

Jacob Flees from Laban

31: 1-21

DIG: Why were Laban and his sons becoming increasingly distressed? How had Laban cheated Jacob? What did ADONAI do about it? How did Ya'akov know when to leave Laban and where to go? What did Leah and Rachel think of Jacob's plan to return to Canaan? Why did Rachel take her father's household gods?

REFLECT: How do you know when it's time to leave a relationship? When was the last time the Lord reminded you of a vow or a promise that you made to Him? What things of the world, like Rachel's household gods, are you holding onto?

Jacob's prosperity could not go unnoticed for long. He had heard what Laban's sons were saying: **Jacob (Hebrew: Ya'akov) has taken everything our father owned and has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father.** This was simply not true, in fact, quite the opposite; **Jacob had added to their father's wealth. And Ya'akov noticed that Laban's attitude toward him was not what it had been (31:1-2).** He knew he couldn't live much longer in Haran, but he had made an agreement to keep Laban's flocks and he hesitated to be the first to break it. He no doubt suspected that his uncle did not intend to honor it and would probably take his flocks from him by force, but the deceitful Laban had not yet made any overt move to do this, and he could not discern the intent of Laban's heart. However, **God** could.⁴⁸⁸

Then ADONAI spoke to Ya'akov a second time. The first time was at Bethel twenty years previously. At that time **God** commanded: **Go back to the Land of your fathers and to your relatives.** Now as far as his distant family history went, *Jacob was in the land of his fathers, the land of Haran.* But here, it does not refer to the land of Haran. At this time, **the land of his fathers was the land of Canaan, the Land of his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham. And once again the LORD makes the promise: I will be with you (31:3).** It was time for Ya'akov to return to Bethel.

In obedience, **Jacob** prepared to depart. But beforehand, he thought he needed to first explain everything to **Rachel and Leah.** If they did not understand the situation, they might be reluctant to leave their home. He had said little about his problems with their father, but now they need to see the whole picture. **So Ya'akov sent word to Rachel and Leah to come out to the fields where his flocks were.** Jacob didn't want anyone to hear what he was going to say. He said to them: **I see that your father's attitude toward me is not what it was before.** This is because in his self-deception, Laban believed that Jacob had

taken his wealth away. He had been convinced of this by his sons. But Jacob replied: **The God of my father has been with me.** And this very point was about to be explained to his wives. He explains his own faithfulness. **You know that I've worked for your father with all my strength.** This was something his wives had seen with their own eyes. Ya'akov had fully kept his part of the agreement despite their father's deception. **Yet, your father has cheated me by changing my wages ten times. However, God has not allowed him to harm me financially (31:4-7).** Then he gave his wives an example.

If he said, **"The speckled ones will be your wages,"** then all the flocks gave birth to speckled young, but then when Laban saw that more speckled kids were being borne, he changed the agreement and said, **"The streaked ones will be your wages,"** then all the flocks bore streaked young. First of all, that was not the original agreement. The original agreement was that Ya'akov was supposed to get every speckled or spotted kid born. But for each change Laban proposed, Elohim protected and prospered Jacob. During this time, Jacob upheld his end of the agreement and was blameless. In the final analysis, Jacob took none of the credit. He concluded: **So God has taken away your father's livestock and has given them to me (31:8-9).** Jacob then explained to his wives that God had shown all this to him in a dream.

In the breeding season, when Ya'akov would normally use the peeled and striped branches (30:37-39), he once had a dream in which he looked up and saw that the male goats mating with the flock were streaked, speckled or spotted (31:10). The actual goats that were mating were dark brown or black, but God could look into their gene structure (though Jacob could not) and make sure a huge number of streaked, speckled or spotted goats were being produced. So God showed Ya'akov that He, not the peeled branches, was responsible for the increase in his flocks.

The Angel of God was the same One who heard Ishmael crying in the desert (21:17). *He is the second Person of the Trinity, the preincarnate Messiah.* He said to me in the dream. "Jacob," and I answered, "Here I am." And He said: **Look up and see that all the male goats mating with the flock are streaked, speckled or spotted, for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you (31:11-12).** Once again, Ya'akov is blameless, and Laban's actions put him under the cursing aspect of God's covenant with Abraham: **Whoever curses you I will curse (12:3b).** Previously Laban was under the blessing aspect, and he was blessed materially. But now because of his changed attitude, he was under the curse of God. Laban cursed, or tried to financially harm Jacob by trying to decrease his flocks, so now, because of the curse, his own flocks were being decreased.

Ya'akov continued to tell Rachel and Leah of his call to return to Canaan. First ADONAI said to him, "I AM the God of Bethel." Twenty years earlier, Jacob had made a vow to God at Bethel. Jacob had said, since God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then ADONAI will be my God (28:20-21). Then God reminded him that it was time to fulfill that vow and leave that far away land at once and go back to His native land, and back to Bethel (31:13).

Then Rachel and Leah answered Jacob and they raised a rhetorical question: Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father's estate? The answer was no. Now that Laban had sons, the daughters would inherit nothing. Furthermore, Laban had not only cheated Jacob, he had cheated his own daughters. Again they raised a rhetorical question: Does he not regard us as foreigners? This time the answer was yes. Not only has he sold us for fourteen years of labor, but he has also used up what he was paid for us (31:14-15). The custom of their time was that the bride price paid by the husband or his family was supposed to be held in trust in the event it was needed to provide for the wife if she were abandoned or widowed.⁴⁸⁹ But Ya'akov did not pay a bride price to Laban, he gave him seven years of service for each wife. However, no part of the fruits of Jacob's service was set aside for his daughters as it should have been. Laban had built up his own holdings. He would use local custom only if it benefited him. Earlier he had said: It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one (29:26), but here, he would also go against local custom if it served his financial purposes.

Jacob's wives continued to say: Surely all the wealth that God took away from our father belongs to us and our children (31:16a). They rightly felt that since their husband had been responsible for the great prosperity of their father, and since this was in effect what Jacob had given in order to marry them, these possessions by all rights should have come to them. So they both said: Do whatever Elohim has told you (31:16b). In other words, they were ready to go.⁴⁹⁰

Therefore, if Ya'akov thought he had to convince his wives, he was wrong. They already believed in him and were prepared to support his leaving, not necessarily because of what their father had done to Jacob (although that was bad enough), but because of what he had done to them.⁴⁹¹ Unfortunately, their father was no longer concerned about their future; whatever inheritance they might once have had would now go to their brothers. They had watched closely, though silently, the actions of their father and brothers in contrast with those of Jacob, and they could well understand why God had blessed him. They both loved him, and they realized it was to their advantage, as well as their children, for them to leave their father's home and go with Jacob to his own Land.⁴⁹²

Then Ya'akov lost no time getting ready to leave. Like his mother, **Jacob** could think fast on his feet. He had been thinking and praying about this for some time. Once he decided to go, he acted decisively and put his eleven children (Benjamin would be born later) and his four wives on camels. He drove all his livestock ahead of him, along with all the goods he had accumulated by trade in Paddan Aram. In contrast to when he came to Haran empty handed, when he left it must have been quite a large caravan. He left to go to his father Isaac, whom he had heard might still be alive, in the land of Canaan (31:17-18). The time had come for him to take over the patriarchal responsibility associated with God's promises. He possessed both the birthright and the blessing. They both entailed great privileges and responsibilities. It was now time to fulfill them.⁴⁹³

Jacob had sensed that there was nothing Laban wouldn't do if he tried to leave with his flocks, and Ya'akov was responsible for the welfare of his wives and children. Therefore, when Laban was three days journey away shearing his sheep, Jacob used wisdom and left Laban the Aramean by not telling him he was running away. So he fled with all he had, and crossing the Euphrates River he headed to Mount Gilead far to the southwest (31:20-21). This phrase: crossing the River (NIV) or on the other side of the River (NKJ) is significant in Joshua 24:2-3, 14-15. The word in Hebrew was first used of Abraham and means *those who have passed over* (14:13). Mount Gilead is in a mountainous region east of the Jordan River, and was the last place they would pass through before entering the land of Canaan. Once they started on their way, it would probably have taken them ten days or so to reach their destination.

But, when Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole her father's household gods (31:19). Although Rachel trusted God, she was also reluctant to completely give up her previous superstitions. These little household gods, or *teraphim*, were associated with the inheritance and property rights of the owner. So Rachel probably took them thinking that they would validate the legitimacy of her husband's title to the flocks he had acquired while serving Laban and represented the inheritance she had a right to expect.⁴⁹⁴ When Laban found out that Jacob had left unannounced, he was undoubtedly furious. But the loss of his household gods gave him a good excuse to chase down what he considered to be his stolen property. But he was going after much more than his household gods. He was going after what he considered to be his flocks and herds.