

“Between a Rock and a Hard Place” (Genesis 31:1-55)

A pastor was walking down the street one day when he noticed a very small boy trying to press a doorbell on a house across the street. The boy wasn't very tall and the doorbell was too high for him to reach. After watching the boy's efforts, the pastor walked across the street, stepped up behind the little fellow, and placed his hand kindly on the child's shoulder. He then leaned over and gave the doorbell a solid ring. Crouching down to the child's level, the pastor smiled and asked, “And now what, my little man?” To which the boy replied, “Now we run!”¹

The reason I find this story so funny is because I did plenty of this when I was a little boy. In fact, I performed these antics into my teenage years (just kidding!). Obviously, this prank contains elements of adrenalin, deceit, and fear. Fortunately, the consequences are usually minimal...at least for me they were. Other acts of deceit can have great consequences. In Genesis 31, Jacob and Rachel are guilty of exercising deceit and fear, yet through it all, God shows Himself faithful, despite their shortcomings.

Our story begins in 31:1-2: “**Now Jacob heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, ‘Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and from what belonged to our father he has made all this wealth.’ Jacob saw the attitude of Laban, and behold, it was not friendly toward him as formerly.**” Both Laban and his sons were unhappy with Jacob's success. Essentially, Laban's sons were accusing Jacob of stealing their inheritance. And from their perspective, it was disappearing right before their very eyes. As a result, they became envious and bitter toward Jacob. Laban also treated Jacob differently. Six years earlier, Laban was willing to pay any price to have Jacob stay and care for his flocks (30:28, 31). But now Laban's attitude was quickly changing.

God's blessings upon a believer can illicit one of two responses in those around them: a hunger for God or an ungodly envy. Sadly, when a Christian experiences blessings, it is often common for other believers to become envious (Prov 14:30; Jas 4:1-3). When a church experiences numerical growth, other churches can become envious and critical of that church. This should not be! In Rom 12:15a, Paul tells us to “Rejoice with those who rejoice.” We should always seek to celebrate the success of others. As we learn to do this, God is pleased and we remain spiritually healthy.

In 31:3, the LORD said to Jacob, “**Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.**” The last recorded revelation that Jacob had received from God was 20 years earlier, while he was still in the land of promise (28:10-22). But now Jacob receives a divine directive to return to the Promised Land (cf. 28:15). He was directed and assured by God. This was an impressive revelation. Yet, we must remember that there was a 20-year gap. Although many of the events we read about in the OT are captivating and miraculous, the truth is, we live in the most exciting days this world has ever seen. The primary reason for this is that we have all 66 books of the Bible. This is God's full revelation to man and He will reveal Himself through His Word whenever we will take the time to listen. Will you do so today?

In 31:4-13, Jacob laid out the facts to Rachel and Leah about Laban and God's divine providence. First, he describes the tension with Laban. “**So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to his flock in the field, and said to them, ‘I see your father's attitude, that it is not friendly toward me as formerly, but the God of my father has been with me. You know that I have served your father with all my strength. Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times’**” (31:4-7a). Obviously, this is an unhealthy work environment. Yet, Jacob sought to persevere and honor God (1 Pet 2:18-23). You may be in a difficult situation with your boss—God would have you honor him or her and seek to endure until He brings about a change in your environment.

Fortunately, despite Jacob's challenges, God proved Himself faithful. In 31:7b-13, Jacob testifies: **"However, God did not allow him to hurt me. If he spoke thus, 'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flock brought forth speckled; and if he spoke thus, 'The striped shall be your wages,' then all the flock brought forth striped. Thus God has taken away your father's livestock and given them to me. And it came about at the time when the flock were mating that I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream, and behold, the male goats which were mating were striped, speckled, and mottled. Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Lift up now your eyes and see that all the male goats which are mating are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. 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.'"** Jacob was the kind of guy who follows you into a revolving door and comes out ahead of you. But it wasn't his own scheming that brought him prosperity and protection. It was the blessing of God! Psalm 118:6 "The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (NIV) It is also worth noting that God told Jacob to go back to Bethel, back to the place where he first encountered the Lord in a personal way. Sometimes the way forward is to go back! (See Rev 2:4-5)

In 31:14-16, we see that Rachel and Leah agreed with Jacob's assessment. The sisters said to him, **"Do we still have any portion or inheritance in our father's house? Are we not reckoned by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and has also entirely consumed our purchase price. Surely all the wealth which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and our children; now then, do whatever God has said to you."** Seven times in 31:4-16, Jacob and his wives mention God by name.² Clearly, He is the One that is behind every scene. This may be the first time in quite a while when the sisters Leah and Rachel agreed on anything. They can agree in uniting against a common adversary: their father, Laban! Why? Because Laban had stolen their inheritance, treated them like foreigners, sold them, and used up the money from their dowry. They submitted themselves to Jacob's leadership. The sisters responded with these words: **"Do whatever God has said to you."** By their submission, they were ultimately coming under the safety net of God's leadership and authority. Men, we need to be hearing from God. And women need to submit to their husbands, as to the Lord (Eph 5:22).

In 31:17-18, Moses writes, **"Then Jacob arose and put his children and his wives upon camels; 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."** It was nearly 300 miles from Haran to the mountains of Gilead. The journey must have been exhausting for Jacob, knowing that Laban might be pursuing him from behind in order to kill him, and Esau, his brother, might be waiting ahead, also in order to kill him. Talk about between a rock and a hard place.

In 31:19-21, Jacob and Rachel deceived Laban in their departure. **"When Laban had gone to shear his flock, then Rachel stole the household idols that were her father's. And Jacob deceived [lit. "stole the heart of"] Laban the Aramean by not telling him that he was fleeing. 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."** Rachel stole Laban's household idols while Laban was busy at work shearing his sheep. These "idols" (*teraphim*) were small figurines (two to three inches long) used in divination and to bring good luck.³ The question is: "Why did Rachel take these idols?" There are several possibilities: (1) To guarantee fertility.⁴ (2) For divination and protection during the journey to Canaan, possibly to prevent Laban from using them to catch them (cf. 30:27). (3) In order to establish a future claim on Laban's family inheritance.⁵ While we cannot be sure of the exact reason, it seems likely that Rachel simply took them for her own protection and blessing.⁶ This is confirmed in 35:2 when God commanded Jacob to "get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves." It seems more than likely that Rachel may well have been attached religiously to these false gods as she left her father's house.⁷

It is curious that Rachel, and not Leah, almost always turned out to be Jacob's greatest hindrance in life. In spite of the fact that Rachel had a growing trust in God, she was reluctant to make a complete break from her idolatrous past. We aren't really any different. We may not be putting our trust in idols, but we still struggle at times with putting our full confidence in God and His Word.

Jacob left without informing Laban. Jacob was doing God's will by returning to the land of promise, but he was not doing it in God's way. He was acting in the flesh rather than being led by the Spirit. We can get so caught up in *doing* God's will that we forget to ask *how* we are to do God's will. Our methods must always be consistent with God's Word if our actions are to be honoring to God and rewarded by God (cf. Heb 11:6). Jacob was afraid of Laban when he should have been afraid of God. Proverbs 29:25 says, "The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted." Who are you afraid of today? What circumstances are causing you anxiety? God wants you to release this to Him.

Our story continues with a confrontation between Laban and Jacob (31:22-55). In 31:22-24, Moses writes: **"When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, 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. 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.'"** Catching up with Jacob was not so easy; he had a three-day head start. It took Laban and his men seven days to finally overtake Jacob. But before he did, the Lord appeared to Laban in a dream and warned him **"not speak to Jacob either good or bad."** This is rather astonishing! God Himself appeared to Laban, a wicked unbeliever, and provided him counsel and direction (31:29; cf. Abimelech in 20:3). Indeed, God is a gracious and sovereign God.

In 31:25-42, the tension builds to a high point. Moses writes, **"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. Then Laban said to Jacob, 'What have you done by deceiving me and carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword? [Laban accuses Jacob of deceiving him. If this isn't the pot calling the kettle black!] 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; and did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters? Now you have done foolishly. 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.' Now you have indeed gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods?'"** Laban plays the part of the offended father and grandfather whose deep affection for his daughters and grandchildren caused him great emotional pain when he found they had secretly left without any good-byes. Then he really overplays his hand when he says that if he'd only known, he would have thrown a big going-away party. Right! Of course the big issue with Laban is, **"Why did you steal my gods?"** As par for the course, Laban is concerned about himself, his wealth, and his false gods.

In 31:31-42, Jacob responds to Laban: I left town... **'because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. 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. 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. 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. 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." Now I've heard of having someone under your thumb, but under your seat??? Rachel was sitting on Laban's gods!

What a comical indictment against idolatry! The idols were already nothing gods, but they became unclean and suffered humiliation when Rachel, who claimed to be unclean, sat on them while menstruating (31:34-35; cf. Lev 15:20).⁸

After the search comes up empty, Jacob unleashes 20 years of pent-up frustration. Beginning in 31:36: **“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? 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. 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. 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.’⁹ Thus I was: by day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. 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. 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.”** In this section (31:31-42), Jacob shows himself to be a faithful man.

- *Jacob defended his integrity* (31:31-37). In response to Laban’s accusations, Jacob asked: **“What is my transgression? What is my sin?”** He had confidence that he was above reproach in his integrity. This is reminiscent of 1 Peter 2:12: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”
- *Jacob defended his character* (31:38-41). (1) He served Laban for 20 years (cf. Col 3:22-24). (2) He was a source of blessing to Laban’s flocks. (3) He bore the cost of lost or stolen animals. It was customary for a shepherd to bring the carcass of a sheep to the owner as proof that the animal was actually killed by wild animals. Having provided proof, the shepherd would be freed from personal responsibility for the loss. But Jacob says he didn’t even do this. Instead, he went the extra mile—he replaced any lost or stolen animals from his own flock. Jacob was the model worker. He took care of the sheep, absorbed losses, and withstood terrible weather. Notice something here: Laban does not disagree with Jacob. He can’t argue with the integrity and example of Jacob’s life (cf. Titus 2:9-10). (4) He more than paid for his wives and flocks: 14 years for Leah and Rachel and 6 years for the flocks. Jacob was a man of integrity and character. Even in difficult, unfair, and trying times he faithfully kept his word. He did his best in whatever he had to do. And God was pleased.
- *Jacob testified to the sovereignty of God* (31:42). (1) God protected Jacob from Laban. (2) God saw Jacob’s hardship and hard work (cf. 2 Chron 16:9). (3) God rebuked Laban in a dream. Jacob’s words in 31:42 summarize his whole life in Haran: God has been especially gracious and sovereign.

God often sends difficult people to us who have the peculiar gift of bringing out the worst in us. Those difficult people force us to come to grips with our hidden weaknesses. Jacob had lived his life relying on trickery and deceit to get what he wanted. Uncle Laban turned the tables on Jacob, forcing him to take a dose of his own medicine. After Haran, Jacob would at least think twice before cheating someone else. He now knows how Esau felt.¹⁰ God is now ready to use Jacob’s life in a greater fashion.

Our story concludes in 31:43-55: **“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? So now come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.’ Then Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar.¹¹ Jacob said to his kinsmen, ‘Gather stones.’ So they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. Now Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. [Galeed (“witness heap”) is the name from which Gilead came.] Laban said, ‘This heap is a witness between you and me this day.’ Therefore it was named Galeed, and Mizpah [“The witness or watchtower”], for he said, ‘May the LORD watch between you and me when we are absent one from the other. 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.’ [It is impossible to avoid noticing the curious misconception of the term “mizpah” which characterizes its use today. As used for a motto on rings, Christmas cards, and even as the title of an organization, it is interpreted to mean union, trust, fellowship; while its original meaning was that of separation, distrust, and warning. Two men, neither of whom trusted the other, said in effect: “I cannot trust you out of my sight. The Lord must be the watchman between us if we and our goods are to be kept safe from each other.”] Laban said to Jacob, ‘Behold this heap and behold the pillar which I have set between you and me. 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. 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. [Laban had two deities in mind when he said “The God of Abraham and the god of Nahor,” as the Hebrew plural verb translated “judge” indicates. Jacob swore by the “fear of his father Isaac,” which indicates that he was worshipping the God of his fathers. Laban swore by the pagan god his fathers worshipped.] 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. Early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place.”**

The long and stormy relationship between Laban and Jacob had finally come to an end! This is the last mention of Laban we have in the Bible. Laban is an unfortunate example of a worldly, covetous man—one who knows about the true God. He had seen the reality of God in the life of Jacob, along with the power of God in His blessing and protection of Jacob. He himself had even enjoyed many of the blessings of God, through his relationship to Jacob. In spite of all this, he chose to continue in his idolatry and self-centered, self-absorbed lifestyle. Rather than seeking to follow the truth of God’s plan, as witnessed by Jacob, he merely resented and coveted the blessing of God on Jacob. In his vigorous pursuit of worldly success, he lost his family, his wealth, and his hope of eternal life in Christ. He chose poorly!¹²

In a study in Cleveland, Ohio, coroners examined the hearts of 15 assault victims who died after being attacked, even though their wounds were not life threatening. Charles Hirsch, one of the researchers, concluded that 11 of the 15 victims had torn fibers and lesions in their hearts, most likely caused by mortal fear. They died because of what they feared might happen, but didn’t.

That study proved that “scared to death” is more than a casual expression. If fear can put a stop to life, think what else it can put a stop to. It can cancel out opportunities that God sets before us. God opens a door in front of us and we freeze—we’re afraid to walk through. We are afraid of being alone, afraid we’ll have no resources, and afraid we’ll look foolish when we fail. But even if we do fail, God has promised to cause even our failures to be for our good. When God promises to be with us wherever we go, there should be no fear that keeps us from walking through His open doors. Is there an open door that you’re afraid to walk through? Don’t be. Trust God—you have nothing to fear with Him by your side.¹³

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Notes

¹ Preaching Now Vol. 4 No. 34 10/11/05.

² See also R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 390.

³ In Deuteronomy 27:15 Moses provides this warning: “‘Cursed is the man who makes an idol or a molten image, an abomination to the LORD, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and sets it up in secret.’ And all the people shall answer and say, ‘Amen.’”

⁴ Harry A. Hoffner Jr., “The Linguistic Origins of Teraphim,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July-September 1967): 230-238.

⁵ The significance of these images has been debated for the last three decades. Ever since the Nuzi documents with an adoption contract were found, it has been popular to link them with rights to the family inheritance or the will. The text from Nuzi stipulates, “If Nashwi has a son of his own, he shall divide [the estate] equally with Wullu, but the son of Nashwi shall take the gods of Nashwi. However, if Nashwi does not have a son of his own, then Wullu shall take the gods of Nashwi.” The thought that possession of the household gods somehow was connected with a legal claim to the inheritance has had general acceptance previously, but now is not as firmly held as it once was. See Cyrus H. Gordon, “Biblical Customs and the Nuzi Tablets,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 3 (1940): 6. Gordon was the strongest advocate of this position.

⁶ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Vol. 2: WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 273.

⁷ Walter C. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997 [1996]), Electronic ed.

⁸ This time both almost bring ruin on the family by their risk taking: she by her rash theft, he by his rash vow ([31:32] cf. his sons’ rash vow in 44:6-12). Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 430.

⁹ Under traditional ancient Near Eastern law, a shepherd was not held responsible for losses to his master’s flocks due to attacking wild beasts and, in some cases, thieves. Yet Jacob had borne these losses (31:39). Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 277.

¹⁰ Ray Pritchard, *God’s Catfish: Genesis 29-31*: <http://www.calvarymemorial.com/sermons/SMdisplay.asp?id=332>

¹¹ They may have erected the heap of stones (Heb. *gal*, cairn, 31:46) both as a table for the meal and as a memorial of the event. Standing stones sometimes marked supposed dwelling places of the gods (cf. 28:17-18), and cairns often marked graves (cf. Josh. 7:26; 8:29; 2 Sam. 18:17). Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Genesis* (<http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdf>, 2005), 210.

¹² Bob Hallman, “Choose This Day ...” (Genesis 31:1-55) http://www3.calvarychapel.com/kauai/teachings/genesis_pdf/gen_31_notes.pdf

¹³ David Jeremiah, *Turning Point Daily Devotional* (12-9-05) taken from Preaching Now (1-3-06): Preaching in a New Year Vol 5. No. 1.