



Jacob Returns Home Genesis 31-32

Introduction

Much had taken place in Jacob's life since leaving his home in Beersheba to escape the wrath of Esau. In God's providence, he had reached Haran, the dwelling place of his parent's relatives, and had fallen in love with Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother, Laban. Jacob had worked hard and endured Laban's selfishness, greed and trickery for fourteen years to receive his two daughters in marriage -- Leah by deception, and Rachel because of love. Through Leah, Rachel and their two maids, he had fathered eleven sons and a daughter.

Jacob had not forgotten his homeland and the promises of God. Mesopotamia was not his home and he had expressed his desire to Laban to return to "*my own place.....my country*" (Genesis 30:25). When selfish Laban had urged him to stay, Jacob had cunningly enticed him to accept a plan of dividing the flocks which Laban could not resist. Laban was convinced that the plan would work in his favor! However, things did not turn out as Laban planned. God sovereignly blessed Jacob's flocks at Laban's expense, and it seemed that his trickery had been turned back upon him.

OUTLINE of GENESIS 31-32

I. Jacob's Departure - Genesis 31:1-35

II. Jacob's Covenant With Laban - Genesis 31:36-55

III. Jacob's Preparations to Meet Esau - Genesis 32:1-32

I. Jacob's Departure - Genesis 31:1-31

A. Jacob and His Family Leave - Genesis 31:1-13

Jacob became aware that greedy Laban and his sons were envious of his success. When they were profiting from God's blessings through Jacob, they were quite content, but seeing only Jacob blessed aroused their jealousy and anger. God's timing was now right for Jacob to leave. With a solemn promise, God promised to be with him, Jacob had lived in Haran for twenty years.

1. God's word to Jacob - 31:1-3

The Lord spoke to Jacob and urged him to return to his family. The Lord promised to be with Jacob.

2. Jacob's wives agree - 31:14-18

Jacob called his wives, Rachel and Leah, and reminded them of his devoted service to their father. In addition to the deception of his marriage to Leah, Laban had cheated Jacob ten times on his wages. But God had protected Jacob. While carrying out his breeding plan with the flocks, God had given Jacob a dream in which the "*Angel of God*" spoke to him and assured him of a successful outcome, reminded him of the vow he had made at Bethel, and encouraged him to return home. This dream had given Jacob great confidence.

Rachel and Leah were of one mind with Jacob. They, too, had experienced Laban's selfishness and greed. He had treated them as though they were not his daughters at all, but "*strangers*". Furthermore, Laban was not planning to leave any inheritance to them, even though it was Jacob's management and competence that had increased his wealth considerably. His wives concluded, with Jacob, that the right thing to do was to follow God's leading and leave Laban. So, Jacob loaded his wives and children on camels, and along with all of his livestock and possessions, he set out for the land of Canaan.

B. Laban's Anger - Genesis 31:19-25

Laban was violently angry three days later when he was finally told that Jacob and his family had left. He was further infuriated when he returned home from the fields to discover that his household gods had been stolen. Before leaving, Rachel had taken advantage of her father's absence and stolen the idols which were thought to provide protection for the home. With revenge in mind, Laban summoned his family members and went after Jacob. This was in spite of the fact that God had told him in a dream, "*Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.*" In the idiom of the day, this meant that Laban was to let him go.

C. Laban's Search and Rachel's Sin - Genesis 31:25-35

Laban caught up with Jacob and rebuked him for leaving unannounced, depriving him of arranging a proper farewell for his daughters and grandchildren. Laban claimed that he understood Jacob might have left because of a longing in his heart to return to his father's house, but he could not understand why Jacob would have stolen his household idols. Jacob admitted that fear of losing his wives and children had led to

his rapid departure, but he had no knowledge of the stolen idols. He invited Laban to search his assemblage and kill the guilty one if found. He was not aware that Rachel had stolen the items and put them in her camel's saddle.

Laban commenced his search, and when he came to Rachel's tent, he found her sitting on the camel's saddle. She excused herself from rising, explaining that "*the manner of women is with me*" (her menstrual period). So he passed her by, continuing his search elsewhere.

What motivated Rachel to steal? Observers have offered several possibilities, but perhaps the main cause was that she had been brought up in a home of idol worship and superstition. Her background of false-religion, combined with her weak faith in God, resulted in a divided allegiance between God and her father's idols. She was afraid that she would be deprived of the good fortune the idols might confer upon her.

Application

Like Laban, some people do not regard Christianity as solidly based on one true living God and His infallible Word. They add elements of other religions or non-Biblical belief systems, such as reincarnation, justification by works or purgatory, to coincide with their erroneous thinking.

Listen to what the prophet Isaiah wrote, "*I am the Lord, that is my name; and I will not give my glory to another*" (42:8). "*Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me*" (43:10). "*I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me*: (44:6; 45:5; 46:9). In the New Testament Book of Revelation, the apostle John wrote, "*If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words in this prophesy, God shall take away his part in the Book of Life from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book*" (22:18-19).

Be alert and be discerning among friends, teachers, preachers and religious books. Do not be led astray by the idols of this world. A divided mind leads to confusion and mistrust of Holy God. Remember that, "*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways*" (James 1:5-8).

II. Jacob's Covenant With Laban - Genesis 31:36-55

A. Reminder to Laban - Genesis 31:38-43

After his search, Laban demanded to know why Jacob had deceived him. His outrage exposed to everyone his boasting, insincere, ungodly character. Jacob gave Laban a firm reminder of his long and faithful service, attributing all of his success and prosperity to God's divine protection and providence. Cognizant of God's previous warning (31:24), Laban gave his approval for Jacob to leave. H. C. Leupold writes, "Laban throughout this section is a good illustration of the man who has fallen away from the true God, still knows of Him, feels impelled to heed His Word, but otherwise has put God on the same level with heathen deities, and lives a life such as a renegade might live" (The Biblical Expositor, Volume I).

B. Settlement with Laban - Genesis 31:44-55

Laban proposed a covenant, motivated by his fear that Jacob would grow strong and return someday to avenge all the wrongs and trickery he had imposed. This covenant might better be called a nonaggression pact between antagonists or an agreement due to lack of trust.

According to custom, stones were set up as a testament to their covenant, a consecration meal was shared and appropriate oaths taken in the name of God. Laban swore by "*The God of Abraham, the God of Nahor, and the God of their father*." He apparently regarded the God of Abraham as one of the gods of his family. Terah, the father of Abraham had probably been a moon-worshipper in the land of Ur. It seems that Jacob did not equate the God of Nahor with the true God of Abraham and to differentiate, he swore his oath by "*the Fear of his father Isaac*," referring to the God of Abraham. (Taken from The New Geneva Study Bible study notes.)

They named the place Mizpah, which means "a watch," "watch station" or "sentry". Both sides agreed never to pass beyond the stones with an intent to harm the other.

That night Jacob offered a sacrifice to God, and the next morning both parties went on their way.

III. Jacob's Preparations to Meet Esau - Genesis 32:1-32

A. Jacob's Fear of Esau - Genesis 32:1-6

As Jacob continued traveling southward toward the

Promised Land, he was met by two angels of God. Apparently their mission was to provide reassurance when Jacob was about to need it badly. His new fear concerned his brother, Esau, who, twenty years earlier, had vowed to kill him. Jacob felt that the situation would never be peaceful unless he took the initiative, so he sent a diplomatic, conciliatory message to Esau, relating his experiences and success with Laban. The messengers reported back that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred men. So, with great fear and distress, Jacob took the matter before the Lord.

B. Jacob's Prayer - Genesis 32:7-12

Jacob's fear was that Esau might come and kill him. He knew for certain that the only ground he could stand on was God's word. He reminded God of His instructions to return to the land of Canaan (Genesis 31:3), confessed his fear and acknowledged that he was not worthy of the mercies and truth that God had shown him. He begged for God's deliverance and claimed God's promise of grace for a safe return to his land. This prayer reflected his humble attitude and realization of his dire need of God's protection. It was, as some observers have stated, an excellent model prayer.

C. Jacob's Goodwill Gift - Genesis 32:13-21

Jacob prepared a very generous gift of five hundred and fifty animals for his brother as a token of good will. He divided them into three droves and sent them ahead with his servants to present to Esau. He gave each of the servants individual instructions with the exact words to be spoken to Esau. They were to address Esau as "lord" and refer to Jacob as his "servant". Jacob's purpose was to "*appease him with the present*". Jacob was obviously feeling the guilt of his former sin against his brother. His hope was that the gift would cover the guilt and insure peace between himself and Esau.

Application

Rather than pray and trust God to soften Esau's heart, Jacob tried to cover his guilt with gifts. How do you deal with guilt over sin in your life? Do you ever try to cover it as Jacob did? The Scriptures tell us clearly how to deal with sin and guilt. "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:9).

D. Jacob's Wrestling Match with the Lord - Genesis 32:22-30

That night Jacob sent his family, servants and flocks over the Jabbok, a stream which flows into the Jordan River from the east. Jacob stayed at camp alone that night and experienced a major step in his spiritual development. He recognized that his human cleverness and abilities were no longer equal to the challenges ahead and he longed for a settled conviction that God was leading his life.

Jacob was not alone for long. A "*Man*" appeared and wrestled with him until daybreak. This "*Man*" is identified by Jacob, in verse 30, as God, Himself. Hosea 12:4 refers to Him as the "*Angel*" of the Lord, also identified as God, a pre-incarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It appears that God took the initiative in starting the match, with the purpose of bringing Jacob to the end of himself. As He allowed Jacob to prevail, He touched the socket of his hip, putting it out of joint and leaving him crippled and with a perpetual memory of the night he wrestled with God. He would never be tempted to think of it as an imaginary event or dream. It would always be a reminder to place himself upon God's mercy and grace, for he had "*seen God face to face*". Jacob named the place Peniel, which means "the face of God".

E. Jacob's New Name - Genesis 32:25-32

As Jacob wrestled with the Lord and the morning dawned, the Lord told Jacob to let Him go. Jacob refused to give in until the Lord blessed him. At this point, Jacob was given a new name – Israel – for he had struggled against God and against men and prevailed. Israel means "God's fighter" or "he struggles with God". This significant event in no way denies the omnipotence of God, but effectively demonstrates the power of prayer and persistence in helping believers seek God's will and blessings in their lives.

Application

In what areas do you find yourself struggling with God? Will you choose to take your struggles to Him in prayer and rest calmly in His tender mercy and grace?