

## “Unless the Lord...” – *Genesis 31:17-55*

**Introduction** – We continue in the long story of Jacob and, as always, context matters. Jacob deceived his father to receive the promised blessing (Gen 27:28-29) but after Isaac repented, the blessing was openly reiterated (Gen 28:3-4) and even more so by the Lord Himself (Gen 28:13-15). Now, in Genesis 31, Moses records the turbulent events surrounding Jacob’s “exodus” and the exodus theme continues. Laban was the mini-Pharaoh, harassing Jacob and his family for twenty years. He had deceived Jacob on his wedding night, forced him to work an additional seven years for the woman he loved, cheated Jacob by changing his wages ten times, would have left Jacob with nothing and basically sold his daughters away. Jacob and his wives agreed that enough was enough, and the Lord affirmed that as well (31:3). That was music to Jacob’s ears and so he seized the opportunity.

**Exodus and Pursuit** (vv17-25) – It was sheep shearing season and Jacob’s flock was at least three days away. It was the perfect time. Jacob carried away all his family and possessions “*which he had gained*” lawfully from Laban. Verse 19 however notes that Rachel stole her father’s *teraphim*, the only fly in the ointment of this exodus. Verse 20 says that Jacob “*stole the heart*” of Laban, a Hebrew idiom meaning that he deceived Laban with this departure, “*in that he did not tell him that he intended to flee.*” Just as he had fled from his father’s home, so Jacob now fled from Laban to go back to his home. When Laban heard of this, he put an entourage together, pursued and overtook Jacob in the mountains of Gilead (vv22-23). But God came to Laban in a dream warning him not to render judgment upon Jacob (“*speak neither good nor bad*”).

**God Protects His People** – In one sense, Jacob was held captive for twenty years. But it turns out God was protecting and blessing Jacob. Now, obeying the Lord and fleeing, God continued to remain with Jacob just as He had promised. Notice how in both the twenty years of servitude and in the overtaking by Laban it can look as though God was not with Jacob. But in both we come to see how God was both with and for Jacob – fulfilling and furthering the blessing. Which way are you to look at your story?

**Who is the Victim Here?** (vv26-42) – The setup is a legal argument before witnesses. Laban has brought his “*brethren*” (most likely an entourage loyal or in debt to him). He probably intended to come and take back the flocks by force, but the dream had put an end to that (v29). Instead, he pathetically plays the victim card (vv26-27). He charges Jacob with “stealing” his daughters, his grandchildren, and his flocks (they were all legally Jacob’s). He then claims he would have thrown an amazing going-away party (Jacob, Rachel, and Leah would not believe this to be true – see vv14-16). But it’s not aimed at them – he is looking for approval from the mob. And maybe Laban believed/deceived himself. Envy and bitterness, resentment towards someone God has been gracious to, success when one doesn’t think that brother or sister deserve it, these sins cloud our thinking. Beware of the “elder brother syndrome” where the brother of the prodigal son refuses to celebrate the grace bestowed on the younger brother. We love to talk about grace in theory; we show our true colors when we think someone should still be suffering the consequences of their sin.

**Sitting on Stolen Household Idols** (vv31-35) – One charge seemed to stick: “*why did you steal my gods?*” (vv30ff). The irony is thick. God protects Jacob but Laban must protect his gods. Laban is allowed to search all the tents. Rachel then deceives her own deceitful father, and Laban cannot imagine that she would be sitting on the idols. There would be hardly anything more humiliating than placing those idols where she did if you understand the ironic and humorous picture. If we remember that Moses is writing for Israel, we see here another pre-exodus judgment upon the pagan gods (Ex 12:12, Num 33:3-4). These gods were empty, silly, worthy of such mockery, and so are all idols before the face of Yahweh.

**A Righteous Rebuke** (vv36-42) – On the contrary, Jacob speaks truth as the oppression of twenty years brings forth righteous anger. These verses record many instances of Laban’s greed and Jacob’s patient service and hard work. But it ends with what kept Jacob going and a powerful confession of faith (v42). We will come back to this verse, central to the passage.

**A Pact of Mutual Non-Aggression** (vv43-55) – This is the good outcome of Laban overtaking Jacob. Laban hasn’t won the argument and so tries this, “they are mine, mine, mine....” (v43). Knowing he has lost, Laban capitulates to reality and initiates a covenant with Jacob. It is a promise of non-aggression, of property lines and property. Laban invokes a plurality of gods while Jacob swore by “*the Fear of his father Isaac*,” a name for Yahweh (v53). What has become known as “*the Mitzpah benediction*” (v49) is mistakenly used today on Christmas cards and wedding bands, but this was a declaration of two men who neither trusted nor liked each other. They were warning each other, “God is watching!”

**Unless the Lord...** - This declaration of the faithfulness of God is the big takeaway, not only for this passage, but the whole story of Jacob's life. He could have claimed it was his cleverness that got him to this point. But Jacob knew, "*unless the Lord...*" (v42). God had seen his affliction, as He would in the Exodus story (Ex 3:7), the story that would bear Jacob's new name. This confession becomes the confession of Israel (Psalm 94:17, 119:92, 127:1, Isaiah 1:9, and John 3:27 where John the Baptist declares, "*a man can receive nothing unless it is given to him from heaven*"). Why are you where you are today? "*Unless the Lord...*"

As you look ahead towards your future, can you look back and see the times where "*unless the Lord had...*" and you were graced with blessings, with deliverances, with provision, with a particular answer, with strength to endure, with... - This is what stories can do, because we are often in the middle of the next "twenty years." Trust the faithfulness of God, of God with you (Gen 28:15, Matt 28:20) and God for you (Rom 8:31-32).

We are not told if Jacob saw God's faithfulness during all his endeavors and trials, but we can see that he did in retrospect. That remembrance, recalling of what God was doing - and you didn't even know it back then - is gold for moving on into the next part of your life. A well-disciplined memory increases and strengthens present faith.

And what is true of your spiritual life is true of your natural life as well. See the faithfulness of God in His acts of providence! How much is God at work in your life all the time? What if it was up to you to superintend the beating of your heart, the activities of each of your organs, the work of feeding and replacing the cells in your body, and such. Bishop Alford (19<sup>th</sup> Century) used this argument to help Christians understand how faithful God is in the spiritual world as well. What keeps us believing and living for the Lord (Phil 2:12-13)? Where does such power come from (1 Pet 4:11)? I daresay that we have no idea the depths of God's faithfulness and provision we have consumed over the years of our lives or how different our lives would be had God not intervened in specific ways in keeping His promises to us (Jude 24-25).

---

Dave Hatcher - September 13, 2026