

# **Jacob Departs Mesopotamia, a Changed Man (Genesis 31:14-54)**

## **Expository Lessons from the Book of Genesis**

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### **I. Background, from Prior Lesson (Genesis 29-31:13)**

- a. Jacob traveled to Haran and married to Rachel and Leah, two sisters. He has built a large family, including 11 sons to this point. He has become a wealthy man, with large flocks and herds of animals.
- b. After 20 years of serving his deceitful Uncle Laban, the Angel of God tells Jacob to depart Haran and return to his homeland.

### **II. Jacob Leaves Mesopotamia with His Wives and Possessions (Read Genesis 31:14-21)**

- a. Elements of the story
  - i. Jacob had been told by the Angel of God to return to the land of his birth.
  - ii. Rachel and Leah are upset with their father, Laban. They support Jacob's decision to depart with them, their children and all of their possessions.
  - iii. Rachel steals her father's idols, and takes them with her when she departs.
  - iv. Jacob and his family flee while Laban is away; Jacob does not tell his uncle/father-in-law.

### **III. Laban Finds Out and Pursues Jacob (Read Genesis 31:22-35)**

- a. Elements of the story
  - i. Three days after Jacob's group departs, Laban finds out.
  - ii. Laban gathers his relatives and pursues, overtaking Jacob seven days later.
  - iii. God comes to Laban in a dream and warns him, "Be careful that you do not speak evil things to Jacob at any time."
  - iv. Laban confronts Jacob:
    - 1. Asks why Jacob departed secretly without telling Laban.

2. Asks why Jacob did not give Laban a chance to properly say goodbye to his daughters and grandchildren.
3. Tells Jacob that the previous night the Lord came to Laban in a dream, telling him not to speak evil of Jacob.
4. Asks Jacob why he stole Laban's gods.
- v. Jacob, unaware that his wife Rachel had stolen Laban's gods, protests that he is innocent and challenges Laban to do a search of all he has.
- vi. Rachel hides the gods in camel saddle bags, sits on them, and tells her father she can't get up because she is having her monthly period! Consequently, Laban does not find the stolen gods.

#### IV. **Jacob Gets Angry, Rebukes Laban** (Read **Genesis 31:36-42**)

- a. Why this section is important (to me).
  - i. This passage reveals what is on Jacob's heart. It shows *what he is thinking and feeling*, not just what he is doing.
  - ii. One of a few places in the Old Testament where we can peer into the heart of heroes of faith, to see what was going on inside them; why they did what they did. Other examples of similar 'windows' into the hearts of heroes of faith in the OT can be found in:
    1. **Psalms** of David;
    2. Job's speech near the end of **Book of Job**; and
    3. Joseph's speech to his brothers in **Genesis 50**.
  - iii. Passages like this provide keys to *how* great heroes of faith in the Old Testament could do what they did. I can learn from them, and imitate their hearts.
- b. Jacob's response to Laban
  - i. Jacob is angry that he has been accused of stealing Laban's gods.
  - ii. Jacob recounts that he had served Laban faithfully for 20 years, caring for Laban's sheep and never taking any of them for himself. Jacob even bore the loss of any animals that had been stolen or devoured by wild animals.
  - iii. Summarizes what it was like serving Laban, tending the sheep.
    1. "There I was. In the day the drought consumed me,
    2. and the frost by night,

3. and my sleep departed from my eyes.
4. Thus I have been in your house twenty years; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flocks, and you changed my wages ten times with respect to the female lambs." (**Genesis 31:40-41**, LXX, OSB)
- iv. Jacob had spent time in God's great School of Suffering: burning heat and drought by day, freezing at night, and unable to sleep; for 20 years! If that were not enough, he also suffered emotionally: submitting to a deceitful boss and father-in-law who cheated him repeatedly.
- v. Jacob was refined through that time of suffering. As a young man, he had been arrogant, deceitful and unrighteously taking things into his own hands. Consider the attitude he has toward God now:
  1. "Unless the God of my father Abraham and the fear of Isaac had been with me surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. But God saw my affliction and the labors of my hands, and rebuked you last night." (**Genesis 31:42**, LXX, OSB)
  2. Jacob credits God with his deliverance; he sees that God was watching the whole time he was afflicted. The Lord had seen his hard work and suffering, and it was God who rescued him from the hand of Laban.
  3. Jacob, the strategist and deceiver, had been refined and his character changed through a prolonged period of service in the Lord's 'School of Suffering'.
- vi. Consider all the great men and women of faith in the Old Testament whose faith was refined through suffering.
  1. Job, who lost all his children, his possession and his health (**Job 1-3**)
  2. Moses, rejected by his people and by the Egyptians, spent 40 years in the wilderness tending sheep before he was called (**Exodus 2-3; Acts 7:23-36**)
  3. Joseph, sold into slavery and cast into prison (**Genesis 37, 39-41**)
  4. David, hunted down by Saul in the wilderness as a young man (**1 Samuel 19-27; Psalms 18, 57 and 59**)
  5. Elijah, hunted down by Ahab and Jezebel (**1 Kings 17-19**)

6. Daniel, cast into the lions' den (**Daniel 6**)
  7. Daniel's three friends, cast into the fiery furnace after refusing to bow to an idol (**Daniel 3**)
  8. The heroes of faith recalled in **Hebrews 11**, where it concludes:
    - a. "... Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth." (**Hebrews 11:35–38**, NKJV)
- vii. Consider what it says about Jesus, in **Hebrews**:
1. "though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him," (**Hebrews 5:8–9**, NKJV)
  2. "For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings." (**Hebrews 2:10**, NKJV)
  3. From these two passages, we learn:
    - a. Jesus learned obedience from what He suffered
    - b. Also, *even Jesus* had to be perfected through suffering!
    - c. (Here 'perfect' means 'made *complete*'; it does imply that Jesus was flawed in any way.)
- viii. Here is my own non-theological and unpopular three-point outline of the Book of Hebrews:
1. Christ who is our Creator, Lord, leader, High Priest and brother, had to suffer. He was perfected through that suffering. (**Hebrews 1-10**)
  2. The heroes of faith all had to suffer (**Hebrews 11**)

3. So, what should we expect to see, as followers of Christ, in our own lives? (Hint: ties back to points 1 and 2.)
  - a. Yes, the third point is that we too are called to suffer in this life. (**Hebrews 12-13**)
    - i. Read **Hebrews 12:1-13**.
    - ii. As the “great cloud of witnesses” suffered, as the author and finisher of our faith endured suffering, we must persevere through our own suffering here.
    - iii. God chastens (*scourges*, from **Proverbs 3** as quoted here) us, as a loving father, so that we can partake in His holiness.
    - iv. This will be painful now. However, if we are trained by it, it will produce something greater in our lives.
  - ix. Peter says the same thing, in what is the main theme of his first letter.
    1. “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,” (**1 Peter 1:6-7**, NKJV)
    2. “Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: ‘Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth’; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously;” (**1 Peter 2:18-23**, NKJV)
      - a. Consider: Christian servants being admonished to suffer in the example of Christ when they are being beaten for doing nothing wrong!

3. "Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God." (1 Peter 4:1-2, NKJV)
    - a. In our personal spiritual armory, one of the most important things we must have is the mind of Christ, being willing to suffer for righteousness, without retaliating or becoming bitter.
  4. "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy." (1 Peter 4:12-13, NKJV)
- x. Consider what Paul says.
1. Popular contemporary 'praise and worship' church music is full of expressions about loving God, appreciation of God's mercy, praising God and wanting to know Jesus. But consider what Paul asked for in **Philippians 3:10**. Do Christians today really want these things?
    - a. Wanting to know *Christ* (Yes, everyone wants that.)
    - b. Wanting to know *the power of His resurrection* (Yes again, everyone wants that power in his life.)
    - c. Wanting to know the *fellowship of (sharing in) Christ's sufferings* (Almost no one wants that!)
- xi. This message, that followers of Christ are called to embrace suffering, is not preached in the modern seeker-friendly churches that present a watered-down version of the gospel. A popular verse I recall hearing often (from the NIV translation) is:
1. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (**Jeremiah 29:11**, NIV) This passage is often presented to mean: God loves you, wants to bless you, and does not want anything bad to happen to you if you will seek him with all your heart.
  2. One small problem: we need to read that verse in context! That "plan to prosper" was not going to be fulfilled until after

*70 years of captivity* in Babylon, after the original hearers were dead or very old.

3. Even 'conservative' Bible-based churches, in a desire to grow and reach out to the lost, can get seduced by similar approaches. For example, it can come in the form of, "Look at our nice happy families and wholesome lives we have; if you become a Christian and join us, *you can enjoy all these blessings too!*" Problem: that is *not* the gospel Jesus proclaimed.
4. The gospel Jesus presented involves suffering: His first, and ours to follow. Consider the day that Peter received his sharpest rebuke.
  - a. "From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!' But He turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.' Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.'" (**Matthew 16:21-24**, NKJV)
  - b. Peter tries to correct Jesus, and take out the suffering part.
  - c. Jesus responds: "Get behind me, Satan! ...you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."
  - d. Jesus then explains that anyone who wants to follow him must deny himself and take up his cross (must embrace suffering and rejection as well).
  - e. That is the gospel Jesus preached. And now we also see how Satan would corrupt it.
- xii. Seeker-friendly watered-down, no-suffering gospel will have to explain away the teachings of Jesus that clearly involve suffering on our part, such as:
  1. Not resisting evil people (lawsuits, war)

2. Submission to those in authority over us (citizens to government authorities they don't like, wives to husbands, children to parents)
3. Permanence of marriage. False gospel of "God wants you to be happy" used to justify remarriage after divorce, which Jesus called adultery.
4. Jesus' teachings on money and materialism do not fit with the modern 'Christian-Epicurean' lifestyle of living for pleasure and comfort.
5. Any teaching that goes against the grain of the society around us and will make us unpopular (like Biblical roles of men and women) will get compromised.
6. Those who have been 'converted' to a compromised false-promises gospel of no-suffering will not last when trials come. So these churches are just making second-soil Christians who will not have what it takes to make it to the end, to heaven. (**Matthew 13:20-21** and **Luke 8:13**)

xiii. Back to the story of Jacob.

1. As a young man, Jacob valued the important things (his inheritance), unlike his brother Esau.
2. However, Jacob was deceitful and self-reliant.
3. God disciplined him through 20 years of suffering under someone even more deceitful than he was.
4. God perfected the good that Jacob had in him, and refined away the bad parts of his character.
5. Jacob returned home a very different man, after relying on God through 20 years in the School of Suffering.
6. This is a classic, encouraging example for me to remember when I am facing trials in this life.

**V. Jacob and Laban Make a Covenant (Read Genesis 31:43-54)**

a. Elements of the covenant:

- i. A pillar was erected, a pile of stones made as a witness to the covenant, and a meal was shared.
- ii. Jacob must treat Laban's daughters well; take no other wives.



- iii. Neither Jacob nor Laban will pass that pillar to harm the other.
- b. An interesting expression I notice here. Twice in this chapter (**Genesis 31:42, 53**) God is referred to as “the fear of Isaac”.
  - i. This makes me wonder: What did Isaac say about the Lord to his son, Jacob? What did Jacob remember from his father?
  - ii. **Questions:** Are Christians still supposed to fear God today? Doesn’t it say in the New Testament that “perfect love cast out fear” (**1 John 4:18**)? Wasn’t fear of God the imperfect motivation of the Old Testament, whereas now through Jesus we can really know God, and so we just love God? Or should we fear God, but only in the sense of having an awesome respect for God (as opposed to being terrified)?
  - iii. First, consider what Jesus taught about the fear of God.
    - 1. “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched—where ‘Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched—where ‘Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’” (**Mark 9:42–46**, NKJV)
    - 2. (Directions given to the 12 as they are sent out to preach) “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (**Matthew 10:28**, NKJV)
    - 3. Based on what we read in those two passages, we can readily answer three of our questions:
      - a. Did Jesus consider fear of God to be an outdated concept, or an inferior motivation? (**A:** Clearly, no.)
      - b. Was it just reverent awe, or actual terror? (**A:** The old-fashioned *terror* kind of fear.)
      - c. Was his admonition to fear God directed only at unbelievers, or was it to his close followers as well? (**A:** This teaching was directed to his followers.)
  - iv. Now let’s look at what the apostles taught, after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, regarding the fear of God

1. **Peter:** "Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king." (**1 Peter 2:17**, NKJV)
    - a. Did Peter really mean that, writing to Christians? Why didn't he say "Love the brothers, *love* God", instead?
  2. **Paul:** "Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. *Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord*, we persuade men; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences." (**2 Corinthians 5:9-11**, NKJV)
    - a. According to Paul, the terror of the Lord is a good motivation for evangelism!
  3. **Paul:** "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, *perfecting holiness in the fear of God*." (**2 Corinthians 7:1**, NKJV)
    - a. The fear of God motivates us to remove corrupting things from our lives, and to grow more complete in our holiness.
- v. Conclusion, regarding fear of God
1. Jacob somehow learned that his father, Isaac, feared God. It made an impact on Jacob, and he carried that understanding with him through 20 years of struggle and suffering in Mesopotamia.
  2. This understanding of the fear of God helped Jacob make it through this extremely difficult time, which transformed his character and drew him closer to God.
  3. Jesus held up the fear of God as something important for his followers to embrace. Peter and Paul 'got it' and call us to fear God today, for our own good. Fear of God is an important motivation for us to live holy lives and to seek and save those who are lost.