

## God's Leading to Leave Laban

*The Back to Bethel Journey Begins!*

**Text:** Gen. 31:1-55

### Introduction:

1. Genesis 31-33 document Jacob's journey from Haran back to Canaan. His long season of 20 years under Laban has finally come to an end and the next phase of God's gracious work in Jacob's life opens.
2. God would do some powerful and significant things in Jacob's life on his return journey to Canaan. It was a journey filled with drama. First Jacob is confronted by Laban (Gen. 31), then he has to face Esau (Gen. 32-33). Through it all, God was working to bring Jacob to the end of himself and turn him into Israel.
3. We will consider the theme of God's leading the life of Jacob at this time under four headings.

### I. THE OCCASION OF GOD'S LEADING (VS. 1-16)

#### A. The Catalyst for God's Will (Vs. 1-3)

We note several key influences at work in Jacob's life at this time that God used to move him in the direction of His will. There was:

##### 1. A Desire from Within (Gen. 30:26; Vs. 30)

- a. Jacob had a longing in his heart to return to the land of his father. Jacob knew in his heart that his stay at Haran was only temporary. God had promised him at Bethel – "And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of." (Gen. 28:15)
- b. Sometimes the desires of our heart can be wrong but as we earnestly seek to remain yielded to the Lord, God can put a desire in our heart and use it as a part of his leadership in our lives. Psalm 37:4 "Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart."
- c. Warning: When seeking God's will, we need to be careful about relying upon only one principle of guidance. Some desires are from the Lord and will be fulfilled. Sometimes it can be a challenge to discern if a desire is from the Lord or just from ourselves. That is why we need more than just a desire to determine God's leading in our lives.

##### 2. A Difficulty from Without (Vs. 1-2)

The circumstances in Jacob's life at this time were also a part of the preparation of God to move him in the direction of His will. Like the previous point, circumstances alone should not be relied upon but they are a part of the picture when God is leading. In Jacob's case there was:

- a. The animosity of Laban's sons (Vs. 1). Jacob overhears Laban's sons and they were speaking slanderous things about him.

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- i. The hypocrisy of their accusations – these same sons had helped cheat Jacob out of what was rightfully his straight after his agreement with Laban their father (Gen. 30:35-36).
  - ii. The inaccuracy of their accusations – Jacob had not taken away “all” of Laban’s goods. In fact, he hadn’t stolen anything. He had legitimately built up his flocks and herds based on the agreement he had made with Laban. There’s nothing like material possessions to bring out the worst in people!
- b. The attitude of Laban himself (Vs. 2)
- i. Jacob discerned from Laban’s countenance that his attitude and spirit towards him had changed. Up till this point, Laban had wanted Jacob around because of the blessings he received for Jacob’s sake (Gen. 30:27). But now that had all changed. Laban bore “an unkindly demeanour toward his nephew”. The countenance reveals much about one’s inner attitudes.
  - ii. These difficulties would help prepare Jacob for the move God was about to command. God was stirring up Jacob’s nest (Deut. 32:11) and getting him ready for the next phase of His will.

### 3. A Directive from Above (Vs. 3)

This was the final and most important part of God making his will clear to Jacob at this time.

- a. The precept – “Return unto the land of thy fathers, and to thy kindred”. God’s command was plain and clear. It was time for Jacob to go back to his own country and kindred.
- b. The promise – “and I will be with thee”. Again, the promise of God’s presence is given to sustain Jacob. Little did Jacob know the challenges that were just ahead of him as he embarked on that journey! How comforting this promise would be in those times of test to know that God was with him. Knowing God is with us as we follow his perfect will brings great comfort and assurance to the heart.
- c. Summary of the steps in discerning God’s will by W.H. Griffith Thomas: “Mark carefully the steps by which Jacob was led to return home. They afford a striking lesson on the Divine methods of guidance. Firstly, the desire to go home sprang up in Jacob’s heart. Then, circumstances between him and Laban began to make it impossible for him to remain. Lastly, came the Divine message of command. Thus, inward desire, outward circumstances and the Divine Word combined to make the pathway clear. This is ever the way of God’s guidance; the conviction of the spirit within, the Word agreeing with it in principle, and then outward circumstances making action possible. When these three agree, we may be sure of right guidance.”

### B. The Counselling over God’s Will (Vs. 4-16)

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This is another important step in discerning God's will. When we believe we have discerned God's will through biblical principles such as the ones we noted above, we would be wise to get counsel from those we trust before taking a step.

### 1. Jacob's speaking to his wives (Vs. 4-13)

Jacob calls Rachel and Leah out to the field where he is with the flock and seeks their support of God's leading in his life. Here we see Jacob beginning to exercise some godly leadership in his family in order to take them forward in God's perfect plan for them. Jacob outlines:

a. The reality of the situation (Vs. 4-9). Laban plainly outlines the facts that he was no longer in Laban's favour and then recounts the injustices of Laban in relation to his wages. He also recognizes that God had been with him (Vs. 5b) and that God had intervened in the situation and given him the cattle (Vs. 9).

b. The revelation in the situation (Vs. 10-13).

i. The revelation of God's power (Vs. 11-12). God revealed to Jacob in a dream that it was His power that had orchestrated the favourable outcome for Jacob with the flocks and herds. This would have been humbling for Jacob who may well have thought the success was due to his clever scheming with the rods in the water troughs!

ii. The revelation of God's Person (Vs. 13a). God declares to Jacob, "I am the God of Bethel". Jacob's mind would have immediately gone back to that life changing encounter with God recorded in Genesis 28. The declaration of His Person would add weight and authority to the command that would follow.

iii. The revelation of God's plan (Vs. 13b). Jacob was to leave Haran and return to the land of Canaan. God had spoken clearly and plainly.

### 2. Jacob's support from his wives (Vs. 14-16)

a. Rachel and Leah were ready and willing to support Jacob in his leadership. They readily agree with him concerning the despicable character of their father. What a sad commentary we get her concerning Laban from his own daughters!

b. Rachel and Leah's attitude was that if God had spoken to Jacob has their husband, that was enough for them. He should follow through. What a blessing when husbands and wives are united in their quest to follow God's leading for their lives! What a tragedy when a wife actively opposed God's leading in her husband's life!

## II. THE OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S LEADING (VS. 17-21)

### A. The Promptness of Jacob's Obedience (Vs. 17-18)

1. Now that God's will was clear in Jacob's life and he had gained the necessary support of his family, he immediately set about moving in the direction God had told him to. Jacob had waited 20 years for this moment and now that it had arrived, he moved promptly to obey God.

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2. Note: Remember that there are periods of waiting on the Lord in the Christian life but things can move quite quickly when it is God's timing to move us forward.

### **B. The Problem accompanying Jacob's Obedience (Vs. 19)**

Little did Jacob realize that while he was busy seeking to accomplish God's will, his wife Rachel was stealing her father's gods to take along with her secretly.

1. The details about these gods.
  - a. The Hebrew word for 'images' is 'Teraphim'. These were small household gods. "These idols seem to have been used as charms, whose presence was thought to bring good to the possessor." (Thomas) How foolish to worship something that can be so easily stolen!
  - b. The Hebrew word is 'teraphim' and refers to "small idol figurines used in divination and as household deities supposed to bring good luck to the owner. Their use frequently cropped up in later Israelite history, but was definitely idolatrous and contrary to the true faith of Jehovah." (Henry Morris)
2. The danger of these gods.
  - a. These idols had no place in the home of one who knew the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. While they were not true gods, they represented the kingdom of Satan and had the potential to bring an evil influence into the home. "Her (Rachel's) attitude was little different from that of many a new Christian today, happy to know the Lord but not yet willing to enter a life of separation from the world." (Henry Morris)
  - b. We could ask the question, "Rachel, as a believer in the One True God, what on earth are these images doing in your home and in your life?"
  - c. As we think about our own homes and lives, perhaps the Holy Spirit might ask us, "What are those secret idols/images doing in your life? You are a blood-washed, born-again child of God!"
    - i. What's that book doing on your shelf as a Christian? It glamorizes sin and dishonours the Lord.
    - ii. What's that T.V. show doing in your life? It's full of dark and depraved themes. In fact, should you have that T.V. set at all in your home, constantly spewing forth evil images into your home and life.
    - iii. What is that DVD doing in your cabinet as a believer? There are scenes in there that no child of God should watch.
    - iv. What place does that music of the world have in your CD collection or digital download collection? You come to church on Sunday and sing the hymns but then go home and allow the world's beat to pulsate through your heart, carrying with it messages that are empty and vain at best or outright lewd and ungodly at worst.
    - v. What are those secret social media images doing on your phone? Why are you subscribed to that TikTok influencer? In fact, why are you even on a platform like

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TikTok, Facebook or Twitter? Secret, destructive images in one's life wasn't just a problem in Rachel's day. The problem is alive and well in our day. In fact, with modern technology, secret images are a bigger problem today than ever. So many Christians are going down the social media sinkhole in our day.

- vi. What's that secret habit of accessing pornographic images doing in your life? You're a part of the bride of Christ and those strange women have no place in your life as a believer.
- vii. What's that garment doing in your wardrobe as a child of God? It is contrary to biblical principles of modesty and decency and follows the godless, fashions of a world obsessed with nakedness and sensuality.
- viii. What's that bottle of wine doing in your cupboard? Why would you turn to the wine of the world when you have the joy of the Spirit in your life?
- ix. What place do those secret idols of the heart have in your life?<sup>1</sup> Are those thought patterns, imaginations and inner affections of God? Should those philosophies of the world be dominating your mind or the infallible truth of God's Word? 2 Cor. 10:4-5 "(For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;"
- x. Challenge: Purge out the secret idols in your life. They may seem innocent and harmless but they will bring the influence of the world and the devil into your life and home. Later on, Jacob would issue a challenge to his family – "Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments." (Gen. 35:2)

### C. The Procedure of Jacob's Obedience (Vs. 20-21)

1. Jacob had to flee Laban in haste. Some are critical of Jacob for this but in the context, it was probably the right action. Laban was a ruthless and godless man who no doubt would have stood in Jacob's way. As it was, he pursued Jacob and would have done him harm had it not been for the intervention of God.
2. It is sad when someone has to flee a Laban-like family member but it sometimes happens. What a sad commentary on the kind of man Laban was that his daughters and son in law didn't feel it was safe for them to even try and say goodbye.

## III. THE OPPOSITION TO GOD'S LEADING (VS. 22-43)

The road to Bethel is a contested road! When we begin doing the will of God, it will not be long before others will protest our actions in one way or another. Laban viciously opposed God's leading in Jacob's life. Mark it

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel 14:3 "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their heart,"

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down, the path of God's will and blessing in your life is rarely trial and trouble free! How did Laban oppose Jacob in his quest to follow God's leading?

### A. By Pursuing Jacob (Vs. 22-25)

1. Look at the great lengths Laban was prepared to go to in order to try and stop Jacob in his tracks. We are reminded that the devil is relentless in his attempts to try and obstruct us in the path of God's will and blessing.
2. No doubt Laban had evil intentions against Jacob (See Vs. 29) but God intervened and overruled. God's hand of preservation was upon Jacob and God would ensure that His will was carried out in his life. Jacob was living in fear of Laban at this time (Vs. 31) but God was already dealing with Laban.

### B. By Accusing Jacob (Vs. 26-43)

Accusation is one of the enemy's favourite tactics he uses to try and slow you down in the path of God's will!

1. Laban's accusations (Vs. 26-30)  
His accusations involved
  - a. Exaggeration (Vs. 26) – Jacob had not carried away Laban's daughters like captives at all. On the contrary, he had taken the time to discuss his plan of action with Rachel and Leah and had their full support. Slanderers love to sensationalize and scandalize a situation to try and make it appear to be one way when in actual fact it is another. Matthew Henry writes, "Those that mean ill themselves are most apt to put the worst construction upon what others do innocently."
  - b. Dishonesty (Vs. 27-28) – Knowing Laban's character and history, we highly doubt that this was an honest and sincere statement. Laban had already thwarted Jacob from leaving once before (Gen. 30:26). Some people are very good and making claims about what they would have done in a hypothetical situation but in practical reality their actions expose them as empty lies.
  - c. Intimidation (Vs. 29) – Laban's words unmask the true attitude of his heart. He was malicious towards Jacob and would have done him harm if he could have. What a terrible, unkind thing to say - "It is in the power of my hand to do you hurt"!
  - d. Misapplication (Vs. 30) – Laban's idols had been stolen it was true but not by Jacob. Laban is making accusations without evidence.
2. Jacob's answer (Vs. 31-43)  
Jacob speaks about:
  1. The question regarding his action (Vs. 31). Jacob had fled because he legitimately feared that Laban would take his wives by force and sent him away empty handed (Vs. 42).
  2. The accusation concerning false gods (Vs. 32-35). Jacob's reply appears a bit hasty. So confident was he that this was a false accusation that he pronounced the death penalty against the one found with the idols. Little did he know that his favourite wife had those very idols in her tent!

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3. The indignation over the injustices (Vs. 36-42)
  - a. The injustice of Laban's pursuit of Jacob (Vs. 36-37)
  - b. The injustices of Laban's past treatment of Jacob (Vs. 38-42)
    - i. Jacob had acted with integrity (Vs. 38-40)
    - ii. Laban had acted with dishonesty (Vs. 41-43)

### IV. THE OVERCOMER IN GOD'S LEADING (VS. 44-55)

By the grace of God Jacob was able to overcome Laban's opposition, part ways and continue on his journey in God's will. This was made possible through:

#### A. The Protection of God (Vs. 24, 29, 42)

1. We see the faithfulness of God to His promises in Jacob's life all through this account. No matter how determined Laban might have been to obstruct Jacob in his journey, God's would overrule and ensure His will was carried out.
2. In like manner, only the protecting, preserving hand of God in our lives can keep us from the attacks of the enemy.

#### B. The Parting with Laban (Vs. 44-55)

For Jacob to go forward, he had to part ways with Laban. This was made possible through a covenant that was made between them.

1. The symbols of the covenant (Vs. 44-48)
  - a. Stones and a stone pillar (Vs. 45-49)
    - i. Jergarsahadutha = means "The Heap of Testimony" in the Aramaic or Chaldaic language of Laban.
    - ii. Galeed = means "The Heap of Witness" in the Hebrew language.
    - iii. Mizpah = means "watchtower" and "denotes it as a sort of sentry guarding the boundary between Laban's sphere of activities and Jacob's sphere of activities." (Morris)
  - b. A ceremonial meal (Vs. 46b)
2. The terms of the covenant (Vs. 49-53)
3. The worship after the covenant (Vs. 54). Jacob offers sacrifices to God after the covenant has been made. It could be that these were a part of the formal ceremony but its more likely they represented an act of worship on Jacob's part. No doubt Jacob was thankful for God's gracious intervention into this difficult situation.
4. The separation after the covenant (Vs. 55). This is the last mention of Laban in the Bible. We leave this sad figure behind us as we follow Jacob's life from here. God had used this season with Laban to teach Jacob some valuable lessons but now the time had come to take him upwards and forwards. What a lesson Laban provides in how not to live as a Christian! Laban in his greed ended up missing out on what was truly special in life (e.g., family). "Laban is an unfortunate example of a worldly, covetous man, one who knows about the true God and to whom a thorough witness had been given. He had seen the reality of God in the life of Jacob, along with the power of God in His blessing and protection of Jacob. He himself had even enjoyed many of the blessings of God through his relationship to Jacob. Nevertheless, he continued in idolatry and covetousness, seeking material gain for himself to the exclusion of

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all other considerations...His life constitutes a sober warning to a great host of semireligious but fundamentally self-worshiping and self-seeking men and women today." (Morris)

### **Conclusion:**

1. Are you yielded to God's will in your life and are you seeking to discern His will through Scriptural principles?
2. Are there any idols in your life that need to be purged out?
3. Are you an opposer or an encourager of God's will in the lives of others?