

Genesis 31:17 – 55

^{31:17} Then Jacob arose and put his children and his wives upon camels; ¹⁸ and he drove away all his livestock and all his property which he had gathered, his acquired livestock which he had gathered in Paddan-aram, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac. ¹⁹ When Laban had gone to shear his flock, then Rachel stole the household idols that were her father's. ²⁰ And Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him that he was fleeing. ²¹ So he fled with all that he had; and he arose and crossed the Euphrates River, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead. ²² When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, ²³ then he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him a distance of seven days' journey, and he overtook him in the hill country of Gilead. ²⁴ God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream of the night and said to him, 'Be careful that you do not speak to Jacob either good or bad.' ²⁵ Laban caught up with Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen camped in the hill country of Gilead. ²⁶ Then Laban said to Jacob, 'What have you done by deceiving me and carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword? ²⁷ Why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell me so that I might have sent you away with joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre; ²⁸ and did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters? Now you have done foolishly. ²⁹ 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 speak either good or bad to Jacob.' ³⁰ Now you have indeed gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods?' ³¹ Then Jacob replied to Laban, 'Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. ³² The one with whom you find your gods shall not live; in the presence of our kinsmen point out what is yours among my belongings and take it for yourself.' For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them. ³³ So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two maids, but he did not find them. Then he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's tent. ³⁴ Now Rachel had taken the household idols and put them in the camel's saddle, and she sat on them. And Laban felt through all the tent but did not find them. ³⁵ She said to her father, 'Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is upon me.' So he searched but did not find the household idols. ³⁶ Then Jacob became angry and contended with Laban; and Jacob said to Laban, 'What is my transgression? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me? ³⁷ Though 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. ³⁸ These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten the rams of your flocks. ³⁹ That which was torn of beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself. You required it of my hand whether stolen by day or stolen by night. ⁴⁰ Thus I was: by day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. ⁴¹ 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 changed my wages ten times. ⁴² If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had not been for me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, so He rendered judgment last night.' ⁴³ Then Laban replied to Jacob, 'The daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne? ⁴⁴ So now come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.' ⁴⁵ Then Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar.

⁴⁶ Jacob said to his kinsmen, ‘Gather stones.’ So they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. ⁴⁷ Now Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. ⁴⁸ Laban said, ‘This heap is a witness between you and me this day.’ Therefore it was named Galeed, ⁴⁹ and Mizpah, for he said, ‘May the LORD watch between you and me when we are absent one from the other. ⁵⁰ If you mistreat my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no man is with us, see, God is witness between you and me.’ ⁵¹ Laban said to Jacob, ‘Behold this heap and behold the pillar which I have set between you and me. ⁵² This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass by this heap to you for harm, and you will not pass by this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. ⁵³ 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. ⁵⁴ Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his kinsmen to the meal; and they ate the meal and spent the night on the mountain. ⁵⁵ Early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place.

Historical and Cultural Background

- *God’s Original Vision for Relationships:* God had said, ‘A man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife’ (Gen.2:24). How is that happening here as Jacob, Leah, and Rachel leave Laban? How is it still uncertain?
- *God’s Previous Word to Jacob:* God had said to Jacob just before this, ‘I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth’ (Gen.31:13).
- *Stones:* Stones play a special role in Jacob’s life:
 - Stone for a pillow which becomes a place of revelation through a dream (Gen.28:11), and then becomes a sacred marker as a pillar (Gen.28:18)
 - Stone on the well that Jacob rolled away (Gen.29:1 – 10)
 - Stones as a pillar for a witness between Jacob and Laban (Gen.31:45 – 52). ‘Jegar-sahadutha’ and ‘Galeed’ are the Aramaic and Hebrew names for ‘witness pile.’
 - Stone pillar at Bethel to mark where God speaks to him again (Gen.35:14)

Questions

1. (optional, if group dynamics are good) Who has called the shots in your life besides the Lord Jesus? Who has influenced your values besides him?
2. Is Jacob doing the right thing here?
 - a. Yes in terms of leaving
 - b. He deceived Laban by not telling him that he was leaving, but it's unclear how God sees that situation. It's possible that this was just what Laban needed, and the only real way Jacob could have left.
 - c. After all, God had just told Jacob to leave. He didn't necessarily tell Jacob or indicate to him that he should say farewell to Laban, or even ask his blessing. This might have been what God wanted.
3. Why does Rachel steal her dad's household idols?
 - a. Is this an ironic move on her part? Was she trying to get her father mad? Or was she actually wanting to keep worshiping those idols?
 - b. Given that the idols never come up again, it is likely that Rachel is just doing this to spite her father. She probably does not want to worship them again. She might want to show her father that his gods are stupid and fragile.
 - c. To sit on the household idols is to humiliate them. There's even the joke that she was having her period on them. Modern Iraqis and Afghans have not liked to be under helicopters because they were under the feet of foreign soldiers. Being underneath someone like that was shaming.
 - d. Technically, didn't she steal from her father? Sure, in the same way that you might steal alcohol from an alcoholic.
 - e. See below for more reasons
4. How does Jacob handle the situation once Laban catches up to him?
 - a. He confronts Laban. He *finally* gives a full litany of the ways that Laban has wronged him and his family.
 - i. Let me defend myself before you; why are you accusing me? (31:36)
 - ii. You rummaged through my stuff and found no evidence; I am (technically) innocent of the charge of theft (31:17, since Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the idols)
 - iii. I have never stolen from you before, for twenty years, nor mishandled your flocks (31:18)
 - iv. Whatever was lost or stolen by another I bore the loss of it myself, because you required it (31:19)
 - v. I worked for you day and night, in extreme conditions, losing sleep (31:40).
 - vi. For twenty years I have served you, fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock, and you changed my wages ten times, unfairly (31:41).
 - vii. You are so cruel, you would have sent me away with nothing, and not the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, not been for me. 'God has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, so He rendered judgment last night.' (31:42)
 - viii. Illustrate this by a real-life example of standing up to a manipulative father-in-law or parent figure, or boss.
 - ix. What kind of courage did it take for Jacob to finally say that?
 - x. This is probably a foreshadowing of God delivering the Israelites and others out from the rule of Pharaoh, in the Exodus. God rendered judgment on Pharaoh, and especially the gods of Egypt. God brought Israel out with livestock and gold and silver that the Egyptians gave them.
 - b. What did Jacob learn from his own family how to deal with being mistreated?
 - i. He seems to have just swallowed it for many years.
 - ii. He never confronted his father about it until the time was ripe to steal the blessing from Esau
 - iii. He even had God's prophecy on his side!
 - iv. It's amazing what happens to us when we don't confront other people's sin. We develop strengths in other ways to compensate, but we remain weak in a profound, deep, and fundamental place.
 - c. Why is it important for us, as followers of Jesus, to learn how to confront someone else with their sin?

- i. Because of the danger that our anger poses to ourselves: Matthew 5:21 – 26, Ephesians 4:26 – 27, James 1:20: so anger would not be stored up in us. It's not always the case that we can express our anger to the other person. For example, I never was able to 'vent' my anger at my own parents for the ways I felt I had been wronged as a child. But I did allow the Lord to help me be in touch with my own anger and give it to him.
 - ii. Because of the danger that the other person's sin poses to them: Matthew 18:15 – 18: to give the other person a chance to consider and repent.
 - d. If we cannot confront someone over something we believe to be from the Lord, what does that mean?
 - i. Our identity is not fully in Jesus; it's in the other person's acceptance
 - ii. We are willing to compromise the truth in order to be liked
 - iii. Illus: That can happen in the church. When I was just over one year old as a Christian, during my senior year of high school, I noticed that my church, a Japanese-American church, celebrated dads and grads in June. It was Father's Day for dads and graduation day for high school grads. What my church did was to bring the high school seniors to the front of the church during a service and announce where each person was going to college. I was heading to Stanford, and there were things people did and said to me that made me uncomfortable. Parents elbowed their kids in the pews. A mom asked me to tutor her daughter. Plus, I knew people who were struggling in school. What if there was someone who didn't graduate? Or who wasn't going onto college? I felt like that element of the service just reinforced the academic idolatry and comparison-orientation of Asian culture. I knew I had to ask the pastor and other leaders to reconsider doing this. It took half a year for me to pray about it and read Scripture and think about what words I was going to say. But when I came back for Christmas break, I asked my pastor to meet with me, and I asked him why the church did that. To me, it seemed *cultural* but not *Christian*. And it was *cultural* in a sinful way that *could not be redeemed by Christ*. It was to be eliminated. I said so, and asked for his perspective. He said that I wasn't the only person to ask about that. He said he could see my point. After that, my church did not pull graduating students to the front. We prayed for people broadly speaking, and celebrated everyone's learning, but we did not celebrate graduation per se, and we certainly did not name all the colleges that people were going to.
 - e. Application: How are you going to draw the appropriate boundaries? Or share how another person's choices have affected you?
- 5. How does Laban respond? Does he become more of a man of integrity? Or just as much of a hypocrite?
 - a. God tells him to speak neither good nor evil (Gen.31:24, repeated in 31:29).
 - i. Why not speak good to Jacob? Because Laban would probably try to bribe or trick Jacob again. Laban can't be trusted to offer good things!
 - b. Laban thinks it was wrong for Jacob to just run off. But he tricked Jacob to work for him for fourteen years for his two daughters. And he had six more years after that. At any time, he could have done what any proper father-in-law should do: send his son-in-law off with resources and blessings. Recall that Abraham sent his nephew Lot off in Genesis 13 with resources and blessings.
 - c. He says he wants Jacob not to mistreat his daughters. But he himself mistreated his own daughters by tricking Jacob to marry Leah first, instead of Rachel!! Laban has been an awful, treacherous father!!
 - d. He seems to be a classic narcissist. He cannot even admit that he was wrong. Instead, he still blames Jacob. He is a more extreme form of Adam, who blamed Eve and God, for his own sin.
 - e. Then after Jacob reminds him of how hard he had to work, under Laban's scheming, Laban insists that Jacob is the one who is wronging him by stealing. 'The daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne?' (Gen.31:43). This guy just can't admit that he's wrong!! What's up with that?!
 - f. Laban's story shows us that God will ultimately win by being the source of life. Meanwhile, evil will defeat itself. Evil cuts itself off from goodness and life. Just like Laban could have let Jacob go much earlier with his blessing, but he kept wanting his flocks to increase. Instead, God just had them decrease while Jacob's flock increased. Laban's own greed killed him. That's a microcosm

of the greater destiny of human beings. Evil cuts itself off from goodness and life and just implodes. That's why the motif of fire for God starts out positive, because God wants to refine and purify and produce more beauty and life in us. But if human beings resist God's purifying, the fire feels like God just wants to inflict pain. But that's the perspective of someone who wants to hold onto what God wants to burn away. They've become forever addicted to something that they can no longer have, like Laban wanting his household idols. Evil defeats itself, like in Lord of the Rings, when the Ring falls into the fire because it corrupted Gollum.

6. How does Jacob respond to Laban with the stones and the covenant?
 - a. He sees that there is no point to arguing with Laban anymore. Just separate from him ASAP.
 - b. He offers a sacrifice on the mountain (what mountain?), like Abraham did in Genesis 12:8 on a mountain between Bethel and Ai. He is publicly demonstrating his faith and commitment to God, in view of all around him.
 - c. God takes from Laban his household idols, which are probably cut stones. And God leaves Laban with uncut stones. It's a simple challenge to not worship things of his own making, and to worship the Creator God.
7. What's the significance of stones in the life of Jacob? Stones seem to be used by God in revelation to Jacob. Stones seem to represent Mount Eden (Ezk.28:13 – 14; rivers normally converge in nature, so the four rivers which flow out from Eden must be from a higher elevation). Stones are miniature mountains. Of course, they are made of the same stuff. You can stand on them and they are a little higher than the earth. So when Jacob's story intersects with stones, God uses them for symbolic reasons, to remind Jacob of His story with humanity.
 - a. When Jacob uses a stone for a pillow, God makes it serve as a connection point between heaven and earth, where Jacob sees a ladder with angels of God coming up and down. God turned the stone into a place of revelation, a point of connection, as Mount Eden once was.
 - b. When Jacob meets Rachel and falls in love, he rolls away the heavy stone from the top of the well. That is also a reminder of Eden, where under and through the mountain, rivers flowed (Gen.2:10 – 14). When Jacob moved the stone, there was water underneath it.
 - c. When Jacob sets up the stones as a pillar between himself and Laban, it has some of the significance of Eden. Jacob, Leah, and Rachel part with Laban in the spirit of how 'For this reason, a man [and woman] will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife' (Gen.2:24). God was bringing Jacob and Leah and Rachel – weird as the situation was – back to being a new Adam and Eve, in the creation vision. So the stones serve as a marker of Eden, a marker of what God is doing.
 - d. Stones seem to refer to foundations for Jacob as well. God is providing him with foundations based on revelations of Himself and of Jacob's own self. Those are the best kinds of revelations, and they go hand in hand.
 - e. Our foundation 'stone' is Jesus himself, because he is the cornerstone of a new temple in which God is revealed to humanity and to the world. But in realist language, he is the foundation for understanding who and what humanity is (fallen image bearers of God), and who and what God is (100% love who wants human partnership).
 - i. Jesus quoted Psalm 118:22 about being the cornerstone of a new temple: ^{Mt.21:42} Jesus said to them, 'Did you never read in the Scriptures, 'The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief cornerstone'; 'this came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? ⁴³ Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it. ⁴⁴ And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.'
 - ii. When Jesus was killed and buried, and then raised again, God moved a huge stone, like Jacob did, but this one was Jesus' grave stone (Mt.27:66; 28:2)
 - iii. Peter later says: ⁴ And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, ⁵ you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For this is contained in Scripture: 'Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious cornerstone, and he who believes in him will not be disappointed.' ⁷ This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, 'the stone which the builders rejected, this became the very cornerstone,' ⁸

and, 'a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense'; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.

iv. See also Ephesians 2:11 – 22

8. How has Jacob drawn boundaries around himself? How are they healthier now than before?
- a. Application: How have you drawn boundaries around yourself for the sake of your relationship with God and what He's called you to?
 - b. Illus: After my freshman year in college, I had to make a major decision about boundaries. I had just gone away to college, and my younger sister had just started high school. I had been praying that she would come to know Jesus. So one day she told me on the phone that she had been going to a Christian club that met every day at lunch. It was put on by a history teacher. On Mondays, this teacher would have a worship time. On Tuesdays, there would be a Bible study. On Wednesdays, he would invite a student from a nearby Bible college to come and teach a passage of the Scriptures. On Thursdays, there would be a time for discussion. And on Fridays, there'd be a movie or games or something. My sister came to know about Jesus and eventually accepted Christ that year because this teacher was so psyched about Christ and spreading God's kingdom, even at a public school! I went to meet this man, and to me, he was funny looking. He had gray hair, he wore a red plaid shirt and bright red tie. But joy was written all over his face, and I said to myself, 'I can see myself doing this. This is important work.' I said to him, 'Thank you.' He said, 'God bless you.' I took all of my sophomore year to think about the kingdom of God. The next summer, I told my parents that I MIGHT want to be a high school teacher, and I wanted to take a step in that direction to see if it fit me. They were furious. They demanded, 'Why are we sending you to Stanford, then?!' Shocked, I said, 'I don't know.' The summer of 1992 was filled with tension. My parents threatened to yank me out of school. I wanted to hold on to Stanford. The question for me at that point was, 'What would I seek first? Being completely available to follow Christ? Or following my own agenda and having a nice backup plan called a Stanford degree?' By the end of that summer, in my heart, I let go of Stanford, I let go of a cushy lifestyle, I let go of however making big money made me an 'eligible bachelor.' As best I knew how, I asked Jesus Christ to be the only King for me. I said to my parents, 'I'm not saying that I KNOW I want to teach high school. I'm just saying that I'd like the freedom to explore it. But if sending me to Stanford makes you feel like you have control over my choices, I'll leave Stanford. I'll put myself through school somewhere else. It may take longer, but it'll be okay.' I meant it. Later, they said they would keep sending me to Stanford, and that I could choose. But the significant part of that episode is that Jesus used it to change something deep in my heart. It was a strange, powerful freedom. Jesus wants you to find that freedom in him.