GENESIS

Chapter 31

*Jacob Flees From Laban*

**Jacob heard that Laban’s sons were saying, “Jacob has taken everything our father owned and has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father.” 2 And Jacob noticed that Laban’s attitude toward him was not what it had been. 3 Then the Lord said to Jacob, “Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.” 4 So Jacob sent word to Rachel and Leah to come out to the fields where his flocks were. 5 He said to them, “I see that your father’s attitude toward me is not what it was before, but the God of my father has been with me. 6 You know that I’ve worked for your father with all my strength, 7 yet your father has cheated me by changing my wages ten times. However, God has not allowed him to harm me. 8 If he said, ‘The speckled ones will be your wages,’ then all the flocks gave birth to speckled young; and if he said, ‘The streaked ones will be your wages,’ then all the flocks bore streaked young. 9 So God has taken away your father’s livestock and has given them to me. 10 “In breeding season I once had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the male goats mating with the flock were streaked, speckled or spotted. 11 The angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob.’ I answered, ‘Here I am.’ 12 And he said, ‘Look up and see that all the male goats mating with the flock are streaked, speckled or spotted, for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. 13 I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land.’ ” 14 Then Rachel and Leah replied, “Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father’s estate? 15 Does he not regard us as foreigners? Not only has he sold us, but he has used up what was paid for us. 16 Surely all the wealth that God took away from our father belongs to us and our children. So do whatever God has told you.” 17 Then Jacob put his children and his wives on camels, 18 and he drove all his livestock ahead of him, along with all the goods he had accumulated in Paddan Aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan. 19 When Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole her father’s household gods. 20 Moreover, Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him he was running away. 21 So he fled with all he had, and crossing the River, he headed for the hill country of Gilead.**

**31:1** For six more years – that makes twenty in all – the tug-of-war between Laban and Jacob went on. Jacob did everything he knew to guarantee that there would be larger numbers of newborn cattle that were irregular in color. Laban on the other hand, changed Jacob’s wages repeatedly. In spite of such dishonesty, however, the Lord continues to bless Jacob, and his growing prosperity irritated Laban and his sons. They looked upon him not as a member of their family, not as man whom God had blessed. They saw him only as an outsider who through dishonesty had managed to get his hands on what was rightfully their inheritance. (PBC)

**31:2** LABAN’S ATTITUDE – Literally, “the face of Laban was no longer with him.” Laban’s face showed that his attitude toward Jacob had changed. (TLSB)

**31:3** *Go back to the land of your fathers.* Every sign Jacob was getting—from his wives (see vv. 14–16), from Laban (see v. 2), from Laban’s sons (see v. 1) and now from God himself—told him that it was time to return to Canaan. (CSB)

Luther: “Because the Word orders it, he is not fearful but proceeds in the name of the Lord, for these are the words of God, who is liberating Jacob from distress and promising to defend him in the future” (AE 6:11). TLSB)

 *I will be with you.* See note on 26:3. (CSB)

The Lord, the God of the covenant, settled the matter for Jacob in a dream one night. As the bearer of the Messianic promise, Jacob did not belong in Haran, but in Canaan, the future homeland of his descendants. Jacob realized, of course, that for him to return home meant facing Esau. Was Esau still seeking to kill him? God’s promise to Jacob made it easier for him to obey. (PBC)

**31:4** *Rachel and Leah.* At long last (see v. 14) Rachel, the younger, has been given precedence over Leah—but she will soon become a deceiver like her husband Jacob (see vv. 31, 35). (CSB)

To make sure they were ready to leave their homeland. (TLSB)

Jacob may have been surprised at this wives’ immediate willingness to leave their childhood home. They, too, had been aware of a change in their father’s attitude – not only toward Jacob, but toward them. (PBC)

**31:7** *ten times.* See v. 41. “Ten” here probably signifies completeness. In effect, Jacob accused Laban of cheating him at every turn. (CSB)

An expression meaning “constantly.” (TLSB)

**31:9** See note on 30:39. (CSB)

God gave them. Jacob did not steal them, as Laban’s sons said (v.1) (TLSB)

**31:10** SAW THEM IN A DREAM – (28:12-16), God used a dream to reveal His gracious will to Jacob. (TLSB)

**31:11** *angel of God.* See note on 16:7. (CSB)

Cf v. 13. Elsewherre called “the angel of the Lord” (e.g., 16:7). God is the speaker. (TLSB)

 *Here I am.* See note on 22:1. (CSB)

**31:13** *Bethel, where you anointed a pillar.* See note on 28:18. (CSB)

At Bethel, the Lord identified Himself as “the God of Abraham… (and) Isaac” (28:13). Since Jacob had been living among people who worshiped false gods, he needed this reminder of who the true God is. (TLSB)

**31:14** SHARE IN THE INHERITANCE – “He no longer looks upon us as daughters,” they said, “but as foreigners,” as slaves whom one uses only for his own advantage. (PBC)

Luther: “According to God’s command it is the duty of a mother or wife to assist her husband in nourishing and bringing up the children and in attending to the administration of the household. These two wives complain…about the cruelty of their father, in as much as they are already the mothers of 12 children and they are still deprived…of the things necessary for nourishing such a numerous household” (AE 6:15). (TLSB)

**31:15** USED UP WHAT WAS PAID FOR US – ESV has “devoured.” Laban used up his daughters’ portion and inheritance for his own purposes. (TLSB)

Another action of their father’s that embittered them was that “he has used up what was paid for us.” According to Mesopotamian law a father was supposed to retain a portion of the price paid for his daughter at the time of her marriage. He could invest it, but he was supposed to return it to her if at some time in her life she needed it, since the bride-price was the daughter’s insurance policy. (PBC)

**31:16** BELONGS TO US – Because Laban had selfishly appropriated what Jacob had paid for Leah and Rachel had gotten from their father was rightfully theirs. (PBC)

**31:18** *Paddan Aram.* Means “plain of Aram,” another name for Aram Naharaim (see note on 24:10). See map of “Jacob’s Journeys”. (CSB)

**31:19** GONE TO SHEAR HIS SHEEP – Usually done in spring. Laban put a distance of three days’ journey between his flocks and Jacob’s (30:36). (TLSB)

 *household gods.* Small portable idols, which Rachel probably stole because she thought they would bring her protection and blessing. Or perhaps she wanted to have something tangible to worship on the long journey ahead, a practice referred to much later in the writings of Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian. In any case, Rachel was not yet free of her pagan background (see 35:2; Jos 24:2). (CSB)

Hebrew teraphim. Rachel may have stolen her father’s idols out of anger, or she may have thought they would grant protection. Neither motive was right. (TLSB)

A detail I this episode that puzzles Bible students is Rachel’s theft of her father’s household gods. Various reasons have been advanced to explain her thievery. Some have thought she was secretly an idolatress and actually looked to those little gods for protection. Some scholars feel there was economic significance in possessing the father’s gods, that after the father’s death the child who inherited the father’s gods succeeded him as head of the clan. If this is so, we can understand why Laban was so upset at the thought that Jacob had his household gods. (PBC)

**31:21** *So he fled.* As he had fled earlier from Esau (27:42–43). Jacob’s devious dealings produced only hostility from which he had to flee.

One of the little ironies of Jacob’s checkered career is that twenty years earlier he’d had to flee Canaan to go to Haran. Now he had to flee Haran to return to Canaan. (PBC)

 WITH ALL HE HAD – This large caravan – including wives and children, manservants and maidservants, cows and sheep and goats, camels and donkey – headed out south from Haran. We get some idea of the size of Jacob’s flocks and herds when in advance of his meeting with Esau (recorded in the next chapter of Genesis). (PBC)

 THE RIVER – It was the Euphrates. This river marked the northern boundary of the land promised to Abraham (15:18).

 HE HEADED FOR – The ESV has “set his face.” This suggests Jacob’s determination to move away from Laban rapidly. He would cover a great distance. (TLSB)

After a week they had reached the land of Gilead, east of the Sea of Galilee, leaving a trail that could not have been difficult for Laban to follow. (PBC)

 *Gilead.* A fertile region southeast of the Sea of Galilee. (CSB)

*Laban Pursues Jacob*

**22 On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled. 23 Taking his relatives with him, he pursued Jacob for seven days and caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead. 24 Then God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream at night and said to him, “Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.” 25 Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country of Gilead when Laban overtook him, and Laban and his relatives camped there too. 26 Then Laban said to Jacob, “What have you done? You’ve deceived me, and you’ve carried off my daughters like captives in war. 27 Why did you run off secretly and deceive me? Why didn’t you tell me, so I could send you away with joy and singing to the music of tambourines and harps? 28 You didn’t even let me kiss my grandchildren and my daughters good-by. You have done a foolish thing. 29 I have the power to harm you; but last night the God of your father said to me, ‘Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.’ 30 Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father’s house. But why did you steal my gods?” 31 Jacob answered Laban, “I was afraid, because I thought you would take your daughters away from me by force. 32 But if you find anyone who has your gods, he shall not live. In the presence of our relatives, see for yourself whether there is anything of yours here with me; and if so, take it.” Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods. 33 So Laban went into Jacob’s tent and into Leah’s tent and into the tent of the two maidservants, but he found nothing. After he came out of Leah’s tent, he entered Rachel’s tent. 34 Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them inside her camel’s saddle and was sitting on them. Laban searched through everything in the tent but found nothing. 35 Rachel said to her father, “Don’t be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence; I’m having my period.” So he searched but could not find the household gods. 36 Jacob was angry and took Laban to task. “What is my crime?” he asked Laban. “What sin have I committed that you hunt me down? 37 Now that you have searched through all my goods, what have you found that belongs to your household? Put it here in front of your relatives and mine, and let them judge between the two of us. 38 “I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten rams from your flocks. 39 I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself. And you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night. 40 This was my situation: The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes. 41 It was like this for the twenty years I was in your household. I worked for you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, 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 with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed. But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you.” 43 Laban answered Jacob, “The women are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks. All you see is mine. Yet what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about the children they have borne? 44 Come now, let’s make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us.” 45 So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. 46 He said to his relatives, “Gather some stones.” So they took stones and piled them in a heap, and they ate there by the heap. 47 Laban called it Jegar Sahadutha, and Jacob called it Galeed.48 Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me today.” That is why it was called Galeed. 49 It was also called Mizpah, because he said, “May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other. 50 If you mistreat my daughters or if you take any wives besides my daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me.” 51 Laban also said to Jacob, “Here is this heap, and here is this pillar I have set up between you and me. 52 This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not go past this heap to your side to harm you and that you will not go past this heap and pillar to my side to harm me. 53 May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.” So Jacob took an oath in the name of the Fear of his father Isaac. 54 He offered a sacrifice there in the hill country and invited his relatives to a meal. After they had eaten, they spent the night there. 55 Early the next morning Laban kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then he left and returned home.**

**31:22** THIRD DAY – Laban picked up the trial three days later when he learned that Jacob had left. (PBC)

**31: 24** BE CAREFUL NOT TO –LXX, “anything bad.” Luther: “in your heart you have thought up a huge mass of accusations and charges to vomit out against him. But I order you not only to keep your hands off him but not to offend him even by a word” (AE 6:39). (TLSB)

Just before he caught up with Jacob, Laban had a dream in which God warned him not to try to harm his son-in-law. It’s conceivable that a bitter and vengeful man, with a small force of armed men, could simply have taken the livestock and forced Jacob and his household back to Haran, this time as slaves. (PBC)

**31:26** *deceived.* Jacob’s character, reflected in his name (see NIV text notes on 25:26; 27:36), is emphasized in the narrative again and again. (CSB)

 LIKE CAPTIVES OF WAR – Laban’s words are filled with anger. He disregarded the Lord’s command (v. 24) by comparing his daughters to prisoners of war. (TLSB)

**31:27** Hypocritical statement. (TLSB)

 *harps.* Much smaller, and with fewer strings (usually 6 to 12), than their modern counterparts. (CSB)

**31:28** KISS MY GRANDCHILDREN – There’s hypocrisy in his words, as he described himself as a hurt father who had enjoyed a tender and loving relationship with his daughters. He pretended that he had nothing but respect and goodwill for Jacob, whereas both of them knew better. (PBC)

**31:29** Laban probably came closest to the truth when he admitted that only the fear of God’s vengeance had restrained him from resorting to violence. (PBC)

**31:31** JACOB ANSWERED – It must have been difficult for Jacob to keep a straight face as he listened to Laban’s self-righteous tirade. Everybody present knew that Laban’s charges against Jacob were simply not true. (PBC)

**31:32** *if you find anyone who has your gods, he shall not live.* Cf. 44:7–12. Though he made the offer in all innocence, Jacob almost lost his beloved Rachel. He had now been deceived even by his wife. (CSB)

ESV has “our kinsmen.” These were relatives who were present. (TLSB)

**31:34** *inside her camel’s saddle … sitting on them.* Indicating the small size and powerlessness of the household gods. (CSB)

Apparently, the saddle could be removed from the camel and serve as a convenient seat for travels. That Rachel would sit on “gods” shows that idolatry is ridiculous. (TLSB)

**31:35** *I’m having my period.* In later times, anything a menstruating woman sat on was considered ritually unclean (Lev 15:20). Rachel, too, had become a deceiver. (CSB)

Rachel claims to be menstruating but may not be telling the truth. (TLSB)

Rachel appears to have her father’s cunning. As Laban proceeded to search all of Jacob’s tents and baggage, Rachel hid the gods in her camel’s saddle bag and managed to keep her father from looking for them there. (PBC)

**31:36** HUNT ME DOWN – It was then that Jacob exploded in anger. “What is my crime? What sine have I committed that you hunt me down like a common thief? (PBC)

**31:38** HAVE NOT MISCARRIED – I served you for 20 years, and you know your livestock received the best of care. While I was out on the range away from home, I never4 killed any of your animals for food. (Clay tablets discovered at the site of ancient Nuzi records lawsuits brought by cattle owners against herdsmen, for slaughtering animals without permission.) (PBC)

**31:39** BORE THE LOSS – Under some ancient law codes (e.g., Code of Hammurabi), a shepherd was not held responsible for losses incurred from attacks of wild beasts. (TLSB)

**31:40** SLEEP FLED FROM MY EYES – Jacob was deprived of sleep because he faithfully tended Laban’s flocks. (TLSB)

**31:42** *Fear.* Here a surrogate for God. Or perhaps the Hebrew for this word means “Kinsman,” stressing the intimacy of God’s relationship to the patriarch. (CSB)

**31:43** *all that you see is mine*. All that Jacob had originally came from Laban. (TLSB)

**31:44** *make a covenant*. Peace agreement in which Jacob also pledged to be faithful to his wives (v 50). (TLSB)

 *witness*. Laban had often gone back on his word. This formal covenant was meant to testify that this time both he and Jacob could be trusted. (TLSB)

**31:45** *stone* … *pillar*. As a sign of the covenant. (TLSB)

**31:46** *ate.* See note on 26:30. (CSB)

**31:47** *Jegar-sahadutha* … *Galeed*. Different languages of the names show the persistent cultural boundaries between the two men. (TLSB)

Hebrew the *heap of witness*. ESV Note. (TLSB)

**31:48** For the naming of an altar under similar circumstances see Jos 22:10–12, 34. (CSB)

**31:49** *May … other.* The so-called Mizpah benediction, which in context is in fact a denunciation or curse. (CSB)

Several other locations in Israel were named Mizpah. (TLSB)

*Mizpah* means *watchpost* chap. 32:1 in Hebrew. ESV Notes. (TLSB)

**31:51** *heap … pillar … between you and me.* Boundary markers between Laban’s territory and Jacob’s territory. Galeed, Jacob’s name for the heap, is a pun on Gilead (see v. 47 and NIV text note). (CSB)

**31:52** *I will not pass over this heap* … *to do harm*. The pillar and stones served as boundary markers. (TLSB)

**31:53** *God of their father.* Or possibly “gods of their father [i.e., Terah],” reflecting Laban’s polytheistic background (see Jos 24:2).

Nahor, Laban’s grandfather (24:15, 29), served “other gods” (Jsh 24:2). Notwithstanding Laban’s oath in v 50, it is quite clear that he worshiped multiple gods.(TLSB)

 *judge between us*. Laban called on the gods to be the guardian of this covenant. (TLSB)

 *Fear of his father Isaac.* See note on v. 42. Jacob had met the “God of Isaac” (28:13) at Bethel 20 years earlier. (CSB)

Jacob bound himself to the agreement in the name of the true God. (TLSB)

**31:54** *sacrifice … meal.* Two important aspects of the covenant-making (see v. 44) process (see Ex 24:5–8, 11).

It was customary to end a covenant ceremony with a sacrifice and meal. (TLSB)

 *relatives.* Those with whom he had now entered into a covenant. The common meal indicated mutual acceptance (see note on 26:30). (CSB)

Luther: “It is likely that Jacob had many relatives in his household from the house of Laban who worked for him” (AE 6:66). (TLSB)

**31:55** *blessed.* Or “said farewell to” (see NIV text note on 47:10; see also 31:28).

**Ch 31** Deception leads to dispute between relatives, which threatens to break out into open warfare. Such an outcome is avoided because God steps in. Family feuds, often fueled by deceit, continue to plague relationships today. We need God to step into our lives, into our families. In Him and in His Word there is no deceit. Trust Him to forgive the contrite sinner and to quiet the angry heart. Go to Christ for pardon and for peace. • “Grant peace in mercy, Lord, we pray, Peace in our time, O send us! For there is none on earth but thee, None other to defend us. Only thou, Lord, canst fight for us.” Amen. (AE 53:287) (TLSB)