<sup>22</sup> First, Laban does not regard Jacob with the same favor as before—but the God of Jacob’s father has been with Jacob (Gen. 31:5). Second, although Jacob served Laban with all his strength, Laban cheated him and changed his wages ten times—but God did not permit Laban to harm Jacob (Gen. 31:6–7). Third, Laban changed his mind as to whether Jacob should receive the spotted animals or the striped animals—but regardless of Laban’s arrangement *du jour*, God took away Laban’s livestock and gave them to Jacob (Gen. 31:8–9).

Most likely, Jacob’s reference to Laban’s changing his wages “ten times” (Gen. 31:7, 41) is not an

exact count, but a round, figurative number.<sup>23</sup> Jacob’s point is that Laban has been thoroughly unscrupulous in his dealings with Jacob. Jacob has provided genuine (“with all my strength”; Gen. 31:6) service, while Laban has continually changed Jacob’s wages. The two words *wages* and *service* appear extensively throughout the narratives of Jacob’s first (Gen. 29:15–30) and second wage disputes (Gen. 30:25–34).<sup>24</sup> Just as Laban did not give Rachel to Jacob in marriage, so now Laban has attempted to withhold sheep and goats from Jacob. In both cases, Jacob provided the service, but Laban cheated Jacob by refusing to pay the agreed-upon wages. The word *cheated* “means deceived or fooled in the sense of failing to follow up on a commitment (cf. Exod 8:29[25]; Jer 9:5[4]). Here it describes Laban’s repeated change in Jacob’s wages whenever the need arose.”<sup>25</sup>

### God Has Been With Jacob

This time, however, God has blessed Jacob so that Laban is not able to harm him. In the first wage negotiation, Laban slyly promised to give “her” to Jacob in marriage, without specifying whether he meant Rachel or Leah (Gen. 29:19). Then, when Jacob asked to receive “my wife” at the end of his service, Laban said nothing to clarify which *wife* Jacob meant (Gen. 29:21). In the second wage negotiation, Laban keeps changing the agreement—first saying that only the *spotted* belonged to Jacob, and then saying that only the *striped* were Jacob’s (Gen. 31:8).<sup>26</sup> Whichever direction Laban turns, however, God abundantly provides that coloring of animal for Jacob. During this second arrangement, Laban finds no success in his attempts to cheat his way to prosperity.

Thus, God has been with Jacob (Gen. 31:5), has not permitted Laban to harm Jacob (Gen. 31:7), and has taken away Laban’s livestock and given them to Jacob (Gen. 31:9). In that last phrase, the words “taken away” might be better translated as “rescued,” since the verb often refers to saving someone from the danger of death (Gen. 32:11; 37:21–22)—or, significantly, of delivering the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt (Ex. 3:8; 5:23; 6:6).<sup>27</sup> In the previous passage, we observed a similar interplay between the *abundant increase* of the flocks of Laban and Jacob (Gen. 30:30, 43) and the abundant increase (ESV: “spread abroad”) of the Israelites in Egypt (Ex. 1:12). In both cases, what happens to Jacob’s livestock foreshadows what will later happen to the people of Israel as a whole: they will *increase abundantly*, and God will *deliver* them from the hands of their oppressors. Much later, God will continue to be *with* his people in the person of Jesus Christ, but in a much more direct way as *Immanuel*, which means “God with us” (Matt. 1:23).

### Jacob’s Vision

In this speech to his wives, Jacob appeals to more than simply the mistreatment he has experienced from Laban. More importantly, Jacob also cites the word of the Lord from the “angel of God” (that is, from God himself; cp. Gen. 31:11, 13):<sup>28</sup>

[10] “In the breeding season of the flock I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream that the goats that mated with the flock were striped, spotted, and mottled. [11] Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob,’ and I said, ‘Here I am!’ [12] And he said, ‘Lift up your eyes and see, all the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted, and mottled, for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. [13] I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred.’” (Gen. 31:10–13)

There is some question about *when* Jacob receives this dream. On the one hand, Jacob seems to suggest that he experienced this dream some time in the past: “In the breeding season of the flock...” (Gen. 31:10).<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the content of God’s word closes with a direct command to return immediately to the land of Canaan: “Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred” (Gen. 31:13). If Jacob indeed received this dream some time before, then he deliberately ignored the Lord’s command during this time, which seems unlikely. On the whole, it seems best to understand Genesis 31:10–13 as a fuller account of the word of the Lord that came to Jacob in Genesis 31:3.<sup>30</sup>

This dream reveals two critical pieces of information. First, God declares explicitly that *he* has been the one causing Jacob’s livestock to increase. God even gives the reason for his intervention: “for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you” (Gen. 31:12). Previously we could only infer that the hand of God was at work to bless Jacob’s odd breeding techniques; now we know with certainty that God has blessed Jacob in spite of Laban’s persecution. It was God, not the peeled branches, that brought about Jacob’s wealth. Just as God will deliver the people of Israel out of Egypt because he *sees* their affliction (Ex. 2:25), so God blesses Jacob because he *sees* how Laban has oppressed him.

Second, God reveals something of his purpose for calling Jacob to return to the land of Canaan: “I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me” (Gen. 31:13). Jacob vowed that if God indeed remains with him and keeps him in his way, giving him bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that God brings him back to his father’s house in peace—that is, if the Lord indeed becomes as God to him—then Jacob will worship there (“this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house”) and give to God a tithe of what God has given to him (Gen. 28:20–22). The Lord has fulfilled all of his promises to Jacob to be with him and to provide for him as his God, and now the Lord is calling Jacob back to Canaan to worship him there.<sup>31</sup> Jacob left as a fugitive who lived by manipulating those around him, and he now returns to his homeland as a worshiper who lives according to the blessings and promises of God. Everything that has happened up to this point—including all of Jacob’s suffering at the hand of Laban—took place according to God’s plan to sanctify and transform Jacob into an entirely different man.<sup>32</sup>

### The Response of Rachel and Leah

Jacob, then, is not trying to talk his wives into some scheme he has drawn up. Rather, he is declaring to his wives the word of the Lord. Therefore, he is calling his wives to trust and obey the Lord by accompanying him back to Canaan.<sup>33</sup> His wives rise to the occasion, especially since they have their own grievances with their father:

[14] Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, “Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father’s house? [15] Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has indeed devoured our money. [16] All the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, whatever God has said to you, do.” (Gen. 31:14–16)

The phrase “portion or inheritance” occurs frequently in the Old Testament to refer to each Israelite’s portion of land in Canaan that God gave to them as an inheritance according to the

promises he made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (cf. Deut. 10:9; 12:12; cf. 2 Sa. 20:1; 1 Kgs. 12:16).<sup>34</sup> Obviously, this is not quite the “portion or inheritance” that Rachel and Leah mean.

Instead, Jacob’s wives are claiming that their father has “sold” them, and that he has “indeed devoured our money” (Gen. 31:15). John Walton helpfully explains the cultural background of their complaint:

The willingness of Leah and Rachel to leave is premised on an accusation against their father concerning his handling of their inheritance. As mentioned above, the bride price paid by the husband’s family was supposed to be held in trust in the event it was needed to provide for the wife if she were abandoned or widowed. Jacob, of course, gave no bride price but his labor, so the equivalent of his wages should have been set aside for the women. Apparently that was never done. Jacob’s labor has benefited Laban, not the women; thus, it is as if he has “sold” them to Jacob. If their father’s house holds no economic security for them, they have no reason to stay.<sup>35</sup>

Laban should have kept back their inheritance as something like a life insurance policy, should something happen to Jacob. Instead, Laban has devoured that wealth. In doing so, he has not treated them as the daughters of a wealthy landowner; rather, he has sold his daughters into marriage as though they were slaves, who could not expect their father’s protection any longer. Because their father has not protected them, they have nothing holding them back from departing from their father’s house for the land of Canaan. Even Rachel and Leah can expect no inheritance from their own father. Their only hope is to trust in the promises of inheritance that God has made to the fathers of Jacob.

Furthermore, Rachel and Leah acknowledge that God has protected them, even as their own father has not: “All the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children” (Gen. 31:16). The verb for “taken away” is the same verb that will appear in Exodus 12:36: “Thus they *plundered* the Egyptians.”<sup>36</sup> In the previous passage, the thrust of the whole passage demonstrated that Jacob’s increase in wealth at Laban’s expense functions as a type of how the Israelites plundered the Egyptians on the way out of Egypt. Rachel and Leah confirm this point by their word choice. God has plundered their father, who oppressed their husband and, therefore, them and their children.

With that, Rachel and Leah agree to obey the command of the Lord: “Now then, whatever God has said to you, do” (Gen. 31:16). Just as Rebekah chose to leave Laban’s household (Gen. 24:58), and just as Ruth will choose to leave her homeland (Ruth 1:16), so Rachel and Leah choose to leave their homeland to go to Canaan.<sup>37</sup> This is no small matter, for it means that they are entrusting themselves to their husband’s God instead of their father.<sup>38</sup> This is a significant step of faith that God will ultimately reward in their critical role in the establishment of the nation of Israel.

Even so, we should recognize that Rachel and Leah do not leave for Canaan out of extraordinary faith. Rather, they believe that they have no prospect for security with their father. It will be better to take their chances with Jacob in Canaan than to remain around their father in Paddan-aram. Evangelism always works this way, since no one comes to Christ with any more than a small understanding of what they are gaining. Instead, God first gives them clarity to see their absolute poverty in their current situation. Because of this, new believers often still have bad habits to unlearn

and bad desires to put to death, as we will see in Rachel's case in the final section of this passage.

### **Manner: We Come into God's Holiness (Gen. 31:17–21)**

After securing the agreement of his wives, Jacob makes preparations to depart for Canaan:

[17] So Jacob arose and set his sons and his wives on camels. [18] He drove away all his livestock, all his property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac. (Gen. 31:17–18)

Just as God's call to Jacob (Gen. 31:3) sounded like God's call to Abraham (Gen. 12:1), now also the phrase "all his property that he had gained" reminds us of Abram's journey from Haran: "And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and *all their possessions that they had gathered*, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan" (Gen. 12:5).<sup>39</sup>

#### Stealing Laban's Idols

On the way out, Rachel does something puzzling: "Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods" (Gen. 31:19). This verse raises two big questions. First, why does Laban have these "household gods"? Elsewhere, this word for "household gods" appears in the context of divination (cf. 1 Sam. 15:23; Ezek. 21:26; Zech. 10:2), and we know that Laban himself practices divination (Gen. 30:27). These household gods are likely the means by which Laban seeks supernatural knowledge. If so, then this passage has a clear literary parallel when Joseph tests his brothers by planting the silver cup by which he practices divination (Gen. 44:5) into Benjamin's sack, as though it were stolen.<sup>40</sup>

Second, why does Rachel steal them? Commentators suggest many possible answers. Some believe that she may have had a religious reason for doing so, since household gods are, by definition, religious objects.<sup>41</sup> Idolatry, as Calvin observes, "is almost innate in the human mind."<sup>42</sup> It is possible, then, that Rachel wants to take some back-up gods along with her in case Jacob's God cannot get them through the challenges that lie ahead of them. Alternately, given Rachel's bitterness at how her father has treated her (cf. Gen. 31:14–16), Rachel may steal these household gods "for their monetary value, motivated by greed, or out of spite, motivated by vindictiveness."<sup>43</sup> Whether for religious reasons or revenge, Rachel's actions demonstrate her spiritual immaturity as she departs for Canaan.

In some ways, then, Rachel's actions as she prepares to leave *her* home in Paddan-aram imitate Jacob's actions before he left *his* home in Canaan. In both cases, the younger child steals something of value from the father—in Jacob's case, the blessing, but in Rachel's case, the household gods.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the younger child pulls off this heist while someone else is at work—in Esau's case, hunting in the field (Gen. 27:1–4, 30), but in Laban's case, shearing his sheep (Gen. 31:19). Finally, Rachel's theft sets up one final show-down with Laban (Gen. 31:22–55), just as Isaac had one final interaction with Jacob before the younger son left for Mesopotamia (Gen. 28:1–5).

#### Stealing Laban's Heart

Rachel, then, is *like* Jacob, a fact that the text underscores in the final verses of this passage:



[20] And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee. [21] He fled with all that he had and arose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead. (Gen. 31:20–21)

Literally, the text says that “Jacob *stole* the heart of Laban the Aramean” (Gen. 31:20), employing the same verb that was used to describe how Rachel *stole* her father’s household gods. The text demonstrates Rachel’s similarity to Jacob in “parallel thefts.”<sup>45</sup> Even so, the text also draws a clear distinction between the respective thefts of Rachel and Jacob: “Rachel perpetrated an actual theft, while Jacob’s theft is an act of self-defense and reasonable. Hers is unexplained and appears to be arbitrary....Jacob’s deception is not as serious as Rachel’s.”<sup>46</sup> Rachel is similar to Jacob, but we also recognize how far Jacob has come, and how far Rachel still needs to come. Like Rachel, we too need discipleship, for God calls us not only to come *out* of the world, but to come *into* his holiness (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1). For the believer, holiness is not an option, for no one without holiness will ever see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). Nevertheless, Rachel’s actions remind us that none of us *start* our lives from a place of holiness. All of us must lay hold of holiness as God’s gracious gift to us as a part of the inheritance we have in Christ.

Finally, the text again gives us echoes of Jacob’s original departure from Canaan. Jacob “arises” (Gen. 30:17, 21) and “flees” (Gen. 30:20, 21) from his “brother” (ESV: “kinsman”; Gen. 29:15), just as Rebekah instructed him to “arise and flee” to *her* brother (Gen. 27:43) and away from *his* brother (Gen. 27:42, 44, 45).<sup>47</sup> This time around, Jacob arises and flees by faith, according to the command of the Lord. It is Rachel who acts faithlessly in such a way as to put the entire mission in jeopardy, as we will see in the next passage.

## Discussion Questions

1. What kind of risk does Jacob take by pursuing the inheritance of his fathers, rather than the inheritance of Laban (Gen. 30:43–31:2)? What kind of comfort and stability might you need to risk to follow God’s call? What lifestyles, relationships, or even careers might you need to abandon to walk by faith? What makes the inheritance God offers in Christ worth such risks?
2. How many ways has Laban attempted to cheat Jacob and change his wages (Gen. 31:4–12)? How many ways has God thwarted Laban? In what areas of your life do you recognize threats against you? How have you seen God protect you in those circumstances? What confidence does that give you as you seek to follow Christ by faith through difficult circumstances?
3. Why are Rachel and Leah willing to go with Jacob (Gen. 31:14–16)? Do their responses demonstrate great faith? Why are they willing to risk so much to go to a land they have never visited in obedience to a God they do not know? Do you know any stories of people who come to faith in Christ not because of great knowledge, but to find refuge from a crumbling world?
4. When Rachel steals her father’s household gods, how does she behave like Jacob when he was preparing to leave Canaan (Gen. 31:19)? What does this tell us about her faith at this point in time?

What sins held you captive when you first came to faith in Christ? What sins are you still battling today? What steps toward holiness is God calling you to take by faith?

## Notes

1. “This is the second reference to Laban’s sons. In 30:35 they are mature enough to be placed in charge of their father’s flocks, and here in 31:1 they are old enough to be rivals to Jacob, to see themselves as those whose future material security is in doubt due to Jacob’s large gains. These two references imply, then, that it is incorrect to think that for a good while after Jacob reached Haran and Laban’s house, Laban had only daughters.” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 287.)

2. Kidner, *Genesis*, 175.

3. Literally, this is “three days ago,” but Hebrew counting considers the present day as the first day. Therefore, *yesterday* is two days ago, and the *day before yesterday* is three days ago.

4. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 269.

5. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 196.

6. “It was far more useful to holy Jacob to have his father-in-law and his sons opposed, than to have them courteously obsequious to his wishes; because their favor might have deprived him of the blessing of God. We also have more than sufficient experience of the power of earthly attractions, and of the ease with which, when they abound, the oblivion of celestial blessings steals over us. Wherefore let us not think it hard to be awakened by the Lord, when we fall into adversity, or receive but little favor from the world; for hatred, threats, disgrace, and slanders, are often more advantageous to us than the applause of all men on every side.” (Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 162. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.ix.i.html>>)

7. Fokkerman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 152. *My note*: Both passages use the same root verb (שׁוּב); however, in Genesis 28:15 the verb appears in the causative (Hiphil) stem, “I will cause you to return.” Here in Genesis 31:3, the verb appears in the more direct (Qal) stem in an imperative form: “Return!”

8. “The key word in this unit is the word ‘father(s),’ occurring with various pronouns, ‘our father’ (vv. 1,14,16), ‘your fathers’ (v. 3), ‘your father’ (vv. 5,6,7,9), and ‘my father’ (v. 5). This recurring term establishes the interest of the passage, namely, the question of inheritance. The passage contrasts the inheritance owed Laban’s sons and daughters and the inheritance that Jacob will obtain from his own father’s house (Isaac). The sons protest that Jacob has swindled their father’s possessions, and the daughters complain that their father robbed them of their dowry. But God instructs Jacob to return to the ‘land of *your fathers*’ (v. 3; italics mine), indicating the promissory blessings made to Jacob’s ancestors Abraham and Isaac. Jacob stands to gain far more in Canaan than even the vast possessions that he accrued in Paddan Aram (cf. 28:13–14). He is the recipient of God’s immeasurable favor, who also protects him, for he promised Jacob, ‘I will be with you’ (v. 3; cf. 26:3; 28:15).” (Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 509.)

9. Fokkerman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 152.

10. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 196.

11. Fokkerman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 163.

12. Kidner, *Genesis*, 175.

13. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 525.

14. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 268.

15. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 529.

16. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 270.

17. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 288.

18. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 270.

19. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 288.
20. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 271.
21. Kidner, *Genesis*, 175.
22. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 270.
23. Kidner, *Genesis*, 176.
24. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 153.
25. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 512–13.
26. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 158.
27. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 271.
28. Kidner, *Genesis*, 176.
29. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 272.
30. Kidner, *Genesis*, 175.
31. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 272.
32. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 196.
33. Kidner, *Genesis*, 175–76.
34. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 272.
35. Walton, *Genesis*, 590.
36. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 530.
37. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 197.
38. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 509.
39. Wenham observes that the phrases are nearly identical in Hebrew: וְאֶת־כָּל־רְכוּשָׁם אֲשֶׁר רָכְשׁוּ (Gen. 12:5) vs. וְאֶת־כָּל־רְכָשׁוֹ אֲשֶׁר רָכָשׁ (Gen. 31:18). (*Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 273.)
40. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 520.
41. Kidner, *Genesis*, 176.
42. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 170. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.ix.i.html>>
43. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 295.
44. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 197.
45. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 163.
46. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 296.
47. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 163.