

Genesis 30:25-31:55
Psalm 124
1 Corinthians 10:1-22

“Flee from Idolatry”

October 25, 2009

Genesis tells the story of Jacob for people who are supposed to remember the exodus.
If you lived through the exodus from Egypt,
then you would hear the story of Jacob fleeing Laban
as a reminder of how Israel fled from Pharaoh.

Obviously the stories are very different:
Jacob is fleeing from his uncle Laban, who is also his father-in-law.
Moses may have been raised in Pharaoh’s house,
but there is no kinship between them.

But both Jacob and Israel are enslaved by their benefactors,
both then plunder their captors,
both are chased into the wilderness.

As such Psalm 124 is a fitting response –
both for Jacob at the end of Genesis 31
and for Israel on the other side of the Red Sea,
and, as our NT lesson from 1 Corinthians 10 will show,
it is also a fitting response for us,
who have passed through the waters of baptism
and have escaped the snare of the fowlers.

And all of this is true for us
because it was first true for Jesus.
He has escaped the snare of death,
being set free from the power of death
because it was not possible for death to hold him!

And so let us sing Psalm 124 as those who have been set free in Christ!
Psalm 124
1 Corinthians 10:1-22

Flee from idolatry.
This is the central theme of our passage in Genesis.
It also is Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians,
as he urges them to turn away from the idolatrous meals of their day,
to the Lord’s Table – the participation in the sacrifice of Christ.

What is it that competes for the attention of your heart?
Tonight we will be looking at Jesus’ teaching
on what it means to love the Lord our God with *all* our heart.
If you are to love God with *all* your heart,

that means that if there is *anything* in which you are not loving God,
that is an idol –
that is competing with Christ as an object of your allegiance.

Flee from idolatry means flee to Jesus.

And Paul reminds us that we have a tangible, physical expression of this in the Lord's Supper.

Genesis 25-35 is the book of the Generations of Isaac.

And in these chapters we are seeing how the narrative is designed to show us,
how the blessing of Abraham comes to Jacob.

We have come to the central story of the Generations of Isaac:

the birth of the Patriarchs – in the context of Jacob's struggles with Laban.

God had promised Jacob at Bethel that the blessing of Abraham would come to him.

And now in our passage today God renews that promise,
and calls Jacob to return to the land – and to his kindred.

A Birth of Esau and Jacob (25:19-34)

B Blessing of Isaac (26:1-5)

C Rebekah in a foreign palace – pact with foreigners (26:1-35)

D Jacob Steals Esau's Blessing (27:1-28:9)

E Jacob into Exile: God's Promise (28:10-22)

F Conflict with Laban: Rachel and Leah (29:1-30)

G The Birth of the Patriarchs (29:31-30:24)

F' Conflict with Laban: Prosperity/Flight (30:25-31:55)

E' Jacob Returning: God's Blessing (32:1-32)

D' Esau Reconciles with Jacob (33:1-17)

C' Dinah in a Foreign Palace – pact with foreigners (33:18-34:31)

B' Blessing of Jacob (35:1-15)

A' Birth of Benjamin – Deaths of Rachel and Isaac (35:16-29)

1. Jacob Outwits Laban (30:25-43)

25 As soon as Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country. 26 Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, that I may go, for you know the service that I have given you."

Back in 29:21 Jacob had announced that the seven years were complete
and had requested his payment –

"give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed."

Now Jacob declares that the second seven years are complete.

"Give me my wives and children for whom I have served you, that I may go."

Why does Jacob have to ask?

Why doesn't he just leave?

Because Jacob is no better than a slave.

When Abraham's servant had won the hand of Rebekah for Isaac,

he had brought lavish presents which “paid” for her.
But Jacob came empty-handed and rather than treat him as a kinsman,
Laban has treated him as a slave,
and Jacob has had to work for Leah and Rachel.
The fourteen years are now up,
and Jacob now wishes to return to Canaan –
but he acknowledges that Laban remains in charge.

A Babylonian slave who “marries up” as it were,
only has right to his wives and children so long as he remains with his master.

(The same is true in the Mosaic law:

Exodus 21:2 says,

“When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years,
and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing.

If comes in single, he shall go out single;

if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him.

If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters,

the wife and her children shall be her master’s, and he shall go out alone.”)

Jacob is a kinsman, and so *should* be treated better than this,
but Jacob seems to recognize that Laban is treating him as a slave,
after all, he can only take his wives and children if Laban agrees to let them go.

And three times in verse 26 Jacob refers to his status as a slave –
the same word that will be used to refer to Israel’s servitude in Egypt.

And like Pharaoh,

Laban does not want to let Jacob go...

27 But Laban said to him, “If I have found favor in your sight, I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you. 28 Name your wages, and I will give it.”

We are not impressed that Laban had to use divination
to figure out that Jacob’s presence brought blessings.

God had said to Jacob what he had said to Abraham,

“Those who bless you will be blessed.”

Laban (in spite of his trickery) *has* blessed Jacob with wives and children,
and so God has blessed him.

But as soon as you hear Laban saying, “Name your wages”

you remember that 14 years before he had said the same thing.

Laban is at his old tricks again!

29 Jacob said to him, “You yourself know how I have served you, and how your livestock has fared with me. 30 For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly, and the

Lord has blessed you wherever I turned. But now when shall I provide for my own household also?” 31 He said, “What shall I give you?”

From Babylonian herding contracts we know that a shepherd was often given 20% of the flock.
Abnormally colored sheep and goats are usually a much smaller percentage than this.
But a 20% wage would take a long time to pay out,
and Jacob has no intention of waiting.

Jacob said, “You shall not give me anything. If you will do this for me, I will again pasture your flock and keep it: 32 let me pass through all your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats, and they shall be my wages. 33 So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come to look into my wages with you. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen.” 34 Laban said, “Good! Let it be as you have said.”

Laban thinks that he has a great deal here –
and what is more, Laban deals deceitfully with Jacob from the start, as we see in verse 35.

35 But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it, and every lamb that was black, and put them in the charge of his sons. 36 And he set a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob pastured the rest of Laban's flock.

Jacob was supposed to have a starter flock of spotted and speckled,
but Laban removes them three days away.

37 Then Jacob took fresh sticks of poplar and almond and plane trees, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the sticks.

The word for “white” in Hebrew is “laban.”

Remember Jacob and Esau (whose other name is Edom)?

Edom means “red.”

You may remember that Jacob took Red’s birthright by red stew.

Now he takes White’s flocks by white sticks.

38 He set the sticks that he had peeled in front of the flocks in the troughs, that is, the watering places, where the flocks came to drink. And since they bred when they came to drink, 39 the flocks bred in front of the sticks and so the flocks brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted. 40 And Jacob separated the lambs and set the faces of the flocks toward the striped and all the black in the flock of Laban. He put his own droves apart and did not put them with Laban's flock. 41 Whenever the stronger of the flock were breeding, Jacob would lay the sticks in the troughs before the eyes of the flock, that they might breed among the sticks, 42 but for the feebler of the flock he would not lay them there. So the feebler would be Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's.

43 Thus the man increased greatly and had large flocks, female servants and male servants, and camels and donkeys.

Modern commentators seem to think that Jacob is acting deceptively in this,
but that is not the way that Genesis portrays this.

There is nothing deceptive or magical about this.
Jacob is practicing selective breeding,
and (like Leah and Rachel with the mandrakes)
is doing his best to further his wealth and outward estate
according to the best knowledge he has.
Jacob believes God and puts his faith into practice.

It may be that there is no scientific evidence that demonstrates
that these rods would have the slightest effect on the offspring of the flocks.

So what?

If you think that it is good science that brings about the blessing of God,
you obviously have not been paying attention to what has happened in the last century!

Sure, science has enabled us to live longer –
but our obsession with living longer
appears to be on the brink of destroying our economy!
We have incredible technologies that enable us to do things that no one ever dreamed of –
and yet we have become proud and haughty
and we claim that we don't need God.

Flee from idolatry!
The temptation to put your trust in modern science and technology is great.

But notice the difference with Jacob.
Jacob uses the best technology he has –
but he uses it in dependence upon the living God,
trusting that God will do what he has promised.

As we hear in part two of our narrative today,
Jacob is acting on the promises of God.
God has promised that he will be *with* Jacob.
Now, when you hear that God will be with you,
how do you respond?
Do you respond with “let go and let God!”?
No!
When you hear that God will be with you,
that gives you confidence to go forth and do your best –
knowing that your best is *not* what will accomplish God's purposes!

Rather, God will accomplish his purposes –
and ordinarily he will use outward and ordinary means to do this.
Yes, God can work *in spite of* the failings of his people;
but the *ordinary* pattern is that he uses the obedience of his people.

Israel's rebellion in the wilderness did not thwart God's purposes!
But it was only when Joshua obeyed,
that Israel received the promised inheritance.

So by all means, take advantage of the best of modern science –
but do not forget the promises of God:
those who bless the seed of Abraham will be blessed –
and those who curse the seed of Abraham will be cursed.

And that is just as true today as it was for Laban!

2. Jacob Flees Laban (31:1-55)

a. The LORD Calls Jacob to Return to the Land (31:1-3)

31:1 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.

You can, perhaps, sympathize with Laban's sons.

Their cousin Jacob shows up and takes their father's flocks
and over 14 years multiplies them beyond all expectation.

They start getting used to the idea that *they* are going to benefit from cousin Jacob's work.
But now it seems that all the flocks are winding up in Jacob's hands.

3 Then the Lord said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you."

This is what God had said at Bethel.

God had told Jacob that he would be with him,
and now he says that he will be with him as he returns to the land.

b. The God of Bethel Fulfills His Word (31:4-16)

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.'"

Jacob calls his wives and tells them that the God of Bethel has appeared to him and has called him to return to the land of his kindred.

Their response is interesting:

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."

Laban treated his daughters like foreigners – selling them to Jacob, whom he essentially enslaved.

And yet God has blessed Jacob, and so they confess their faith in Jacob's God.

Rachel and Leah do as Paul urges:
they are prepared to flee from idolatry.

And in keeping with the Exodus theme that we have been watching,
the word for "take away" in v16 is translated "plunder" in Ex 12:36.
So you could say that "all the wealth that God has plundered from our father"
now belongs to Leah and Rachel and their children.

Leah and Rachel recognize that their father has used them for his own advantage –
but that his plans have backfired –
and so they now join wholeheartedly in Jacob's attempt to steal away
back to the Promised Land.

c. Jacob Steals Away (31:17-24)

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.

This is where it gets interesting!

"Household gods" were the images of gods or ancestors
that were supposed to provide blessing and protection to a home.
They were ordinarily left to the eldest son
as a symbol of how he would maintain the name of his fathers.

If Rachel believes in Jacob's God, then why does she take Laban's household gods?
The text provides us with no access to Rachel's thinking on this subject,
so I will not speculate as to what Rachel was thinking.

What we are given is the text.
And the text presents verses 19-20 in parallel.

The word for steal in verse 19 is the same as verse 20 –
Rachel steals Laban's household gods.
Jacob steals Laban's heart.
[also in verses 26-27]

20 And Jacob stole the heart of Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee.
To understand this you need to know that there is another pun here.

The word for heart is "leb"
He stole the "leb" of Laban.

The "leb" – the "heart" is what makes you what you are.
Jacob has stolen Laban's identity.
And this is more literally true than you may realize:
he has "stolen" Laban's daughters and his grandchildren – and his flocks.

Jacob is walking away with everything that matters to Laban.

And Rachel compounds it by taking his household gods.
There may be some ambivalence in her motivation (we don't know).
But the point is that Jacob and his wives are plundering Laban,
even as Israel will plunder Egypt.

If you want to understand this in terms of the text,
then think in terms of what Rachel has said about her father:
"he regards us as foreigners."
He sold us!

In those days marriage was always a financial deal.
But the way that Laban treated them – and Jacob – was an insult.
Treating his nephew (and son-in-law) as a slave only demeans his daughters as well.

And so
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."

Literally the phrase "either good or bad"

reads “from the good to the bad.”

The idea here is not that Laban may not say anything at all –
neither does it mean (as the English might suggest)
that Laban is wrong for blessing Jacob’s family (v55)!

Rather, it means “make sure that your conversation with Jacob does not go from good to bad!”
Notice that the result is true!
Laban starts out very poorly – and the conversation goes from bad to good!

d. The Fear of Isaac and the Gods of Laban (31:25-42)

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 [plural] 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?”

Laban starts with all sorts of accusations:

you stole my heart (tricked me)
you drove away my daughters
(he probably doesn’t realize that his daughters are on Jacob’s side!)
you have acted foolishly
and you have stolen my gods.

Notice that Laban’s list starts and ends with the two “thefts”
You stole my heart and you stole my household 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.

Laban says that Jacob has taken his daughters captive,
but Jacob says that he feared that Laban would do the same to him!
Jacob understood that in Paddan-Aram, Laban was legally able to force him to stay.

But Jacob calls the kinsmen to witness that he has taken nothing that rightly belongs to Laban.

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.

Some have suggested that Jacob’s curse lands on Rachel.
After all, she had taken the household gods, and so she deserved to die.
And of course, Rachel *does* die first of all Jacob’s household.

But Jacob's curse is *not* that whoever has taken the household gods shall die,
it is whoever Laban *finds* with the household gods.

It would be better to see the parallel with what Joseph does decades later.
Joseph will send his brothers home with grain,
but he will put his golden cup in Benjamin's bag.
The sons of Rachel will replay their mother's ruse.

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.

The fact that she is menstruating on top of Laban's household gods
is hardly in keeping with the idea that she valued them highly.
His household gods have the value of a sanitary napkin!
Whatever Rachel's motives may have been,
her actions indicate a fundamental rejection of everything her father stands for.

And while we would not normally consider that a noble thing in a child,
you have to remember who Laban is!

He is an idolater.

And Rachel is fleeing idolatry.
She is fleeing to the promised land – returning home with her husband –
the Seed of the Woman and the Seed of Abraham.

There is good reason for why the early Fathers saw in Leah and Rachel a picture of the church.
If Jacob is the Seed of the Woman, the Seed of Abraham,
the one who has passed through the exile of death outside the land,
and is now being raised up to his father's land,
then Rachel is indeed the bride of the Son of God.

And we, like Rachel, should consider the household gods –
the economic idols of our day –
to have the value of a sanitary napkin!
Recall that Jesus once said that the devil was "the father" of the wicked.
Our old father, the devil, comes charging after us, seeking to bring us back to his service.
We need to have the same confidence as Rachel
to remain seated, letting the blood of our uncleanness
flow out over the idols we once served!

So Laban has leveled various accusations against Jacob,
but none of them stick.

36 Then Jacob became angry and berated Laban.

“Berate” is probably not the best term here.

The word “rib” refers to a legal quarrel or dispute.

Since Laban’s accusations have proven false
(or at least he can find no evidence for them),
Jacob responds by bringing his own case against Laban.

Indeed, Jacob calls the kinsmen as witnesses in his “rib” against 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.*

And Jacob reminds Laban (and the kinsmen) of all that has happened:

*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.*

Such is the life of the shepherd.

When Jesus called Peter to “feed my sheep”
he was calling him to such a life.

Jacob is claiming to be the Good Shepherd who cared for the sheep.

Our Lord Jesus will use the same image for himself.
He is the Good Shepherd who has cared for us in this way.

*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.”*

This episode is the only place where God is called the “Fear of Isaac.”

Why does Jacob refer to God this way?

Well, what has God done?

He has put fear into Laban.

The God of Abraham is the one who is to be feared,
because he is able to do what he promises.

And now the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac has seen my affliction.

The only other times this phrase “to see affliction” is used is in Ex 3:7 and Dt 26:7 – both of which refer to God seeing the affliction of Israel in Egypt.

God has spoken now to Laban –

as he will later speak to Pharaoh through Moses –
and now Laban will let Jacob go.

e. The Covenant of Witness (31:43-55)

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.”

Laban finally acknowledges that he has lost the “rib” –
he has lost the dispute.

He still claims the daughters, children, and flocks,
but he admits that they are out of his hands.

He will not fight against the God of Abraham, the Fear of Isaac.
And so he proposes making a covenant – a treaty.

This is an interesting moment.

Until this day Laban had hoped to keep Jacob as his slave,
but now Laban has been convinced by the Fear of Isaac
to accept Jacob as his equal.

He recognizes that the God of Abraham is with Jacob,
and so he wants to have Jacob on his side in a fight.

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, [heap of witness] but Jacob called it Galeed [heap of witness]. 48 Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me today.” Therefore he named it Galeed, 49 and Mizpah, [watchpost] 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.”

This covenant arrangement recognizes Jacob as an equal with Laban.

The verb “judge” is plural – indicating that Laban is thinking of at least two different gods.
The God of Abraham and the god of Nahor are not the same god.
Laban will not fight against the God of Abraham –
but neither will he renounce his own gods.
He will not flee idolatry –
rather, he will do it like a dog to its vomit.

Beware, my beloved!
It is not enough to acknowledge that the God of Abraham is God.
You must also renounce all other gods.

You must flee from idolatry.
And yes, it is true: we share some ambiguous motives with Rachel.
If we are honest with ourselves, even our worship of the true God
is tainted with our selfishness.

But that is why Paul says that no temptation has seized you except what is common to man.
And God will provide you with the way of escape
as he provided Jacob:

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.

Jacob hosts the covenant meal with his kinsmen.
Notice that Jacob’s sacrifice is not the polytheistic observance of Laban.
He swore by the Fear of his father Isaac.

Jacob has fled from idolatry and now offers sacrifices to the God of Abraham alone.

55 Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned home.

Paul says that those who eat the sacrifices are participants in the altar.
Hebrews 13:10 says that we have an altar
from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat.
Jesus suffered outside the gate
and offered the once-for-all sacrifice of his blood in the heavens.
And he has offered his own body and blood to us that we might partake of that sacrifice.

Flee from idolatry.
Flee to Jesus.
Flee outside the camp of the cities of this age –
flee to the heavenly altar where Jesus offered this sacrifice.
And through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God,
that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name!