

### Jacob and Laban Make a Covenant

#### Genesis 31:36-55

Genesis 31:36-55 - *"Then Jacob was angry and rebuked Laban, and Jacob answered and said to Laban: "What is my trespass? What is my sin, that you have so hotly pursued me?"<sup>37</sup> Although you have searched all my things, what part of your household things have you found? Set it here before my brethren and your brethren, that they may judge between us both!<sup>38</sup> These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried their young, and I have not eaten the rams of your flock.<sup>39</sup> That which was torn by beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it. You required it from my hand, whether stolen by day or stolen by night.<sup>40</sup> There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes.<sup>41</sup> Thus I have been in your house twenty years; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times.<sup>42</sup> Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the labor of my hands, and rebuked you last night."*

<sup>43</sup> *And Laban answered and said to Jacob, "These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children, and this flock is my flock; all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne?"<sup>44</sup> Now therefore, come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me."*

<sup>45</sup> *So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar.<sup>46</sup> Then Jacob said to his brethren, "Gather stones." And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there on the heap.<sup>47</sup> Laban called it Jegar Sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed.*

<sup>48</sup> *And Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me this day. "Therefore its name was called Galeed,<sup>49</sup> also Mizpah, because he said, "May the LORD watch between you and me when we are absent one from another.<sup>50</sup> If you afflict my daughters, or if you take other wives besides my daughters, although no man is with us—see, God is witness between you and me!"*

<sup>51</sup> *Then Laban said to Jacob, "Here is this heap and here is this pillar, which I have placed between you and me.<sup>52</sup> This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me, for harm.<sup>53</sup> The God of Abraham, the God of Nahor, and the God of their father judge between us." And Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac.<sup>54</sup> Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his brethren to eat bread. And they ate bread and stayed all night on the mountain.<sup>55</sup> And early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons and daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place."*

#### Background Notes

When you read the commentaries on Jacob, you get mixed reviews on his life. Most commentators see Jacob as deceitful, crafty, cunning, and totally selfish. Yes, say these commentators, Jacob did want the blessing of God, and the

spiritual side of the birthright, but it was only for selfish reasons. On the other hand, some commentators see Jacob in a good light. They say he was a man of God and he only made a few mistakes -- and those mistakes were mostly caused by the people who surrounded him.

My own view of Jacob is somewhere in the middle. There is no doubt that Jacob was selfish and deceitful, and he had a long way to go and many lessons to learn in the School of God. However, I believe that Jacob did have a genuine desire for the things of God, and he did learn the lessons that God taught him.

During his twenty years with Laban, we don't read of Jacob complaining. He was fair, and he was a hard worker, not a free loader. So what Jacob said to Laban in these verses was true, and Laban couldn't refute Jacob's just claims. Jacob had been a good shepherd and a good worker. He had gone the extra mile. He had served faithfully for fourteen years for his wives, and then six years for his flocks and herds. During all that time, he didn't take any of Laban's animals for food, and he had even paid for any losses from Laban's flocks out of his own flocks. There is no record that he complained when Laban reduced his wages ten times. So when Jacob mentioned all this to Laban, it was obvious to Laban that he didn't have a leg to stand on. So he wisely decided to make an agreement with Jacob.

Jacob set up a stone as a pillar, which was typical when making a covenant in that day. They also had the typical covenant meal, normal in that day when making covenant.

Part of this agreement has been wrongly called the "Mizpah Benediction." Verse 49, *"May the LORD watch between you and me when we are absent one from another."* I'm sure you have seen this so-called "blessing" on greeting cards, thank you notes, charm bracelets, plaques for the wall, and other items. But in context, these words are really not a blessing or benediction at all!

This statement is actually more of a malediction or denunciation, and even could be considered a curse rather than a benediction! Laban was telling Jacob that he didn't trust him, and that Jacob had better not mistreat his daughters, and that he'd better not cross the boundary marker that was being set up -- and may the Lord judge between us, particularly you, Jacob, to make sure you don't do the wrong thing while we are absent one from the other. So you see, it is not really a blessing or benediction in context.

After Jacob made a sacrifice, and they had a meal together, Laban said good-bye and left early the next morning to go back to Haran. Laban had come in like a lion, but he went out like a lamb.

In verse 53, Laban swore by the God of Abraham, the God of Nahor, and the God of their father. We see that Laban is typical of many people today. They invoke the name of God, but they believe in a lot of other gods as well.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. The Life of Jacob is a microcosm of the history of Israel.

In the next chapter, Jacob's name will be changed to Israel. In many ways the history of Jacob's life reflects the history of the nation of Israel. As Jacob was forced to leave home and go to a foreign land, so the nation of Israel was dispersed and scattered amongst the nations. As God's covenant and promise to Jacob at Bethel was never changed or terminated, so God's covenant with the Jewish people is still valid today. As God prospered Jacob while he was in a foreign land, in spite of opposition and unfair treatment, so the Jewish people have prospered during their dispersion among the nations, in spite of opposition and unfair treatment. As God brought Jacob back to his homeland, so God will bring the Jewish people back to their Land -- and that is happening today, even as we speak! As God protected Jacob from Laban the Syrian, so God is protecting Israel from the Syrians today. The life of Jacob is a microcosm of the history of Israel.

Now consider a few more possible aspects to this microcosm. When Jacob first returned to his homeland, there was a measure of unbelief, as we will see in chapter 33. This fact may be reflected in the fact that Israel today is returning in unbelief. The fact that Jacob's sons mistreated some of the people of the land, as we'll see in chapter 34, may be reflected in the fact that the nation of Israel has sometimes been unfair in the way they have treated the inhabitants of the land. And the fact that Jacob was not appreciated by his surrounding neighbors, but was protected by God, may be reflected in the opposition of their neighbors to the present-day nation of Israel -- but God has protected Israel through numerous attacks and wars.

Now those last few thoughts were not taken from any book, so think it through. I don't want to be dogmatic, but the Bible tells us that there will be a spiritual revival in the nation of Israel in the future. The Scriptures predict that the Jewish people will not only return physically to their land, but there will be a spiritual revival as well. Read Romans 11 in this connection. I believe this spiritual revival of the nation is foreseen in the spiritual revival in Jacob's life. In Genesis 35, Jacob finally goes back to Bethel where God had first appeared to him. The life of Jacob is a microcosm of the history of Israel.

### 2. The life of Jacob is a microcosm of the Christian life.

You have heard the following expressions, "There's a little bit of Jacob in every one of us," or "We are all a little bit like Jacob." The fact of the matter is, we are all a **lot** like Jacob, and I am speaking to Christians! Like Jacob, we have a desire for spiritual things, and I trust we can give a good account of ourselves as Jacob did here in these verses before us. But like Jacob, we have a lot of rough edges in our lives, on which the Lord needs to work. Like Jacob, we make mistakes that the Lord must correct. Like Jacob, all too often we are selfish and proud. Like Jacob, we must go to the School of God and take a number of courses -- and sometimes the same course twice, or even more! And like Jacob, we don't always pass these courses with flying colors.

But Jacob finally came to graduation when he was old. *“By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff”(Hebrews 11:21).* So in our lives, God continues to work with us and in us. Philippians 1:6 tells us that: *“He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”*

The life of Jacob is a microcosm of the Christian life.

## Practical Application

**Let’s learn to “respond without reacting” to false accusations.**

What do we do when we are falsely accused? Our natural tendency is to react -- in fact, we tend to overreact! There is a natural tendency to retaliate and try to take revenge. We know that retaliation and taking revenge are wrong, because Romans 12:19 says, *“Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.”*

Well then, what should we do when we are falsely accused? Should we just sit there and do nothing? We should respond without reacting? When Laban falsely accused Jacob, Jacob did not retaliate or take revenge. But he didn’t just let the false accusations pass. He responded with the facts in a concise and firm way. That is what Nehemiah did when he was falsely accused. In Nehemiah 6, the enemy accused Nehemiah of wanting to be a king over all the people. Nehemiah flatly denied the charge, and he went right on building the wall of Jerusalem. He didn’t waste a lot of time trying to defend himself, and he didn’t take revenge, but he did respond.

When the Lord Jesus was falsely accused of casting out demons by the power of Satan, what did He do? He responded by stating the truth: these were lies! But He didn’t react by retaliating or taking revenge on the people who were slandering him. Let’s learn to “respond without reacting” to false accusations.

Recently one of my students (who is not doing very well academically) sent me a note in which she accused me of being unfair in the tests I give. Now my natural tendency would be to react, and maybe even flunk this student for daring to question my ways of testing! I’m going to try **not** to react -- but I am going to respond. I plan to write a note to the student and tell her exactly why I test the way I do, and that it has worked well for over twenty years of teaching, but I am open to change if she can show me a better way.

Let’s follow this practical application. Let’s learn to “respond without reacting” to false accusations.