

GENESIS—WEEK 26

ON THE RUN



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is Rachel Hides her Father's Idols by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770) a fresco painted on a wall of Palazzo Patriarcale, Udine, Italy

Jacob's great escape—not. Jacob takes off in the middle of the night, but Laban tracks him down.

From a secular point of view, the whole thing seems to backfire, but it's really just another of God's lesson-trials for Jacob.

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Thank you.

Genesis 31:1–55 — On the Run
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1 Genesis 31:1–13 (ESV)

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.” And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before. Then the LORD said to Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.”

So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was 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. You know that I have served your father with all my strength, yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times. But God did not permit him to harm me. 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. Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me. 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. 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. 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.’”

The surprise here is that God calls Himself “*the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me.*” Jacob thinks he’s done a brilliant job of working his deal with Laban. God trumps the whole thing by reminding Jacob of the other deal, the deal he made at Bethel.

Think about what a shock this must have been to Jacob. His breeding trick is working. His portion of the flock keeps growing. He thinks he’s some kind of genius negotiator/shepherd. Then ... Pop! The bubble bursts. It was all God! And the livestock were just props; Jacob’s deal with Laban was a sideshow. The promise Jacob made to God at Bethel is the only thing that matters.

Jacob has to feel like he’s been had. He got distracted from the original deal he made with God and was scoring points in a ballgame that didn’t count. Meanwhile, God checkmates him. But the toughest pill of all is that this is all his fault. No one tricked him; he tricked himself.

His greed made him the ultimate sucker.

We’ve all had a wake-up moment where we realize that we’re paying attention to the wrong thing. I’m worrying about a game on TV while dinner burns. I’m worrying about burning dinner instead of preparing for an important meeting. I’m busy preparing for a meeting and miss the signs of a heart attack.

One of the keys to growing in Christ is changing our focus. All our secular priorities aren’t what life is all about. Jesus didn’t die for our 401k plans.

Never forget that your own growth is your highest priority. We tend to be so busy trying to grow others that we neglect our own growth. That’s tantamount to thinking we’ve arrived.

2 Genesis 31:14–21 (ESV)

Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, “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.”

So Jacob arose and set his sons and his wives on camels. 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. Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods. And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee. He fled with all that he had and arose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.

While Jacob has some legitimate gripes against Laban, stealing away with both his daughters and all the grandchildren is way, way over the top. Imagine if your son-in-law did that to you.

This whole thing is just sin soup. Laban is treating everyone badly, even his own descendants. What’s up with that?

Then Jacob masterminds the rudest goodbye imaginable. What’s up with that?

Then Rachel tops everyone with her spoiled-brat theft of her dad’s household gods.

Oh, good grief. Laban would have given her more valuable presents as a send-off gift.

Actually, Rachel’s stunt spawns the next lesson God has in store for Jacob. While it will be painful when Laban discovers that his daughters and grandchildren are gone—and he might have gone after them anyway just to say a proper goodbye—the theft of his household gods is just cause for rounding up a posse and chasing them down.

Jacob’s head start might have been enough under normal circumstances—he’s obviously assuming that—but not now. He won’t make a clean escape. Jacob will have to face Laban.

Yet again, events conspire to force Jacob to grow.

The cruel truth is that many people wreck their family relationships. We’re often just as knuckleheaded as Laban, Jacob, and Rachel. Even if we haven’t personally ruined relationships, we know people who have.

And that’s just us. Then there’s the enemy who sows dissension and chaos wherever he can. A healthy marriage helps both people grow in Christ. The enemy hates that; thus, every marriage is in his crosshairs.

All marriages need prayer—and not just the ones that are on the rocks. This is tricky because it’s not easy to find the right words to pray for a marriage with no obvious problems.

The only way to know is to ask. “How can I pray for you?”

3 Genesis 31:22–35 (ESV)

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

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. And Laban said to Jacob, “What have you done, that you have tricked me and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword? 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? And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? Now you have done foolishly. 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.’ And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?” Jacob answered and said to Laban, “Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. 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.

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. 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. 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.

While the text doesn't explicitly say this, it feels like Laban knows, or at least suspects, that Rachel is lying. He made a big show of making an exhaustive search—even feeling around the tents. He knows his gods are there somewhere. Now he's in the last tent, where he does **not** want to find them. If he checks under Rachel, the outcome is unthinkable. Did Laban notice a look of fear in her eyes? When? Is this why he saved Rachel's tent for last? In any case, he seems to have decided to just let it go.

It also looks like Jacob puzzles this out while he's watching Laban search. He will later do something about it (in 35:4). That action makes most sense in this context.

If so, this is a signal moment for Jacob. When the light bulb comes on, and he sees Laban on the brink of finding the gods in Rachel's tent, his eyes, and his attitude, are opened. The holy clue-bat strikes again. His decision to take off without saying goodbye is looking dumber by the second.

His signature deceitfulness is getting slammed.

Jacob is learning the sinner's motto, “I am a mess.” We all get this, but can use an occasional reminder.

Ask God to remind you—but be prepared for a real response.

4 Genesis 31:36–42 (ESV)

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? 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. 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. 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. There I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. 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. 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.”

The humiliation of being searched really trips Jacob’s wire. He still needs to learn humility, but he does make some good points here. Jacob worked hard these last 20 years; Laban has done well by him. The sincerity of this tirade shows that Jacob no longer thinks his trick with the sticks was meaningful. God alone gave the harvest.

Jacob ends his tirade with a mini-sermon. He’s preaching words he’s only just now beginning to understand. Laban had told Jacob how he learned that God has his back, and Jacob reflects that back at Laban. At least Jacob is paying attention.

Jacob has reached an important stage in his sanctification. He is now a “spoiled brat believer.” He definitely believes in God and is grateful, but he sees God as his copilot instead of his pilot. He thinks it’s his show and he’s blessed—because, of course he’s blessed.

The next steps will be tough but important—and interesting too. Jacob needs to be humbled. He still doesn’t care about anyone but himself. He needs to learn that it’s not all about him.

That step is coming.

Jacob is not unlike many new believers, especially in America. One of the jobs of a local church is to move them past that stage. This is made more difficult by the way Christianity is “sold” in America. We present the gospel as a great deal, an easy way to get into heaven. “Heaven is a free gift,” we say.

That’s true, but it focuses the gospel on what we get out of it instead of focusing on Christ. The church has the rather challenging job of teaching people that it’s not all about us; it’s all about God.

Pray for new believers. Pick out one or two that you know and lift them up to the Lord. Ask Him to show them the magnificence of His plans and the magnificence of Himself.

Ask the Holy Spirit to open their hearts and minds to greater concepts.

5 Genesis 31:43-55 (ESV)

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? Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I. And let it be a witness between you and me.” So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. And Jacob said to his kinsmen, “Gather stones.” And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me today.” Therefore he named it Galeed, and 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.”

Then Laban said to Jacob, “See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me. 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. 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, 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.

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

Laban outclasses Jacob by replying to his tirade with a father’s heart. He makes a good point, but he doesn’t press the issue. His measured response makes Jacob look small. Laban (who has all the power in this situation) isn’t hurt by Jacob’s words. He’s the adult in the room.

Laban suggests a covenant, and Jacob just follows along. Jacob’s only direct quote in this entire passage is, “Gather stones.” Jacob does swear an oath in the end, but it’s all Laban’s ceremony. The next morning, Laban does the things a loving father would do and heads home. He knows he’ll probably never see his daughters or the grand-kids again.

This is wonderful example of the greater one displaying grace towards the lesser one. Laban makes Jacob’s tirade in 31:36–42 sound like whining. Scripture does not record Jacob being humbled by this, but it’s hard to imagine that he wasn’t. Rachel and Leah may have helped drive that point home later; I know my wife would have.

This is the perfect prelude to what happens next.

Spouses can be excellent accountability partners because they are often eyewitnesses to the things we need to be called out on. Other accountability partners are great, even essential, but for them to do any good, we have to accurately self-report our mess-ups.

That can be a pretty unreliable mechanism, especially at the times when we most need to be called out.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What was your biggest wake-up moment—when you realized that God’s plans outclassed what you thought was important?
2. Is there any useful way to intervene in a troubled marriage?
3. How are you like Jacob?
4. Think back to when you were a new believer. How was your faith immature?
5. When have you been humbled by someone else’s grace?