

# LIFE BIBLE STUDY

## **SESSION OBJECTIVE: GENESIS 30:25-31:55**

To learn about Jacob's departure from Laban.

## **Leaving the Nest**

All it takes is a quick internet search to figure out that many people struggle with the “empty nest” phase of life. There are countless blogs written by (mostly) moms and (some) dads on what they learned from their own experience, hoping to pass on some wisdom to the next class of empty nesters. There are psychological



articles written as well on the effects of children leaving the home. It shouldn't surprise us, then, to find a story in the Scriptures that illustrates the difficulty of such an event. Genesis chapters 30 and 31 describe the events that unfolded prior to and during Jacob's departure from Laban, and Laban's response to it.

## **Jacob's Proposition**

Immediately following the birth of Joseph, Jacob asks permission from Laban to leave his lands and go back to his own, “home and country” (Gen. 30:25). Given that Jacob has been living off of Laban's land, and the children of his wives are technically also the grandchildren of Laban, this departure is a more complex situation than one might think. Who decides which of the livestock are Jacob's and which are Laban's? What about possessions? What about the sons? Does Laban not have any say on the matter? Below are a few important details in this portion of the story.

**JACOB HAS FULFILLED HIS DUTY**

To be sure, Jacob has done his part. For the hand of Rachel (and unknowingly Leah), he had to work a total of fourteen years under Laban. The first seven years were already accomplished when Jacob realized he had been deceived into marrying Leah, and then another seven years were given to take Rachel as well. In that period of seven years, and beyond that, Leah, Bilhah, Zilpah, Leah again, and finally Rachel all bore Jacob sons (and one daughter). Jacob had done all that he had sworn to do while with Laban, and honestly (Gen. 30:26). In Jacob's mind, he was rightfully free of his duty to Laban.

**LABAN'S RELUCTANCY**

The thought of Jacob leaving was not a positive one for Laban, and for selfish reasons. Laban told Jacob that through divination, he learned that God had blessed him because of Jacob. It should not surprise us that Laban has some association with divination, as Joseph later has some familiarity with it as well (Gen. 44:5, 15). However, it is also a strange usage of the word. Divination (Hb. *nāḥaš*) typically means to see the future, not to understand the past. It can also mean to interpret signs or omens. It could be that Laban had a dream or vision of such a reality, and this word is being used to cover that. Either way, Jacob himself affirms Laban's conviction in verses 29 and 30, "You yourself know how I have served you, and how your livestock was fared with me. For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned." Jacob's presence has brought Laban a great fortune, indicating that God has kept His promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3). Now, the prospect of Jacob leaving is alarming to Laban, because if Jacob goes, the blessing goes with him.

**THE PROPOSAL AND DECEIT**

Laban is weary of what Jacob might ask of him before he leaves, but to his surprise, he asks for only one thing: "Let me pass through all your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats, and they shall be my wages. So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come to look into my wages with you. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen" (Gen. 30:32-33). The request is strange. In the mediterranean world, sheep are normally white and goats are normally black; Jacob is thus requesting the irregular part of the flock.

Laban agrees, but then arranges the spotted lambs to be immediately removed and given to his sons, revealing a plan to deceive Jacob (Gen. 30:34-35). This is especially wrong for at least two reasons. For one, Jacob has every right to leave with some possession given his fulfillment of the terms agreed upon by the two parties. Secondly, Jacob's request is not burdensome to Laban at all. These were the outcast sheep. Laban's deceit reveals not only worry that he will no longer prosper when Jacob leaves but an outright injurious intent.

## Shepherding Tricks

After giving all of the spotted and speckled sheep to his sons, there are no longer any for Jacob to take. He nevertheless begins his plan to shepherd them, and employs a seemingly absurd method. He, "took fresh sticks of poplar and almond and plane trees, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the sticks. He set the sticks that he had peeled in front of the flocks in the troughs, that is, the watering places, where the flocks came to drink" (Gen. 30:37-38). The idea behind the plan is silly. The sticks would present a spotted look to the sheep as they came to drink. However, they also mated where they drank, and so Jacob imagined the sheep seeing the spotted pattern while they are mating and hoped this would make them produce spotted offspring.

The plan would be considered ridiculous, except it worked! The sheep began producing spotted and irregular sheep, exactly the kind Jacob would be entitled to. He took his method to the next level by only putting these sticks down when the strongest of the herd came to drink and mate, thus his sheep were all of the highest quality. The ending result some time later is that Jacob's flock increased drastically, as did his servants and other livestock, thus showing that God had fulfilled what He said He would do in Bethel (Gen. 28:14-15).

## A Complicated Departure

Perhaps it was the growing size of Jacob's possessions that created some jealousy for Laban's house, but the text doesn't say for sure. Either way, Laban and his son's displeasure coupled with God telling him to leave and return home were enough for Jacob to begin acting immediately (Gen. 31:1-3). Below is an outline of some important details.

### **JACOB'S DREAM**

Jacob approaches his wives and explains to them his urgency to leave. He begins by stating that he has lost the pleasure of their father: "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" (Gen. 31:5). Next, he rationalizes the decisions by truthfully accounting all the ways that Laban had cheated him (Gen. 31:6-7). However, he saves his best reason for last. He reveals the source of his method of mating sheep that seemed almost supernatural; as it turns out it was! He tells them that God came to him in a dream and told him what to do in order to procure the spotted and speckled sheep. This is convincing enough for Rachel and Leah. They tell him there is no inheritance for them since they had been sold to Jacob, and the money Laban made had already been squandered (Gen. 31:14-15).

### **THE HOUSEHOLD GODS**

Immediately Jacob loads his family up, presumably in a caravan of sorts, intent on departing as soon as possible. Given the large flock that Jacob had amassed, the journey would not be quick. This was a large operation that required some organization. However, as they are about to leave, Rachel goes into her father's house and steals their household gods while he is shearing the sheep (Gen. 31:19). These are to be understood as idols. Keil and Delitzsch remark that they were, "probably small images of household gods in human form, which were worshipped as givers of earthly prosperity, and also consulted as oracles." This makes a lot of sense given the earlier divinations mentioned by Laban. Either way, unbeknownst to Leah and Jacob, Rachel seizes the opportunity to take them with her.

### **LABAN'S DREAM**

It takes three days before Laban finds out of Jacob's departure, but it does not take him long to begin his pursuit of Jacob. He gathers his kinsman and begins to follow him, but God comes to Laban in a dream to warn him. The brevity of the recorded message is strange, but it might be that the author assumes that the reader will recall a similar message that Yahweh delivered to Abimelech regarding Abraham (Gen. 20:3-7). This dream is crucial to the developing story.

Laban does in fact pursue and catch Jacob, and the text indicates he had the ability to do harm to Jacob and his party, but it is the dream and message of Yahweh that prevents Laban from acting. Laban's main stated issue (thought I think there is more going on under the surface) is that Jacob left without giving Laban the opportunity to say goodbye to his daughters and grandchildren. Beyond that, he takes issue that someone has stolen away his household gods (Gen. 31:30).

The reproach from Laban is met with objection in Jacob. For one, one can hardly imagine that Laban would have sent Jacob and his party off with, “mirth, and songs, with tambourine and lyre” (Gen. 31:27). This is, after all, a man who sold off his daughters in a shady and dishonest manner. He also tried to cheat Jacob of the speckled and spotted lambs. His stated issue does not factor the many examples of his fear of losing what he has gained because of the blessing of God on Jacob’s life. Jacob does, however, admit that he left because he feared that Laban would take his daughters away from him (Gen. 31:31).

But what of the issue of the missing household gods? There is a bit of irony here, and likely intended; Laban respects Jacob’s God but Jacob does not respect Laban’s, or so it appears that way to Laban. The text unfolds a search through Jacob’s belongings, and all of his party to find the missing figurines, but Rachel hides them in her camel’s saddle and sits on them (Gen. 31:34). In order to not seem out of place by not coming off her camel, she says to Laban, “Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me” (Gen. 31:34). This is a reference to the fact that she is on her menstrual cycle and is either too weak from blood loss or in pain.

#### **JACOB’S REBUKE**

After not finding the household gods (that Jacob is still not even aware of), Jacob responds to Laban angrily in sharp rebuke. The language here of, “my kinsman and your kinsman,” indicates he is likely even calling into effect a legal procedure or lawsuit (Gen. 31:37). Not only has Laban not found the items he has accused Jacob of stealing, but Jacob has done nothing but serve Laban honestly. We are finally told how many total years he was with Laban and the condition of his wages: “Fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times” (Gen. 31:41). Jacob is convinced that, because he has served Laban rightly and honestly, and has never complained about the extremely unfair and inequitable conditions under which he has worked, now for Laban to pursue and accuse him has drawn the ire and rebuke of God Himself (Gen. 31:42).

## **Resolution**

Laban’s response is at first, ridiculous. He still maintains a false belief that he has some authority over his daughters and grandchildren. Is this Laban’s inability to admit wrong? Or does he still legitimately believe he has power? Either way, he responds next by proposing a covenant and a pillar to be erected. This is unnecessary as the witness of the two men’s kinsmen were enough, but Jacob nevertheless begins the construction of a pillar first without even responding to Laban. Pillars were seen as places (usually on high ground) upon which an act or spiritually significant moment took place, and also a place from which God would watch the parties of the covenant to make sure they upheld their end of the bargain. Laban once again is presumptuous in his claim of erecting the pillar himself (Gen. 31:51), as Jacob and his men were the ones who actually did it. This whole covenant sequence is ironic. Laban is attempting to use it to hold Jacob accountable, and yet the one who needs holding accountable is Laban! Jacob has already cut a covenant once with him in bargaining for Rachel, and Laban broke the covenant. Why Jacob trusts him here to cut another covenant merely demonstrates the trust that Jacob has in Yahweh, not Laban. After the covenant is made, Laban kisses his family goodbye, and returns home, and Jacob continues his journey.

## Study Questions

### Day One

1. Read Genesis 30:25-36. What does Jacob propose to Laban? What does Laban do before Jacob begins pasturing the sheep? What does this reveal about the character of Laban?

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2. Read Genesis 30:37-43. What was Jacob's method of breeding sheep? Describe it in your own words. Did it work? What other measures did he take to insure he would have the strongest sheep?

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### Day Two

1. Read Genesis 31:1-16. What did Jacob hear from the sons of Laban? What did he do in response to hearing this? In your own words, write down what he told Rachel and Leah, regarding Laban's malpractice and God's counsel.

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2. Read Genesis 31:17-24. What did Rachel do while Laban was shearing his sheep? How much time passed before Laban found out about Jacob's departure? What did he do in response? What did God say to Laban in his dream?

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### Day Three

1. Read Genesis 31:25-32. What issues did Laban have with Jacob leaving in the manner that he did? There were two big issues. Why did Laban not bring harm against Jacob? What reason did Jacob give for leaving in the manner that he did? What did he advise regarding the missing household gods?

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2. Read Genesis 31:33-35. Where did Laban search for his missing household gods? What did Rachel do to hide them? What excuse did she give for not coming off of her camel?

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### Day Four

1. Read Genesis 31:36-42. How did Jacob respond after Laban's inability to produce proof that he stole the household gods? Write in your own words the issues that Jacob takes up with Laban.

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2. Read Genesis 31:43-55. What did the two do to resolve the conflict? What did they name the heap (write each of the names they gave and their meaning)? What did the covenant entail? What did Jacob do after he made the covenant with Laban?
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## Week 25 Discussion: Fear

In Genesis 31:1-2, Jacob hears the sons of Laban talking negatively about him, and he begins to internally reason that perhaps he has lost the affections of Laban. Laban had not treated Jacob fairly while he was there, and so the concern of such a reality was not off base (Gen. 31:31, 36-42). It was not wrong for Jacob to leave, but perhaps he could have left on better terms if not for the fear he was struggling with. Likewise, Laban feared that he would lose his affluence if Jacob left because he rightly recognized that all of his blessings had been a result of Jacob's presence. Because of that, Laban acted deceptively to try and keep Jacob around. Talk as a group about how fear affects your decision making, and what you can do to overcome it.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever made a hasty decision out of fear? Share with the group what happened, and how it turned out. Would that decision have worked out better if more thought and prayer had been put into it?
2. Have you ever manipulated a situation out of fear of change? Share with the group if you are willing.
3. What is the thing you fear the most?
4. Read 2 Timothy 1:7. What three things does God give us that contrast fear?
5. Read 2 Peter 2:17. What is the one thing we are told to fear? Why do you think that is (Hint: Read Matt. 10:28)?
6. Has your involvement in the church community ever helped you move through fear and make a wise decision? Share with the group if you are willing.

## Takeaways:

1. Jacob leaves Laban's home after fearing that he has lost the affection of Laban.
2. God takes care of Jacob and blesses him with great prosperity even in spite of Laban's best efforts to sabotage him.

### **PRAYER REQUESTS:**