

Laban Pursues Jacob; God Protects Jacob

Genesis 31:22-35

Genesis 31:22-35 - *"And Laban was told on the third day that Jacob had fled. ²³ Then he took his brethren with him and pursued him for seven days' journey, and he overtook him in the mountains of Gilead. ²⁴ But God had come to Laban the Syrian in a dream by night, and said to him, "Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad."*

²⁵ So Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the mountains, and Laban with his brethren pitched in the mountains of Gilead.

²⁶ And Laban said to Jacob: "What have you done, that you have stolen away unknown to me, and carried away my daughters like captives taken with the sword? ²⁷ Why did you flee away secretly, and steal away from me, and not tell me; for I might have sent you away with joy and songs, with timbrel and harp? ²⁸ And you did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters. Now you have done foolishly in so doing. ²⁹ It is in my power to do you harm, but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.' ³⁰ And now you have surely gone because you greatly long for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?"

³¹ Then Jacob answered and said to Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I said, 'Perhaps you would take your daughters from me by force.' ³² With whomever you find your gods, do not let him live. In the presence of our brethren, identify what I have of yours and take it with you." For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.

³³ And Laban went into Jacob's tent, into Leah's tent, and into the two maids' tents, but he did not find them. Then he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's tent. ³⁴ Now Rachel had taken the household idols, put them in the camel's saddle, and sat on them. And Laban searched all about the tent but did not find them. ³⁵ And she said to her father, "Let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is with me." And he searched but did not find the household idols."

Background Notes

After 20 years of working for Laban, Jacob decided to head for home. So he left with his family and flocks. But he didn't tell his father-in-law, Laban, that he was leaving. Jacob knew that Laban wouldn't want him to leave, because Jacob was the key to Laban's material prosperity. Jacob had served Laban honorably, and God had blessed his efforts. As a result, Laban had prospered - and Laban knew it. *"Laban said to him, "Please stay, if I have found favor in your eyes, for I have learned by experience that the LORD has blessed me for your sake" (Genesis 30:27).*

Sure enough, when Laban found out that Jacob had left, he and his men pursued Jacob and overtook him in the "mountains of Gilead" - in the northwestern area in the country of Jordan today, near where the countries of Jordan and Syria come together.

With a lot of bravado and blustery talk, Laban accused Jacob of shameful behavior, and accused him of stealing his “household gods.” Jacob denied these charges because he didn’t know that his wife, Rachel, had stolen the idols. These idols were very small female figurines that were thought to bring blessing and fertility to the home. Rachel only had one child at this time, so she may not have been freed up from superstitious pagan fertility ideas. Furthermore, in that culture the household idols (“teraphim”) were used as title deeds to property, so that may be one of the reasons why Rachel wanted them. We cannot be sure.

Rachel had them hidden the small idols in her camel’s saddle, and she was in her tent and sitting on the saddle when Laban came to search for the idols. In that day, when people were traveling, the large wooden camel saddles were brought into the tents at the end of the day’s travel to be used as furniture. So having a camel’s saddle in the tent was not unusual.

Rachel didn’t stand when her father entered the tent, even though that was the expected polite gesture in that culture. Her excuse for her behavior was: *“And she said to her father, “Let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is with me” (v35).* So Laban searched, but did not find the household idols.

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers are guaranteed God’s protection when they are following God’s will.

Laban fully intended either to harm Jacob or force him to return to Haran, but God protected Jacob. Verse 24: *“But God had come to Laban the Syrian in a dream by night, and said to him, “Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.”* The “good” that Laban might have spoken would likely have been to offer some kind of good deal or inducement for Jacob to return to Haran, but God told him not to do that. The main point here is that Jacob was following God’s will, and God protected him.

Verse 3: *“Then the LORD said to Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you.”* So, when Jacob left Laban and headed home with his family and flocks, he was doing God’s will. God wanted Jacob home. Twenty years earlier, when Jacob was at Bethel, God had promised that He would bring Jacob back home (Genesis 28:15). So Jacob was following God’s will, and God protected him.

Believers today are guaranteed God’s protection when they are following God’s will. This is another way of saying that “believers are immortal until their work on earth is done.” This does **not** mean that Christians won’t die in car accidents or from cancer, or won’t be called upon to be martyrs - but it does mean that we don’t have to fear the opposition or try to appease the opposition if we are doing what God has called us to do. God is with us and He will protect us. Guardian angels are part of God’s protective system, along with circumstances and our common sense – and even the dreams God may send to unbelievers, as we see here.

Psalm 91 is one of the Bible's great "protection guarantees" for believers who are following God's will. *"Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the perilous pestilence. He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield and buckler. You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day, nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand, but it shall not come near you... Because you have made the LORD, who is my refuge, even the Most High, your dwelling place, No evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your dwelling; for He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.*

Believers are guaranteed God's protection when they're following God's will.

2. Believers are not guaranteed smooth sailing, even when they are doing God's will.

God protected Jacob as he traveled home, but that did not mean that Jacob had an easy trip. Think of the logistics of moving a large family, many servants, and large flocks and herds almost 500 miles! God told Jacob to go home, but God didn't perform some kind of miracle to get Jacob there. There were no heavenly chariots or air-conditioned buses or trucks - just the difficult hot and dusty travel that was normal for that day.

And then there was the opposition from Laban. God protected Jacob from Laban, but it was not a pleasant experience. Jacob was not guaranteed smooth sailing, even though he was following God's will.

Believers are not guaranteed smooth sailing, even when they're doing God's will. Some Christians think that when they are doing God's will everything will go well and they will have only "smooth sailing." In fact, some Christians think that if they are not experiencing smooth sailing, they must be out of God's will! Well, that's simply not true!

The Bible does **not** teach this! Look at the apostle Paul's life. See 2 Corinthians 11. Most of the time Paul **did not** have smooth sailing - but he was certainly doing God's will! God allows the storms of life to teach us many lessons, and the storms of life can come in all kinds of varieties: physical, emotional, and spiritual. We can be sure that the Lord will be with us in the storms of life, but remember, believers are not guaranteed smooth sailing - even when they're doing God's will.

Practical Application

Be careful about making rash statements!

In verse 32, Jacob made a rash statement. Laban had accused Jacob of stealing his idols, and Jacob reacted with this rash statement: *“With whomever you find your gods, do not let him live. In the presence of our brethren, identify what I have of yours and take it with you.”*

It reminds us of the rash statement made by Jephthah, a judge of Israel (Judges 11). He said that if the Lord would give him victory in battle, he would sacrifice to the Lord whatever came out of his house first.

Like Jephthah, Jacob should have been more careful about making such a rash statement. He wasn't aware that his beloved wife Rachel had stolen the idols. We all need to be careful about making rash statements!

Last year I made a rash statement in one of my classes. One of my students built me a big model of Noah's Ark in exact “N-gauge” scale. In N gauge, railroad boxcars are about three inches long, so the N-gauge Ark is about 3 feet long. The Ark that Noah constructed was one **huge** boat, and the model is a great model! The only problem was that we couldn't find any N-gauge animals to go on the Ark. We found some N-gauge farm animals, but I wanted some giraffes and lions and elephants! Hobby stores said they weren't available, so one day in my class I foolishly said, in jest, “If any student can get me some N-gauge giraffes and elephants, I'll give him or her an ‘A’ in the course!” What a rash statement! Well, a few weeks later a student triumphantly told me that he had found N-gauge giraffes, lions, and elephants! Amazing! In fact, he had gotten two of each animal for me! So I was able to place them, two by two, going up the ramp into the model Ark.

Fortunately for me, that young man was already an ‘A’ student so, like Jacob, I escaped the consequences of my rash statement! But sometimes we get ourselves into really serious trouble by the rash or thoughtless statements we make. Would you agree?

So let's follow our practical application: Be careful not to make rash statements!