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Genesis 31:17 - 31:55



Genesis - Steve Gregg

In this passage, Jacob leaves Laban's house after realizing his uneasy relationship with Laban's sons. He experiences a dream about returning to Bethel, which he shares with his wives. Rachel steals household goods, which she hides in a camel's saddle. Jacob and Laban confront each other, and they make an agreement stacking stones as witnesses, calling it "Mizpah." Laban asks Jacob not to take any wives besides his daughters to keep the inheritance in the family line.

Transcript

Alright, we're going to turn again to Genesis chapter 31 and pick up the story where we left off. In the first 16 verses, because Jacob saw that his in-laws were not very pleased with him, because they were getting poorer and he was getting richer, as they understood it at their expense, and I guess that would be the correct way to understand it, the flocks were all coming out Jacob's by coloration. And that means that fewer of them were Laban's, so that Laban had been poor when Jacob came, then in six years, or in 14 years of Jacob's work, Laban had become wealthy in livestock, and then in the remaining six years, Laban's flocks had gone over to Jacob.

So, in a sense, God made Laban wealthy for the first 14 years, so that that wealth could be transferred to Jacob, eventually. And now Laban and his sons are not pleased with Jacob. Jacob has had a dream in which God has told him it's time to return to Bethel, back to the promised land.

He's been away for 20 years, and he calls his wives out to share the plan with them, and they agree that this is a good idea. So, in verse 17, we see that Jacob rose and set his sons and his wives on camels, and he carried away all his livestock and all his possessions. He carried them away, he carried them, you know, it means he just removed them from there.

He drove the herds. He carried away all his livestock, which he had gained in Paddan Aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan. Now, Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel had stolen the household teraphim that were her father's.

And Jacob stole away, unknown to Laban, the Syrian, in that he did not tell him that he intended to flee. So he fled with all that he had. He arose and crossed over the river and headed toward the mountains of Gilead.

Now, the fact that Rachel had taken the household teraphim, which would be emblems of inheritance rights, according to most archaeologists who have actually found teraphim from the period, they're little statuettes, maybe a foot tall or so, that were more symbolic in their value than they were actual objects of worship. And she probably took them, intending that her brother's inheritance would go to her son, Joseph. But she didn't even tell Jacob about this.

Jacob, she assumed, perhaps would not approve of this. And the fact that he didn't know it becomes significant later in the story. So he is leaving while Laban is occupied, shearing his sheep.

And remember, Laban had put three days distance between himself and Jacob, so that it would take three days for a messenger to get to Laban to let him know that Jacob had left. Jacob, therefore, would get a three-day head start if Laban decided to pursue. However, as good as that might seem, it would take at least 10 days driving the sheep, sheep are slow.

And it would take at least 10 days at a very fast pace to get back to the promised land, back into across the border where hopefully Laban would not pursue him. So Jacob was kind of taking a risk here. Would three days advance head start be enough to escape from the pursuit of Laban and his sons? As it turned out, Laban and his sons did catch up with him on the tenth day, which since Laban got a three-day late start, we can see that Laban was able to travel the same distance in seven days that Jacob traveled in 10.

But that's not hard to understand. What's actually hard to understand is how Jacob traveled quite that far in the time, because it's something like 50 miles he traveled in 10, I mean, 500 miles. So he traveled in 10 days.

That'd be like 50 miles a day. I don't know. 400 miles, you say? One commentator said 500, but I guess it depends on where we're seeing the safety border or whatever.

But let's say it was 400, a little easier. Still 10 days, that's 40 miles a day, and that's a lot of moving, even if you're traveling without sheep and children and women and folks and stuff like that. So it's clear that Jacob was traveling and driving his flocks day and night for 10 days.

That's how frightened he was of being caught up with, because, I mean, you can walk 20 miles in, what, about seven hours? So that's at normal walking speed. 40 miles a day, you'd be walking 14 hours a day, if not more, with sheep maybe even longer a day, because he might have been giving the flocks and his family very little sleep along the

way to try to get across the border where, across the river basically, where Laban could not reach him. He did not quite make it, but he had a good chance at it, and he almost seemed to make it.

He seemed almost to make it. We read in verse 22, And Laban was told on the third day that Jacob had fled. Then he took his brethren with him and pursued him for seven days' journey and overtook him in the mountains of Gilead.

Now, it's not clear exactly what Laban intended to do. As it turns out, he acts like he just wanted to kiss his daughters goodbye. And, you know, shame on you for not letting me have that privilege.

But we know that Laban, and Jacob knew, that Laban was not exactly a trustworthy man. The man was not one likely to give up wealth. We see that by the fact that he changed Jacob's wages ten times in order to try to secure things from Jacob.

And he might have just taken them by force if he thought it was going to come to that. Jacob apparently did not have many fighting men in his entourage, probably just his own sons and his wives, maybe a few servants, but Laban obviously came with a larger force and basically actually told Jacob, I would have hurt you. Probably what he would have done would be to steal the flocks back and maybe even take his daughters and children back and leave Jacob dead or at least leave Jacob alone without his family or his flocks.

But something happened in verse 24. God had come to Laban the Syrian in a dream by night and said to him, Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad. Now, if this were a literal statement, then of course, obviously Laban should have just gone home and not had a conversation with Jacob at all.

But you should not speak good or bad is more of an idiom. It essentially means that you shouldn't really make any decision about anything with Jacob. Let him make the decision of what he's going to do.

And there's actually the same phrases used elsewhere later on in Scripture. So Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the mountains and Laban with his brethren pitched in the mountains of Gilead.

And Laban approached Jacob and said, What have you done that you have stolen away unknown to me and carried away my daughters like captives taken with the sword? Why did you flee away secretly and steal away from me and not tell me? For I might have sent you away with joy and songs and timbrel and harp. And you did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters, meaning grandsons and daughters. Now you have done foolishly in so doing.

It is in my power to do you harm. But the God of your father spoke to me last night saying, Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad. And now you have

surely gone because you greatly long for your father's house.

But why did you steal my teraphim? And Jacob answered and said to Laban, Because I was afraid for I said, Perhaps you would take your daughters from me by force. That's the answer to the first question. As for the answer to about the teraphim, he says, With whomever you find your teraphim, Do not let him live in the presence of our brethren.

Identify what I have of yours and take it with you. For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them. So he says, If you find anything of yours that we've stolen, let that person has it die.

Now, it's not likely that Laban would have killed his own daughter had he found them there. But she would have been in trouble and he might have even, you know, Taken or forcibly back from Jacob or something as a penalty. In any case, Jacob didn't know that they were among the things there.

Now, Laban went into Jacob's tent. It's interesting how this is told. This is told the same way as the searching of the sacks of grain.

Jacob's son is told later in the story of Joseph. Because we know who has the teraphim, but no one in the story knows except Rachel. But we've been told where they are.

And we find that all the tents are searched one at a time. Rachel's being saved for last. So the tension builds.

It's getting closer to where it's really done. Is it going to be found? Same thing happens in the story of Joseph's brothers and their sacks of grain. We know that that Benjamin's cup, Benjamin's sack has the cup in it.

That's been thought. And yet they start with the oldest brother. Second, they move down and we the way the story is told the tension map is a they're getting closer to Benjamin's sack.

It's there. They're going to find it. And in fact, they do.

But they don't find the teraphim here. But the story is told the same way. You know, we are given advance notice where it would be found if it's going to be found.

And yet the story is kind of it. It leads to it very gradually. It says Laban went into Jacob's tent, into Leah's tent and into the two maids tent.

But he did not find them. Well, there's not many tents left. Then he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's tent.

Now, Rachel had taken the household idols of the teraphim and put them in the camel's saddle. Now, the saddle of the camel is quite different than a saddle of a horse, because

the back of a camel is a lot different than the back of a horse. The back of a horse is fairly accommodating to a rider with or without a saddle.

A camel's back is not very accommodating to a rider without a saddle. And the saddle has to kind of accommodate for the strange shape. It's actually built up out of wood, like a piece of furniture.

And so the Bedouin people, when they would pitch tent, they would take the saddle off the camel and use it for a couch or a chair inside their tent until it was time to travel again. And these camel saddles could have, you know, compartments in them for storing food or whatever. They were big items, large structures.

And therefore, she had hidden the teraphim inside of that and she was sitting on top of it. And Laban searched all about the tent, but not find them. And she said to her father, let it not displease my Lord that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is with me.

And he searched, but did not find the household idols. Now, the manner of women, here's a reference to her menstrual period. And even though the law of Moses had not been given, you know, codifying this in the Middle East, a woman during her period was considered to be, you know, in isolation.

And perhaps the cultural feelings were very much like they were later written down in the law, where if a woman who had a period was sitting on something, and even if she got off it again, it was still unclean. So that if those were kind of the general sentiments of the culture, she would be saying, you know, I'm on my period, don't ask me to get up. And of course, even if she had gotten up, the saddle would be unclean and, you know, Laban would not want to touch it.

So she's, now she might not even be lying. She might be telling the truth, but can't tell with Rachel. She's not necessarily honest.

She did feel these things and she's pretending not to have them. So she's not exactly being honest, even if this particular excuse is correct. So he didn't find them.

And then, of course, Jacob feels vindicated, even though Laban was correct in making the accusation. Jacob doesn't know it and no one else knows it except Rachel. So Jacob is now feeling a little cocky and he's able to strut around and make his little speech to Laban.

He was terrified of Laban until now, but it's now become clear that in this particular accusation, Laban has made that before all of Laban's sons, Jacob is righteous and Laban is the suspicious one in the wrong. So that encourages Jacob to get angry and rebuke Laban. And Jacob answered and said to Laban, what is my trespass? What is my sin that you have so hotly pursued me? Although you have searched all my things, what part of

your household things have you found? Set it here before my brethren and your brethren, that they may judge between us both.

These twenty years I have been with you. Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried their young, and I have not eaten the rams of your flock. That which was torn by beasts I did not bring to you.

I bore the loss of it. You required it from my hand, whether stolen by day or by night. There I was in the day, drought consumed me.

It was desert. In the frost by night, and my sleep departed from mine eyes. Thus I have been in your house twenty years.

I served you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham, the fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night, which encouraged Jacob to rebuke him too.

He's got a big God standing behind him, rebuking him too, so he's empowered. But, you know, this tells us something about those six years that we didn't know. And that is that Laban's working agreement with Jacob was pretty unreasonable, because it is the custom of shepherds not to be responsible for animals that are taken by wild beasts in the night.

The shepherd did not have to bear the loss of it. That is, if you're caring for someone else's sheep, they don't expect you to be responsible for the lion or the bear that comes and takes the sheep while you're asleep. Customarily, in that area, a sheep herder didn't bear that responsibility.

But he says, you required me to pay if one of the sheep was killed in the night by a predator. So, of course, I couldn't sleep. It would cost me.

He says, so sleep departed from my eyes. In the daytime, I was out in the sun watching the sheep. At the nighttime, I was out in the frost watching the sheep.

I wasn't bundled up in my bedroll. I had to watch the sheep day and night, and I didn't get any sleep. Now, here's a man who was 77 when this began.

He's now 97. For the past six years, he hasn't gotten much sleep. He's just traveled 400 miles in 10 days at a breakneck speed for a company on foot.

And he's got to be exhausted. I guess he could be forgiven for being a little angry. And, of course, as far as he knows, he's just been falsely accused.

And that's just the final indignity that Laban has shown him after 20 years of indignity.

And so he lets fly. This is a cathartic experience for Jacob.

He's had all this pent up for a long time. Notice he speaks of God in verse 42 as the God of Abraham and the fear of Isaac. He has every opportunity to say, and my God, but he doesn't quite say that.

Why? Because he had told God, if you get me home safely, then you'll be my God. Well, he's not quite home safely yet. He's close.

He's almost there. But this is still not the safe. He's not in the in the safety zone yet.

And Laban, who is, of course, embarrassed by having made this strong accusations and being apparently proven wrong. He's a bit humbled. And he answered to Jacob, These daughters are my daughters and these children are my children.

This flock is my flock. All that you see is mine. But what can I say to you this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne now, therefore, come and let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.

So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar, just like he had done at Bethel. But this is a different location. Then Jacob said to his brethren, gather stones.

And they took stones and made a heap and they ate there on the heap. Now, by the way, this is the second time it's mentioned Jacob's brethren. The only brother we know that Jacob had was Esau, and he wasn't there.

I had suggested the possibility that Isaac and Rebekah might have had other children that we don't know about after Jacob and Esau were born, and they just weren't mentioned because Jacob and Esau are the significant ones. But I don't think we have to assume that. I don't think we have to assume that Jacob had other siblings.

Brethren means relatives, generally speaking. I mean, in some context, it does mean male siblings. But it's a very common thing in Scripture for brethren just mean relatives.

And so his brethren, his relatives, would even include Laban's sons because they were part of the extended family. They were in-laws, they were brothers-in-law. So he could speak of his brethren and even mean Laban's sons or even mean his own children.

Remember that Abraham had said to Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray, between you and me, because we are brethren. And yet Lot was his nephew, not his brother. So that's just the way the speech is.

I thought I'd mention that because you might wonder, who are these brethren that Jacob keeps making reference to? And so he said to his brethren, Gather stones. And they took stones and made a heap. And they ate there on the heap.

And Laban called it Jigar-sahajatar. But Jacob called it Galid. Now, Laban's name for it means heap of witness in his own language, which is Aramaic or Syrian.

And Galid is Hebrew, and it means the same thing, heap of witness. Both of them called it the heap of witness because this heap of stones was to bear witness to an agreement they were about to make. And they didn't call it by the same name because Jacob wanted to call it by a Hebrew name.

And Laban wanted to call it by an Aramaic name, which is just another instance of them just not being cooperative with each other. Laban said, This heap is a witness between you and me this day. Therefore, its name was called Galid, the heap of witness.

Also, it's called Mizpah. Now, Mizpah means watch. Because he said, May Yahweh watch between you and me when we are absent from one another.

Now, this is sometimes referred to as the Mizpah benediction. And sometimes even people have this line on little medallions and stuff they wear. May the Lord watch between you and me while we're absent from one another.

Sounds sweet, but actually what he's saying is, I think you're a rascal and I don't trust you out of my sight, so I'm going to have God watch you because I can't keep my eye on you. And he makes it very clear that's what he means because he says in verse 5, If you afflict my daughters or if you take other wives beside my daughters, although no man is with us, see God is witness between you and me. God is watching you, even though you may think I can't see you.

I can't, but God can, and therefore you're agreeing not to take other wives besides my daughters. Now, why would Laban care whether Jacob did that? It's not like Laban didn't believe in polygamy. I mean, he's the one who gave Jacob two wives in the first place and then he didn't seem to object to the two concubines bearing grandsons for him.

I think probably the idea here is that at this point, all of your sons are in my family line. They're my grandchildren. If you take other wives that are not related to me, the children there will not be my family line and it will divide up the inheritance too thinly.

At this point, the inheritance will be divided only among my own grandson. If you take other wives, their children will split the inheritance up. I think he's trying to look out for the unique inheritance rights of his own grandchildren here when he says don't take other wives.

Now, then Laban said to Jacob, Here is a heap, here is this heap, and here is this pillar which I have placed between you and me. This heap is witness and this pillar is witness that I will not pass beyond this heap to you and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me for harm. The God of Abraham, the God of Nahor, the God of their father judged between us.

Now, Laban refers to the same God of Abraham and Nahor as the God of their father, Terah. And like I said earlier, Joshua tells us that Terah worshipped other gods, but he may have stopped doing so. About the time that Yahweh revealed himself to Abram and they all left Ur of the Chaldees, it's very possible that Terah and the whole family adopted the God that had given those instructions as their God.

So it's possible that Terah died a worshipper of Yahweh. Laban at least thought so. And Jacob swore by the fear of his father Isaac.

That means God. God is the one who Isaac feared. To fear God means to worship God in this context.

And so he swore by the God that his father Isaac worshipped. Again, keeping God at somewhat arm's length from Jacob himself. Not getting too close or claiming any ownership of God himself.

Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain and called his brethren to eat bread. And they ate bread and stayed all night on the mountain. And early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his sons and daughters and blessed them.

Then Laban departed and returned to his place. So now Jacob still had some more traveling to do, but he could travel at a little more leisurely pace. He was not being pursued.

This stressful ten days was now past. One could think that he could take a breather and relax, get a little sleep and so forth. But another crisis immediately arises.

We will not read the next chapter now because we got a late start and we'll not have a full length lecture. But, of course, he's now just had his stressful encounter with Laban. Then he gets news of Esau's approach.

And Esau is not coming alone. Esau has 400 men with him. Now, if Esau was coming alone, Jacob might feel like Esau wants to just meet with him.

Wants to welcome him back to the land. Maybe Esau and he will be reconciled. But Esau is bringing 400 men with him.

That's a pretty big welcoming committee. And certainly enough that if Esau is hostile, it can give troubles to Jacob, who doesn't have an army with him. And so Jacob gets this new set of worries.

And so that's what's going to come up next. Jacob begins to, well, he continues his journey at probably a more leisurely pace. And the crisis is passed with Laban.

But he does not yet know that there's going to be a crisis with Esau. Or at least a perceived crisis. As we know, because we've read ahead, it doesn't end up really being

that bad.

But he doesn't know that. And therefore, what's going on inside of Jacob is a lot of anxiety and stress. And that is a factor in understanding the strange phenomenon of a man wrestling with him all night.

We'll talk about that later in that chapter. We'll save that for next time because of our time limitations.