
The Trouble with In-Laws

Genesis 31:17-55

Introduction Well none of you has trouble with in-laws, I am sure...

I have the perfect solution to in-law trouble – never allow them to meet. My father passed away before Esther and I met. When I went out to the Washington State to marry Esther, my mother was told not to travel due to her own mother’s imminent death. With Esther’s parents not traveling this way but once and that when my mom was in Germany and my mother never having traveled out there, my in-laws have never met. Yes, as unfathomable as it seems, my mother and Esther’s parents have never met one another.

So, not having very many in-law stories myself, I looked up in-laws on the web. Guess what, there is a website dedicated to Mother-in-Law stories. I read through some of them. Most are pathetic. Some are truly sad. Frankly, they end up as much being a reflection on weak, pampered mama’s boys as anything else. So, where are the father-in-law websites? Almost non-existent

Yet, here, the in-law trouble is a father-in-law.

Some Background 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).

God is pleased to glorify Himself by taking us through many kinds of hardships. Some those holiness making tools in God’s hands are called relatives. 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!!!” Most of you will recognize some of the trouble with in-laws.

A Secret Departure**(v.17-21)**

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

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”.

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 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 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)

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 gain what was not his.

Also, what kind of gods are they that allow themselves to 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)

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 descendents will not, honor the intent nor the words of a contract. 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 is launched a long and tedious search. 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. So 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. 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 goat 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.

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!

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

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 others faces, the veins in their neck's bulging.

With Dishonest Assertions

(v.43-44)

Laban's next sentence is astounding in it its hubris. "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. 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. 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."

So 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. Laban says good bye, 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...

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. **Lessons**

CORE PRINCIPLE: Stop trying to solve in-law 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. 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. Keep the Lord's Day for the Lord – it is not family day.

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