

in the gods of his ancestors (polytheism) and he could talk of the 'god' of any of his ancestors and invoke them in an oath; and this is what he did here. Faced with this oath which was really an ignorant insult of his grandfather Abraham, Jacob simply stood his ground and concluded the agreement by swearing his oath on the name that he had given to the God of his father Isaac, the 'Awesome One' (31:53). There was no need for Jacob to pursue the issue with the man he had defeated and who would disappear from his life the very next day.

The final sharing of a meal in the evening, and Laban's departure early next day is formally and briefly described (31:54,55), and apart from the meaningless gesture of farewell that Laban gave in embracing his daughters and grandchildren, he left. He had, after all, stated in the agreement that he really did not wish to see them again!

Application

If anything, this scripture is a supreme example of how to 'stand ground' before evil that is defeated. By acting as he did, Jacob affected a clean break with Laban and all the evil of the past. The deception, lies and corruption of everything that had gone on whilst he was in Mesopotamia was now at an end, and Jacob was now in a position to know that the God who had promised to be with him on the day that he left Canaan (28:13f.), had not only kept his word, but had blessed him. The fact that Jacob set up a stone pillar is an indication that this was one of three supremely important occasions in Jacob's life (for the others, see 28:18 and 35:20). It is strange that so many Christians today place little value on formally turning away from evil and moving on.

The equivalent for us today is repentance, the forgiveness of sins, and absolution. If we have harboured evil in our lives, or lived with it unknowingly for years, then when we are brought by the Lord to a place of victory over that evil, the natural response of many Christians is to say 'thank You', and the attempt to move on. In reality, our spirits work in a more complex way than that, and the copious references in Scripture to repentance and the forgiveness of sins are testimony to how seriously these matters should be taken. In the world of fickle human emotions within which we all live, we will serve ourselves well if we mark our victories against the Evil One in specific ways; with words said or actions done. The stone pillar and the mound remained in the hill country of Gilead for centuries, not simply as a marker between Jacob and Laban, but as a reminder of Jacob's defeat of his evil father-in-law. We need reminders today of what God has done for us; church services which celebrate our victory over evil, specific prayers to break our ties with the past or with evil, or promises made and kept about serving the Lord or giving Him of our time or money. All these help keep us on the godly path of life that the Lord has for us.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What can we do today to help people celebrate victory over Satan and live free from the troubles of the past?
2. In discussion, share your thoughts about how much Jacob has learned from Laban over his twenty years of service.
3. Does the name of God 'Awesome One' merit any place in the vocabulary of the Church today? Where and how?

Discipleship

What are the key moments in your own life in which you have been blessed by God with victory over evil? Do you celebrate this? Or is this something you too easily forget? Is it perhaps true that what you previously experienced as victory over evil has turned sour, and you need to return to that place again before you can go forward? A number of scenarios are possible; but pray and ask the Lord to help you mark, celebrate and sustain your victory in Christ over the enemy! It can really help you to move on!

Final Prayer

Help us, Heavenly Father, to recognise those special moments that You have used to lead us on in our faith. May we learn to remember them and value them, and may we always learn the valuable lessons of the past so that we may grow in grace and love. AMEN

Prayer

Fill us afresh with compassion and love, Lord God, Father of all. When we come across evil or wicked behaviour in others, whether directed to us or not, help us to stand firm in godliness and goodness. Make us a rock in stormy times, and fill us with Your Holy Spirit we pray; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Young families and the Church

Please pray today for the children and young people of Christian parents who are growing up in a world where violence and extreme behaviour is seen as part of life, and the whole ethos of living evolves around television, music and celebrity status. Pray against the works of Satan to draw young people away from the path of discipleship.

Meditation

Make your decisions, be discerning,
But do not point the finger. God alone is Judge.

Decide to work, to live, to love,
But He who gave you life is God, and He alone is Judge.

Take your choices, select the best,
But do not exploit the poor. God alone is Judge.

Use your earnings, enjoy its fruits,
But the only reward is God's, and He alone is Judge.

By doing right, you make this Judge your friend;
By doing wrong, you do not loose a friend,
You hear His judgement on you, good or ill:
And by your choice and decisions, yours alone,
He can be your truest friend;
Do make it so.

Bible Study - Genesis 31:43-55

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?' ⁴⁴ So come, we will make a contract, you and I; and let it be evidence of the agreement between you and me.'

⁴⁵ So Jacob took a stone, and set it up as a pillar. ⁴⁶ He then said to his relatives, 'Gather stones,' so they gathered some stones, and made a mound; and they had a meal there by the mound. ⁴⁷ Laban called it "Jegar-sahadutha": but Jacob called it 'stone mound'. ⁴⁸ Laban said, 'This mound is a witness between you and me today.' He therefore called it 'stone mound'. ⁴⁹ And he called the pillar "Mizpah", for he said, 'May the Lord keep watch between you and me, when we are out of each other's sight: ⁵⁰ If you mistreat my daughters, or you take other wives as well as my daughters, though no one else is with us, remember that God will be a witness between you and me.'

⁵¹ Then Laban added, 'See this mound and the pillar which I have placed between you and me; ⁵² this mound is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this mound to do you harm, and you will not pass beyond this mound and this pillar to do me harm. ⁵³ May the god of Abraham and the god of Nahor (the deities of their forefathers) judge between us.' Jacob then swore by the Awesome One of his father Isaac, ⁵⁴ and Jacob offered a sacrifice on the hillside and called his relatives to eat bread; and they ate bread and spent all the night on the hillside.

⁵⁵ Early the next morning Laban kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them; and then he left and returned home.

Review

Jacob had now won his twenty year battle of wit and will against his father-in-law. After Laban abjectly failed to substantiate his accusations (see previous Bible study on 31:36-43), he was now forced to seek an agreement with Jacob. This whole passage describes Laban's pathetic attempts to set agreements with Jacob that would protect him from his son-in-law.

What we have read today in Scripture is laughable. We naturally read it with due reverence for God's Word, but as soon as we look at the details, the words and actions of Laban stand out for what they are; a weak and dismal attempt to justify himself after Jacob's comprehensive non-violent victory over him. The sad thing about this passage is that it is highly confusing to read, and most of what was done and said is quite meaningless to us today. We therefore read through it, understand that Laban was formally 'setting boundaries' between himself and Jacob, and move on to the next chapter (32), which contains the fascinating and tense drama of Jacob's re-entry into the Promised Land. If we move too quickly past this text, however, we will miss its considerable spiritual significance.

The passage contains insight into God's peaceful providence which accomplishes victory without escalating violence and subdue the evils of the world. Laban pursued Jacob with a force of men intent upon violence (31:22), but not only had he been held back by a word from God (31:24), he was publicly exposed by Jacob (31:36-43) and had nowhere left to turn except to seek peace. If we follow the Lord's ways, then how much more can we defeat evil in this world by following Jacob's example, with the assurance of our victory complete in Christ Jesus? Secondly, sin and wickedness are exposed for the deceptions that they are. Every sentence of Laban's demands was a condemnation of himself, not Jacob. Jacob had no need of an agreement now he was the victor (31:44) and the Lord had already watched over the wicked and deceitful deeds done, and Laban stood accused, not Jacob (31:49). Laban made great play of demanding protection for his daughters (31:50) yet it was he who had mistreated them, which is why they stood by their husband in the dramatic confrontation (31:14; 33-35). He even made great play of being a kind and generous father and grandfather (31:55), which was a parody of the truth. When God works powerfully through His people, those who are sinful have nowhere to hide; and the truth is that if we are active in the Lord's service, then sin will be publicly exposed for what it is. There is more, which we will explore later.

Towards the end of the passage, the agreement between Laban and Jacob was concluded by oaths sworn by the two men in the names of the gods in whom they believed (31:53). This verse is powerfully revealing of the spiritual battle that had taken place over the previous twenty years. Laban was a polytheist who swore on the gods of his ancestors, but Jacob swore on the 'Awesome One', the God of his father Isaac, the name of God that he had just spoken of (31:42) in his hour of victory. Behind all of the battles of life that are endured by God's people, there is a spiritual battle that rages, and our victory is secured by knowing where we stand!

Going Deeper

As we explore the real meaning of the pillar and the mound that were set up, and the actions of Jacob and the words of Laban, we will find out more about the spiritual victory won by Jacob by staying close to God. Some of the text is obscure, but there is enough to make it fascinating!

The agreement, and the stones.

Laban knew he was defeated and condemned himself by his own words. His daughters and grandchildren had been cared for by Jacob since the day of Jacob's marriage, and he had been exposed as such a greedy person, the idea that he might provide for the extended family was laughable (31:43). It was quite normal practice in ancient disputes for the party who had lost the dispute to seek to gain agreements that would protect them from further humiliation. See, for example, the non-aggression agreement between Abraham and the Philistines (15:8-21) and also between Isaac and the Philistines (26:26-34). It was therefore up to Laban now to propose the agreement, and Jacob's role was to accept what was said, or not (31:44).

It is important for the understanding of this passage to know that it is structured around significant pairs of things, promises, and curses, etc. If you read this passage in some Bible versions, you will find yourself quite confused about what is going on, which is why I point out this feature, and why the translation above attempts to make this clear. It could be that this pairing within a story had some other ancient significance, but it does at least appear to amplify

the sense of division now established between Laban and Jacob. Two stone objects formed the focus of all that happened next; a stone pillar set up by Jacob (31:45) and a mound of stones set up by Jacob's relatives (31:46). Also (unclear to us who read this in English) two languages were used to name the objects, Aramean which was the language of Mesopotamia spoken by Laban, and Hebrew which was spoken by Jacob (we shall see what this means later). In addition, Laban swore his oath on a pair of gods (see 31:53), and the whole event was encompassed by two meals (31:46; 54).

Laban began negotiations by proposing an agreement, and Jacob indicated his initial acceptance of a settlement by personally setting a large upright stone in the ground, which made a distinctive feature of the landscape (31:45). Jacob, as the senior figure in the negotiations, did not name this pillar; that was done later by Laban (31:49). Jacob then told his relatives to 'gather stones' (31:46). The great parody within this scene is that by so doing, Jacob's family, who Laban had just claimed as his own, consequently walked out at Jacob's instruction to gather the stones required to make a heap, or mound, thereby witnessing against Laban. After the stone and the mound were set in place, although no further words or agreements had been made, all the parties sat down for a meal to signify that they were prepared to negotiate (31:46).

The naming of the stones.

From verses 47 to 49, the text of Scripture is unclear, and can only be deciphered bearing in mind the pairing of the stone and the mound, and the two languages, Aramaic and Hebrew. What happened was this. Laban began the negotiating procedure by declaring a name for the mound; he had nothing original to say, calling it in Aramaic, 'Jegar-sahadutha' which means, literally, 'heap of stones'. This naming was completely non-threatening to Jacob, so he reciprocated by calling it virtually the same in Hebrew; 'Galeed', meaning 'stone mound'. There was a similarity between this Hebrew word and the word for 'witness'; a word-play that Laban then used when saying 'this mound is a witness between you and me today'.

Still, Laban did not say what his requested conditions were as he was quite unused to being defeated! He then turned to the pillar that Jacob had set up, before the mound, and called it 'Mitzpah' which means 'watchpost', or 'signpost'. Laban explained the meaning of this name by setting out his request, which was that his daughters should be treated well by Jacob. This sounds somewhat farcical to us in the circumstances, but there is evidence from ancient marriage agreements that in general, a father would seek a formal undertaking to treat his daughter well before releasing her in marriage. In this light, Laban was doing what he should have done years before, and formally sever the tie between himself and his daughters, and release them into Jacob's care. It was, of course, exactly what Jacob wanted and he did not need to respond. His subsequent compliance with Laban's request, from a position of strength, was sufficient agreement.

The second request of Laban was that the two 'witnesses', the upright stone and the stone mound, should act as a boundary which neither of them would cross in order to do each other harm (31:51). Laban now seems a pathetic figure, having been responsible for considerable harm to Jacob and his family for years, but he was acting in pure self interest. He was not fully aware, however, of the serious intent of Jacob to travel on into Canaan at God's command. Jacob had no intention of going back to Mesopotamia! His family constituted the future twelve tribes of Israel (including Benjamin, with whom Rachel may well have been pregnant at this time, being born a little later as the family entered the Promised Land – see 35:16f.). In future, there would be no going back to Mesopotamia to find wives for the sons of Abraham!

The swearing of oaths

Laban and Jacob formally swore oaths to finalise the deal, which was perfectly acceptable to Jacob. Laban's apparent demands were little more than misguided self interest. He was so wrapped up in his own world of voracious greed that he had no comprehension of what he was dealing with. His own evil treatment of Jacob had merely been used by Almighty God to test and prove his servant Jacob.

The words used in verse 53 are confusing in many Bible translations, but I have tried to make it clear. Laban swore the agreement on two ancestral gods, that of his father Nahor and his brother Abraham. From our point of view, we know that the God of Abraham was the One true God, but this was not Laban's perception. As far as he was concerned, he held a general belief