

Jacob's Flight

- ¹ 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."
- 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.'"
- ¹⁴ Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, "Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house?
- ¹⁵ Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has indeed devoured our money.
- ¹⁶ All 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."

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.

²⁰ And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee.

²¹ He fled with all that he had and arose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.

²² When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled,

²³ he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead.

²⁴ But 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."

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?"

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.

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.

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."

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."

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."

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.

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

^{32:1} Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him.

² And when Jacob saw them he said, "This is God's camp!" So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.

Genesis 31:1-32:2

Jealousy

Jealousy in human beings is a great and terrible sin. According to the dictionary, jealousy is “feeling resentment against someone because of that person's rivalry, success, or advantages.” The NT has several lists of sins that are grouped together. When jealousy appears in these lists, it has other motives and character problems associated with it. James speaks of selfish ambition and boasting in the same breath as jealousy (James 3:14). People that are jealous are Me-Monsters: self-centered and prideful people.

Jealousy is something born out of the Tenth Commandment which teaches us not to covet. Coveting is desiring something that does not belong to us. Jealousy is a

feeling that results when a person covets. But jealousy does not end in a feeling. Rather, it begins to work its way out of the heart and into the members of the body.

Romans 13:13 speaks of **quarreling** and jealousy. When you covet and begin to feel resentment, then it makes its way out in the form of **quarrels**, bickering, and squabbling. This in turn can lead to worse things. **1 Corinthians 3:3** speaks of “**jealously and strife among you.**” **Strife** is anger and bitter disagreements that result in greater and greater conflicts. **2 Corinthians 12:20** lists “**quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.**” Galatians adds, “**enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions**” (**Gal 5:20**). These are not the fruit of the Spirit by which God’s people are to be known. They are the deeds of the flesh and they wreak havoc wherever they are present, be that in families, churches, businesses, associations, government, or nations.

The story today to does not contain the word “jealousy.” But when you read through the story, it is clear that this is one of the great sins that gave rise to other sins that are mentioned, such as **gossip** and **slander** due to **culpable misinterpretation of facts** (**1**, see **6-10**), **resentment** and

mistrust, (**Gen 31:2**), lying/deceiving/cheating (7),¹ breaking of contracts (7),² disinheritance (15), division (17), theft (19), deceit/trickery (20), anger (23), secrecy (27), lying (35), and other things. These are all the result of Laban, Jacob's uncle, being jealous of Jacob. And they tore their relationship apart.

So why was Laban jealous? **First**, Jacob hears his cousins **gossiping** about him saying, “**Jacob has taken all that was our father's, and from what was our father's he has gained all this wealth**” (**Gen 31:1**). However, Jacob reveals the truth of the matter later. He calls Rachel and Leah in from the fields where they were shepherding (4). He is very concerned and says, “**I see that your father does not regard me with favor as he did before**”³ (5, 2). “**You know that I have served your father with all my strength**” (6). Jacob was honest and hard working. “**Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times**” (7). Laban began to sin against Jacob by **breaking the contract** they had agreed upon in the previous chapter when Jacob promised to work several more years for Laban in return for, what seemed at the time to Laban, a great deal. Jacob would receive all the spotted sheep that were born from pure animals.

¹ The ESV has “cheated.” The word (*talal*) is translated with these various other English words.

² Laban “changed [Jacob's] wages ten times.”

³ Literally, “I have seen your father's face (panim), that it is not towards me as before.”

Why would Laban do this, when previously he was so quick to make this deal? The answer is, “If [Laban] said, ‘the spotted [sheep] 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” (8). Laban was beside himself as to how this could happen. He had made even one such birth, let alone scores of them, virtually impossible by leaving Jacob with only pure animals, and separating his own flock by a three days journey.

In the previous chapter, Laban had learned by **divination** that Jacob’s God was blessing him in his work and that Laban was prospering because of it (30:27). This is an important clue as to the start of Laban’s jealousy now. Laban did not have personal contact with the LORD, and he probably was not even a believer. He used something later forbidden in the law to determine the source of his good fortune. He learned that it was both **God and Jacob** as God’s instrument. This is why Laban did not want Jacob to leave in the first place. But Laban’s lack of faith is what now causes him to **completely misinterpret his circumstances**.

Laban clearly thinks that Jacob is stealing in some way. Either he is actually stealing already born sheep, or somehow, he is mating his flock with Laban’s. The first would be easy to

prove, and he obviously couldn't. The second would be virtually impossible. Because Jacob is growing in riches, and Laban is losing his, Laban becomes jealous even though in the back of his mind he had to understand that God was blessing Jacob based upon his previous divination. His sons add to the delusion, saying that Jacob has taken everything from their father.

Not being able to see truth is a spiritual condition that even Christians can become blind to when things like jealousy, envy, anger, resentment, and worse begin to take root. Things that cannot be seen with the eye start to seem impossible, even though we may know that they are not. Our faith wanes and sin grows. Eventually, it turns outward onto others unless it is repented. This is why faith in Christ, rather than in what one can see with their eyes is so vital. You must continually press on to take hold of your election, to make certain that you are trusting in Christ and all his benefits rather than in the things that cause you to doubt and envy and the like.

Jacob's Dream: The Angel of God

Look at how the story takes us to just this place. We learn in the present chapter that indeed, God is the one behind both of these things. “God has taken away the livestock of your

father and given them to me” (9), not through theft, but through miraculous births via those striped staffs and Jacob’s cunning business decisions. Jacob learned at this time through a dream that it was God doing this for him. The important passage is Gen 31:10-13. He “saw in a dream that the goats that mated with the flock were striped, spotted, and mottled. Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob,’ and I said, ‘Here I am!’ 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” (10-12). So there is clearly a miracle going on here. But who is this “angel of God?”

This is the first time we have run across the exact phrase “the angel of God” in Jacob’s life.⁴ Previously, the Angel of the LORD told Jacob, “I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me” (13). That word was Yahweh. This is the more generic word *elohim*. In that chapter, the supernatural beings are El Shaddai (Gen 28:3), *elohim* (4), *mal’ake elohim* (angels of God; 12), and Yahweh (13). All but the angels of God (plural) are the same person—the God of Israel. Now here, in the phrase “angel of God,” we learn explicitly what we saw implicitly, when it described

⁴ But see Hagar and Ishmael: Gen 21:17.

Yahweh “standing” on top of Jacob’s “ladder.” This is not some invisible, disembodied voice. It is the **Angel of God**. He is the God of Bethel, which means that he is El Shaddai, Elohim, and Yahweh. Now, unless this is a fourth person of the Trinity, this is not the Father, it is not the Spirit, and so it must be the Son of God. **Christ is the God of Bethel**.

In that story, Jacob was fleeing Esau on his way to Haran. Now, this dream serves as the beginning of the reversal. Because of the way Laban is now treating him, Jacob must flee Laban and go back to Bethel. But why now? It is because the fulfillment of the covenant between Jacob and the Angel is now complete. “At Bethel, Jacob had vowed that if the Lord protected him and brought him back to his homeland, the Lord would be his God and he would worship there.”⁵ In **Gen 31:5**, Jacob has admitted, “The God of my father has been with me.” “Therefore, the LORD said to Jacob, ‘Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you’” (3).

Though he has not heard from God often in these past twenty years, the LORD never left him. Indeed, he was prospering Jacob, not to teach that all people necessarily prosper in this life, but to prove to us through Jacob, that

⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 272.

God keeps his promises. He was also protecting Jacob for the harm that Laban sought to inflict upon him (7). Unbelief could not see this. Thus, the Angel is now giving faith to Jacob by meeting with him in this dream, confirming to him his covenant love for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore, the Angel of God leaves Jacob with this command, the same command he gave to Abraham, “Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred” (13).

Jacob has the command of God confirmed by Rachel and Leah. Laban’s jealousy for Jacob had caused him to turn himself against his own daughters, such is the horror that sin can cause. The sisters told Jacob, “Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father’s house? Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has indeed devoured our money. All 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” (14-16). I am of the opinion that the text uses Elohim (God) rather than the LORD, in order to show us that this family has yet to covenant with God, therefore, the covenant name cannot rightly belong to them. People are not born Christians, even if they have Christian parents. There must be a covenant between each new generation of children. Each must have his

own faith. We will see another covenant at the end of this chapter that will help impress upon us the seriousness of entering into a covenant with God. But what a happy seriousness it also is.

Jacob Flees Laban

With God's direction and his wives' blessing, Jacob is now **ready to leave**. Of course, God is also using the circumstance of Laban's jealousy and sin to provoke Jacob to listen to him. It is always easier to obey when you sort of have no choice. This is God's grace working through our difficulties. It is his **sovereignty** in using those **circumstances** for our good and for his glory.

“**So Jacob arose and set his sons and his wives on camels**” (17). Then he began to drive all of his livestock that he had acquired in Laban's service, he set his face to the west, and began the long journey back to Canaan to his father Isaac (18). In the meantime, while Laban was off at work, Rachel went into his house and “**stole her father's household gods**” (19). This is a very strange thing that has relevance to what we saw earlier with divination, and it will come up again in the story, so we want to think about it for a moment.

At first glance, it appears that Rachel is angry at her father, so to get back at him, she steals his property. “**You**

leave me with nothing, I'll show you.” But I’m not entirely sure this is what is happening here. “Household gods” is a translation of the word “teraphim.” **What is a teraphim?**

The word appears in a smattering of places in the OT. The story of Michal helping her husband David flee from Saul tells of a single teraphim that was so large, she used it to double as David laying in his bed (1 Sam 19:13, 16). It was obviously a huge statue made for a king’s palace. We will learn in our story, that the teraphim that Rachel stole could fit in her camel’s saddle.

Our minds naturally go to the word “idol” here, which makes the translation “household gods” a bit strange. But “gods” is a more helpful translation than “idol” in this instance, because of what the word “idol” means to modern English speaking readers. When *we* think “idols” we think through the lenses of our cultures very anti-supernatural modern materialistic evolutionary worldview. We take the Psalm literally, rather than sarcastically and polemically when it says, “They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat” (Ps 115:5-7). We take the prophets’ consistent mockery of idols

and interpret it to mean that these people actually worshiped sticks and stones that they had decorated and carved. What unevolved apes!

We do not understand, because we are so far removed from the ancient worldview, that when an idol was made, it was not thought of **ontologically**, as if they were actually creating a deity, but **residentially**. They were building a house for an already existing deity to live in on this side of the supernatural veil. Idols were the places that the gods would come and dwell. To destroy an idol was not to destroy the god, but to destroy his house. To steal an idol was to move the gods his house.

The typical word for “god” is the word “*elohim*.” This word is used to describe several kinds of beings. Obviously, **the LORD** is called *Elohim*. **Psalm 82:1** refers to the heavenly “**sons of God**”⁶ (vs. 6) as *elohim*.⁷ Our own passage calls an

⁶ Compare the “sons of God” (*beney elohim*, where *elohim* is the plural form of *Eloah*) of Psalm 82:1 with the sons of God (ESV’s “heavenly beings” or *beney elim*, where *elim* is simply the plural form of *El*). It is easily seen that these are heavenly beings.

⁷ Some translations (i.e. NAS) take *elohim* here as the rulers of Israel. This is based on two OT texts in Exodus (out of thousands of uses of *elohim*) where some think *elohim* translates human judges. It does not. This idea was demolished long ago in Cyrus Gordon, “אלהים (Elohim) in Its Reputed Meaning of *Rulers, Judges*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54 (1935): 139–144. The other text is John 10:34, where Jesus quotes Psalm 82:6. Many think Jesus is called the Pharisees “gods.” The reality is, he is calling himself one of the heavenly sons of God. Jesus would never dream of calling the Pharisees gods! See See Michael Heiser, “You’ve Seen One Elohim, You’ve Seen Them All? A Critique of Mormonism’s Use of Psalm 82,” *FARMS*

angel and *elohim*.⁸ Deut 32:17 has demons being called *elohim*.⁹ And 1 Sam 28:13 calls the dead Samuel an *elohim*.

Now, obviously, Not all *elohim* are God. In fact, only one of them is. And yet, demons and angels are clearly real, even though they are called *elohim*. Therefore, other *elohim* must be real. When we look at what all of these *elohim* have in common, we find that it is **not attributes** (God is omnipresent, omnipotent, eternal, etc, while other *elohim* are not), but **residence**. There's that idea again. All *elohim* live in the spirit world.¹⁰

The word “teraphim” (*trphm*) may be related to the word “to **heal**” (*rp*'), just like the Rephaim are related to this word. In this case, a teraphim might be a kind of **demonic** entity.¹¹ We think of demons as purely evil, because Jesus teaches us to

Review 19/1 (2007): 221–266.

⁸ Deut 32:43 LXX has the “angels” bowing down to God, while the Dead Sea Scrolls have it as the “gods” bowing down to God.

⁹ See the NAS. Ps 96:5 LXX says that the “gods” (Heb. *Elohim*) are “devils.”

¹⁰ **Going Deeper:** It is strange that **Mormons** seem to get this more than many Christians, at least on one level. They believe that when Mormons die, they will become gods. But of course, they miss it at the crucial point, for they believe that God the Father was once a man just like us and that we will become just like him. This is the ultimate blasphemy on both counts. When we die, we will take up residence as spirit-beings in heaven, at least until we are given our new bodies, but we will never be like God. The whole point of the Bible from beginning to end is that no one was, is, or will ever be like God.

¹¹ The following discussion is from T. J. Lewis, “Teraphim,” ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999).

think of them as beings that oppose God. But ancient people did think in these good vs. evil ways about them. They were much more interested in pragmatics—what could the demon do for me (one of the reasons they are evil). Their view was more like that of the Roman Catholic view of saints (which, not coincidentally, also are put into idols), and they could be used to heal or to harm. The other option is that a teraphim was a **protector** (from an Akkadian word *palilu*). These protectors were usually **ancestral deities** or dead relatives. Hence, “household gods.” In either case, the idea was that some kind of supernatural being was located within the object.

In **2 Kgs 23:24**, the teraphim are associated with **necromancy, wizardry**, and the shades of the dead, which may mean that they were likely the very objects Laban used to divine who was blessing him in the previous chapter. This is probably a clue as to what Rachel is doing. Yet, precisely what she had in mind is difficult to say. It may have been a faithless move, perhaps thinking that this would allow her son to be heir of Laban’s things, as the one possessing the teraphim was given such a status. Or, it may have been just the opposite. In stealing the teraphim, Rachel may have been **trying to prevent Laban** from using them as divining sources

to figure out where Jacob had gone. Or, I suppose, both thoughts could have been in her mind.

Whatever the case, it is important to at least understand these things, because the teraphim show up again in a few verses. The main point is that Rachel “**stole**” them. This is contrasted with Jacob “**tricking**” Laban, by not telling him that he intended to flee (**Gen 31:20**). Of course, this brings us back to the great harm that Laban’s original jealousy had caused. He had destroyed the faith of his own family in him. He had created enemies of his children. Now they are getting back at him. With these two actions on our minds, Jacob flees with everything that he has and crosses the Euphrates river,¹² setting his face toward the hill country of Gilead (**21**).

Laban Catches Jacob

At this point, the scene switches from Jacob back to Laban. Laban is told about Jacob “**on the third day**” (**31:22**) after Jacob had fled. The other time this phrase is used in the stories of this great family, Abraham was lead to the mountain to sacrifice his son on the **third day** (**22:4**). That day would be a day of figurative death and resurrection for Isaac.

¹² **Going Deeper:** This idea of crossing the river, is, in my opinion, Jacob’s “baptism” into what he will soon understand as his new faith. His father Abraham had crossed the river (Josh 24:3), as had Abraham’s servant who went to Haran to find Isaac a wife. The symbolism of crossing the river to enter the Promised Land or Temple is a theme that begins in Eden and continues on through the last chapter of the Bible. See my *Waters of Creation* book for more.

The number has obvious symbolic meaning. The same is true of the next number. Laban pursued Jacob “for seven days” (31:23) Seven is the great number of Genesis, a number that symbolizes completion and creation.

Laban got all the way to Gilead, in northern Israel, when for the first time, God came to the Aramean in a dream (24). Laban is a foreigner, and he is now entering Yahweh’s territory. God said, “Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.” Would Laban heed the warning of this strange God?

He overtook Jacob (25), who was traveling with four women and 12 children, not to mention flocks of sheep and other animals. Jacob had rested for the night here, and Laban came to him with five serious complaints, complaints that we must remember were the result of Laban’s treatment of his family. Apparently, he won’t listen to *this* God!

First he said why have you tricked me (26). He is indignant, angry. This one reminds us of Jacob the deceiver. Some things never change. Second, he asked why Jacob had “driven away my daughters like captives of the sword” (26). This attack is purely the result of Laban’s inability to live in reality. Jacob hadn’t driven his wives away like hostages being kidnapped. Laban is either lying or is self-deceived. This is

what sin causes us to do. Third, he asks, “**Why did you flee secretly**” and trick me, not telling me so that I might send you away with **mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre** (27). While this was the tradition custom of those days, does anyone seriously believe that this is how Laban would have taken the news that Jacob was leaving? It is **a ruse** to make himself look good in front of others. He is a hypocrite. Notice how many sins have arisen in Laban all because he was jealous.

It does not stop here. Fourth, why did you **not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell** (28). Laban not tries to throw a **guilt complex** on Jacob. Jacob is fleeing, not leaving. Yet, Laban wants to kiss his daughters whom he had essentially sold away? He concludes, “**You have done foolishly**” (28). Now he **blames**. This is all your fault, Jacob. Do you see how Laban’s sin actually multiplies because he won’t face it?

The fifth point takes a couple of verses to unfold. “**It is in my power to do you harm**” (29). Now he **threatens** Jacob. But suddenly, Laban remembers his dream. He remembers that God had come to him. “**But the God of your father spoke to me last night**” (29). He would not allow Laban to harm Jacob. Given all the other things that God had done for Jacob,

Laban now takes God's threat seriously. How very ironic, not only because he remembers God's threat in the same breath that he threatens Jacob, but imagine this kind of a response to God from today from a pagan!

The thought of the God before him now clears his thinking slightly. He begins to finally think, not of himself, but of Jacob. “And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house” (30). He enters into Jacob's thinking, which is the first step towards any kind of reconciliation. But one thing still remains. “Why did you steal my gods (teraphim)?” (30).

Rachel with Laban's Gods

What unfolds now is the story of Laban trying to retrieve his gods from Jacob. Jacob answers all of the questions with a single statement, “Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters by force” (31), this is why I fled. How justifiable a man's rage is, until he actually bothers to listen to the other side. Then it isn't quite as easy. Jacob was afraid? Why? What have I done to him? Laban may have begun slapping himself on the cheek to wake up from his delusion.

“Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live” (32). Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them, but he

makes a vow that unwittingly threatens his beloved wife. If she is caught, he will be undone. Did Rachel hear this?

Laban begins to **search around** for the teraphim. He goes into **Leah's tent, to Bilhah's tent, to Zilpah's tent** (33). While he is still searching, we learn that Rachel has stolen the statues away in her **camel's saddle and is now sitting** on them (34). Laban searches her tent and does not find them anywhere. He approaches his Little Lamb, while she is still sitting on the camel, and she comes up with a perfect lie, **"I cannot rise before you, my lord, for the way of women is upon me"** (35). She is bleeding and unclean. It is perfect. Not only won't Laban know anything, neither will Jacob.

Suddenly, Jacob is incensed and begins to berate Laban, **"What is my offense. What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me?"** (36). You rummage through all my property, go through my wives tents, do it all publicly. See here, all these people are witnesses. Let them now judge who is right and who is wrong (37). Laban is now embarrassed, yet probably for the only thing he does right in the whole story, since we know that Rachel did steal the teraphim.

Jacob continues, **"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"** (38). Jacob is

blameless. What was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you. “I bore the loss of it myself” (39). Jacob is selfless. “From my hand you requited it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night” (39). Jacob has been persecuted. “Heat consumed me by day and the cold by night, and sleep fled from my eyes” (40). His has been the way of suffering. “I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times” (41). Jacob has served, obeyed, and endured. The man has become a type of Christ.

Even more so because we see that the God of his father Abraham and the Fear of Isaac was on his side, seeing his affliction (42). God rebuked Laban and prospered Jacob. Then, finally, Laban comes to his full senses. “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” (43)?

This is the critical point in the story. What changed his mind? What drew him out? What caused the jealousy to melt away? What stayed his hand of anger? It was the fear of the LORD. “Fear” is a word used here of Isaac’s God. God has literally scared Laban to his senses. Sometimes, this is what we

need.

A recent thread on a Christian forum has a girl saying, “I have become convinced in the belief that universalism is the only logical way to interpret the Bible. I can no longer believe in an eternal hell as I was taught all my life as it directly contradicts God's character in many ways.” She asks, “How righteous would it be to torture people endlessly? That would make God Hitler.” This girl simply does not fear God. That is very clear by such words. People presume to speak so trivially about God, like he is just one of us, as if we can stand in judgment over him. People are not afraid of God at all. The only reason I can think of why this is the case, is ironically because **he is so gracious**. It is the grace of God that prevents us from fearing him, for it shelters his holiness through his mercy. And even in the story here, this is done primarily through Christ. For grace and truth comes through Jesus Christ.

Making a Covenant

It is the grace of God that overlooks Laban’s speaking to Jacob and allows the two men to enter into **a covenant** together. This is not a covenant between God and man, nor between a king and a vassal. It is a covenant between **a father and a son**. Sometimes, something stronger than bloodlines

must keep people together. In this case, it is a covenant. Let's look and see what this particular covenant involved.

The first thing said about it is that it is a “witness” (Gen 31:44). The covenant will be a witness between the two men. This “witness” took the form of a kind of ceremony. First, a stone was set up as a pillar (45). Then, many stones were gathered together, and they made a heap out of them (46). This would have looked like those cairns you find on 14ers, stacks of stones marking the trail, only much, much larger. Then they named the heap. Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha (Aramaic for Heap of Testimony). Jacob called it Galeed (Hebrew for Witness Heap) (47).

Next came the stipulations of the covenant. “This heap is a witness between you and me today” (48). This seems strange, because how can a heap of rocks witness anything? This is one of the reasons I wanted to tell you about the teraphim. The god was thought to localize or reside in the statue. Those statues were either made of wood or stone. Here we have stone. One commentary states, “In Canaanite religion, the massebah, or standing stone, was erected and considered as a guardian or a dwelling place of a god (see Deut 16:21–22; 1 Kings 14:23).”¹³

¹³ Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity

The naming of the heap was probably the **invocation**, where **God** was called upon to witness the treaty-making ceremony and to enforce its stipulations. This is confirmed when it says it was named Mizpah, for he said, “**The LORD watch between you and me, when we are out of one another’s sight. 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**” (50). They were not so dumb as to think that stones would see anything. No, it is God who witnesses it by coming to this kind of house/temple that they are erecting for him here.

The heap of stones also served a more basic function. It became a **boundary marker** for the two of them. This is part of the covenantal stipulations. “**See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me. This heap (*gal*) is a witness, and the pillar (*matstsebah*) 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**” (51-52). It was not that they could never see one another again, but that here at this moment, they were swearing never to seek to harm one another again.

They sealed this covenant with **the sanctions** of the

covenant, “The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us” (53).¹⁴ This brought the seriousness of the occasion into full view. God himself has overseen this ceremony, and if they should break their vows, he will call them to account. This is sealed with the covenantal sacrifice. If their own blood is not enough to ensure their proper treatment of one another, the sacrifice will be. “Jacob offered a sacrifice in the hill country” (54). The covenant was cut. The blood was shed. The vow was finished. Where the covenant is made, there is no room for retribution or retaliation.

But the ceremony does not end on a frightening, serious note. Few covenants do. Rather, it ends with the obligatory covenant meal. “They ate together by the heap” (46). Jacob “called his kinsmen to eat bread. They ate bread and spent the night in the hill country” (54). What purpose does the meal serve? It serves the purpose of drawing the two parties together in fellowship and friendship. These two men have, for twenty years, had a growing rift between them.

Jacob had been badly treated by his uncle, Laban had

¹⁴ Throughout this section, it is difficult to tell if there is one pillar or two, one God or two being called upon. Most translations read as if Laban and Jacob are calling upon the same God and that there is only one heap and pillar, and the names refer to the same object. I’ve taken this interpretation in this sermon. This is mostly because Laban seems to call upon only Yahweh in the naming of the terms of the covenant (49).

sinned greatly against him. We have seen deception, lying, gossip, slander, misconstrual, resentment, mistrust, cheating, breaking of contracts, disinheritance, division, theft, trickery, anger, secrecy, lying, and more. Jacob had retreated in fear, running from the conflict in order to avoid harm to himself and his family. Laban had caught up with him and was ready to strike the final blow, when God met him and put the fear of God into him, thereby tempering his anger and allowing love to flow anew.

But now, their **grapes of wrath** are washed away with the sweet wine of gladness. The **morsels of jealousy** and resentment are swallowed up with the bread of new life together by the sacrificial meat of one slain that they might be renewed. Brothers and sisters, this is what happens when people begin to fear the Lord after great conflict arises between them. When God is seen once more for who he is, not only in the fear, but in the blamelessness, selflessness, and suffering of the Lamb of God who offered himself as a sacrifice on our behalf, then sins are forgiven, retribution is forgotten, and renewal can begin. For who is the God that is presented to us here? It is the Angel of God, the Lord Jesus before taking human flesh.

It is not a coincidence that Laban began his quest on **the**

third day, and that seven days later he and Jacob ended their most tense night together as a family around a meal. For it foreshadows to us the death of Christ and his resurrection on the third day. He shows us the new creation that is now ours in Christ Jesus.

The story ends with Laban leaving early in the morning, kissing his grandchildren and his daughters, blessing them, and returning home. He is a new man, renewed by the Fear of God. For his part, Jacob went on his way, back to Canaan. There we read, “The angels of God met him” (32:1). “When he saw them he said, ‘This is God’s camp!’” (2). There, he would stop to prepare himself to make amends with someone else. All the broken relationships must be mended, not just one. His brother Esau, from whom he fled 20 years earlier after he sought to kill him is coming. When one conflict is settled, a new one begins, but God is ready to help, because he has sworn to do so, that we might each have reconciliation to God through our Lord Jesus Christ.