

## Family Feud Genesis 31

Take your Bibles and turn to Genesis 31. We left off last week with Jacob using some of the strangest breeding practices to increase in wealth and outwit his con-artist uncle, Laban. By the most unlikely of methods, Jacob has really come out on top by the end of chapter 30. As Matthew so eloquently put it, Jacob had learned to rely on the Lord and to have low expectations of others, and thus to overcome disappointment. Laban sought to steal the wages he had agreed to give Jacob, but the Lord continually overturned Laban's deceitful schemes. As we come to chapter 31, Jacob has become quite prosperous in the house of Laban. He hasn't cheated Laban, though Laban has tried to cheat him. But the Lord has caused the flock of Laban to produce spotted and striped offspring so that Jacob could have all that he needed to return home with his large household. Six years have passed since Jacob first told Laban he desired to go back home and made the agreement with Laban for the spotted and striped sheep of his flock. Six long years of laboring and shepherding in the household of a scoundrel. Now, it is going to become clear that it is finally time to leave. Let's pick up in verse 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." <sup>2</sup> And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before. (Genesis 31:1-2)

Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before. Remember that Laban had told Jacob in the last chapter, "If I have found favor in your sight, I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you." (Genesis 30:27) There we see the favor with which Laban had looked upon Jacob. It was a selfish favor. He favored him because the Lord blessed Laban. It was all about Laban. As soon as the blessing of the Lord upon Jacob stopped serving Laban, Laban's whole attitude toward Jacob changed. Even the way Laban looked at Jacob indicated to Jacob that something was off. So much of communication is non-verbal. Jacob could see that something had shifted in Laban's countenance toward him. Laban couldn't hide his contempt for the one whom God had blessed any longer. That's when the Lord made it clear to Jacob that it was time to leave.

<sup>3</sup> Then the Lord said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you." <sup>4</sup> So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> You know that I have served your father with all my strength, <sup>7</sup> yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times. But God did not permit him to harm me. (Genesis 31:3-7)

The faith of Jacob is now becoming much more visible. The young man who twenty years earlier had strode into town with confidence in his own strength had learned the hard way that his only strength was the Lord. He served Laban with all his strength, which is good, that's what we're called to do, but at the end of the day Laban still cheated him and continually changed his

wages. His own strength could not protect him against the williness of his uncle. But God could, and God had. How did God not permit Laban to harm Jacob?

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am!' <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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.'" (Genesis 31:8-13)

Matthew pointed this out last week, but here, Jacob let's his wives and us in on a little secret about the whole agreement he made with Laban for the spotted and striped sheep and goats of his flock. Apparently, the Lord had spoken to Jacob in a dream to assure him that He was with Him and that the flock would breed striped, spotted, and mottled offspring in abundance. Jacob had an insight that no one else knew about. Jacob chose the lesser portion, and God blessed him with the greater portion.

As Christians today, we often do things that make no sense to the watching world because we have an insight that no one else does. The cross of Jesus Christ has become for us a powerful motivator to do upside-down sorts of things. In the Kingdom of God, the way up is down. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. The greatest among you shall be your servant. We think in the opposite way of the world because we serve a Lord who became a servant. We serve a Lord who became poor for our sakes. His cross gives us guidance to do things that seem crazy to the world. We do crazy, upside-down generous things. We give freely because we've received freely. We serve selflessly, not for what we get in return. We do it all without the desire to be praised by others, but rather, with the desire to see others praise the Lord.

Jacob was learning the hard way that the way up is down. Through 20 years of hard and often unrewarded labor, he was being humbled. The mistreatment of Laban was all a part of God's gracious plan to chisel away Jacob's pride and self-reliance and shape him into the form of a humble servant. He had to become a willing, joyful, and unworthy servant before he could receive the blessing God had promised him. The path of righteousness and blessing is the path of humble service to the Lord.

Jacob didn't know how his wives would respond to his request. There had to be some fear that they might say they didn't want to leave. After all, he was asking them to leave behind everything they had ever known to journey with him into a far-off land they had only heard about. How relieved he must have been to hear this response from them.

<sup>14</sup> Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, "Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house? <sup>15</sup> Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he

has indeed devoured our money. <sup>16</sup> 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.” (Genesis 31:14-16)

It seems Laban’s failure to love his daughters as he should was now coming back to bite him. I sense more than a hint of resentment in their words. I don’t think they had much love for their father at this point, justifiably so. He had devoured their money. The dowry that Jacob had left in the care of Laban, which was intended as a protection for Laban’s daughters should anything happen to Jacob, was apparently squandered away by Laban. He spent it on himself. Even with his daughters, Laban put Laban first.

In light of the kind of father Laban was, Jacob’s wives were more than ready to leave his household behind. They were more than ready to go with Jacob wherever God sent him, and Rachel was even going to rub a little salt in her father’s wound before she left.

<sup>17</sup> So Jacob arose and set his sons and his wives on camels. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods.<sup>20</sup> And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee. <sup>21</sup> He fled with all that he had and arose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead. (Genesis 31:17-21)

Jacob took advantage of an opportunity when Laban was out for an extended time shearing his sheep, and he gets out of dodge without telling Laban. He set his face toward the hill country of Gilead, which is the region north-east of the Jordan River. That is the same phrase used of Jesus as He entered Jerusalem for the last time. It indicates a steely-eyed determination to go where He knew God was calling him to go. Paul put the same idea in these words, “**But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**” (Philippians 3:13-14) To where is your face set today? Is your face set on Jesus, the one who set His face to go to Jerusalem and die for you?

Now, what is going on with Rachel stealing her father’s household gods? First of all, what are those? The Hebrew word is *teraphim*, and these were likely little human-like statues. They were idols, and we know from the recently discovered Nuzi tablets, that these gods carried a great deal of significance in the home. They belonged to the patriarch, and they were used for divination. Laban would likely consult these little statues for guidance. The Nuzi tablets also indicate that these gods basically conferred the right of authority and ownership over the household to the one who possessed them. When a father wanted to give his entire estate to a son-in-law, he would grant him the teraphim. So, it’s very possible that this was an act of retribution by Rachel. It’s unlikely that she took these gods out of reverence for them. Far from this being done out of a desire to keep with her father’s religious traditions, I believe it was an act of defiance, done to steal what her father saw as his right of possession over her and the rest of her household.

Laban is not going to be pleased when he hears the unwelcome news of his son-in-law's departure, especially when he finds out his gods are gone.

**<sup>22</sup> When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled,<sup>23</sup> he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead. (Genesis 31:22-23)**

This whole scene feels like it could be taken right out one of those great old westerns where the heroes are being pursued by a band of robbers. It's a seven-day pursuit into the hills of Gilead, and Laban was gaining on Jacob all the way. I can't be dogmatic about this, but I believe Laban was prepared to kill Jacob if he needed to. He was chasing him down to bring him and all his goods back to Mesopotamia. Based on the kind of man he was, I wouldn't be surprised if he was prepared to go to the most extreme measure if necessary, which would make what happened next even more dramatic.

**<sup>24</sup> But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad." <sup>25</sup> And Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen pitched tents in the hill country of Gilead. <sup>26</sup> And Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done, that you have tricked me and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword? <sup>27</sup> Why did you flee secretly and trick me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre? <sup>28</sup> And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? Now you have done foolishly. (Genesis 31:24-28)**

Boy, Laban is really laying it on thick here, isn't he? Did he really think Jacob would buy this? I almost wonder if Laban hadn't convinced himself that this is how he would have sent Jacob and his daughters away if Jacob had not fled from him. Liars have a tendency to begin to convince themselves of their own lies. They live in such a state of denial that they believe in their own goodness. We all know that this was a lie, though, and so did Jacob. It would not have been a moment of mirth and songs if Jacob had told him his plans. Laban is delusional. Watch how his delusion comes through in that he still thinks he has power over Jacob.

**<sup>29</sup> It is in my power to do you harm. But the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.' (Genesis 31:29)**

Laban is a mass of contradictions. He claims to have the power to do Jacob harm, but he doesn't. Here we see the restraint that God can place even upon a reprobate human will. Laban is a free moral agent, he could do whatever he wants, but God restrains even Laban from harming His chosen one. There is a line that even the unbelieving world cannot cross when it comes to disobeying God. That's a harrowing thought. There will come a point at which they will have to unwillingly bow their knee and confess that Jesus is Lord. Don't let that be you. Don't stay stuck in your obstinacy. Let the Lord soften your heart and give you a heart of flesh. Surrender to Him while it is still the day of salvation. It is in your power to deny Him today, but

there will come a day when you can no longer deny Him. Trust me, you do not want to wait until that day to yield your will to Him.

Watch the sad statement that Laban makes about his gods. <sup>30</sup> **And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?" (Genesis 31:30)** "Why did you steal my gods?" What kind of gods does Laban serve if they can be stolen from him? You know what the Bible says about the kind of gods Laban worshiped? It says they are *elil*, the Hebrew word we often see translated for idols, but which literally means insufficiency or worthlessness. Psalm 95:6 says, **"For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens."** That phrase "worthless idols" is one word in the Hebrew *elilim*: insufficiency, worthlessness, futility. Why? Because of what they are. They are blocks of wood or stone or precious metal. They are lifeless, inanimate objects, incapable of speaking or moving or doing anything. They just sit there, and some day, they will be burned up or destroyed. What are you worshiping today? Be careful, there are countless *elilim*, counterfeit gods we can serve. Don't serve a god that can be stolen from you like Laban.

Now, watch how Jacob responded to Laban's wordy and windy speech.

<sup>31</sup> **Jacob answered and said to Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. <sup>32</sup> Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsmen point out what I have that is yours, and take it."** Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them. (Genesis 31:31-32)

Now, the stage is set for a very tense scene. Jacob has no idea that he just put Rachel's life in danger. She didn't even tell him what she had done. This just goes to show us that we don't always know as much as we think we do. We always tend to think we have all the facts when we get in a dispute. But we should always be careful to remind ourselves there is much that we might not know. Before you rush to judgment in a matter, always be careful to remain humble and gather as many facts as you can. Let's watch how this dramatic scene unfolds.

<sup>33</sup> **So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two female servants, but he did not find them. And he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's. <sup>34</sup> Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle and sat on them. Laban felt all about the tent, but did not find them. <sup>35</sup> And she said to her father, "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me."** So he searched but did not find the household gods. (Genesis 31:33-35)

You can't make this stuff up. Isn't the Bible awesome? Sometimes the text just speaks for itself. What more can I add to that? Rachel managed to scheme her father out of his household gods by pleading the way of women. So, Laban's search comes up empty. Now, Jacob is going to finally let loose all his frustration with Laban.

<sup>36</sup> **Then Jacob became angry and berated Laban. Jacob said to Laban, "What is my offense? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me? <sup>37</sup> For you have felt through all my goods; what have**

you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two.<sup>38</sup> These twenty years I have been with you. Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks.<sup>39</sup> What was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you. I bore the loss of it myself. From my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night.<sup>40</sup> There I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes.<sup>41</sup> These twenty years I have been in your house. I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times.<sup>42</sup> If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night.” (Genesis 31:36-42)

This must have felt good for Jacob. He is like a tea kettle letting off steam. I think his closing words tell us a lot about the lessons Jacob has learned through these 20 years of servitude. All the credit goes to the God of his father. If it weren't for God, Jacob knows he would have nothing. Hopefully, we can all say the same thing. If God had not been on my side, I'd be empty-handed. I'd have nothing if it weren't for God's grace and kindness. That's what sets Jacob apart from Laban, and it's what sets us apart as Christians. Laban is a self-made man, and a miserable one at that, and Jacob is a God-made man, and is blessed beyond measure. We are what we are because we know that we'd be nothing and we'd have nothing apart from the grace of God. Let's see how Laban responds.

<sup>43</sup> Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, “The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day for these my daughters or for their children whom they have borne? <sup>44</sup> Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I. And let it be a witness between you and me.” (Genesis 31:43-44)

You know what word really sticks out to me in Laban's response? Mine. My, My, My, Mine. It's all mine. Even though Laban is being forced to let Jacob go with all this stuff that isn't actually his anymore, he still can't let go of his sense of entitlement to it all. This is a mark of unbelief. Those who will not surrender to the Lord and His grace tend to hold on to things that aren't even theirs by right. We come into the world thinking this way, which is ironic considering we come into the world naked, and we leave it naked. As parents, we see it in our kids from the moment they learn to talk. Even before they can talk, they already know how to fight over what they think is theirs. Mine. It's such a dangerous and pernicious word in the mouth of a sinner.

Laban is really forced into a corner here, so he decides to make a covenant with Jacob.

<sup>45</sup> So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. <sup>46</sup> And Jacob said to his kinsmen, “Gather stones.” And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap.<sup>47</sup> Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed.<sup>48</sup> Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me today.” Therefore he named it Galeed, <sup>49</sup> and Mizpah, for he said, “The Lord watch between you and me, when we are out of one another's sight. <sup>50</sup> If you oppress my daughters,

or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no one is with us, see, God is witness between you and me.”

<sup>51</sup> Then Laban said to Jacob, “See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me. <sup>52</sup> This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, to do harm. <sup>53</sup> The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.” So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac,<sup>54</sup> and Jacob offered a sacrifice in the hill country and called his kinsmen to eat bread. They ate bread and spent the night in the hill country.

<sup>55</sup> Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned home. (Genesis 31:45-55)

This is a covenant of division, not of peace. Laban refers to the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, that’s Abraham’s brother, the God of their father, Terah. This is very telling about Laban’s faith. Laban does not know God. It doesn’t come through well in the English, but when Laban says God, he uses the plural in all three instances. He thinks in polytheistic terms, according to the pagan customs of his culture. We already saw that in his possession of household idols, teraphim.

I think there are more parallels than we realize between Laban’s theological system and the popular theology of our modern era. The calls for coexistence and tolerance, with the emblems of all the different faiths, the calls for interfaith ecumenism, these are in essence no different from the pagan ideology of Laban. You either serve the one, true living God, whom Jacob refers to in the singular, the Fear of Isaac, or you are bound to open yourself up to a host of false gods.

Some have interpreted the covenant here as being a happy ending between Jacob and Laban, like they made up and left each other as friends. There is actually a piece of jewelry called the Mizpah pendant.



On it is Genesis 31:49, "The Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent from one another." That's a sweet sentiment, but I think it sadly misses the entire point and context of the verse it's quoting. This is not a heart-felt, hugs and kisses kind of moment. This is a sad and tragic moment of deep family division. An uncle is bidding his nephew and son-in-law good riddance with a deep resentment against him because he feels he's been robbed, though he hasn't.

This is a tale that has been retold in almost every family since the fall. There are divisions in just about every family. We feud over stuff just like Laban did with Jacob. Inheritances and possessions divide us like almost nothing else. There are some who use deceitful methods to get a leg up even on members of their own household. That still happens today. In fact, as self continues to be enthroned in our culture, these family divisions will only get worse and worse. For it is our selfish passions that cause such quarrels and fights.

At the root of these divisions over stuff is the great divide. The great divide is Jesus Christ, who is the Fear of Isaac. He is the same God whom Jacob served, the God of Bethel. Jacob and Laban had to split apart because they didn't have the same God.

Jesus told us He came to bring this kind of division in families. <sup>34</sup> "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. <sup>35</sup> For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. <sup>36</sup> And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. (Matthew 10:34-36) If you have division in your family, take heart that there is nothing new under the sun. As a follower of Christ, you cannot escape the inevitable. There will be those even in your family who are your enemies. It's going to be painful, and it's going to be difficult, but you just stay faithful and do everything in your power, as far as it depends on you, to seek peace and to be a witness to the peace and joy that are in Christ Jesus. If it comes to the point that they say they want nothing to do with you, grieve and be sorrowful, but know that it is a part of this life.

This is not a call to warfare or to take up arms for Christians, but just a statement of a sad fact that those who serve Jesus Christ as King will be hated by those who do not. We do not seek this out, but it will come to us. It's a division that cannot be avoided or escaped. What should you do when family feuds arise? Pray for your family members who are your enemies. If you are blessed enough to not have any, give thanks to the Lord. But for those who do, love them. Pray for those who persecute you. Don't be rude or arrogant toward them. Show them the humility of Christ, and seek to win them to Christ with a gentle and loving spirit, while speaking the truth and giving a reason for the hope within you. Work diligently at all that you do. Be a living example of the grace and patience of the Lord Jesus.

Dethrone self in your own life. Seek to dethrone self in your home. Put Christ on the throne. Let Him rule over your heart and your household, and all quarreling will cease. He is the God of Bethel, and He will fulfill His promise to be with you and to never leave you until He has done what He has promised you. God was ultimately fulfilling His promise to Jacob through this



covenant that Laban made with him. Jacob was now free from Laban. Now, he was headed home. If you are in Christ, you are free as well, and you are headed home.