

“Now Jacob heard the words of Laban’s sons, saying, ‘Jacob has taken away all that was our father’s, and from what was our father’s he has acquired all this wealth.’ And Jacob saw the countenance of Laban, and indeed it was not favorable toward him as before” (Genesis 31:1-2).

After [completing his term of employment](#) with his father-in-law, Laban, Jacob’s life entered a new era of affluence: ***“Thus the man became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks, female and male servants, and camels and donkeys” (Genesis 30:43).***

But despite the vast distance separating Laban and Jacob, the opening verses of Genesis chapter thirty-one tell us how Jacob learned of Laban’s son’s resentment over his divinely ordained prosperity. Genesis 31:1 reveals the source of their displeasure: ***“Jacob has robbed our father of everything! ... He has gained all his wealth at our father’s expense” (NLT).***

But that assessment was far from accurate, for Laban and Jacob had entered an agreement that gave Jacob ownership of any livestock born with special markings. Laban quickly accepted those terms, but their arrangement had clearly worked out better for Jacob than Laban and his sons expected.

Now that Jacob’s wealth was rapidly increasing, they no longer viewed their agreement as an honest business arrangement; Laban’s sons now saw Jacob as someone who was “stealing” from their father. Thus, we are reminded that a jealous or envious attitude distorts our ability to discern the truth.

Unfortunately, Jacob’s personal experience served to corroborate that rumor: ***“Jacob also noticed that Laban was not as friendly as he had been before” (Genesis 31:2 CEV).*** So it became apparent to Jacob that Laban had issues with him as well.

You see, Jacob had a good working relationship with Laban as long as Laban derived the benefit from their arrangement. But now that God had blessed Jacob with wealth and prosperity, their relationship took a turn for the worse. That’s when God stepped in to change the course of Jacob’s life.

“Then the Lord said to Jacob, ‘Return to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you’” (Genesis 31:3).

So the time had come for God to [make good on His promises and bring Jacob back home](#). But prior to his departure, Jacob first made time for a family meeting...

“So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to the field, to his flock, and said to them, ‘I see your father’s countenance, that it is not favorable toward me as before; but the God of my father has been with me. And you know that with all my might I have served your father.

Yet your father has deceived me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not allow him to hurt me. If he said thus: ‘The speckled shall be your wages,’ then all the flocks bore speckled. And if he said thus: ‘The streaked shall be your wages,’ then all the flocks bore streaked. So God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me.

And it happened, at the time when the flocks conceived, that I lifted my eyes and saw in a dream, and behold, the rams which leaped upon the flocks were streaked, speckled, and gray-spotted. Then the Angel of God spoke to me in a dream, saying, ‘Jacob.’ And I said, ‘Here I am.’

And He said, ‘Lift your eyes now and see, all the rams which leap on the flocks are streaked, speckled, and gray-spotted; for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed the pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now arise, get out of this land, and return to the land of your family’” (Genesis 31:4-13).

This was a strategic and well-calculated decision. Notice that Jacob first called Leah and Rachel out to the field to speak with him. That provided the opportunity for a private conversation without the daily distractions of life back home.

Jacob undoubtedly realized that a decision to return to his ancestral home would demand a series of sacrifices from his family. For instance, Leah and Rachel would have to leave the only place they had ever called home. It also meant uprooting their children and moving them to an unfamiliar land.

So instead of “surprising” his family with this news, Jacob wisely ensured that Leah and Rachel had an advance opportunity to join with him in executing God’s plan.

Jacob’s reference to the fact that Laban changed his wages “ten times” is a figurative expression that highlights Laban’s repeated alterations to their working arrangement. You see, Laban’s agreement with Jacob specified that Jacob would receive the livestock born with special markings; the speckled, spotted, and streaked animals.

But once Laban realized that Jacob had begun to profit from this arrangement, it seems that he reneged on their agreement. Instead of letting Jacob have all the off-colored animals (as per their original agreement), Laban apparently informed Jacob that he could only take the speckled animals. Then he changed his mind and limited Jacob's wages to the animals that were born with striped markings. Each change likely involved a different, and increasingly unfavorable, set of rules.

But those changes mattered little in the end, for God was watching out for Jacob: ***“Whenever he said, ‘The speckled ones will be your wages,’ all the flocks gave birth to speckled young. And whenever he said, ‘The striped ones will be your wages,’ all the flocks gave birth to striped young. So God has taken away your father’s livestock and has given them to me!” (Genesis 31:8-9 GW).***

Unfortunately, Jacob's experience with Laban is not unusual. You see, it is not uncommon to find employers who follow Laban's poor example, even today. Thus, we can learn something important from Jacob's interaction with Laban.

For instance, Jacob did not grumble or complain about how unfairly Laban had treated him. Instead, he continued to work hard and mind his business as he waited for God to address the situation. Finally, Jacob made certain to honor God for His protection and provision. In this manner, Jacob lived out the words of Psalm 118:6: ***“The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?”***

So how did Leah and Rachel respond to Jacob's message? That answer comes in the following verses...

“Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, ‘Is there still any portion or inheritance for us in our father’s house? Are we not considered strangers by him?

For he has sold us, and also completely consumed our money. For all these riches which God has taken from our father are really ours and our children’s; now then, whatever God has said to you, do it!” (Genesis 31:14-16).

Regrettably, it appears that Laban simply used his daughters to extract years of free labor from their husband; at least, that’s how they seemed to feel. In fact, Leah and Rachel’s relationship with Laban had deteriorated to the point where they felt like strangers within their family. And as far as Jacob’s earnings were concerned, Leah and Rachel felt God had simply returned what was rightfully theirs..

Jacob’s wives then gave him some excellent advice: ***“...do whatever God tells you to do” (Genesis 31:16 CEV).*** Rachel and Leah were thus prepared to move all their possessions to an unfamiliar land that was hundreds of miles away.

But more importantly, Leah and Rachel expressed their willingness to act on God's directive, even if it meant leaving the only place they'd ever known. So Leah and Rachel acted in a highly commendable manner as they encouraged Jacob to follow God's direction.

“Then Jacob rose and set his sons and his wives on camels. And he carried away all his livestock and all his possessions which he had gained, his acquired livestock which he had gained in Paddan Aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan” (Genesis 31:17-18).

So Jacob began his return to his childhood home, along with his wives, children, and all he possessed. Those possessions included ***“...all the belongings he had acquired in Paddan-aram” (NLT)***. This tells us that Jacob didn't leave with anything that belonged to his father-in-law Laban, or so he thought.

“While Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole the household idols that belonged to her father” (Genesis 31:19 NET).

These “household idols” (also known as teraphim) were small figurines that took the form of female goddesses. These images were thought to serve a threefold purpose:

- They supposedly brought good luck to their owner.
- They allegedly possessed the ability to tell the future or discover secret information (also known as “divination”).
- They served to establish property ownership. Anyone in possession of these idols held a legal right to claim an inherited property.

So why would Rachel steal these things from her father? Perhaps Rachel really believed these idols possessed the ability to assist Laban in finding Jacob following their departure. If so, then Rachel's superstitious concerns were completely unfounded, for we'll later find that Laban quickly tracked Jacob down without them after they left.

It's also possible that Rachel wanted to retaliate against her father for squandering her share of his assets ([Genesis 31:14-15](#)). A third possibility involves Laban's estate. Since Laban made Leah and Rachel feel as if they were no longer part of his family, Rachel may have stolen these idols in an effort to claim a portion of his property following his death.

But whatever her reason, Rachel's theft will eventually lead to a considerable amount of trouble for Jacob.

“Moreover, Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him he was running away. So he fled with all he had, and crossing the River, he headed for the hill country of Gilead” (Genesis 31:20-21 NIV).

Jacob apparently realized that Laban was not inclined to allow him to walk away and return home. This was especially true in light of Laban's apparent belief that Jacob had stolen from him in some way ([Genesis 31:1](#)). So it probably seemed like a good idea for Jacob to leave quietly.

The problem is that we're told that ***“...Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean.”*** So, while Jacob heeded God's command to return home, he didn't follow God's plan in God's way. Since Jacob was known to be a follower of God, this deceptive act served to misrepresent the God he claimed to serve. Jacob's example thus reminds us that simply doing what God wants us to do is insufficient; we must do so in a way that honors Him as well.

So Jacob departed from Laban on his return home. But there was a powerful and dangerous enemy waiting ahead. That enemy was Jacob's brother Esau.

[Genesis chapter twenty-seven](#) tells us how Jacob deceived his elderly father and secured the family inheritance that his father intended to give his older brother Esau. That made Esau angry enough to threaten to kill Jacob. However, Jacob escaped his brother's wrath and subsequently began his saga with Laban.

Those events took place approximately twenty years prior to our narrative in Genesis chapter thirty-one. So while Jacob's departure enabled him to avoid his brother's murderous intent, it also provided Esau with two additional decades to cultivate a sense of resentment toward him- and who knew how he might respond when he learned of Jacob's return?

But if that wasn't enough, there was a second enemy who was approaching from the other direction. That enemy was someone Jacob knew all too well...

“And Laban was told on the third day that Jacob had fled. Then he took his brethren with him and pursued him for seven days' journey, and he overtook him in the mountains of Gilead” (Genesis 31:22-23).

The geographic distance between Laban and Jacob was equivalent to three days of travel according to their labor agreement. This meant that Laban had to journey for seventy-two hours just to reach Jacob's point of departure. But even though Jacob had a significant head start, it only took Laban seven days to catch up with him.

To get an idea of just how fast Laban was moving, we simply need to look at the distance he covered in those seven days of travel. First, Laban had a three-day journey just to get back to Jacob's original starting point, a distance of about fifty to sixty miles (80-130 km). Laban then had to travel for an additional three hundred miles (483 km) to reach the hill country of Gilead.

Thus, Laban covered a total distance of about three hundred and fifty to four hundred miles (563-644 km) in just seven days. Considering the primitive technology and infrastructure of his era, that represented an extraordinary rate of progress.

But why would Laban go to such efforts? Well, Laban's reason for embarking on this journey will soon become clear.

First, let's consider Laban's mindset as he approached Jacob's camp. Does it seem reasonable to conclude that Laban chased Jacob at top speed for hundreds of miles just to say goodbye? Or did he have something else in mind? And why would Laban bring a posse of relatives along with him?

Laban's response clearly implies that he was seeking to prevent Jacob from leaving, or perhaps something worse. But when God instructed Jacob to return to the land of his ancestors, He didn't leave Jacob to fend for himself. Instead, He also stepped in to protect Jacob from anyone who may have attempted to interfere...

“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.' So Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the mountains, and Laban with his brethren pitched in the mountains of Gilead” (Genesis 31:24-25).

If we could rephrase God's message to Laban in these verses, we might say that God told him, “Don't try to stop Jacob from going forward and don't try to talk him into going back.”

So God protected Jacob by forbidding Laban to involve himself in anything Jacob was doing. And while Laban didn't seem to have much of a relationship with God, he apparently knew enough to realize that it was in his interest to follow those instructions.

“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? 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? And you did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters. Now you have done foolishly in so doing'” (Genesis 31:26-28).

So Laban wanted Jacob to believe that he undertook this 350-400 mile, high-speed chase for two reasons:

- Jacob left before Laban could give him a going-away party, complete with a band playing music.
- He wanted to make Jacob feel guilty because he had prevented him from saying goodbye to his daughters and grandchildren.

Unfortunately, Laban probably wasn't honest with Jacob regarding these motives. Instead, there are other, more realistic possibilities to account for his behavior.

Although Laban tried to portray himself as an innocent victim of Jacob's decision to leave without notice, the truth was likely otherwise. A more likely explanation is that God's warning had restrained him from moving forward with his preferred course of action. And what was Laban's preferred course of action? That answer comes next...

“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’” (Genesis 31:29).

In saying, ***“I have the power to harm you...” (NIV)*** Laban offers some insight into his attitude towards Jacob. Laban had likely intended to ***“destroy” (NLT)*** Jacob when he caught up with him, but God's intervention prevented him from taking action.

Remember that God had earlier warned Laban ***“...not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad” (ESV)***. If Laban had spoken “good” to Jacob, then he might have convinced Jacob to return with him. If he had spoken “bad” to Jacob (which seems to be his intent), then Jacob might have suffered injury or death as a result.

Since Laban appeared to be under the impression that Jacob's possessions actually belonged to him, he may have convinced himself that Jacob was a thief. That would have provided him with the necessary justification to act against Jacob, or even kill him. But Laban's fear of divine retribution was sufficient to deter him from taking either course of action.

Now it's likely that Jacob, Leah, and Rachel dismissed Laban's stated desire to throw a going-away party and say goodbye to them. So Laban tried another approach...

“And now you have surely gone because you greatly long for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?” (Genesis 31:30).

The “gods” Laban spoke of were small figurines that were used for divination or to establish property rights. But Jacob didn't steal anything from Laban, and he was willing to prove it...

“Then Jacob answered and said to Laban, ‘Because I was afraid, for I said, ‘Perhaps you would take your daughters from me by force.’ 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” (Genesis 31:31-32).

So Jacob gave his side of the story and invited Laban to go on a reconnaissance mission. Laban readily agreed to Jacob’s offer and got right to work...

“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. 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. 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” (Genesis 31:33-35).

So it appears that Rachel had learned something from her father, Laban. That “something” involved the art of crafting a believable lie while avoiding detection.

When Laban showed up in Rachel’s tent to search through her belongings, she knew he would expect her to follow the normal cultural practices of that era. One such practice required a child to rise in the presence of his or her father. But Rachel also knew that once she arose to greet her father, Laban would take the opportunity to look through the saddlebag where she had been sitting; the exact place where she had hidden these idols.

Rachel addressed that vulnerability by essentially saying, *“Father, please don’t be angry, but I’m having my menstrual period and I can’t get up.”* That was enough to trick Laban into searching everywhere except the place where these “gods” were hidden.

Of course, one aspect of this scene is quite amusing if we stop to consider it. For instance, what kind of “god” would permit itself to be stolen? What kind of “god” would allow itself to be stuffed inside a bag? What kind of “god” would tolerate an individual who sat upon it? But these were the “gods” Laban trusted.

So Laban failed to discover his household gods among Jacob's belongings, and that provided Jacob with an opportunity to tell Laban exactly how he felt...

“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? 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!

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!” (Genesis 31:36-38).

Laban had treated Jacob unfairly for many years, and now it was time for Jacob to respond. He did so by rebuking (or expressing his strong disapproval) of the way Laban treated him...

- Verse 36: *“What wrong did I commit that led you to pursue me relentlessly for hundreds of miles?”*
- Verse 37: *“Did you find anything of yours in my belongings? Why don’t you put it out here in front of our families so everyone can see and decide?”*
- Verse 38: *“None of the female members of your livestock miscarried while I was watching over them and I butchered none of the males so that I could grill a steak for myself.”*

But Jacob's reprimand was far from over...

“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” (Genesis 31:39).

A shepherd was customarily responsible for any animal that was lost from their herd in the Old Testament era. However, a shepherd could bring the body of a sheep or goat to the owner of a herd to serve as evidence that he or she attempted to save that animal from a predator. In that instance, a shepherd would be relieved of the financial burden associated with the loss of an animal.

But Jacob never exercised that right. Instead, Jacob assumed financial responsibility for any missing animals from Laban's herd, regardless of whether he was to blame for their loss. In fact, Jacob said, ***“You required it from my hand...”*** which suggests that Laban made him pay for every loss, even those losses that were not Jacob's fault.

But Jacob still wasn't done...

“There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes” (Genesis 31:40).

Even when the daytime heat was scorching or the nighttime cold made sleep impossible, Jacob was there, doing his job for Laban year after year. That made Laban's response even more egregious...

“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” (Genesis 31:41).

As mentioned earlier, this reference to Laban and the fact that he had changed Jacob's wages ***“ten times,”*** meant that Laban continually changed the terms of their labor agreement. Whenever it looked as if Jacob might benefit from their arrangement, Laban changed the conditions of their contract.

In fact, Laban would have sent Jacob back home with nothing, except for one thing...

“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” (Genesis 31:42).

Jacob worked hard to achieve what he had, but he also knew that God was the One who was responsible for his success. Because of this, Jacob made certain to credit God for His protection and provision. In doing so, Jacob lived out the words of Deuteronomy 8:17-18...

“You may say to yourselves, ‘I became wealthy because of my own ability and strength.’ But remember the Lord your God is the one who makes you wealthy. He's confirming the promise which he swore to your ancestors. It's still in effect today” (Deuteronomy 8:17-18 GW).

So how did Laban respond to Jacob's rebuke? Well, Laban had an explanation that seemed completely reasonable, at least to him...

“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?’” (Genesis 31:43).

Even though Laban and Jacob had come to an agreement, Laban apparently felt that Jacob's possessions rightfully belonged to him. This flawed line of reasoning allowed Laban to rationalize and justify his exploitive behavior.

Laban's warped sense of logic led him to conclude that he was entitled to do as he pleased with "his" property. That included several attempts to swindle Jacob out of his rightful earnings under the terms of their agreement.

But there was one thing that Laban didn't anticipate- God's intervention prevented him from harming Jacob or hindering his escape. So once Laban caught up with Jacob, his options for confronting him were severely limited. Thus, in order to salvage something of value from this situation, Laban proposed a truce...

“Now therefore, come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.’ So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. Then Jacob said to his brethren, ‘Gather stones.’ And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there on the heap. Laban called it Jegar Sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed.

And Laban said, ‘This heap is a witness between you and me this day.’ Therefore its name was called Galeed, also Mizpah, because he said, ‘May the Lord watch between you and me when we are absent one from another’” (Genesis 31:44-49).

From a 21st century perspective, we might say that Jacob and Laban established a “mutual non-aggression” treaty. This heap of stones thus served as a sort of “de-militarized zone.” Although Jacob and Laban referred to these stones by different names, they both meant the same thing: “*heap of witness.*”

The word “Mizpah” in Genesis 31:49 means “watchpost.” Apart from its appearance in this passage, some may recognize this word from its association with a piece of jewelry known as a “Mizpah charm” or “Mizpah coin.”

This piece comprises two separate parts that fit together as one. It also includes an inscription taken from the verse quoted above: “***May the Lord watch between you and me when we are absent one from another.***” This enables two loved ones to carry one half of each charm, thus serving as a tangible reminder of their bond while they are apart from one another.

This concept is very endearing, except for one thing. You see, this passage has nothing to do with mutual love and affection. Instead, these verses express a sense of mutual distrust between Jacob and Laban.

In making this covenant, Laban and Jacob essentially said to one another: “*You are so devious that I pray for divine intervention to keep you in check when I cannot do so for myself.*” One source offers some additional insight regarding this passage...

“In effect, the pillar of Mizpah meant, ‘If you come over on my side of this line, ...I’ll kill you.’ The covenant breaker would need God to take care of him, because the other would shoot to kill.” ⁽¹⁾

So why would Laban propose this armistice? Laban's proposal may have stemmed from his suspicion that Jacob was still in possession of his household idols, despite his inability to find them among Jacob's belongings. Those household idols would have given Jacob rights to Laban's property if he elected to return.

But now, this agreement served to prevent Jacob from entering Laban's territory. And from Jacob's perspective, it meant that he would never have to deal with Laban again.

(1) Dr. Donald Barnhouse, *Genesis Vol 2* p 110, quoted in *Wilmington's Guide To The Bible* p 51

“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!”

Then Laban said to Jacob, 'Here is this heap and here is this pillar, which I have placed between you and me. 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. 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. 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. And early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons and daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place” (Genesis 31:50-55).

This is the last we will ever hear from Laban in the pages of the Scriptures. Yet even though Laban is a fairly minor character, his life offers a meaningful illustration that furnishes an important lesson for today.

First, Laban exemplifies the type of person who is seemingly religious, but selfishly prioritizes his own self-interest above all else. Whenever Laban saw an opportunity to serve his interest, he sought to maneuver that situation to his advantage without regard to his prior commitments or the collateral damage he might inflict upon others.

So Laban’s time upon the Biblical stage has now concluded, and all that remains is his enduring legacy as a cheater, scammer, and selfish individual. Laban’s example also brings us to one last question from this chapter: when our time on earth is over, how do we wish to be remembered? Do we seek to be remembered as individuals who lived God-honoring lives? Or, (like Laban), do we prefer to be remembered some other way?