

Jacob’s Flight

I. REVIEW

A. Summary of Last Week

1. God alone is the author of life, as is shown in the drama of Rachel and Leah's quest for children.
2. Regardless of all the self-serving manipulation and trickery that occurs between Laban, his children, and Jacob, God accomplished His purpose to start a family that would form the basis of the new nation of Israel.
3. God kept His promise to Jacob and was with him during his time in Haran, protecting and prospering him, making him a blessing, and preparing him to return to his promised home.
4. God used the trials and circumstances in Jacob’s life to begin to mold Jacob into the Patriarch he would become. Those 20 years were not wasted, as Jacob experienced first-hand God's faithfulness on his behalf, and began to know Him personally as his God.

II. FURTHER REFLECTION

In the midst of the turmoil and selfishness that characterize Jacob's young household, it is tempting to step back and question God's wisdom in building His future kingdom on one man's family.

- Why not reach down and call out more Abrahams?
- Surely a nation better representative of God could be put together from separate, well chosen individuals!

Perhaps! And yet there is something deeply significant about the fact that God started with a family. He began it all with Adam and Eve and the command to be fruitful and multiply: a reflection of the triune family of God Himself.

He made a fresh start with Noah and Noah's wife, their sons and their sons' wives: a family household. And now - even though we have seen time and time again that the righteousness of one man does not necessarily continue on in his children - God is persisting in His plan to use the offspring of one righteous man to bless the world. Why?

- Because salvation from sin and to life with God is a family affair!

Adam fathered a human family beleaguered by sin. Noah and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob would one day be recognized for their faith - but their families too were beset by sin.

They were cursed by nature, inherited from birth from Adam. Under the New Covenant, though, a New Adam would father a new family that He would make righteous by cancelling their bondage to sin and imparting His very nature to them.

True, membership in this new family is for those who have faith - not just for those who are born into a Christian family or who call themselves Christians. But to look at each person as an individual in pursuit of heaven, or at life with God as a personal matter between each person and his God, is to miss the fullness of what has been revealed in that new covenant.

When we are baptized, we are reborn into God's family: born of God, with His nature in us and enabling us to be righteous. We are called the children of God, for that is what we are! (See I John 3:1-10).

The Catholic Church preserves this sense of family. God is our Father. Mary is our Mother; the saints are our brothers and sisters. In the Church hierarchy too there are fathers and sisters and brothers.

- Think of the significance of our family prayer, the "Our Father."
- Because Christ has given us his nature, we can dare to call God "Father!" "Abba" - "Daddy."

- "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (1 John 3:1) Thanks be to God!!

Jacob Flees

Jacob has become sufficiently rich and strong to provoke the envy of Laban's clan. At the same time, he feels up to returning to Canaan to face his brother Esau. The blessing that Isaac gave Jacob has borne fruit.

Six years have passed since Jacob first felt it was time to leave (see Gen. 31:41), and he has become "exceedingly prosperous." He has been with Laban for a total of twenty years! Fourteen years for the two daughters and six years for the flock.

What do Laban and his sons think of Jacob's good fortune? Are they correct in their assumption?

Read: Genesis 31:1-18

[1] Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, "Jacob has taken all that was our father's; and from what was our father's he has gained all this wealth."

[2] And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before.

[3] Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you."

[4] So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was,

[5] and said to them, "I see that your father does not regard me with favor as he did before. But the God of my father has been with me.

[6] You know that I have served your father with all my strength;

[7] yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not permit him to harm me.

[8] If he said, 'The spotted shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore spotted; and if he said, 'The striped shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore striped.

[9] Thus God has taken away the cattle of your father, and given them to me.

[10] In the mating season of the flock I lifted up my eyes, and saw in a dream that the he-goats which leaped upon the flock were striped, spotted, and mottled.

[11] Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am!'

[12] And he said, 'Lift up your eyes and see, all the goats that leap upon the flock are striped, spotted, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you.

[13] I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go forth from this land, and return to the land of your birth.'"

[14] Then Rachel and Leah answered him, "Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house?

[15] Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has been using up the money given for us.

[16] All the property which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children; now then, whatever God has said to you, do."

[17] So Jacob arose, and set his sons and his wives on camels;

[18] and he drove away all his cattle, all his livestock which he had gained, the cattle in his possession which he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac.

B. Laban and his Sons are Jealous of Jacob

Where Laban formerly attributed his own blessing to Jacob, his attitude now changes (Gen. 31:2). He sees that Jacob's gain is from his flocks, and his sons are jealous of his success and attribute it to stealing rather than to Jacob's ingenuity.

They look at what is gone and not at what they have gained from Jacob's presence. But as Jacob's wives recognize (vss. 14-16), their father had kept what was theirs by right as a bride-price (the price of Jacob's 14 years of labour) - and thus the flocks Jacob has been taking from are actually theirs.

C. Jacob's Success belongs to God

Jacob knows his success belongs to God. As he told his wives, God has been with him (vs. 5); God has kept Laban from harming him (vs.7); God saw to it that whatever parameters Laban set on Jacob's wages, they were met (vss. 8,9); and God took Laban's livestock and gave it to Jacob.

However cunning or skillful Jacob has been, he gives credit for the results to God. This stands in contrast to Jacob's earlier scheming, by which he runs ahead of God and attempts to accomplish things on his own.

D. God calls Jacob to Return Home

In verse 5, Jacob says: *"But the God of my father has been with me."* Jacob calls God "the God of my father."

Jacob doesn't seem to see God as his God yet, although he sees Him as a personal God who has revealed Himself to his ancestors: when explaining to his wives the reason for his prosperity, he credits "the God of my father."

Yet when God revealed Himself to Jacob in a dream, telling him it was time to return home, God reminds him that He is "the God of Bethel (vs. 13) - not just the God of Isaac, but the God who revealed himself personally to Jacob at Bethel.

In his dream, God reminded Jacob of his vow.

At Bethel Jacob vowed that *"If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that thou givest me I will give the tenth to thee"* (Gen. 28:20-22).

God has fulfilled His part of the promise, and Jacob's explanation to his wives shows he knows it; now it is time for Jacob to return and make the LORD his God. In returning home and to God he is less like Abraham being called to a new country than he is like the Prodigal Son of Jesus' parable, in which the son left and then returns to his father's house.

E. Application

Called by God to return to his native country, Jacob can symbolize the attitude of the Christian who is called once and again to conversion, to return to that gift he was once given [the gift of grace], to come back to his Father's house.

III. JACOB LEAVES SECRETLY

Read: Genesis 31:19-21

[19] Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods.

[20] And Jacob outwitted Laban the Aramean, in that he did not tell him that he intended to flee.

[21] He fled with all that he had, and arose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.

Rather than leave openly, Jacob deceived Laban, leaving secretly with family and flocks and denying Laban the chance to say goodbye and give them a proper send-off.

Rachel played her own part in the deception when she stole Laban's household gods. (It is not clear whether she wanted them for protection or blessing, or to worship, but clearly Laban gave place to more than one God in his household and Rachel was in some way influenced by this).

Note: The “household gods” stolen by Rachael were probably statues in human form [cultic figurines also called “teraphim”] of gods who protected the house and its people.

They were used for divination – a form of idolatry which tries to discern the future using occult sources or powers, as opposed to God’s power [See Catechism of the Catholic Church {CCC} #2115 - 2116 below].

A. CCC on Divination

CCC #2115 - God can reveal the future to his prophets or to other saints. Still, a sound Christian attitude consists in putting oneself confidently into the hands of Providence for whatever concerns the future, and giving up all unhealthy curiosity about it.

CCC #2116 - All forms of *divination* are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to “unveil” the future. [*Cf. Deut 18:10; Jer 29:8*].

Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over

time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honour, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone.

IV. LABAN OVERTAKES JACOB

Read: Genesis 31:22-42

[22] When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled,

[23] he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead.

[24] But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night, and said to him, "Take heed that you say not a word to Jacob, either good or bad."

[25] And Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen encamped in the hill country of Gilead.

[26] And Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done, that you have cheated me, and carried away my daughters like captives of the sword?"

[27] Why did you flee secretly, and cheat me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre?"

[28] And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? Now you have done foolishly.

[29] It is in my power to do you harm; but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Take heed that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.'

[30] And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?"

[31] Jacob answered Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force.

[32] Any one with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsmen point out what I have that is yours, and take it." Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.

[33] So Laban went into Jacob's tent, and into Leah's tent, and into the tent of the two maidservants, but he did not find them. And he went out of Leah's tent, and entered Rachel's.

[34] Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle, and sat upon them. Laban felt all about the tent, but did not find them.

[35] And she said to her father, "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me." So he searched, but did not find the household gods.

[36] Then Jacob became angry, and upbraided Laban; Jacob said to Laban, "What is my offense? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me?"

[37] Although you have felt through all my goods, what have you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two.

[38] These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your she-goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks.

[39] That which was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself; of my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night.

[40] Thus I was; by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes.

[41] These twenty years I have been in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times.

[42] If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands, and rebuked you last night."

The furious Laban chased them all the way to Gilead before overtaking them. God appeared to Laban in a dream to warn him off. He apparently changed Laban's heart as well, for his attitude seems softened by the time he confronts Jacob, and the matter is solved not by blows but with a treaty.

As St. John Chrysostom noticed, "*...the one who pursues [Jacob] so relentlessly and who seeks to inflict on him the punishment of flight, not only has no scathing criticism to make but in fact addresses to him mildly as father to son: 'What have you done? Why did you flee secretly?' What a change you can see: he had been wild with anger, but now he is as gentle as a lamb.*" (Homiliae in Genesim, 57, 5).

V. LABAN AND JACOB MAKE A COVENANT

Read: Genesis 31: 43-55

[43] Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and 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?"

[44] Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I; and let it be a witness between you and me."

[45] So Jacob took a stone, and set it up as a pillar.

[46] And Jacob said to his kinsmen, "Gather stones," and they took stones, and made a heap; and they ate there by the heap.

[47] Laban called it Je'gar-sahadu'tha: but Jacob called it Galeed.

[48] Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me today." Therefore he named it Galeed,

[49] and the pillar Mizpah, for he said, "The LORD watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.

[50] If you ill-treat my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no man is with us, remember, God is witness between you and me."

[51] Then Laban said to Jacob, "See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me.

[52] This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, for harm.

[53] The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us." So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac,

[54] and Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain and called his kinsmen to eat bread; and they ate bread and tarried all night on the mountain.

[55] Early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them; then he departed and returned home.

A. The Covenant

Jacob must agree not to mistreat Laban's daughters or to take other wives, and a boundary is set between their territories which both agree not to pass to harm

the other. The name Mizpah means "watchtower." The Aramean Jegar-sahadutha and the Hebrew Galeed both mean "witness heap." The heap of stones will serve as a reminder and God will watch them both to make sure they hold to their vows.

Jacob swore by a name he used earlier for God when defending himself to Laban (Gen. 31:42): "the Fear of Isaac." The word used for "fear" (or "the terrible") here also can mean "kinsman." In the context of this title it evokes both the close relationship between God and the patriarchs and also the power and might of the God who stood beside Jacob.

VI. SUMMARY

What have we learned about God in these chapters?

First, He keeps His promises. He stayed with Jacob as He promised at Bethel, even though Jacob was gone for a full 20 years. Also as promised, He gave Jacob descendants and is taking him back to Canaan safely, protecting him from Laban's wrath.

Secondly, God does not depend on perfect people but uses even human failings to advance His plan.

And third, He protects His own, intervening if and when it is necessary.