

Jacob vs Laban, Part Two

- Genesis 31:17-55
- We saw last week that God spoke to Jacob, telling him to go back to the land of his fathers, and “I will be with you,” God said. Jacob gathers his family and everything that belonged to him, taking nothing *himself* that belonged to Laban, and the whole family rode away on camels, with a multitude of Jacob’s livestock following along. But there are two steals in his leaving. First, we are told that Rachel stole her father’s household idols, or “teraphim.” Why would she do that? It is possible she worshiped them herself. Or since they were sometimes used as deeds to property, she thought she would be taking away any possible inheritance Laban’s other children might receive. On a slightly more positive note, maybe she took them because she didn’t want Laban to be able to use the idols to divine information to catch them. Or she may have taken them just to punish her father for the way he had treated Jacob. Or finally, maybe she took them because they were made of precious metal and were worth something. For whatever reason, Rachel stole them, and it leads to a potentially deadly encounter. In fact, would Laban have pursued if they had not been stolen?
- The other steal is more subtle. Verse 20 says Jacob “tricked” Laban and left without telling him, but the word can mean he stole Laban’s heart. Why did Jacob steal away in the night? Laban asks him that when he catches up to him and Jacob says, “Because I was afraid.” At least Jacob owned it, but he could have said, “Because God has seen what you were doing and the Lord told me to go back home.” Donald Barnhouse wrote, “He could have announced his departure and gone in the glory of an army with banners. But fear made it impossible to reap the full measure of blessing. He sneaked away into the will of God instead of departing in triumph.” Saints, listen. Fear steals blessings! Let’s look at this story under three main points: Laban’s reproach, Jacob’s response, and Pillar of Separation.
- **Laban’s Reproach (verses 22-35)**
- Laban got word that Jacob had left three days earlier and so he took a posse of his kinsmen after them. What is our clue that Laban had evil intent toward his son-in-law and that he wasn’t hustling after him so he could give him and his daughters and grandchildren parting gifts and a big old sloppy kiss goodbye? The fact that God appeared to Laban in a dream, just as he had done with Abimilech in chapter 20 when he said to him, “Abimilech, you’re a dead man because of the woman you have taken.” God appears to Laban in a dream and tells him not to say anything good or bad to Jacob. From which we could infer and Laban certainly did, that God meant for him to do *nothing* to harm Jacob.
- I guess Laban didn’t count lies as anything bad. Count the lies of Laban, which is a good name for a bad band. 1. (26) You have driven away my daughters like captives of the sword. No, they went freely and gladly. 2. (27) We would have sent you away with a celebration! Really? You would have celebrated the departure of your source of blessing and income? 3. It is in my power to do you harm. Well, theoretically, yes, but spiritually, not a chance. God warned you, Laban. 4. (30) You stole my gods. No, that was your daughter.
- Jacob says whoever stole his gods should die, not knowing what Rachel had done, so Laban tears the camp apart looking for them. He started with Jacob’s tent, then Leah’s, then Bilhah’s and Zilpah’s, and finally Rachel’s. His second daughter was skilled in deceit, just like her father, and maybe she had picked up some tips from her husband. Children learn what they live with, and she had learned well. She is able to compound her theft with a lie about why she was sitting on a camel saddle, right on top of the household gods that were hidden in it. And as a side note, if these gods had any power at all, couldn’t they have alerted Laban where they were? I mean, if you can cover up a god and hide it and render it powerless, how much of a god is it, really?
- Laban’s search comes up empty, which leads us to...
- **Jacob’s response (verses 36-42)**

- You have heard the old story of the man who says to the counselor, “Every time my wife and I have a fight, she gets historical.” The counselor says, “You mean she gets hysterical?” He says, “No, historical. She tells me every single thing I have ever done wrong.” Well, Jacob gets historical here. He goes off on Laban. It may be a speech he has practiced for the past 20 years, and he lets Laban have it. Have you ever done that? Rehearsed a speech you are going to give to *that* person if you ever get the chance? That’s not a recipe for finding personal peace. It just makes us that much more angry, or bitter. But in this case, Jacob is speaking the truth of his work record for Laban and about Laban’s mistreatment. Look at his argument. 1- Twenty years of faithful labor. Jacob had integrity in his work. 2- No miscarriages. Jacob cared about the success of Laban’s flocks. 3- I have not eaten your rams. (I guess it would be pretty simple to have lambchops regularly and tell your boss the wolves got another one!) Jacob didn’t make his meals tastier at Laban’s expense. 4- Every torn carcass I have brought to you and replaced from my own herd. (It was customary at that time for a shepherd to bring the carcass to his employer to show his bravery in not allowing the wolf to devour it or take it away, thus excusing himself for losing one of the flock). 5- I suffered the heat and the cold and the loss of sleep that comes with the job. (Jacob sacrificed for Laban’s success). Derek Kidner wrote of this list, “The tale of hardships is an astringent corrective to romantic ideas of the biblical shepherd. This, and nothing idyllic, is the pastor’s calling (I would add ,”or the elders’ calling.”) 6- You changed my wages ten times. (Ten was a round number not an exact number. It means that Jacob suffered repeated unfairness from his father-in-law.) 7- If it were not for God’s protection, I would have nothing, for you would have come to take away everything that belongs to me. (It is a good thing that Jacob recognized the power of God at work but notice that he is grateful for the God of his father, the God of Abraham, and the Fear of Isaac, but never once says, “My God.”) He is still more a borrower than an owner of his faith. That will change after the wrestling match at Peniel.
- Laban then responds with more lies when he says the daughters and the children and the flocks and “all that you see is mine.” Come on, Laban! Don’t you get it yet, that God is the source of everything you have and that God’s blessing on Jacob has made you a wealthy man? And if Laban were here, he would still argue and say, “No, this is mine. This is all me.” Henry Morris wrote, “Rather than seeking to follow the truth of God’s plan as witnessed by Jacob, Laban merely resented and coveted the blessing of God on Jacob. He finally ended up with neither. His life constitutes a sober warning to a great host of semireligious but fundamentally self-worshipping and self-seeking men and women today.”
- That leads us to...
- **Pillar of Separation (verses 44-55)**
- Laban says, “Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I.” It is interesting that Laban felt he needed protection from Jacob ever coming back to Paddan-Aram and doing him harm, or harming Laban’s daughters or taking on other wives. Jacob had no intention of ever going back there or doing harm to his wives. If there was protection needed for anyone, it was protection for Jacob against Laban. Well...God had that covered and Jacob knew it, and so he was fine agreeing to peaceful co-existence with his father-in-law.
- They set up a monument in the hill country of Gilead. Jacob set up one stone, a pillar. One pillar, one God. His kinsmen, Laban’s group, set up a pile of stones. Multiple stones, multiple gods. But Laban covered himself by appealing to the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor that Jacob would not cross over this boundary and Laban would not, either. Laban said, “The Lord watch between you and me when we are out of one another’s sight.” This was not a version of the Irish blessing, “May the road rise to meet you, May the wind be always at your back.” No! This was no pact of friendship but a pact between two men who did not trust the other and were saying, “God is watching you and if you violate this agreement, all bets are off and only God will be able to protect you. I will shoot to kill.” There are no hugs and tearful goodbyes, but Jacob does more than Laban who just offers words. Jacob offers a sacrifice to God to seal his commitment, and he calls all his family, including Laban and his

other kinsmen, to break bread together. Here's another step in the sanctification of the patriarch, if you will: when Jacob leaves Gilead, at least he does not leave another offended relative behind who is plotting to kill him. But, he *is* on a journey back towards his brother. More on that next Sunday, Lord willing!

- When they awake in the morning, Laban kisses his daughters and his grandchildren, and the two men part ways. James Boice wrote, "This is the last we hear of Laban in the Bible, and it is good that this is the end of him. Laban is of the world, and Jacob needed to be freed from this world in order to live wholeheartedly for the God of his fathers."
- Prayer
- CHOIR sings/ Communion