

GENESIS

Chapter 31

Jacob Flees From Laban

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. 3 Then the LORD said to Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.” 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. 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.’” 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.” 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. 19 Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods. 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. 22 When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, 23 he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead. 24 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.” 25 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. 26 And Laban said to Jacob, “What have you done, that you have tricked me and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword? 27 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? 28 And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? 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 say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.’ 30 And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house, but why did you steal my

gods?" 31 Jacob answered and said to Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. 32 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. 33 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. 34 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. 35 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. 36 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? 37 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. 38 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. 39 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. 40 There I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold 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 have changed my wages ten times. 42 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." 43 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? 44 Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I. And let it be a witness between you and me." 45 So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. 46 And Jacob said to his kinsmen, "Gather stones." And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. 47 Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. [e] 48 Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me today." Therefore he named it Galeed, 49 and Mizpah, for he said, "The LORD watch between you and me, when we are out of one another's sight. 50 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." 51 Then Laban said to Jacob, "See this heap and 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 over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, to do 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 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. 55 Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned home.

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)

d31:2 *did not regard him* – Literally, “the face of Laban was no longer with him.” Laban’s face showed that his attitude toward Jacob had changed. (TLSB)

31:3 *return 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. 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 God gave them. Jacob did not steal them, as Laban’s sons said (v.1) (TLSB)

31:10 *saw in a dream* – (28:12-16), God used a dream to reveal His gracious will to Jacob. (TLSB)

31:11 *the angel of God*. Cf v. 13. Else where called “the angel of the Lord” (e.g., 16:7). God is the speaker. (TLSB)

31:13 *Bethel, where you anointed a pillar*. 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 *is there any portion or 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 *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. (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 in 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 *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 Euphrates – This river marked the northern boundary of the land promised to Abraham (15:18).

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)

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 say* – 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 *tricked*. Jacob’s character, reflected in his name, is emphasized in the narrative again and again. (CSB)

like captives of the sword – 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)

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

31:28 *kiss my sons and daughters* – 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 *in the presence of our kinsmen*. 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)

These were relatives who were present. (TLSB)

31:34 *put them in the camel’s saddle ... sat 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 *way of women is upon me*. 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 *hotly pursued me* – 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 lost* – 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 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)

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

Hebrew the *heap of witness*.

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

31:49 *Mizph*. 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)

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. (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). (CSB)

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

kinsmen. Those with whom he had now entered into a covenant. The common meal indicated mutual acceptance. (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.” (CSB)

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)