

INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS CHAPTER 31

Jacob was a very honest good man, a man of great devotion and integrity, yet he had more trouble and vexation than any of the patriarchs. He left his father's house in a fright, went to his uncle's in distress, very hard usage he met with there, and now is going back surrounded with fears. Here is,

- I. His resolution to return, [#Ge 31:1-16](#).
- II. His clandestine departure, [#Ge 31:17-21](#).
- III. Laban's pursuit of him in displeasure, [#Ge 31:22-25](#).
- IV. The hot words that passed between them, [#Ge 31:26-42](#).
- V. Their amicable agreement at last, [#Ge 31:43-55](#).

Ver. 1.

Jacob is here taking up a resolution immediately to quit his uncle's service, to take what he had and go back to Canaan. This resolution he took up upon a just provocation, by divine direction, and with the advice and consent of his wives.

I. Upon a just provocation; for Laban and his sons had become very cross and ill natured towards him, so that he could not stay among them with safety or satisfaction.

1. Laban's sons showed their ill-will in what they said, [#Ge 31:1](#). It should seem they said it in Jacob's hearing, with a design to vex him. The last chapter began with Rachel's envying Leah; this begins with Laban's sons envying Jacob. Observe,

(1.) How greatly they magnify Jacob's prosperity: *He has gotten all this glory*. And what was this glory that they made so much ado about? It was a parcel of brown sheep and speckled goats (and perhaps the fine colours made them seem more glorious), and some camels and asses, and such like trading; and this was *all this glory*. Note, Riches are glorious things in the eyes of carnal people, while to all those that are conversant with heavenly things they have no glory in comparison with the glory which excellet. Men's over-valuing worldly wealth is that fundamental error which is the root of covetousness, envy, and all evil.

(2.) How basely they reflect upon Jacob's fidelity, as if what he had he had not gotten honestly: *Jacob has taken away all that was our father's*. Not all, surely. What had become of those cattle which were committed to the custody of Laban's sons, and sent *three days' journey off*? [#Ge 30:35,36](#). They mean all that was committed to him; but, speaking invidiously, they express themselves thus generally. Note,

[1.] Those that are ever so careful to keep a good conscience cannot always be sure of a good name.

[2.] This is one of the vanities and vexations which attend outward prosperity, that it makes a man to be envied of his neighbours ([#Ec 4:4](#)), and *who can stand before envy*? [#Pr 27:4](#). Whom Heaven blesses hell curses, and all its children on earth.

2. Laban himself said little, but his countenance was not towards Jacob as it used to be; and Jacob could not but take notice of it, [#Ge 31:2,5](#). He was but a churl at the best,

but now he was more churlish than formerly. Note, Envy is a sin that often appears in the countenance; hence we read of an *evil eye*, #Pr 23:6. Sour looks may do a great deal towards the ruin of peace and love in a family, and the making of those uneasy of whose comfort we ought to be tender. Laban's angry countenance lost him the greatest blessing his family ever had, and justly.

II. By divine direction and under the convoy of a promise: *The Lord said unto Jacob, Return, and I will be with thee*, #Ge 31:3. Though Jacob had met with very hard usage here, yet he would not quit his place till God bade him. He came thither by orders from Heaven, and there he would stay till he was ordered back. Note, It is our duty to set ourselves, and it will be our comfort to see ourselves, under God's guidance, both in our going out and in our coming in. The direction he had from Heaven is more fully related in the account he gives of it to his wives (#Ge 31:10-13), where he tells them of a dream he had about the cattle, and the wonderful increase of those of his colour; and how the angel of God, in that dream (for I suppose the dream spoken of #Ge 31:10 and that #Ge 31:11 to be the same), took notice of the workings of his fancy in his sleep, and instructed him, so that it was not by chance, or by his own policy, that he obtained that great advantage; but,

1. By the providence of God, who had taken notice of the hardships Laban had put upon him, and took this way to recompense him:

"For I have seen all the Laban doeth unto thee, and herein I have an eye to that."

Note, There is more of equity in the distributions of the divine providence than we are aware of, and by them the injured are recompensed really, though perhaps insensibly. Nor was it only by the justice of providence that Jacob was thus enriched, but,

2. In performance of the promise intimated in what is said #Ge 31:13, *I am the God of Beth-el*, This was the place where the covenant was renewed with him. Note, Worldly prosperity and success are doubly sweet and comfortable when we see them flowing, not from common providence, but from covenant-love, *to perform the mercy promised*--when we have them from God as *the God of Beth-el*, from those promises of the life which now is that belong to godliness. Jacob, even when he had this hopeful prospect of growing rich with Laban, must think of returning. When the world begins to smile upon us we must remember it is not our home. *Now arise (#Ge 31:13) and return,*

(1.) To thy devotions in Canaan, the solemnities of which had perhaps been much intermitted while he was with Laban. The times of this servitude God had winked at; but now,

"Return to the place where thou anointedst the pillar and vowedst the vow. Now that thou beginnest to grow rich it is time to think of an altar and sacrifices again."

(2.) To thy comforts in Canaan: *Return to the land of thy kindred*. He was here among his near kindred; but those only he must look upon as his kindred in the best sense, the kindred he must live and die with, to whom pertained the covenant. Note, The heirs of Canaan must never reckon themselves at home till they come thither, however they may seem to take root here.

III. With the knowledge and consent of his wives. Observe,

1. He sent for Rachel and Leah to him to the field (#Ge 31:4), that he might confer with them more privately, or because one would not come to the other's apartment and he

would willingly talk with them together, or because he had work to do in the field which he would not leave. Note, Husbands that love their wives will communicate their purposes and intentions to them. Where there is a mutual affection there will be a mutual confidence. And the prudence of the wife should engage the heart of her husband to trust in her, **#Pr 31:11**. Jacob told his wives,

(1.) How faithfully he had served their father, **#Ge 31:6**. Note, If others do not do their duty to us, yet we shall have the comfort of having done ours to them.

(2.) How unfaithfully their father had dealt with him **#Ge 31:7**. He would never keep to any bargain that he made with him, but, after the first year, still as he saw Providence favour Jacob with the colour agreed on, every half year of the remaining five he changed it for some other colour, which made it ten times; as if he thought not only to deceive Jacob, but the divine Providence, which manifestly smiled upon him. Note, Those that deal honestly are not always honestly dealt with.

(3.) How God had owned him notwithstanding. He had protected him from Laban's ill-will: *God suffered him not to hurt me*. Note, Those that keep close to God shall be kept safely by him. He had also provided plentifully for him, notwithstanding Laban's design to ruin him: *God has taken away the cattle of your father, and given them to me*, **#Ge 31:9**. Thus the righteous God paid Jacob for his hard service out of Laban's estate; as afterwards he paid the seed of Jacob for their serving the Egyptians, with their spoils. Note, God is not unrighteous to forget his people's work and labour of love, though men be so, **#Heb 6:10**. Providence has ways of making those honest in the event that are not so in their design. Note, further, *The wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just*, **#Pr 13:22**.

(4.) He told them of the command God had given him, in a dream, to return to his own country (**#Ge 31:13**), that they might not suspect his resolution to arise from inconstancy, or any disaffection to their country or family, but might see it to proceed from a principle of obedience to his God, and dependence on him.

2. His wives cheerfully consented to his resolution. They also brought forward their grievances, complaining that their father had been not only unkind, but unjust, to them (**#Ge 31:14-16**), that he looked upon them as strangers, and was without natural affection towards them; and, whereas Jacob had looked upon the wealth which God had transferred from Laban to him as his wages, they looked upon it as their portions; so that, both ways, God forced Laban to pay his debts, both to his servant and to his daughters. So then it seemed,

(1.) They were weary of their own people and their father's house, and could easily forget them. Note, This good use we should make of the unkind usage we meet with from the world, we should sit the more loose to it, and be willing to leave it and desirous to be at home.

(2.) They were willing to go along with their husband, and put themselves with him under the divine direction: *Whatsoever God hath said unto thee do*. Note, Those wives that are their husband's meet helps will never be their hindrances in doing that to which God calls them.

Ver. 17.

Here is,

I. Jacob's flight from Laban. We may suppose he had been long considering of it, and

casting about in his mind respecting it; but when now, at last, God had given him positive orders to go, he made no delay, nor was he disobedient to the heavenly vision. The first opportunity that offered itself he laid hold of, when Laban was shearing his sheep (#Ge 31:19), that part of his flock which was in the hands of his sons three days' journey off. Now,

1. It is certain that it was lawful for Jacob to leave his service suddenly, without giving a quarter's warning. It was not only justified by the particular instructions God gave him, but warranted by the fundamental law of self-preservation, which directs us, when we are in danger, to shift for our own safety, as far as we can do it without wronging our consciences.
2. It was his prudence to steal away unawares to Laban, lest, if Laban had known, he should have hindered him or plundered him.
3. It was honestly done to take no more than his own with him, the *cattle of his getting*, #Ge 31:18. He took what Providence gave him, and was content with that, and would not take the repair of his damages into his own hands. Yet Rachel was not so honest as her husband; she *stole her father's images* (#Ge 31:19) and carried them away with her. The Hebrew calls them *teraphim*. Some think they were only little representations of the ancestors of the family, in statues or pictures, which Rachel had a particular fondness for, and was desirous to have with her, now that she was going into another country. It should rather seem that they were images for a religious use, *penates, household-gods*, either worshipped or consulted as oracles; and we are willing to hope (with bishop Patrick) that she took them away not out of covetousness of the rich metal they were made of, much less for her own use, or out of any superstitious fear lest Laban, by consulting his *teraphim*, might know which way they had gone (Jacob, no doubt, dwelt with his wives as a man of knowledge, and they were better taught than so), but out of a design hereby to convince her father of the folly of his regard to those as gods which could not secure themselves, #Isa 46:1,2.

II. Laban's pursuit of Jacob. Tidings were brought him, on the third day, that Jacob had fled; he immediately raises the whole clan, takes his brethren, that is, the relations of his family, that were all in his interests, and pursues Jacob (as Pharaoh and his Egyptians afterwards pursued the seed of Jacob), to bring him back into bondage again, or with design to strip him of what he had. Seven days' journey he marched in pursuit of him, #Ge 31:23. He would not have taken half the pains to have visited his best friends. But the truth is bad men will do more to serve their sinful passions than good men will to serve their just affections, and are more vehement in their anger than in their love. Well, at length Laban, overtook him, and the very night before he came up with him God interposed in the quarrel, rebuked Laban and sheltered Jacob, charging Laban not to *speak unto him either good or bad* (#Ge 31:24), that is, to say nothing against his going on with his journey, for that it proceeded from the Lord. The same Hebraism we have, #Ge 24:50. Laban, during his seven day's march, had been full of rage against Jacob, and was now full of hopes that his lust should be satisfied upon him (#Ex 15:9); but God comes to him, and with one word ties his hands, though he does not turn his heart. Note,

1. In a dream, and in slumberings upon the bed, God has ways of opening the ears of men, and sealing their instruction, #Job 33:15,16. Thus he admonishes men by their consciences, in secret whispers, which the man of wisdom will hear and heed.
2. The safety of good men is very much owing to the hold God has of the consciences of bad men and the access he has to them.

3. God sometimes appears wonderfully for the deliverance of his people when they are upon the very brink of ruin. The Jews were saved from Haman's plot when the king's decree drew near to be put in execution, **#Es 9:1**.

Ver. 25.

We have here the reasoning, not to say the rallying, that took place between Laban and Jacob at their meeting, in that mountain which was afterwards called Gilead, **#Ge 31:25**. Here is,

I. The high charge which Laban exhibited against him. He accuses him,

1. As a renegade that had unjustly deserted his service. To represent Jacob as a criminal, he will have it thought that he intended kindness to his daughters (**#Ge 31:27,28**), that he would have dismissed them with all the marks of love and honour that could be, that he would have made a solemn business of it, would have kissed his little grandchildren (and that was all he would have given them), and, according to the foolish custom of the country, would have sent them away *with mirth, and with songs, with tabret, and with harp*: not as Rebekah was sent away out of the same family, above 120 years before, with prayers and blessings (**#Ge 24:60**), but with sport and merriment, which was a sign that religion had very much decayed in the family, and that they had lost their seriousness. However, he pretends they would have been treated with respect at parting. Note, It is common for bad men, when they are disappointed in their malicious projects, to pretend that they designed nothing but what was kind and fair. When they cannot do the mischief they intended, they are loathe it should be thought that they ever did intend it. When they have not done what they should have done they come off with this excuse, that they would have done it. Men may thus be deceived, but God cannot. He likewise suggests that Jacob had some bad design in stealing away thus (**#Ge 31:26**), that he took his wives away as captives. Note, Those that mean ill themselves are most apt to put the worst construction upon what others do innocently. The insinuating and the aggravating of faults are the artifices of a designing malice, and those must be represented (though never so unjustly) as intending ill against whom ill is intended. Upon the whole matter,

(1.) He boasts of his own power (**#Ge 31:29**): *It is in the power of my hand to do you hurt*. He supposes that he had both right on his side (*a good action*, as we say, against Jacob) and *strength* on his side, either to avenge the wrong or recover the right. Note, Bad people commonly value themselves much upon their power to do hurt, whereas a power to do good is much more valuable. Those that will do nothing to make themselves amiable love to be thought formidable. And yet,

(2.) He owns himself under the check and restraint of God's power; and, though it redounds much to the credit and comfort of Jacob, he cannot avoid telling him the caution God had given him the night before in a dream, *Speak not to Jacob good nor bad*. Note, As God has all wicked instruments in a chain, so when he pleases he can make them sensible of it, and force them to own it to his praise, as protector of the good, as Balaam did. Or we may look upon this as an instance of some conscientious regard felt by Laban for God's express prohibitions. As bad as he was he durst not injure one whom he saw to be the particular care of Heaven. Note, A great deal of mischief would be prevented if men would but attend to the caveats which their own consciences give them in slumberings upon the bed, and regard the voice of God in them.

2. As a thief, **#Ge 31:30**. Rather than own that he had given him any colour of provocation to depart, he is willing to impute it to a foolish fondness for his father's house, which made him that he would needs begone; but then (says he) *wherefore hast thou stolen my gods?* Foolish man! to call those his gods that could be stolen! Could he expect protection from those that could neither resist nor discover their invaders? Happy are those who have the Lord for their God, for they have a God that they cannot be robbed of. Enemies may steal our goods, but not our God. Here Laban lays to Jacob's charge things that he knew not, the common distress of oppressed innocency.

II. Jacob's apology for himself. Those that commit their cause to God, yet are not forbidden to plead it themselves with meekness and fear.

1. As to the charge of stealing away his own wives he clears himself by giving the true reason why he went away unknown to Laban, **#Ge 31:31**. He feared lest Laban would by force take away his daughters, and so oblige him, by the bond of his affection to his wives, to continue in his service. Note, Those that are unjust in the least, it may be suspected, will be unjust also in much, **#Lu 16:10**. If Laban deceive Jacob in his wages, it is likely he will make no conscience of robbing him of his wives, and putting those asunder whom God has joined together. What may not be feared from men that have no principle of honesty?

2. As to the charge of stealing Laban's gods he pleads not guilty, **#Ge 31:32**. He not only did not take them himself (he was not so fond of them), but he did not know that they were taken. Yet perhaps he spoke too hastily and inconsiderately when he said,

"Whoever had taken them, *let him not live;*"

upon this he might reflect with some bitterness when, not long after, Rachel who had taken them died suddenly in travail. How just soever we think ourselves to be, it is best to forbear imprecations, lest they fall heavier than we imagine.

III. The diligent search Laban made for his gods (**#Ge 31:33-35**), partly out of hatred to Jacob, whom he would gladly have an occasion to quarrel with, partly out of love to his idols, which he was loathe to part with. We do not find that he searched Jacob's flocks for stolen cattle; but he searched his furniture for stolen gods. He was of Micah's mind, *You have taken away my gods, and what have I more?* **#Jud 18:24**. Were the worshippers of false gods so set upon their idols? did they thus walk in the name of their gods? and shall not we be as solicitous in our enquires after the true God? When he has justly departed from us, how carefully should we ask, *Where is God my Maker? O that I knew where I might find him!* **#Job 23:3**. Laban, after all his searches, missed of finding his gods, and was baffled in his enquiry with a sham; but our God will not only be found of those that seek him, but they shall find him their bountiful rewarder.

Ver. 36.

See in these verses,

I. The power of provocation. Jacob's natural temper was mild and calm, and grace had improved it; he was a smooth man, and a plain man; and yet Laban's unreasonable carriage towards him put him into a heat that transported him into a heat that transported him into some vehemence, **#Ge 31:36,37**. His chiding with Laban, though it may admit of some excuse, was not justifiable, nor is it written for our imitation. Grievous words stir up anger, and commonly do but make bad worse. It is a very great affront to one that bears an

honest mind to be charged with dishonesty, and yet even this we must learn to bear with patience, committing our cause to God.

II. The comfort of a good conscience. This was Jacob's rejoicing, that when Laban accused him his own conscience acquitted him, and witnessed for him that he had been in all things willing and careful to live honestly, **#Heb 13:18**. Note, Those that in any employment have dealt faithfully, if they cannot obtain the credit of it with men, yet shall have the comfort of it in their own bosoms.

III. The character of a good servant, and particularly of a faithful shepherd. Jacob had approved himself such a one, **#Ge 31:38-40**.

1. He was very careful, so that, through his oversight or neglect, the ewes did not cast their young. His piety also procured a blessing upon his master's effects that were under his hands. Note, Servants should take no less care of what they are entrusted with for their masters than if they were entitled to it as their own.
2. He was very honest, and took none of that for his own eating which was not allowed him. He contented himself with mean fare, and coveted not to feast upon the rams of the flock. Note, Servants must not be dainty in their food, nor covet what is forbidden them, but in that, and other instances, show all good fidelity.
3. He was very laborious, **#Ge 31:40**. He stuck to his business, all weathers; and bore both heat and cold with invincible patience. Note, Men of business, that intend to make something of it, must resolve to endure hardness. Jacob is here an example to ministers; they also are shepherds, of whom it is required that they be true to their trust and willing to take pains.

IV. The character of a hard master. Laban had been such a one to Jacob. Those are bad masters,

1. Who exact from their servants that which is unjust, by obliging them to make good that which is not damaged by any default of theirs. This Laban did, **#Ge 31:39**. Nay, if there has been a neglect, yet it is unjust to punish above the proportion of the fault. That may be an inconsiderable damage to the master which would go near to ruin a poor servant.
2. Those also are bad masters who deny to their servants that which is just and equal. This Laban did, **#Ge 31:41**. It was unreasonable for him to make Jacob serve for his daughters, when he had in reversion so great an estate secured to him by the promise of God himself; as it was also to give him his daughters without portions, when it was in the power of his hands to do well for them. Thus he robbed the poor because he was poor, as he did also by changing his wages.

V. The care of providence for the protection of injured innocence, **#Ge 31:42**. God took cognizance of the wrong done to Jacob, and repaid him whom Laban would otherwise have sent empty away, and rebuked Laban, who otherwise would have swallowed him up. Note, God is the patron of the oppressed; and those who are wronged and yet not ruined, cast down and yet not destroyed, must acknowledge him in their preservation and give him the glory of it. Observe,

1. Jacob speaks of god as the God of his father, intimating that he thought himself unworthy to be thus regarded, but was beloved for the father's sake.

2. He calls him the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac; for Abraham was dead, and had gone to that world where perfect love casts out fear; but Isaac was yet alive, sanctifying the Lord in his heart, as his fear and his dread.

Ver. 43.

We have here the compromising of the matter between Laban and Jacob. Laban had nothing to say in reply to Jacob's remonstrance: he could neither justify himself nor condemn Jacob, but was convicted by his own conscience of the wrong he had done him; and therefore desires to hear no more of the matter. He is not willing to own himself in a fault, nor to ask Jacob's forgiveness, and make him satisfaction, as he ought to have done. But,

I. He turns it off with a profession of kindness for Jacob's wives and children (**#Ge 31:43**): *These daughters are my daughters*. When he cannot excuse what he has done, he does, in effect, own what he should have done; he should have treated them as his own, but he had counted them as strangers, **#Ge 31:15**. Note, It is common for those who are without natural affection to pretend much to it when it will serve a turn. Or perhaps Laban said this in a vain-glorious say, as one that loved to talk big, and use great swelling words of vanity:

"All that thou seest is mine."

It was not so, it was all Jacob's, and he had paid dearly for it; yet Jacob let him have his saying, perceiving him coming into a better humour. Note, Property lies near the hearts of worldly people. They love to boast of it,

"This is mine, and the other is mine,"

as Nabal, **#1Sa 25:11**, *my bread and my water*.

II. He proposes a covenant of friendship between them, to which Jacob readily agrees, without insisting upon Laban's submission, much less his restitution. Note, When quarrels happen, we should be willing to be friends again upon any terms: peace and love are such valuable jewels that we can scarcely buy them too dearly. Better sit down losers than go on in strife. Now observe here,

1. The substance of this covenant. Jacob left it wholly to Laban to settle it. The tenor of it was,

(1.) That Jacob should be a good husband to his wives, that he should not afflict them, nor marry other wives besides them, **#Ge 31:50**. Jacob had never given him any cause to suspect that he would be any other than a kind husband; yet, as if he had, he was willing to come under this engagement. Though Laban had afflicted them himself, yet he will bind Jacob that he shall not afflict them. Note, Those that are injurious themselves are commonly most jealous of others, and those that do not do their own duty are most peremptory in demanding duty from others.

(2.) That he should never be a bad neighbour to Laban, **#Ge 31:52**. It was agreed that no act of hostility should ever pass between them, that Jacob should forgive and forget all the wrongs he had received and not remember them against Laban or his family in after-times. Note, We may resent an injury which yet we may not revenge.

2. The ceremony of this covenant. It was made and ratified with great solemnity,

according to the usages of those times.

(1.) A pillar was erected (#Ge 31:45), and a heap of stones raised (#Ge 31:46), to perpetuate the memory or the thing, the way of recording agreements by writing being then either not known or not used.

(2.) A sacrifice was offered (#Ge 31:54), a sacrifice of peace-offerings. Note, Our peace with God is that which puts true comfort into our peace with our friends. If parties contend, the reconciliation of both to him will facilitate their reconciliation one to another.

(3.) They did eat bread together (#Ge 31:46), jointly partaking of the feast upon the sacrifice, #Ge 31:54. This was in token of a hearty reconciliation. Covenants of friendship were anciently ratified by the parties eating and drinking together. It was in the nature of a love-feast.

(4.) They solemnly appealed to God concerning their sincerity herein,

[1.] As a witness (#Ge 31:49): *The Lord watch between me and thee*, that is,

"The Lord take cognizance of every thing that shall be done on either side in violation of this league. When we are out of one another's sight, let his be a restraint upon us, that wherever we are we are under God's eye."

This appeal is convertible into a prayer. Friends at a distance from each other may take the comfort of this, that when they cannot know or succour one another God watches between them, and has his eye on them both.

[2.] As a Judge, #Ge 31:53. *The God of Abraham* (from whom Jacob descended), *and the God of Nahor* (from whom Laban descended), *the God of their father* (the common ancestor, from whom they both descended), *judge betwixt us*. God's relation to them is thus expressed to intimate that they worshipped one and the same God, upon which consideration there ought to be no enmity between them. Note, Those that have one God should have one heart: those that agree in religion should strive to agree in every thing else. God is Judge between contending parties, and he will judge righteously; whoever does wrong, it is at his peril.

(5.) They gave a new name to the place, #Ge 31:47,48. Laban called it in Syriac, and Jacob in Hebrew, *the heap of witness*; and (#Ge 31:49) it was called *Mizpah*, a *watch-tower*. Posterity being included in the league, care was taken that thus the memory of it should be preserved. These names are applicable to the seals of the gospel covenant, which are witnesses to us if we be faithful, but witnesses against us if we be false. The name Jacob gave this heap (*Galeed*) stuck by it, not the name Laban gave it. In all this rencounter, Laban was noisy and full of words, affecting to say much; Jacob was silent, and said little. When Laban appealed to God under many titles, Jacob only *swore by the fear of his father Isaac*, that is, the God whom his father Isaac feared, who had never served other gods, as Abraham and Nahor had done. Two words of Jacob's were more memorable than all Laban's speeches and vain repetitions: *for the words of wise men are heard in quiet, more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools*, #Ec 9:17.

Lastly, After all this angry parley, they part friends, #Ge 31:55. Laban very affectionately *kissed his sons and his daughters, and blessed them*, and then went back in peace. Note, God is often better to us than our fears, and strangely overrules the spirits of men in our favour, beyond what we could have expected; for it is not in vain to trust in him.

