
Trouble in Family Relationships

Genesis 31:17-55

In our moment – us now...

God is pleased to grow us and to glorify Himself by taking us through many kinds of hardships.

Some of those hardships are times like we are experiencing now with COVID-19. Some of you are really struggling with fear, anger and rebellion. What should have been measured, mature responses to change and transition have exposed hearts driven by self, comfort and ease. The words of your heart are spilling over into Facebook and Instagram. Instead of gratitude to God you are grumbling against God. Your heart idols are going on the journey with you into the new country.

Some of those hardships are through difficult, strained relationships. Our situation is amplifying small troubles in marital relationships. Couples are finding out that they do struggle being in each other's space every day. What should have been a good thing – lots of time together – has become a hard thing – lots of time together.

Some of these hardships are through transitions that lead from what you don't like in the present to what we fear will be true in the future. You face uncertainties about what life will be like in the coming months and years. What will change? Too many of you wrongly think that we will be back just like we are. A crisis of this magnitude will produce lasting change. How will you handle it? Will you be ready to submit to God's providence? Will you want what God will bring?

Some of those holiness-making tools in God's hands are called relatives.

In their moment – them then...

We will see that here in this chapter of Genesis. Much of this will ring (if we get the culture) with a certain amount of, "O, been there!!!" There are two difficulties in this text.

There is the trouble with transition. This family in this text is going through a dramatic change in their lives. They are leaving one place they have grown up in and moving into a place and time that will be different. It will be a hugely changed sameness.

There is trouble in the family. They are sinning against one another now in open and dramatic ways. But these are the harvest of long sown seeds of deceit, manipulation, and self-centeredness.

Let's get some background. Jacob has married two of the daughters of Laban. He has acquired great wealth and power, both in spite of the machinations of Laban and at his expense. He had respectfully asked to leave and go to his own homeland, having served out the required years for his wife. He has increased his wealth while keeping and breeding Laban's flock. Now, the sons of Laban are jealous and are beginning to make trouble. Jacob has assembled his family out in the fields and flocks. There he has rehearsed the recent providences and larger promises of God. His family seems to be responding in faith and submission – it is time to go home (v.16).

The trouble in this text is with in-laws. We usually think of in-law trouble as with mothers-in-law. Yet, here, the in-law trouble is a father-in-law.

A Secret Departure (v.17-21)

Now having his family's agreement, Jacob begins the enormous job of preparing to move.

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. ²⁰And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee. ²¹He fled with all that he had and arose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.

With Complete Household (v.17-18)

Jacob gathers up his entire household – his children, wives, servants and possessions. This is no small enterprise. It is a great tribe, vast herds, and a long and lumbering caravan.

With Aggravating Circumstances (v.19)

Two things aggravate the situation, make it worse.

He left when Laban was away.

It is clear that Jacob waited to do all this until Laban would not be at home. He does not want the face-to-face confrontation and the conflict that would almost certainly ensue. But, Laban is not going to take this kindly.

Rachel stole her father's idols.

This is the act of an unbeliever. This is someone at least trusting in a charm while preparing to depart from home to the unknown. Or it may well be full-blown idolatry and she wants her household gods to accompany her.

Both of these provoke Laban and fuel his anger and launch pursuit.

With Misdirecting Actions (v.20-21)

The word "tricked" here also occurs in verses 26-27. It means to misdirect or to steal the heart. Moses is using the word intentionally here and in Laban's later accusation to remind us that Jacob is still the trickster. It is God's accurate interpretation of Jacob's attitude and action.

An Immediate Pursuit (v.22-24)

Laban learns three days later that Jacob and his family are all gone. It is described by the word, "flee".

²²When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, ²³he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead. ²⁴But 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."

With Dangerous Intent (v.22-23)

He gathers up his kinsman and takes out in hot pursuit of Jacob. Jacob has a three-day head start. It takes seven days for him to catch up to Jacob. Moses records this in a way that sets the stage for what follows. The galloping pursuers are described as kinsman, not as an army which they actually probably were. They are described as pursuing and closing with Jacob. So it may not be an army but this is military language.

With Divine Warning (v.24)

Laban's dangerous intent becomes clearer as God warns him. Possibly on the night they camped within hailing distance, God comes to him in a dream and speaks to him. God warns Laban not to do so much as to speak badly to Jacob, much less harm him.

An Outraged Confrontation (v.25-42)

Talk about in-law trouble. I doubt seriously any of you have had your father-in-law gather the clan and hunt you down over a seven-day trek. Here are two powerful and prosperous tribal

chieftains facing each other down. Here is a cunning and deeply self-deceived father-in-law preparing to attempt to humiliate his son-in-law.

With Manipulative Attacks (v.25-30)

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 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 begins to attack Jacob verbally, trying to manipulate the situation. He tries to play the wounded and offended parent. "Why would Jacob steal his daughters and grand-children away? Why sneak them off? Why rob Laban of the opportunity to have a party and send them off with appropriate affection and attention? What kind of low, family denying, in-law disrespecting person are you? If it hadn't been for God's warning, I would punish you. After all, I could hurt you."

Listen to the sarcastic attack on Jacob's character. "You say you long for your family (this is how you treat family) and what you really did was steal my gods." Laban is putting Jacob on the defensive. He is accusing him of things he does not know are true. What in any of Laban's experience with Jacob would make him think that JACOB would steal his stupid idols?

Moses' writing here is so interesting. God is quietly at work. Don't you think that the manipulative accusation still touches a sore spot? Jacob well knows that this is the way he treats family, even his own. He was quite willing to deceive his father and steal from his brother, then run in order to keep what was not his.

Also, what kind of gods are they that allow themselves to be captured, stolen and snuck away? All through this account there is irony, if not sarcasm, dripped on these idols, these so-called gods.

With Righteous Indignation (v.31-32)

³¹ Jacob answered and said to Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. 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.

Jacob is not going to be cowed by this sort of harsh and intimidating attack. He simply states what he knows (and Laban well knows, since he is here, seven days later with an "army") that Laban would not have allowed Jacob to leave. Verses 43-44 will tell us why this is true. Laban has not, does not and his descendants will not, honor the intent nor the words of an agreement. Jacob was fairly certain that he was not going to be sent off to his homeland with rejoicing and fond farewells. So, with good reason, he has not acted foolishly, but wisely.

Jacob is so sure that no one in his camp would steal the idols that he says that they will execute the thief. This is huge. If Laban can find anything that is his in Jacob's camp, then he can take it. What he doesn't know is that Rachel, his own heart idol, is herself a god-thief.

With Fruitless Searching (v.33-35)

Thus, a long and tedious search is launched.

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 order in which the tents are searched is illuminating of Laban's mind. He searches Jacob's. He searches Leah's. He searches their servant's tents. He finally goes to Rachel's tent.

Well, here we have the thief. She has taken them and hid them in her camel saddle. These saddles are more like chairs than our western saddles. They often had elaborate cloths draped on them and pockets to hold and carry things in them. It was quite common to take them into the tents as something to sit on there.

She has learned her father's craft and manipulation well. She is sitting on this camel saddle with the gods hidden in it. She basically says, "Please excuse my not moving. I am in my time of month." It takes a stronger and more wily man than Laban to challenge a married daughter who is having her period. So, he never found the purloined idols.

With Angry Accusations (v.36-42)

Now Jacob responds with understandably angry accusations.

³⁶ Then Jacob became angry and berated 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. 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. 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."

Here is Laban, patently a conniving con man, accusing him of a theft he did not commit and implying more, that he has taken the daughters and children wrongly. His wounded indignation here is palatable. "Where is the offense? Where is the sin? What have you found that was yours? Bring forth the proof of your accusations? You think my wives are still yours? You want to try to claim my children? What sheep and goats do you see in my flocks that are not mine? What servant here bears your brand? Come on, bring it out. Put it down here between us. Let others observe and judge!" Jacob may have done much wrong to Esau, but he is innocent when it comes to Laban.

Wow, get that, think back 20 years – some of you can't even do that.

Not only has he not wronged Laban, but he has oft been sinned against by Laban. Now he enumerates and illustrates the long list of grievances he has against his father-in-law. For

twenty years he has suffered at the conniving, deceiving hands of this man. Through it all, he has kept the flocks with consummate skill – no miscarriages. He has never fed himself from Laban’s flock, a reasonable practice and wage for the day. Unlike all other shepherds, he has taken personal responsibility for defensive failure – he has always voluntarily borne the cost of loss from the flock by wild animals. He has replaced stolen animals, whether they were stolen by day or night. He has done so because Laban has demanded it. He has endlessly, tirelessly and personally looked to the good of Laban’s flocks and herds. He fulfilled his agreement, serving the full fourteen years for his wives. Ten times Laban had broken their contract by changing the wages. These are all verifiable and attested by everyone standing around. How dare Laban accuse him of stealing a couple of worthless pieces of wood or rock!

O, but he was not alone in this long, twenty-year struggle. He acknowledges what God had promised when he fled from home: God was with Him. This was not just God’s omnipresence. God attending care was with Him so that he has all this wealth he has now, in spite of all that Laban could do. He also acknowledges the special care of God in the midst of affliction. God had provided and prospered. And now, under threat from Laban, God had directly and personally intervened on Jacob’s behalf. What Laban has heard as a warning Jacob describes as a rebuke. Jacob has it right. There is a distinct, “Laban, you had better not accuse or judge, much less attack or destroy Jacob. You are the one at fault here.”

A Resolving Covenant (v.43-55)

There has to be resolution of this conflict. It cannot go on. It has reached a crescendo. Laban’s false accusations against Jacob and Jacob’s righteous grievances against Laban have both men in each other’s faces, the veins in their necks bulging.

With Dishonest Assertions (v.43-44)

Laban’s next sentence is astounding in its hubris.

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.”

“These are my daughters; these are my (grand) children; these are my flocks; everything here is mine – but there is nothing I can do about it. You’re going to take them. I have to give them up. So, what can I do? I can make you a promise.”

In the tradition they both understood, Jacob took a stone and set it on end as a pillar to mark the occasion and the content of what was about to be promised. They gathered stones into a pile known as a memorial stile. They sat down to eat a covenant meal. Then each in their respective languages, Laban in Aramaic and Jacob in Hebrew, call the place “The Heap of Memorial.”

With Family Threats (v.45-50)

But Laban is not finished.

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

He turns the covenant into a threat. “I promise you that if you abuse by daughters or take more wives, then I call on God to deal with you.” Ok, at one level these are his daughters, grandchildren and, well, used to be, flocks. But NOT ANY MORE! This is nothing but a final threat, a final attempt to make himself look good as the defender of his family. He is still trying to intimidate Jacob. And he is attempting to use God as his stick. So, build this covenant cairn, this heap of stones and call God as witness to and make Jacob understand exactly what Laban is threatening.

With Territorial Promises (v.51-54)

In these verses, Laban and Jacob establish a border, a boundary between them.

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.” 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.

They mutually promise not to cross over this border with the intent to do harm. Probably both of them are thinking, “Do not cross this border again. You stay out of my lands and I will stay out of yours, you meddlesome, troublesome man.”

Laban and Jacob agree and enter this covenant. Laban invokes God by His patriarchal relationships from which he is distant. Jacob invokes the awesome and fearful name of God with which he is personally familiar and moved by. He sacrifices to God and feasts with his family. God has been good. His integrity has been upheld; his father-in-law subdued; his God is pleased.

With Peaceful Departure (v.55)

Just a final, brief word.

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

Laban says goodbye, kissing the daughters and children. The Bible says that he blessed them. We don't know what that blessing was. Then he leaves and goes home. The conflict is over. But...

Reflect and Respond

As we conclude, I am going to focus on help for in-law trouble. Now, I am aware that some of you are single and don't have in-laws... *yet*. I know there are several families here where there are parents and sons and daughters as in-laws. Out of this narrative, we can address challenges and issues in our relationships with extended family.

Second, there are transferable principles here. This is a transition. It has been temptation to sin, to cling to idols, to make false accusations, to assert authority that is not Biblical and to make promises and

agreements that may not be binding. Is any of this going on your family? Has COVID time become a sinning time?

CORE PRINCIPLE: Stop trying to solve family issues as a natural family and deal with them as a spiritual family.

For Parents as In-Laws

BE GOVERNED BY THE SCRIPTURES IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH IN-LAWS AND SONS/DAUGHTERS. You must believe and bow to the Scripture as defining, determining and directing how you engage one another as in-laws.

RECOGNIZE THEIR HOME AS AN INDEPENDENT SPHERE OF AUTHORITY. Primary to this is acknowledging the headship of the man in his home.

GIVE UP THE DESIRE FOR CONTROL. For many parents, control is a difficult issue. You seek to extend the control you had over your kids into the new home. It is particularly difficult when they want to do things differently.

BE POISED TO OFFER WISE AND BIBLICAL COUNSEL. Learn how to take the Scriptures, apply them from the lessons in your own life and give counsel in a way that invites being accepted.

DO NOT USE YOUR STATION IN LIFE TO MANIPULATE AND GAIN WHAT YOU WANT. Do not use your status as grandparents, your money, anything about this place as -in-laws to shame your sons or daughters into what you want and crave.

DO NOT COMPETE WITH THE OTHER IN-LAWS FOR TIME, ATTENTION, ETC. Prefer one another, be willing to give up your perceived rights when it comes to holidays, vacations, over-nighters, etc.

For Sons and Daughters as In-Laws

BE GOVERNED BY THE SCRIPTURES IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH IN-LAWS AND PARENTS. You must believe and bow to the Scripture as defining, determining and directing how you engage one another as in-laws.

BE ONE WITH YOUR SPOUSE IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO YOUR IN-LAWS AND PARENTS. Implement the *leave and cleave* principle of the Bible. Where there are issues, the husband should lead and command with the wife counseling and following.

KEEP CHRIST AND THE CHURCH COMMUNITY AS THE CENTER OF YOUR HOME. Help your parents and in-laws to have a Bible centered view of life and ministry.

BE POISED TO ACCEPT THEIR WISE COUNSEL. Humbly receive, weigh and follow wise counsel. Be able to discern the difference between counsel and command.

Finally, hear and heed this:

As much as lies in you, live at peace with all men, including, for the glory of God, your in-laws.

Bow to God's good providences in bad times. Accept with gratitude and grace what is next.