

The interesting thing about this story is the way that Jacob capitulated to the deceptions of Laban, and placed his faith in God alone for his liberation from his father-in-law. Also, the man who had done so little work as a child was prepared to work even longer for a man who had stood in his way and attempted to cheat him, at least by making sure that any claim he made on the flocks would be contested by his sons, whatever agreement he thought he had made with Laban himself. Now, the flocks that Jacob started with and which belonged to Laban were pure white, and ironically, Laban's name means 'white'. No wonder Jacob wanted the ones that were speckled or spotted or brown (30:32f.); the pure white one reminded him of the man who had cheated him!

We will read tomorrow of what happened over the following years as Jacob bred the sheep and goats, and later about the vision of God which gave him confidence in what he had done even though it made him vulnerable. God had made his choice a long time previously, and was about to fulfil his promises to His servant Jacob.

Application

In the midst of a difficult situation, we would be tempted to fight our way past 'the enemy' in order to find a victory for Christ and His people. This story of Jacob tells us that sometimes it is necessary to give in to the enemy in order to defeat him, simply because the victory does not belong to us but to the Lord alone! In this passage of Scripture, we do not see the full story, but we do see the important part of it in which Jacob yielded control of the situation to the Lord. His enemy, Laban, thought he was in control, but in reality, Jacob had left the situation in God's hands, the God he believed would bring him safely back to the Promised Land. It was a game of double-bluff, Laban thought he had successfully bluffed Jacob into remaining his servant for life, but Jacob called that bluff by leaving Laban to believe what he wished, whereas he had left things in God's hands and had faith that they would turn around.

It is important for us to remember this approach to defeating the enemy, for it clearly yielded impressive results for Jacob, as we shall see in the coming chapters! In our world in which aggression is glorified, we are often tempted to believe that the Devil is only defeated by direct confrontation. This Scripture teaches us otherwise, but maintains without question the supreme importance of faith and trust in God for all things, especially in impossible situations! There is one other possibility, however, which is that when we face what appear to be impossible situations, these may well be the exact circumstances in which the Lord delights to show us that He is in control, and He delights to intervene in human affairs! Miracles have happened, they do happen now, and they will in the future; especially when we trust in the Lord!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Read through the passage of scripture carefully to make sure that you understand what the study notes have said. Check it out if you are uncertain.
2. At what point in the text do you believe that Jacob shows faith in God?
3. In what ways do you believe that Jacob has changed since he was the man who cheated his brother out of his blessing?

Suggestions about discipleship challenges

Each of us face circumstances in which we must decide either to fight on, or to stand back and allow the Lord to pursue His sovereign will. It is very hard to know how to deal with this dilemma! In reality, though, the lesson of this passage may be that we should fight as hard as we can for what is right and then stand back when we know we can do no more. But it is in these last situations that our faith is most tested, for we have to hand things or people over to the Lord. What circumstances do you face in which it seems impossible that the Lord's will can be done?

Final Prayer

You bring us the brightness of joy and the liberation to our souls, Lord Jesus Christ. For when we trust You, believe in Your promises, have faith in Your steadfast love and depend upon Your support, You delight to surprise us with Your answers to our problems. Thank You Lord; AMEN

Prayer

Forgive us, Lord God, for the way in which we struggle to achieve Your will within our lives. Keep Satan's hand at bay, and bring us to that place of inner peace where we can worship You with all our hearts and through all we do, however hard we find the way. In You alone, our lives make sense; keep us safe today, we pray. AMEN

Further Suggestions for Prayer

Weekly Theme: The food we eat

Pray for farmers and all who work on the land to provide our food. Pray for those who farm on a small scale, providing for themselves and a small income, and for who do so on a large scale, supplying shops and supermarkets. Pray for all to work with a proper respect for God's creation.

Meditation

In the beauty of a sunset, God's delight in His creation
Is displayed with a mastery that defies our every faculty:
Every moving, changing, and subtle shade,
And every unlimited variation of light lies in His grasp.

We try to capture this great splendour in so many ways;
The methods of a skilful scientist analyse its physics,
A painter captures it in oils, pastel or water-colour,
Photographers chase the enigma of 'just the right moment'.

Yet we return, evening upon evening, transfixed,
To view the ever changing majesty of a sunset;
Once seen, this glimpse of God is never seen again,
And never seems the same when viewed on smaller screens.

For what we see is always bigger than ourselves,
Our physics, art, photography, and even our imagination:
We only ever capture what You show us of Yourself,
And there's never not a sunset, somewhere, for someone to see.

Bible Study - Genesis 30:25-36

²⁵ After Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, 'Allow me to leave in good faith, so that I can go back to my own home and country. ²⁶ Give me my wives, for whom I have served you, and my children, and let me go. You know how much work I have done for you.'

²⁷ Laban answered, 'Please, if you accept me favourably, I have learned by signs and omens that the LORD has blessed me because of you; ²⁸ state your wages, and I will pay it.' ²⁹ Jacob said to him, 'You know very well how I have worked for you, and how your cattle have fared with me. ³⁰ The little you had before I came has increased significantly; and with me around you, the LORD has blessed you. But when will I be able to provide for my own household also?' ³¹ Laban said, 'What should I give you?' Jacob replied, 'You do not have to give me anything. I will continue to look after your flocks if you do one thing for me: ³² go through the entire flock today, and remove from it every speckled and spotted sheep and goat and every black lamb. Then I shall be paid. ³³ So in the future, you will be able to check whether I have been honest with you about what you have paid me, for any of the goats that is not speckled and spotted among the goats or lambs that are not black, you may consider as stolen!' ³⁴ Laban said, 'Good! I agree with what you have said.'

³⁵ But on that same day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it, and every lamb that was black, and placed them in the care of his own sons; ³⁶ and he placed himself at a distance of three day's journey from Jacob, while he was pasturing the rest of Laban's flock.

Review

After the birth of Jacob's twelve children, it looks to the reader of Genesis as if Jacob's life is beginning to turn around. That is indeed true, but we are about to embark upon one of Scripture's truly dark stories; a tale of intrigue and shady dealing. From this point in his story until he re-enters the Promised Land (33:18f.), Jacob is tested in every way, all his wit and ingenuity is required to escape the clutches of his devious father-in-law, Laban. Each element of the story is full of such complex deception that those of us who read these chapters today can easily become totally confused!

The passage begins with a sharp conversation between Laban and Jacob. After fourteen years of service for his two wives and the birth of Joseph, Jacob wanted to leave and go home to Canaan to fulfil his promise to God (28:20) and the request of his mother (27:43). He asked Laban to let him go immediately. It is abundantly clear, however, that Laban was not prepared to do this. He regarded Jacob as a labourer rather than a son-in-law; a servant who needed to ask to leave rather than a relative who had the freedom so to do (also, see later in 31:43, where Laban insisted that his daughters and grandchildren were his), and he did not want to lose someone who has given him good service (30:27). He was a valuable shepherd, and Laban used all his cunning and smooth talk when declaring that all Jacob had to do was to 'state his wages' in order to continue to work for him.

This placed Jacob in a dilemma. He wanted to leave, but needed to be able to support his family for the journey home and he had nothing. He knew full well that Laban was not about to give him anything, and Laban's caustic words 'what should I give you' (30:31) made it clear that Jacob would receive no favours. He therefore struck a strange deal that sounded as if Laban had managed to lock Jacob into being his servant for life! The details are complex and to do with ancient laws about shepherding; we will see how this and the rest of the story works as the Bible study goes deeper, and by agreeing with Laban the 'wages' of the multicoloured sheep and goats, he thereby agreed to stay on as a labourer. Laban immediately separated out the sheep and goats Jacob requested and gave them to his sons. Of course, they were not interested in Jacob or his future, and it seems to us as if Jacob had completely 'lost the plot'. What hope did he now have of obtaining independence and returning to the Promised Land?

This is where we must remember that we are reading a long story, in which the reader is expected to know more than what is in this passage alone. The next chapter of Genesis reveals that God told Jacob to take this course of action (see 31:7f.), and what Jacob agreed with Laban was in response to a quite specific vision of God! Yet again, the Old Testament is telling us a story of the triumph of God's grace over the ways of humanity. Yes, it is complicated, but the wider picture is a powerful story of the grace of God which shapes one of the foremost characters of the Old Testament.

Going Deeper

There is a much detail in this story which helps us to understand what is going on. It is certainly a story of the Old Testament that I did not understand fully until I studied it. Yet the more I looked, the more fascinating it became! There is more to this story about the grace of God than meets the eye.

Jacob asks to go home

The very first words of our passage are interesting. Why did Jacob wait until Rachel gave birth to Joseph before he asked to leave Laban's household (30:25)? We could regard this as a passing reference which merely tells us about the timing Jacob's request, but it is more than that. Laban had managed to keep Jacob completely tied down under his authority while he worked for him. Now it sounds crude to us, but before Joseph was born, Jacob had evidently consummated the marriage with Leah for she had conceived many children. As long as Rachel herself bore no children, ancient cultures declined to accept that a marriage had been formally consummated, and there are a number of ancient texts from that region of around two thousand BC (roughly the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) which confirm this to be the case. The irony was therefore that if Jacob had attempted to flee before Rachel bore a child, Laban would have been within his rights to claim her back, and with a financial penalty (which Jacob, with no personal wealth, could not pay!), and Rachel of course, was the woman Jacob loved!

The birth of Joseph is therefore the beginning of the story of the liberation of Jacob's family from the clutches of Laban; something that we will find is important as Genesis unfolds, for we all know that later on, as the twelve sons of Jacob grow up, Joseph is the youngest, but also the favoured child of Jacob. His importance did not simply come from his being the first child of Rachel, but he was the one whose birth sparked the hope in Jacob and gave him the confidence to speak to Laban and begin the long road to freedom.

The big problem that Jacob had was that he could not travel with his family unless he had cattle and flocks. His cautious words 'you know how much work I have done for you' were his way of saying to Laban 'part of your wealth is mine'. Laban was not going to accept this, of course, but the One who did know all about this was the Lord! Before Jacob came to Mesopotamia it would be hard to credit him with a day's hard work, for the picture we have of the Jacob who left his father's house was of a man who was pampered (25:28). Since then, the Lord had taken him and begun to fulfil in him the promises of the Covenant; firstly, he had large numbers of children, being the first of his family line to fulfil the promise of 'increase in numbers' (17:4 etc.), and secondly, his work was fruitful, as he was able to declare to Laban in the tense bartering that lay ahead (30:30)

The stubborn and scheming nature of Laban

Laban knew well that Jacob could not leave him unless he managed to obtain flocks and herds from him, which he was not prepared to give. From his point of view, if Jacob had paid for his wives, then he (Laban) would be obliged to give him back the equivalent to provide for his family, but Jacob never paid for his wives in a direct way; he had only worked for them 'in lieu' of payment. From Jacob's point of view, he had paid by increasing Laban's flocks and was due a portion, and this would enable him to set off as he requested.

Laban replied to Jacob with a politeness which hid his real intention. Having said 'please' and 'if you accept me favourably' to Jacob in a manner not unlike that of the famous Uriah Heap in Nicholas Nickleby (a novel by Dickens), he set out his counter proposition, which was that Jacob remain as a shepherd of his, for some agreed pay. It was a simple ploy to say 'No' to Jacob, and he knew it. Any pay that Jacob asked for would mean far less than what he really wanted; his freedom (30:30). The subtlety of what was going on is not conveyed in most Biblical translations, which then put the following question in Laban's mouth; 'what shall I give you' (30:31); implying that Laban was asking Jacob what he wanted in order to leave. This is wrong, for no substantial grammatical change is required in the Hebrew for us to find a far more caustic question as in the translation above 'what should I give you?' for which a more bold form of the English could easily be 'why should I give you anything?'

Ancient documents of the times reveal that it was a common 'sharp practice' amongst wealthy men to tie their labourers into pay deals which either gave them the minimum wage (one and a half shekels per lunar month) or a share of the flock that was the weakest and least likely to breed well or succeed in the long term. Jacob knew he would not get a deal from Laban that would enable him to go immediately, and he needed flocks and herds, not money. He opted for the wage deal that left him with a portion of the flock that was 'speckled and spotted'; a variety that was considered less valuable (because the skin and fleece was not 'pure' white) and less virile (see later in the story).

Laban was perfectly happy with the deal and although it is not said who went in amongst the sheep to do the separation or what Jacob did at this point, Laban put all his speckled and spotted flocks of sheep and goats into the hands of his sons (30:35,36) and at a good distance from Jacob.

God's blessing on Jacob

It is now clear to us that Jacob, who has already experienced two of the Lord's Covenant blessings (see above), now started a third period of employment for Laban in which a miracle of provision would have to take place, because he was left in charge of pure white flocks, and the spotted and speckled sheep and goats he claimed had been removed as far away from him as possible and were in the hands of Laban's sons. They would all be keen to hang on to what they had as part of their inheritance from their father.