

and heading for Gilead, the general term for the hill country to the east of the river Jordan (31:17,21). Apart from deceiving Laban by leaving without telling him, one small incident occurred that would have a bearing on the future in more ways than one.

Nomadic families were known to keep small, wooden effigies of ancestors, otherwise called 'teraphim'. They were used not for the worship of the dead, but for divination (which means predicting future events by 'reading' them in certain objects). The head of the household was responsible for keeping these 'teraphim', and it was these that Rachel took from her father's house. We are not told why. She may have felt that this signified a transference of power from her greedy father to her beloved husband, or she may have felt more comfortable facing a long journey and an uncertain future with the possession of these objects as a 'lucky charm'. We can guess as much as we like, but the significance of her actions would prove to be important both spiritually and practically, as we shall discover tomorrow.

Application

There is much more to come from this story. It is worth taking time to consider one important spiritual matter clearly evidenced within this story. That is the sequence of events by which God established his relationship with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as we have seen above. Firstly He makes a promise, freely given to those whom he chooses. Then he requires something of His chosen, delivered as a command; and the fulfilment of this command or obedience to it bring further blessing. In our text today, Jacob received the promise of God before he came to Laban, he was being required to be obedient in leaving Laban at this time, and was assured of the blessing of entering into the 'Promised Land' of Canaan.

This pattern of God's dealing with people is discernable throughout Scripture, and today as well. The Lord acts first by way of promise, and then asks us to respond in faith and obedience so that we will receive the further blessings He has to give us. You may well find this pattern in your own spiritual life, and if so, you can be sure it is authentic! One important aspect of this pattern is that God acts first to approach His chosen, whether the forefathers of old, or Christians today who are called of God. This prior activity of God, often offered as a promise, is called 'prevenient grace'; the word 'prevenient' meaning 'going before'. How often have you heard a testimony of someone who has said that when they came to faith, they realised that God had been 'in their life' before they committed, or that the Lord had done something for them which drew them towards faith. All of this is 'prevenient grace', and it is essential to our understanding of how God establishes a relationship of love and trust with people. It is an essential piece of theology, and a profound mystery of our faith; and its first appearance in Scripture is in Genesis!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you believe that Jacob was justified in deceiving Laban by leaving without his permission? What were the risks?
2. If God was responsible for Jacob's success in breeding, why does Scripture record so many details about it? What purpose does this serve?
3. What might be considered to be the equivalent of Rachel's 'household gods', or 'teraphim', today?

Discipleship

Consider the pattern which describes the way the Lord deals with His people, as described above in the Bible study. Can you see this pattern within your own life? You may find that the way this has worked is a little strange; for example, you may feel that the Lord's first promises to you were made through your Christian upbringing, rather than an event like 'being healed', for example. Reflect on what commands God has given to you which he expects you to obey, and also the further promises of grace such as the gifts of the Holy Spirit which the Lord delights to give. How much of this is your experience?

Final Prayer

Your grace, Lord Jesus, has gone before us in so many ways. You know the trials we have faced; you have prepared for us great joy and happiness before we even know it; and You defeat the enemy before us when we go about Your business. Thank You for Your grace, Lord Jesus. AMEN

Prayer

We ask for grace, Holy Spirit, to find our way through both the joys and the troubles of life. We confess our unhappiness at things which appear wrong, and we are truly grateful for the wonderful love that You and other people show to us. By Your grace, may we face our troubles and enjoy our privileges, and so, find peace in You; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The food we eat

Pray for the fertility of the land on which crops are grown. Naturally, this varies throughout the world, but in many places people still believe in all manner of fertility rituals. Pray that people will put aside such false folk religion and give praise to our God, who has made all things.

Meditation

What has the world to offer you and me; wealth?

These benefits are an illusion, a diversion from 'the narrow way';
Our Lord says, come, find the true wealth of faith, hope and love.

What has the world to offer you and me; respect?

A deception portrayed by those who like themselves too much!
Our Lord says, come, be loved by my family who know they are loved.

What has the world to offer you and me; power?

An exercise in deception which corrupts all those who seek it;
Our Lord says, come, there's more power in living the fruit of the Spirit.

What had the world to offer you and me; death!

Horror of horrors! Don't tell everyone, we might come to know the truth!
Our Lord says, wait, and don't be afraid, it's the gateway to real life!

Bible Study - Genesis 31:1-21

¹ Jacob heard that Laban's sons were saying, 'Jacob has taken everything that was our father's, and made all his wealth out of him.'² Jacob also saw that Laban's attitude towards him was not as good as before. ³ Then the LORD said to Jacob, 'Return to the land of your ancestors and your family, and I will be with you.'⁴ So he summoned Rachel and Leah to the field with his flocks, ⁵ and said to them, 'I can see that your father does not have regard for me as he did before; but the God of my father has been with me. ⁶ You know the effort with which I have served your father, ⁷ yet he has cheated me and changed my wages ten times; but God did not let him do me harm. ⁸ If he said, "The speckled will be your wages," then all the flock gave birth to speckled; and if he said, "The striped will be your wages," then all the flock gave birth to striped. ⁹ God has therefore taken back your father's livestock and given it all to me.

¹⁰ Once, in the breeding season, I had a dream in which I could see that the male goats mating with the flock were striped, speckled, and mottled. ¹¹ Then in the dream God's angel called me, "Jacob," and I said, "Here I am!" ¹² He said, 'Look; because I have seen all that Laban is doing to you, all the goats mating with the flock are striped, speckled, and mottled! ¹³ I am the God you met at Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land.'"

¹⁴ Then Rachel and Leah replied, 'Do we really have any share left in our father's wealth? ¹⁵ Does he not regard us as foreigners? He sold us, and consumed all our money! ¹⁶ So all the wealth God has taken from our father now belongs to us and to our children; therefore do whatever God has told you.'¹⁷ So Jacob put his children and his wives on camels, ¹⁸ and left with everything he had acquired in Paddan-aram; all his wealth and all the livestock. He set out for his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.

¹⁹ Meanwhile, Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel had stolen her father's household idols. ²⁰ So Jacob outwitted Laban the Aramean by not telling him he was

going to go.²¹ Jacob left with everything he had, and once he crossed the Euphrates, he set course for the hill country of Gilead.

Review

Most of Genesis 31 is the long story of Jacob's escape from his father-in-law Laban, and the beginning of his journey back to Canaan. After such a long time, it is a momentous event, and as we read the story we can almost feel Jacob's powerful sense of call back to the Promised Land and the homelands of Isaac in the southern Negev. It is not surprising however that Laban remains a formidable opponent to God's will for Jacob's life, and the work of the Lord to guide Jacob and his now independent family back to Canaan is fraught with all manner of evil and deception. The majority of the story is contained in three substantial sections of scripture, of which today's and tomorrow's readings are the longest. It is virtually impossible to break the storyline down further and make sense of it, but if we spend time reading the text of Scripture, we will be amply rewarded, as we shall discover in the study.

Today's passage covers the process whereby Jacob decided to leave Laban after becoming concerned at the attitude of Laban's sons towards him (31:1,2), up to the point at which he leaves (31:17,18). Most of the text is a consultation Jacob holds in the fields with Rachel and Leah about whether they should go (31:4f.). It was essential for Jacob that his wives felt happy to leave, for all trace of 'the old life' with Laban needed to be left behind, and if either of them wished to remain, then it would have been impossible for Jacob to go. As it was, the two women could see that they had no future with their father, and although they had lived with Jacob for many years (seven years of payment for Rachel, and six years earning the flocks – see 29:30 and 31:38), this was the time to break the ties with their father.

In reality, it was God who was in control of events, and the agreement of Rachel and Leah was the confirmation Jacob needed to help him do what he believed the Lord was requiring of him. Firstly, God spoke to Jacob when he noticed the grumblings of discontent amongst the sons of Laban when they saw that he was gaining wealth at the expense of their own father. The Lord spoke to Jacob (31:3) and told him to leave, whereupon he acted immediately to summon Rachel and Leah. After spelling out his concerns to his two wives, Jacob then recounted a vision he had seen (31:10-13); this vision spelt out the truth that it was God who was behind his success at rearing the sheep and goats, and the wealth he had gained. Moreover, the vision reminded Jacob of the promises he had made when leaving the Promised Land. Then God's angel commanded Jacob to leave Laban. Any consequent blessing from the Lord would be dependent upon his obedience!

Having taken the decision to leave and proceeded on his way (31:37,38), we discover two problems. Firstly, Jacob left while Laban was occupied shearing his sheep (31:19), moreover, unbeknown to Jacob, Rachel stole some household idols from her father. Both deceptions marred the departure and indicated problems ahead before Jacob could receive the further promises of God that he would be able to 'go back to (his) native land' (31:13)

Going Deeper

There are several features of this story worth further attention; firstly, what exactly did God do about the speckled and spotted sheep? What is reported here is different from happened in the previous verse. More than this, we should have our eyes on the promises and commands of God, which form a pattern which is very close to the Christian understanding of 'grace'.

Jacob gathers his family to explain himself

Once Jacob began to be successful with the breeding of the multicoloured goats and sheep, the other member of Laban's family, his sons, could see their own inheritance slipping through their fingers. From their point of view, Jacob was gaining wealth at their father's expense and ultimately their own, for what Jacob took as pay under the agreements he had with their father would not be available for their inheritance. All through the story, Jacob's success in breeding is compared to the rest of Laban's stock, and the implication is that the other sons were left with weak animals and poor flocks (30:42).

The critical point came when the Lord spoke to Jacob with a direct command to return home (31:3). To Jacob's credit, he acted immediately by summoning his wives to meet him in the fields, where they could have a private conversation away from the whispering and prying eyes of servants among the tents, who might pass on information about what was going on.

It was critical that Jacob persuade his two wives that they should do the culturally unthinkable and leave their father. The real test of God's command was whether he could leave with his family united, for potentially, they were the chosen people of God, the descendants of Abraham and Isaac who were 'pure bred'. Jacob began by explaining himself to his wives, and asked them to choose to stay with him firstly, because God was with him, and secondly because their father had turned his back on them (30:5). We read too swiftly over this verse because the idea that God is 'with us' is something that we who know the presence of Jesus in our own lives can take for granted. If we look back on this matter in Genesis, however, Abraham was told by others that God was 'with him' (21:22), Isaac was told by God that the Lord was 'with him' (26:24), and now Jacob claimed for himself that God was 'with him' (31:5). Jacob was the first person in Scripture to make this claim by and of himself, and in those times it was an astonishing claim to make, and indicated that Jacob was committed to doing the Lord's will.

The speech of the angel

Jacob then reported a dream in which he had seen 'God's angel' (31:11). An angel was a messenger of the Lord and there is confusion in the various stories about angels in Genesis concerning whether it is 'an angel' who speaks, or God Himself. Here, for example, the angel is introduced first, and then says 'I am the God who met you at Bethel' (31:13)! Nevertheless, the general theme of the message was that the successful breeding of the flocks mentioned in the previous chapter was God's work and not Jacob's; something that Jacob had already openly acknowledged (31:7,8) in front of His wives.

There is some confusion amongst scholars about the differences between the breeding described in chapter 30, and those in chapter 31. In the first chapter (30:37f.), all that was described was one circumstance in which Jacob contrived to breed multicoloured or piebald goats and sheep. Here in this chapter, Jacob complained that Laban changed the agreement about whether the stripped or speckled flocks were his wages (31:7,8) and the angel spoke of God's general work over the years which ensured that the mating animals were multicoloured!

It will help us to know that in ancient practice, shepherding contracts were negotiated annually after sheep shearing (we know this from ancient records, separate from the Bible). It looks as if what happened was that when Laban saw that Jacob was being successful, he tried to change the agreement each year to his advantage (see 31:7). This is made all the more obvious in the Hebrew, in which the different words for 'speckled' and 'striped' are virtually the same except for one consonant (one letter)! It was easy to claim that what was spoken was misunderstood! Laban certainly tried every trick possible to prevent Jacob from being successful, and he failed. This was the reason why his 'attitude' changed' towards Jacob (see 30:1).

The angel's words were also consistent with the way in which the Lord had repeatedly dealt with both Abraham and Isaac. Both men had been given a promise, then the Lord commanded them to do something, and He followed up this with a promise of further blessings. In Abraham's life, for example, the first promise came at the beginning as he left Haran for Canaan (12:2,3, and then 15:1f.), the command came later (which was to 'circumcise' Gen ch.17) and the further blessings then came in the form of the birth of his only son Isaac. In Jacob's case, God's first promise to Jacob was to be 'with him' (28:15), which was proved by the growth of his wealth and family whilst in Laban's service. Now, the angel gave God's command to return to the Promised Land, the one part of the Covenant promise of the Lord's blessings which Jacob did not yet possess. Further blessings would follow!

Rachel and Leah's response, and the departure.

The response of Rachel and Leah confirmed Jacob's resolve. They were brave enough to go with their husband. Their arguments for doing so were interesting; they already felt outcast from Laban's family (31:15), moreover, any woman would have expected that the 'bride price' paid to their fathers by their husbands would be returned to them as a dowry, and Laban was not prepared to do this. Jacob had paid for his wives by his work, and Rachel and Leah saw no evidence that Laban had kept any of the benefits of their husband's labour for them. They therefore felt 'sold' by him, and felt that the only way they would have any share in their father's wealth would be through their husband, Jacob, from the flocks Jacob had bred as his and theirs. Remarkably, the feuding Rachel and Leah of earlier times (29:31-30:24) were in total agreement in support of their husband. They wanted to do the Lord's will and leave!

With Laban involved in the intensive work of shearing his sheep at a different location (31:19), there was no reason for Jacob to delay, and he set off for Canaan, crossing the Euphrates river