
Clever Sins

Genesis 30:25-31:16

Clever is an interesting word. It can mean intelligent, bright, smart. To someone from New England, a clever person is easygoing, but not too bright but from the South they are just a pleasant person. But to the British, a clever person often should not be trusted – they tend to turn their cleverness against you. And a “clever move” to a Scotsman is commendable if it was a deceptive feint that got the soccer player around his defender and is contemptible of a person avoiding the intent of a contract.

So what are Laban and Jacob up to here? Are they being clever here – just smart and shrewd or are they making clever moves – underhanded, sneaky, without integrity?

God is at work to change the character and personality of Jacob. We cannot ever say, over the way we are in our attitudes and actions, “That is just the way I am.” Personality is not fixed. It is the current expression of habitual attitudes and actions molded by the past combined with whatever depravities we have inherited and graces God has bestowed. But by God’s grace, even our personalities can be changed into what is pleasing to God. Jacob is a sneaky, conniving, thieving, cruel and crafty in his character. From our introduction to him at his birth all the way through to the end of chapter 33, God is bringing ever increasing pressure to shatter and shape Jacob.

Yet, all along, God is also using each of these situations to fulfill His promises to Jacob. He has promised Him a people, a land and prosperity. So God is at work to both chasten and bless Jacob at the very same time through the very same circumstances. This is a great mercy for all of us – God is at work; He is at work to break us; He is at work to bless us – often all at the same time.

In Bargaining for Advantage (v.25-34)

Here are two powerful men, tribal chieftains related by marriage who now have to work out an exit strategy.

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.” 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.” 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?” 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.”

The Contract Fulfilled (v.25-26)

Jacob is seeking to leave and part from Laban amicably. He announces that he has kept their agreement and now wishes to leave with his wives and family. He has served out the 14 years

in fulfillment of his agreement. Laban is being honored here as the titular clan leader. He wants to return to his own land and people, no disrespect intended.

A small but important digression:

As a side note, some Christians are misusing the Bible by taking narrative accounts like this and developing principles from them. We must distinguish between what is commanded and commended in the Bible, and what is the culture of the Bible. The Old Testament is full of this sort of clan, family clustered together living. This does not mean that clan living is the Biblical way. It does not mean that it is wrong (although, my observation of it in the Bible is that it is an opportunity and provocation of all sorts of family troubles). Just because Jacob lives in a tribal, clan style of culture does not mean that we ought to, as much as possible, live near and in close concert with our extended families. It does not mean that the living grandfathers oversee the sons and grandson's families. The patriarchal clan system is culture, it is not Christian.

Why do I take the time to say this? There is a teaching going around now that is very popular in Christian circles. It is being taught as the Bible way and people doing it another way are sinning. This is the idea commonly called courtship. The strong advocates of courtship are taking the culture in which Christianity exists and turning it into Christianity. I am not saying courtship is wrong. But do not hold it up as some form of spiritually superior dating when in fact a great deal of it is actually medieval not Biblical. There are many things like this that we must be careful about. It may be a way of wisdom but it is not the revealed will of God.

It is clear that this desire to return is triggered by the birth of Joseph. Rachel now has her own son. Whatever was between Laban and Jacob, Joseph's birth stirred Jacob to consider leaving and returning to his homeland. The text does not tell us clearly why this is so. From Jacob's treatment of Joseph, effectively honoring him as the primary heir, it may be that Jacob was already thinking of him this way. Since he now had the heir he would really honor, he needs to establish that heir in the lands God has promised.

The Blessing Acknowledged (v.27-30)

Before Jacob came and was a part of Laban's life and family, Laban was not a successful person, not prosperous. For all his knowing the value of everything and the worth of nothing, God had seen fit to not bless Laban with prosperity.

That all changed when Jacob entered the picture. Laban seems to understand this. Now, he may understand this just as an observation of reality. But he also knows, because of divination or fortune-telling that it is God who is behind the blessing of being associated with Jacob. If Jacob leaves now, Laban may well see his fortunes decline and his prosperity wane.

Let's think about this for a moment. Laban here is clearly a pagan, unbelieving man. He is involved with divination, a form of witchcraft. He seems to be attempting to ascertain whether his own gods or the God of Jacob is the best deity. If Jacob's deity is causing the blessing of prosperity and Jacob is the mediator of that blessing, then Laban cannot afford to have Jacob move away. Laban's involvement in witchcraft and idol worship has deeply affected his view of life and his children. We will find later that when Jacob does leave, Rachel steals the household gods.

Laban is a smart and shrewd man. He asks Jacob to name his wages (if he will stay) and promises to give them. He has had 14 years of service at the cost of two daughters. What now

will Jacob ask as a wage? But Laban views his paying of the wage as a benefactor and giver. "I will give you your wages," he says. Here is crafty man choosing his words carefully. Jacob can name his wages and even work for them. But Laban is not bound to pay what is earned, but rather what he chooses to give.

The Agreement Struck (v.31-34)

Jacob has spent 14 years in the painful employ of this man. He knows that the bare words of the contract will be followed. He knows that the interpretation of the contract will be filled with assumptions and advantages for Laban. After all, he agreed to 7 years of labor for a wife – but Laban gave him Leah instead of Rachel. He is on guard. He hears wages and give – so, he counters.

Laban is not going to give him anything. He states clearly what his wages will be, how that will be identified and when they will be paid. His wages will be all the mottled (spotted and speckled) sheep and goats as well as the black lambs. He will go through the herds, cull out these sheep and incorporate them into his herd. He will then care for Laban's flocks and herds.

Notice the phrasing in verse 33 [read the verse]. He is very concerned about Laban accusing him of theft. He makes it clear that in accepting his wages in this way, Laban can never accuse him of growing his flocks and herds by theft. The mottled animals will reproduce other mottled animals. I love the sort of jockeying and maneuvering of two crafty clever men seeking to gain an advantage and protect their interests. Each one thinks that he is outsmarting the other.

Laban agrees quickly. Now some speculate that he agreed because this looks like a great deal for him. These commentators say that the mottled sheep and goats would be of less value and the removing of them would reduce the future possibility of having these kinds of inferior animals. I think he agrees quickly because he has already observed a loophole and has already planned what he actually does next.

In Maneuvering for Advantage (v.35-43)

What great and interesting drama the next few verses are! With an agreement in hand, Laban seeks to maneuver for advantage. In response, Jacob uses his superior knowledge and practice of husbandry to outwit and out maneuver Laban.

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.

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. 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.

The Crafty Separation of the Herds (v.35-36)

What a sneaky thief Laban is. Before Jacob can cull out his wages, Laban removes all that would have been Jacob's initially. You can almost see him walking slowly away from Jacob and then as soon as he is out of sight running to his herd, sons and herdsmen. He goes through the whole herd, identifies every one of the sheep and goats that would have been Jacob's and separates them out from the herd. He is keeping the letter of the agreement. Jacob can have all those kinds of sheep at the time he goes through the herd. But, if those sheep and goats are not there then, well, he kept his end of the bargain. You should have thought of this, Jacob. You're just not as smart as you think you are. Esau was an easy mark. Laban is not!

To shield them from Jacob, he divides his herd, giving Jacob's portion to his sons thus excluding them from the count. In other words, these are no longer Laban's sheep and goats. They are now his sons. They have already been given as an inheritance and thus are shielded from the agreement. To ensure this, he and this flock move to a standard, 3 days journey away. Thus, he puts distance between Jacob and himself.

The Skillful Breeding of the Herds (v.37-43)

But this is not the end of the game. We are not told Jacob's reaction to this. We just don't know whether he was angry, feeling cheated. Was he grinning to himself because he anticipated something like this from Laban and had already made the plans he now put into play?

At any rate, Jacob is not going to be bested. He is, after all, a master herdsman under whose care Laban's flocks and herds have prospered. So, he begins to implement a plan that was a mix of current folk lore and a profound understanding of animal breeding. Using the understanding he has and the skill he has developed over the years, he begins to breed Laban's remaining flock under his care. The purpose here is twofold. He is seeking to breed multi-colored and black sheep and goats for his wages. He is also ensuring the vitality of his own flock and breeding in weakness into Laban's.

The mechanism that Laban is recorded as using was and still is very much a part of husbandry folklore. Certainly, he later acknowledges that God was the invisible One working behind the scenes to actually cause the animals to give birth to multi-colored sheep and goats. He is using a visible mechanism, possibly because he believes there is a direct connection and possibly because he is providing a false mechanism that Laban may later emulate to little avail. The text makes a word play on the name Laban for as Jacob peeled back the bark on the sticks and exposed the white (*lābān*), he saw his flocks grow. He played the Laban game and won.

The second mechanism that Jacob used is wise and skillful management of breeding. He ensures that the stronger animals are breeding for the variegated colors. He sets all the weaker animals in Laban's flock and the stronger ones in his own. Over time this will strengthen his own flock and weaken Laban's.

This is what is recorded in verse 43. Through his practical application of skill and knowledge to the problem at hand, his prosperity increases and becomes vast in his wealth. He not only increases his sheep and goats, but his whole standing as a tribal chieftain grows as he increases his servants and other herds as well.

In Acknowledging God's Intervention (31:1-16)

The story takes an abrupt turn in verse 1 as God now moves to dislodge Jacob and actually send him back to his homeland.

The Ruining of the Relationship (v.1-3)

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

Laban's sons begin to complain. They are jealous of his wealth. They seem to accuse him of acquiring what should have been theirs. They had originally stolen what was Jacob's; now, they want to accuse him of stealing or at least diminishing their inheritance.

Jacob observes that Laban's attitude toward him is changing as a result of their complaints. Laban has looked on Jacob with favor. You have to wonder if he views Jacob as something of a patsy, someone he can take advantage of, a ready mark for his schemes. Jacob has married both of his daughters, has produced 10 grandsons, has allowed himself to be duped out of his wages, has increased Laban's flocks all the while possibly not realizing that the flock is growing in quantity but diminishing in quality. The boys, however, are starting to convince him. Furthermore, since he is a thief and since Jacob is increasing his own wealth on the back of Laban's then he may well be turning against Jacob.

Then God steps in and settles the questions of staying or leaving. God instructs Jacob to return to his land and to his family. God has blessed him. Now God promises to be with him.

The Rehearsal of God's Favor (v.4-13)

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.' "

So, Jacob gathers his family around to talk with them about what God is doing. He now divulges to his family why he has moved with such care and confidence in his dealings with Laban. All along, he has been in communion with and commanded by the Lord. When Laban tried to cheat him, God instructed him on what to do. We also find out that Laban had constantly been changing the agreement. Yet God helped Jacob at each point.

The Scriptures once again point us to a wonderful lesson. We plan, work hard, are involved in the routine work of what we ought to do. God gives wisdom all along the way, sometimes

such that we prosper even while being taken advantage of. Behind all our labor is God's work. Jacob was doing what he can and could. God was at work to do what Jacob cannot.

Finally, he rehearses the dream God gave him. The angel of the Lord comes to him and reminds him He is the God of Bethel, the house of God. He reminds him of the sacrifice and honor he gave to God. God also reminds him that of the promise he made. Now, it is time to go home.

The Response of the Family (v.14-16)

¹⁴Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, "Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house? ¹⁵Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has indeed devoured our money. ¹⁶All 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."

Both Leah and Rachel respond well to the proposed move. Laban's late actions have estranged them from him, eaten up their inheritance, enlarged their wealth in Jacob's home – why stay here? God has spoken to Jacob, commanding him to return. So, when do we leave?

Here is a wonderful example of how to interact (rare as it may be in the Bible and certainly in this home.) The husband as leader of the home wants to please God and aims to walk in wisdom. He works hard trusting God to accomplish what is needed. He gathers his family and rehearses the faithfulness of God. He interprets what has happened through a God-centered lens. The wives see God at work, have an accurate and realistic view of what has happened and align their hearts to submit to their husband and obey God.

Reflect and Respond

How do we grapple with this text in our world today?

GOD TAKES EVEN THE SINFUL SCHEMING OF MEN AND TURNS IT INTO GOOD. He designed and determined that the sins of Laban and Jacob would move redemptive history forward.

GOD IS AT WORK, DOING WHATEVER IT TAKES, TO MAKE YOU LIKE CHRIST. Romans 8:28-30 teaches us this great truth. Our souls will be deeply comforted if we will map this truth over every thing in our lives.

GOD WILL WORK THROUGH EVEN THE MOST DIFFICULT OF CIRCUMSTANCES TO GIVE WISDOM AND POWER TO ACCOMPLISH WHAT HE INTENDS. Often that wisdom uses our experience and ability in working out God's will. But we depend on that wisdom and intentionally reach for it when we, in prayer, ask God for it in faith.

SOMETIMES WE ARE TOO CLEVER FOR OUR OWN GOOD. How often we are trying to avoid God's providences or force our own plans. God will work through these clever schemes to bring us to see ourselves and to rely on Him.

DECEIT AND DISHONESTY CORRODE CHARACTER. For all of you who must engage the business world – hold fast to being honest in all your dealings.

CHRISTIANS SHOULD BE OPEN AND ABOVE BOARD IN THEIR DEALINGS while recognizing the value of skill and subtlety.

CHRIST STANDS IN STARK CONTRAST TO ALL THIS. His dealing with people was always open and transparent. The words of an agreement were not things used to maneuver for self-gain and advantage.

May we ever see God at work to make us like Christ and to reflect His glory.