

Jacob: Trials With Wives and Laban

Genesis 30-31

Focus Verse

"I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land." – Genesis 31:13

- Jacob's Family – Genesis 30:1-24
- Jacob's Flocks – Genesis 30:25-43
- Jacob's Flight – Genesis 31

Engage

What do you do when hard things only get harder? Does a long road where every step feels uphill mean God has forgotten you? How do you process life when you face not only a season of hard circumstances, but years of trouble? **Jacob's challenging life in Haran did not get easier.** In fact, the unfair treatment Laban imposed on him only multiplied with the years. The strife in his strange family dynamic increased.

The loving discipline of Jacob's heavenly Father permeated his troubles. While Jacob wanted his circumstances to change, our unchanging God had a bigger plan. He molded Jacob's character through discipline that included hardship. God does not abandon His children. Rather, He lovingly aims everything He allows toward something good. God is steadfast when life is uncertain. **God's unchanging character secures believers in this life and for eternity.**

Jacob's Family — Genesis 30:1-24

Laban succeeded in his deceptive plot to marry off both his daughters to Jacob. He secured Jacob's servitude for 14 years in the bargain. Laban sinned against Jacob and both of his daughters when he exchanged Leah for Rachel on the wedding night. Then, Jacob insisted he also wed Rachel, the woman he loved. **The complicated relationships in this dysfunctional family only intensified.** Leah bore Jacob four sons yet despaired of Jacob's favoritism toward Rachel. However, Rachel was beautiful but barren.

Rachel's Struggle – 30:1-8

Rachel's inability to conceive a child brought deep despair. Leah's multiple sons only added to her pain, proving the difficulty to conceive fell on Rachel, not Jacob. In their culture, childbearing signified God's favor. The complicated family relationships described in this passage brought pain and insecurity to both Leah and Rachel. But the ongoing distress of Rachel's infertility should be noted.

In our world today, people are often unaware or insensitive to the challenges caused by infertility. Sometimes men and women deeply desire marriage and children, but God never brings a spouse. Watching

others celebrate pregnancies, new babies and growing families can cause internal conflict as the joy of others intensifies personal pain. **We are wise to recognize that people often face hidden struggles.**

Personal pain impacts relationships, often with those closest to us. **Rachel's pain turned into anger, jealousy, bitterness and resentment.** Her first words recorded in Scripture, "Give me children, or I'll die!" reveal a demand that held Jacob responsible for life itself. Her struggle blinded her to the truth that God, not Jacob, was the giver of life. Rachel dismissed the love Jacob gave her when she chose to focus on what he could not give her – a child. Pain often clouds right thinking as emotions and heartache speak most loudly.

Jacob's response revealed the growing strain in his relationship with Rachel. He pointed her demands to "God, who has kept you from having children." He spoke with truth but lacked grace and compassion. By contrast, Genesis 25 records how Jacob's father, Isaac, and his mother, Rebekah, responded to their childbearing challenges. Isaac prayed to God on behalf of Rebekah because she had not yet conceived.¹ Rebekah was also attuned to the Lord's will through prayer as she sought God's wisdom in her pregnancy with Jacob and Esau.

God remained faithful to His covenant regarding Jacob's family and their destinies. God brought about good, even through the consequences of their sins. Human failings cannot stop God's purposes and plans.

Rachel impatiently suggested the cultural practice of giving her maidservant, Bilhah, to Jacob to bear a child for her. Laban had given each daughter a maid when he wed Leah then Rachel to Jacob. Jacob obviously agreed to Rachel's plan, and when Rachel ordered Jacob to sleep with Bilhah, she bore him two sons. Rachel's words and the names she gave these sons revealed her continued focus on winning the rivalry with her sister, Leah. The first son she named Dan, meaning "he has vindicated," and the second son Naphtali, meaning "my struggle." After the birth of Naphtali, Rachel said, "I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won."

Leah's Response – 30:9-13

The conflict in this family continued to grow. Leah stopped bearing children after giving birth to four sons. Leah now answered Rachel's scheme by giving her servant Zilpah to Jacob. Zilpah bore Jacob two sons that Leah received as "good fortune" and a source of happiness – likely referring to her struggle against her sister. These arranged, polygamous marriages produced unhealthy, complicated and painful relationships. However, God's plans for each person prevailed despite their scheming. God remained faithful to His covenant regarding Jacob's family and their destinies. God brought about good, even through the consequences of their sins. Human failings cannot stop God's purposes and plans.

Strife Between the Sisters – 30:14-21

Now, superstition adds yet another strange twist to the rivalry and quest for fertility between the sisters. Mandrake plants produce an orange-yellow fruit the size of a large plum and full of soft pulp. Mandrakes were believed to promote fertility. Rachel boldly requested the fruit from Leah's son Reuben to help her conceive a child. Leah's response and accusations that Rachel had stolen her husband reveal the tension and bitterness between them. Rachel did not deny the charge.

Rachel sought to gain what she wanted through more bargaining. The women made a deal. Rachel could have the fruit, but Leah would sleep with Jacob

that night in a quest to conceive again. They reduced Jacob to an object they bargained over. Both sisters demanded their rights and sought superiority and control. Leah informed her husband, Jacob, she had hired him, "so he slept with her that night." **Leah conceived and ultimately bore two more sons, Issachar and Zebulun, and a daughter, Dinah.**

God Answers Rachel's Prayer – 30:22-24

God listens to our prayers, even though we may not pray with the purest of motives. Verse 22 turns the focus abruptly from desperate human bargaining to God's compassion and power. **"Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive."** Rachel's ultimate ability to conceive had nothing to do with mandrakes but everything to do with the omnipotence of God, the source of life. Despite Rachel's wrong attempts to gain what only God could give, she prayed. Perhaps God used her suffering to humble her and soften her heart.

Rachel bore a son she named Joseph. She rejoiced because "God has taken away my disgrace." This name, meaning "may he add," reflected both Rachel's gratitude and her desire for another child. She said, "May the LORD add to me another son." Joseph would become one of the most beautiful characters in the Bible. God did indeed allow Rachel to bear another son, though she died in childbirth.²

Jacob's 12 Sons

The descendants of Jacob's 12 sons became the 12 tribes of Israel. Before his death, Jacob gave the patriarchal blessing to his sons.³ Each name held intentional meaning and reminded Abraham's descendants of the future of each respective tribe. Later, Moses' last patriarchal blessing offered even greater clarity regarding the future historical development of each tribe.⁴

Old Testament history revolves around the 12 tribes of Jacob-Israel. The names of Jacob's sons are important to remember. Each son is listed in birth order by his mother. (See Genesis 35:23-26.)

Leah's sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun

Rachel's sons: Joseph and Benjamin

Bilhah's sons: Dan and Naphtali

Zilpah's sons: Gad and Asher

The Doctrine of Eternal Security

God chose to bring His own Son into the world through a deeply flawed family. **The troubling choices made by Jacob, Leah and Rachel are easy to recognize but hard to reconcile in the family God chose as His own.** How could God choose and use a family so filled with self-serving people and torn by conflict? But if we are honest, we relate. We do not offer God anything better. We also come from an imperfect family and contribute to the chaos.

God's perfect standard and the far-from-perfect reality of daily life raise real questions worth pondering. Will God abandon me when I do not do what is right? Even if I start well, what if I do not end well? Am I strong enough or good enough to continue to earn God's favor? Can I disappoint God so badly He will give up on me? **When I am honest, I admit that if my standing with God depends on me, I am in big trouble.**

For those who have come in faith to Christ for salvation, there is good news! **No human opposition or personal failure can undo what God has declared "done."** I do not possess enough human goodness or strength to earn my salvation or keep it secure. Christ does that for me. His perfect righteousness is transferred to me, not based on anything I have done or will do. The security in salvation rests in the finished work of Christ (John 10:27-30; Romans 8:31-39; Ephesians 1:13-14). As a believer, I will continue to sin, but the Holy Spirit is always working in my life through loving discipline and correction (Proverbs 3:11-12; Hebrews 12:4-12). Mere profession or mental agreement with the gospel does not give true salvation. True believers continue to follow Christ, though not perfectly. Philippians 1:6 says, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

Failing to trust that Christ holds salvation secure for eternity makes stability in daily life and peace for the future impossible. At the end of each day, how could anyone know if they have retained God's favor? Can unintentional failings or even deliberate or unconfessed sin overpower the promises of Almighty God? If the answer is "yes," the best I can do is hope that when I draw my last breath, somehow God is "pleased enough" with me to allow me into His eternal presence. Security based on my own goodness and efforts does not feel very secure.

God's Word promises the believer hope and security that should make the heart sing. In Christ, I am secure eternally, and that will not change. Neither my best day nor my worst day alters my settled position in Christ. Who I am before God does not depend on me. Rather than attempting to win what cannot be earned, I can serve and love God out of gratitude and worship. I humbly rest in the sufficient righteousness of Christ. God's relentless pursuit and sanctifying work in my life gives evidence that He is committed to me. I am safe, even when I fail. "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-40).

Jacob's Flocks – Genesis 30:25-43

Jacob Wants to Go Home – 30:25-28

Jacob knew his service commitment to Laban was complete and decided it was time to return to his people and country. His promised inheritance and blessings awaited him there.⁵ **Jacob called on Laban to recognize the fulfilled contract and allow him to depart with his wives and children.**

Laban had other ideas; he wanted Jacob to stay. **Laban acknowledged he had prospered because of God's blessing on Jacob.** His own flocks, herds and wealth greatly increased under Jacob's conscientious work as a shepherd. Laban was right – he spoke the

truth. But what you do with what you know matters. Laban could have expressed humble gratitude to God and Jacob. Instead, Laban tried to exploit the truth to his own advantage. He desired Jacob's ongoing labor and God's continued blessing to advance his cause. Laban reduced relationships to transactions. He asked Jacob to name his price to strike a deal.

Jacob's Offer and Laban's Deceit – 30:29-36

Laban was no stranger to bargaining with Jacob. When setting terms for marrying his daughters, Laban had the advantage. Jacob's approach was courteous

but bolder. He did not want to return to Canaan penniless. **After years of working for Laban, Jacob recognized his shrewdness and knew he had to protect himself.**

Jacob reminded Laban his great increase in wealth came through the Lord's blessing and his labor. While Laban had become rich, Jacob still could not provide for his growing family. Jacob proposed a solution. Laban's sheep were mostly pure white, and goats were usually pure black. **Jacob would remove the speckled, spotted and brown sheep and spotted and speckled goats as his very reasonable wage.** As the herds grew, Laban's flocks could be easily distinguished from Jacob's, upholding the integrity of the deal.

That day, Laban hastily removed the multi-colored animals himself. **In another act of flagrant deceit and manipulation for his own advantage, Laban left Jacob with nothing to claim as his own.** Laban's sons took the animals the distance of three days travel away from Jacob. Laban figured Jacob would be unable to produce speckled or spotted animals from his solid-colored herds and would be forced to stay. However, God's plans could not be thwarted by Laban's unfair and unscrupulous scheme.⁶

Jacob's Counterstrategy – 30:37-43

Jacob drew on his experience breeding and raising livestock for both his father and Laban. While he likely did not understand the genetics of dominant and recessive genes, he had a plan. Was Jacob's plan superstitious? Was it given to him by God? Was it a desire for revenge? The passage is not clear and the question is much debated. Regardless of how we judge Jacob's motives, God blessed his efforts.

Jacob used three methods to gain the advantage.

- He peeled and placed special branches in the water where the flocks would likely mate (30:37-39).
- He separated the newly born flock so they would tend to bear spotted young (30:40).
- He built a herd for himself of the strongest animals (30:41-43; 31:7-12).

Jacob's plan made him “exceedingly prosperous.” He acquired flocks, servants, camels and donkeys. While Jacob's methods cannot be fully understood, God's supernatural blessing is obvious.

Jacob's Flight – Genesis 31

The Conference – 31:1-16

Jacob still intended to return home to Canaan, and the situation in Haran became even more stressful. Laban's sons circulated reports that Jacob had stolen their father's wealth, and Laban's attitude toward him changed. God did not leave Jacob confused about his next step. **The Lord Himself commanded Jacob, “Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.”**

Jacob summoned his wives to explain how God had blessed him despite Laban's deceit. He shared God's command to leave. Both Rachel and Leah recognized they were now strangers in their father's home. They acknowledged Laban's unjust treatment of Jacob and doubted they had any share in his inheritance. They knew God was with Jacob. Therefore, they told Jacob to do “whatever God has told you.” **Leah and Rachel journeyed about 600 miles (about 965 km) and separated permanently from their home, country and family.** In their time and culture, this was an unprecedented and life-changing decision.

ahead. For reasons not explained in the passage, Rachel stole Laban's “household gods” while he was busy shearing sheep. She could have taken the idols for protection on the journey or as a claim of inheritance. Genesis 35:2-4 indicates that others in Jacob's party also brought their own gods.

Jacob and his family left without saying goodbye to Laban. After three days, Laban discovered their absence. He pursued them for seven days before he caught up with them in the northern mountains of Gilead, southeast of the Lake of Galilee. However, God intervened with the self-serving Laban. **Before he reached them, God commanded Laban not to interfere with Jacob's plans.**

The Conflict – 31:26-42

Laban confronted Jacob with a familiar question, “What have you done?” Laban's deceptive, abusive patterns of behavior continued to surface. **Laban's familiar practice of twisting truth to his advantage and forcing others to take the blame appears again.** He questioned their secret departure and declared he would have thrown them a joyful farewell party and kissed his family goodbye. Proud Laban boasted of his power to harm them but stated he had been warned by “the God of your father” not to do so. Instead, Laban accused Jacob of stealing his gods.

The Chase – 31:17-25

Jacob carefully planned their secret departure, sending his wives, children and household goods

Jacob admitted his realistic fear that Laban would take his daughters by force. Jacob's over-confident boast in verse 32, "But if you find anyone who has your gods, that person shall not live," unwittingly endangered Rachel. Laban's search uncovered nothing. Rachel hid the gods and used the cultural considerations attached to a woman's menstrual cycle to prevent her father from searching the area where she was seated.

God guides His people in practical ways. God prepared the way for Jacob to remove his family from Laban's control and gave him boldness to confront the troubling issues. Jacob reminded Laban of his 20 years of faithful service that honored Laban's interests, despite his manipulation and abuse. **Ultimately, Laban's prosperity reflected God's faithfulness to Jacob.** God had upheld Jacob's cause by His direct rebuke of Laban,⁸ which opened a way for a peaceful departure.

The Covenant – 31:43-55

Though Laban continued to view Jacob's wealth as his own, he sought a covenant of peace. They piled up stones to symbolize God's witness of their agreement. Laban, who had misused his own daughters terribly, made Jacob swear he would not mistreat them. Jacob offered a sacrifice, and they committed to peace with one another, confirmed by sharing a meal. Then, early the next morning, Laban kissed his daughters and grandchildren, and he returned home.

God's promise to Jacob would be fulfilled, despite human opposition. The struggles within Jacob's family between his wives and with Laban did not deter God's greater purposes. God's unchanging character, not Jacob's circumstances, secured His future. God does not depend on human perfection to accomplish His perfect plan. God's children rest secure because He is immutable. Though life in this world brings many unexpected twists and turns, the purposes of God remain steadfast. **God's unchanging character secures believers in this life and for eternity.**

Jacob's Character

Jacob makes an interesting character study. **Like any of us, Jacob had human strengths and weaknesses but ultimately matured through God's refining work in his life.** Genesis 25:27 describes younger Jacob as a man who was content to stay home among the tents rather than hunting. Jacob had glaring weaknesses, particularly regarding deceit and scheming to obtain what he desired. Jacob also showed positive qualities such as persistence, hard work, ardent love and patience. He obeyed his father concerning his marriage.⁹ Jacob was obedient and courteous, but also tenacious in his pursuits. He recognized and revered God and obeyed when God gave him direct guidance.¹⁰

Jacob, who is later renamed Israel, represents a significant contribution in God's story of faith recorded in Scripture. In fact, many times the Bible refers to the "God of Jacob."¹¹ **The fact God loved and honored Jacob, despite his personal failings, brings hope to all believers.** God relentlessly pursued Jacob and designed a sequence of circumstances to break him of wrong thinking and actions and to bend him toward His higher purposes. The study of people such as Jacob serves to remind us God can use all kinds of people, even the "wrong" kind of people, because of who He is. When God uses flawed humans for His purposes, all the glory is His. Isaiah 41:8-9 says, "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you."

Take to Heart

Hold Fast

God continued to discipline Jacob's tendency toward cunning self-effort. For 20 long years, Jacob toiled under a father-in-law who sought every opportunity to exploit him for personal gain. God faithfully chiseled Jacob's will to bring gradual, though not perfect, surrender to His will. Even as we praise the "God of Jacob," our awe is not fixed on Jacob, but on God. We study Jacob and learn God can do much with little because He is God. Jacob's biography serves only to exalt an unchanging God who changes people, inch by inch.

Jacob's oath and sacrifice in Genesis 31:53-54 sets the course of his faith and his people. The pillar named Mizpah marked the setting apart of Jacob's descendants from the family of Nahor. From now on, Abraham's descendants through Jacob are connected with the land of Canaan. In future generations, Laban's family merged with the nations around him. **Through Jacob, God established a people for His name in the land He promised to Abraham.**

Throughout his 20 years in Paddan Aram, Jacob gradually grew to trust God more through diligent, faithful service to Laban. As Jacob worked hard under Laban, God worked deeply in Jacob. God's blessing included loving discipline through prolonged hardship. When your troubles escalate, what does God want most from you? God has more important things on His agenda than your escape from hardship. **God will lovingly lead you to growing trust and specific surrender.** Where might you be fighting God instead of yielding to Him? Where and how is God leading you to a place of fresh and deeper surrender? How are you learning the folly of your own efforts and the safety of surrender to God? God cares more about your heart than your comfort.

God will one day set right the injustice in this world. What do you do while you wait for that day? How should you respond

to the proud and powerful, who, like Laban, misuse truth and abuse people for personal gain? **God promises His children strength not only to endure opposition but also to face and fight injustice in His way and time.** Jacob endured patiently but also took action to protect his family. What if standing up for what is right threatens you with personal loss? Challenging situations usually escape simple answers. Dependence on God, trust in His Word and sensitivity to His Holy Spirit provide the best course forward. Sometimes God will lead you to patiently endure and other times to boldly confront evil. God can be trusted to help you know what to say and when. If God appoints you to call out evil, are you willing? Can you trust God to know your part and find your voice when He calls you to action?

The unchanging character of God provides stability in a

world in constant change. Every age and stage of life offers new joys and unfamiliar challenges. Your moods, personality, relationships, days, weeks and years remain in constant flux. Perhaps you relate to Jacob, whose life under Laban brought constantly changing deals and much uncertainty. What a comfort to know that God is the most stable part of your world! Every morning when you wake, God is exactly the same as when you went to sleep the night before. God's perfect character never changes, and He can be trusted completely no matter what your day or year holds. What changing circumstances in your life are calling you to trust the unchanging God? How will this truth about God help steady your life through not just a season of change, but also the reality of constant change in your daily life?

Check out these footnoted references for further study of God's Word in this week's lesson.

- 1: Isaac and Rebekah pray: Genesis 25:21-22
- 2: Rachel's second son, Benjamin: Genesis 35:16-18
- 3: Jacob's patriarchal blessing: Genesis 49
- 4: Moses' prophecy regarding the 12 tribes: Deuteronomy 33
- 5: Jacob's inheritance: Genesis 28:1-5, 13-15
- 6: God helps His people: Genesis 26; 30:43; 31:1-16

- 7: "What have you done?": Genesis 3:13; 4:10; 12:18; 20:9; 26:10; 29:25
- 8: God intervenes with Laban: Genesis 31:24
- 9: Isaac's marriage instructions: Genesis 28:1-2, 6-7
- 10: Jacob's obedience: Genesis 28:16-18; 31:3, 21, 42; 32:9, 30
- 11: The God of Jacob: Exodus 3:6, 15-16; Psalms 20:1; 24:6; 46:7, 11; 75:9; Isaiah 29:23; Micah 4:2; Matthew 22:32; Acts 7:32