

Laban's reply to Jacob's great speech sounds like a complaint, as if he had a just reason to be dissatisfied because Jacob's departure would rob him of a chance to bless his daughters and their children through his wealth. He had some cheek to say this. Everyone present knew that Laban never gave anyone anything, and this was one reason given by Rachel and Leah for leaving Mesopotamia with their husband (31:14-16). No, this was not a complaint, it was Laban's lame and pathetically deluded acceptance of defeat. He knew that Jacob had outwitted him, that there was no future for any relationship between himself and Jacob's whole family. There was no more to be said; both parties would have to go their own way, and we will read tomorrow about how Jacob and Laban settled their differences and moved on. We will never hear of Laban again in Scripture, except by way of genealogical reference. But the hand of God was on Jacob.

Application

Jacob's story shows us two important Gospel themes. Firstly, as a man who changed as his life progressed, he learned new skills (shepherding) and learned that God's hand was on his life from even from before he was born. We often assume today that much of 'who we are' is fixed; our understanding of genes is a triumph of science but a human disaster if people consequently believe that large swathes of our lives, personalities and emotions are somehow genetically fixed. Genes have a part to play in every physical aspect of our nature, but we are all 'spirit – breathed' beings (Gen 2:7), and the spirit of God within us enables us to respond to the promptings of the Spirit of God, and change. Jacob started his life a long way from the kind of man needed by God to play a crucial part in the fulfilment of the Covenant plan of blessing and salvation. He nevertheless responded to the promptings of the Spirit over many years, to the point where he overcame the flaws in his character and boldly proclaimed the God of his fathers. If Jacob could travel that journey in order to be used of God, so can we. From a different perspective, you certainly know that the Lord is at work when unlikely people change and become servants of the Living God; it is what makes the life of the true Church exciting!

Secondly, the shepherd Jacob demonstrated in his own life something of the characteristics of Jesus, the man who was the One True Shepherd. Ancient laws about shepherding may seem to us to be arcane and remote, but they are easily understandable, and point to how we too can demonstrate Jesus, the Good Shepherd, in our own lives. There is a great deal within Jacob's confession about hard work, honesty, integrity, vigilance and care. Qualities that we too often forget when trying to aspire to godliness by measuring ourselves against some of Paul's famous 'lists', the 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal 5:22f.) for example. There is nothing wrong with the powerful and essential teaching of Paul, but it is easy to forget the qualities of humanity that God requires of us for the whole journey of our faith, exemplified in the life and story of Jacob.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. When you read Jacob's speech, does he come across to you as totally honest, or does he take advantage of the situation in any way? Does he exaggerate? If so, why?
2. Make a list of the qualities that you see in Jacob as he justifies his actions in this text.
3. Can you see connections between this passage and the life of Jesus (for example, 'going the second mile'). How might Jesus have used the story of Jacob?

Discipleship

To what extent have you changed over the years, and how has the Lord enabled you to grow in the things of God? This is a searching question, for it begs another one; what does the Lord require of us now, and does He need us to 'change' even more so that He can use us? There are times and places for us to consider such issues, of course, but it is part of Satan's work amongst God's people to make them as comfortable as possible where they are, so that they do not change! May we not succumb to his trap!

Final Prayer

When we do not know it, You are there, Lord Jesus, guiding our lives. But You have always been there, and You chose us before we were born, by Your Spirit; and You will always be there whatever our future, for You love us, and You delight in our care. Thank You Lord Jesus; AMEN

Prayer

Ask yourself whether there is any part of the coming day for which you would value the Lord's special blessing Then pray as follows:
Bless my life, Lord God, and show Yourself in power as I go about my day: Jesus, strengthen me; Holy Spirit, comfort me; I praise You, sovereign Lord and God; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Food we Eat

Please pray today for the food standards that are applied in our countries. There is confusion amongst many people about the advice we are given concerning the safety of some foods, particularly processed foods. Yet the simplicity of a diet of natural foods eaten sufficiently yet sparingly remains good, and Godly, advice!

Meditation

When Jesus calls you to give Him your all;
Then take it to heart, and do what He says.
You'll face trouble and strife, and the enemy's fire,
But never despair, for you're in the right place.

*He equips you, empowers you, and gives you the best
Of His gifts, His love and His powerful embrace;
The world cannot stand against you or the Word
When you're firm in the victory of Jesus' grace.*

When Jesus calls you to action right now;
Never fear for your life, for He has you in hand.
Your faith and your strength will be stretched to the full,
But you'll carry the day when you work to His plan.

When Jesus calls you to rest from your work;
His command is as sure as a 'voice from above'
Saying loudly and clearly; 'well done, my beloved
My Sabbath of rest is for you, with my love.'

Bible Study - Genesis 31:36-43

³⁶ Then Jacob was very angry, and reprimanded Laban, saying, 'Now what have I done wrong! What sin have I committed that you should hunt me down?' ³⁷ Having searched through all my goods, if you have found anything of your own, then place it here before both our families, so that they may judge between the two of us. ³⁸ I have been with you for twenty years; your ewes and goats have not miscarried, and I never ate rams from your flocks. ³⁹ I did not bring you the animals ravaged by wild beasts, but bore the loss myself; you held me responsible for everything, whether stolen by day or by night. ⁴⁰ I endured the consuming heat of the day and the cold by night, and barely slept. ⁴¹ I have been in your house for twenty years, serving you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. ⁴² If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Awesome God of Isaac, had not been with me, you would certainly have sent me away with nothing. God saw my affliction and my work, and rebuked you last night.'

⁴³ Then Laban replied to Jacob, 'The daughters are mine and the children are mine, the flocks are mine, and all that you see belongs to me. What can I do for these daughters of mine now? or even their children when they are borne?'

Review

Is it wise to keep quiet when someone insults your intelligence, plays tricks on you and cheats

you out of everything in life you hold dear? More than this, could you keep quiet if this was done to you despite your best work and complete integrity; and when this was interpreted by others as weakness? You may not feel prepared to stand for such treatment, and according to your own manner and style, might wish to withdraw from the situation or confront it head on to bring about a resolution.

It is highly likely that Jacob felt all these things over the years that his service was abused by Laban. For twenty years, Jacob had remained relatively quiet, accepting the consequences of his actions and bearing the greed and avarice of his employer and father-in-law. Jacob, who was introduced to us in Scripture as a grasping infant (25:26f.), a scheming teenager (25:29f.) and a gullible yet willing deceiver (27:1f.), had been forced to be on the receiving end of years of the grasping, scheming and deceiving manipulation of the man who was the father of the woman he loved; Rachel. In the whole story of Jacob since he left his home for Mesopotamia (28:10f.), God had been with him. We are reminded of the grace of God in caring for Jacob when he set out (28:15), in the names of his children (29:31f.) and in the Lord's blessing on his work (30:30; 31:5 etc), and Jacob does indeed acknowledge this; but his powerful love for Rachel and his desire to care for his family and achieve independence was extremely important to him. Both were the driving force behind Jacob's tolerance of the seemingly intolerable.

At this one point in the story of Jacob, he speaks out in condemnation of the man who had tormented his life for so long. Our passage today is a detailed complaint spoken out by Jacob from a position of strength and in the knowledge that he had been vindicated in front of everyone. Laban had accused him of stealing his daughters, but they had left willingly; Laban had accused him of stealing his 'teraphim', or 'household gods' and after a vain search in which he was outwitted by his own daughter, Jacob's beloved Rachel (31:33-35), Laban's accusations and manipulation lay in tatters and Jacob was vindicated before both his own family and also Laban's assembled sons (31:23). Jacob took the opportunity to justify himself from a position of strength, and finished by declaring his faith in the God of his fathers in a unique and remarkable fashion (31:42). All Laban could do in reply was to whine about his daughters and grandchildren and in the process exposing himself to be a fool.

It is not often that someone has a chance to vindicate themselves before others from a position of strength, as Jacob did in this story, but he had waited for God's timing, and this was the key to his success. For the first time in his life, Jacob was able to demonstrate that he had stood above deception and trickery. Not knowing what his wife had done, Jacob spoke as a man who had not so much outwitted his opponent, but risen above the flaws of his own character by acting justly before God and others. It was a moment of personal triumph.

Going Deeper

Jacob's speech is valuable because of the details it adds to what we know of his story. It has an almost poetic quality, listing the justice of his actions and his answer to any accusations made against him, and some surprising details emerge. Laban's response is flat, and he knows he has met his match!

Jacob's anger at Laban

Jacob was justifiably angered at the affront to his family by the accusations made against him by Laban which had proved false. The strength of the Hebrew words at the beginning of his speech is indicated by the fact that the word translated 'reprimand' became a legal term for 'conducting a lawsuit' in later times in the life of Israel, perhaps even bearing this famous incident in mind. Picking up the refrain from Laban's earlier accusation (31:26), Jacob began 'what have I done wrong?' and immediately emphasised this with a second question 'what sin have I committed?' (31:36) This was a typical pattern of Hebrew speech found both in prose and in poetry, called 'parallelism', in which a point was made and then emphasised or expanded in a second phrase. The two key words from this verse, 'wrongdoing' ('pesach') and 'sin' ('hattath') are powerful words, used by the Bible to explain the nature of sin, the first referring to those things that are simply unacceptable in society or before God, and the second to those things that happen by which we, perhaps inadvertently, fall short of the standards required of us either by others or again, by God.

Jacob's speech proceeded to identify the way in which Laban, not he, had acted in a manner that

was unacceptable before others and before God, and fell far short of the standards of the day. He began with a direct complaint that Laban's pursuit of him was unjustified; principally, Laban had not been able to find either the teraphim he accused Jacob of taking, or anything else of his (see 31:26-35,37). He would not stand for being called a thief (from the reader's perspective of course, he knew nothing about Rachel's pilfering of the teraphim), and if Laban was accusing him of trying to usurp his power by taking the teraphim, then that too, was false. He challenged all present to produce evidence of any wrongdoing on his part; and none did; not even from among Laban's sons.

It is at this point that we get to know the full length of time Jacob spent with Laban, which was twenty years; seven for each of his wives (29:18f. 31:41) and six to establish his flocks. For the whole of this time, Jacob worked as a shepherd, and if we look back at his early life, we will find that this was not what he did whilst at home, where he was used to living 'amongst the tents' (25:27). Jacob had come on a long personal journey to become the expert shepherd that he now was, and able to make the detailed remarks that came next in his speech!

Firstly, he claimed success in breeding, which we know already from his exploits! (Gen 31), but he then declared his integrity saying 'I never ate rams ...' (31:38); for it was a common and often un-provable accusation in those days that shepherds would sometimes eat some of the sheep under their care! (see Ezekiel 34 for a further explanation of this particular sin!). In the next verse, Jacob went further. Not only was he righteous in his dealings, he did more than was required of him. An early shepherding contract found in Mesopotamia states 'if a lion ... has made a kill ... or a lamb is torn by beasts, let (the shepherd) bring it as evidence; he shall not make restitution' (see also Exodus 22:12,13). Jacob declared that, whilst looking after Laban's flock, he had benefited him by bearing all such losses himself. Of course, Jacob could only say this if it was true, and Laban knew that it was.

It is worth considering that even at this early stage in the Bible, the claim made by Jacob was that he had been a 'good shepherd', an early example of a godly leader, showing qualities that were built on by David, celebrated in the famous Psalm 23; 'the Lord is my Shepherd', and distinctively used by the prophets (especially in Isaiah 53, and Ezekiel). In this way, Jacob is the first person in Scripture to illustrate what Jesus meant, centuries later, when he said 'I am the good shepherd ...' It is a fascinating and powerful theme within the whole Bible which speaks of God's love and care for His people.

Jacob's praises to God

Jacob remarkably concludes his speech with a stirring proclamation of faith. Quite truthfully, he declared that his supreme justification was found in the God of His fathers, Abraham and Isaac, and for the second time (the first being in 31:5), Jacob stated that he knew God was 'with him'. Laban had already confessed that he had not attacked Jacob outright with his force of men only because God had spoken to him in a dream (31:24,29) and told him to hold back; so Jacob turned this confession back to Laban and told him this was God's rebuke because he had exploited him (31:42). He was confident that God knew what was right and wrong, and now everyone knew that Jacob was fully justified in what he said.

The unique part of this verse is at the beginning, where Jacob calls on the Lord with these words: 'if the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Awesome God of Isaac ...' You will probably find that most translations of the Bible conclude this sentence with '... the Fear of Isaac ...' But although the Hebrew of this text is uncertain, there is no reason why we cannot translate it as I have done, given that the subject of the whole sentence is God, and it makes sense. For the first time in Jacob's life, he recognised that the God whose presence he acknowledged is the God who was revealed uniquely to his own father and Grandfather, and the name 'Awesome One', or 'Awesome God' is an understandable climax to the whole of Jacob's speech. The very fact that the God of his fathers has protected him and granted him liberty was, for Jacob, truly 'awesome', and he celebrated this by offering the name to God. It is a powerful moment in Jacob's life that was part of his own spiritual journey towards complete reconciliation with Almighty God; an event which comes later as Jacob re-entered the Promised Land (32:22f.). Despite the tremendous strides of faith that Jacob had made since his early days, there was still more for the Lord to do in his life before he would be fully worthy of the Covenant.

Laban's reply