

Genesis in Biblical Perspective: The Gospel of Christ from Genesis – God’s Least-Used Name

Genesis 31

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We are in Genesis 31 where Jacob turns to the Promised Land from his twenty year exile. Let’s start by reading the first three verses. This is the Word of God. It’s the truth. Genesis 31:1–3 says

[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.”

The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of our God abides forever, and by His grace and mercy may it be preached for you.

We know from God’s statement from eternity past God has sovereignly elected Jacob. God said “Jacob I have loved.” Jacob’s sin has been displayed in all of its depravity even in its degeneracy and its despicable nature throughout our study of the life of Jacob. God promised him the blessing but he wouldn’t wait on God to give the blessing, the birth right or the family blessing. He stole all three from Esau with deception and conspiracy with his mother. The result is he ended up under the anger of his brother Esau. So while he obtained these blessings he couldn’t own them because he had to flee for his life. He has now been in exile for twenty years in a place called Paddan-aram, in Ur, the land of the Chaldeans or in our language Iran and Iraq. There he has been in indentured servitude.

Now what’s happened in those twenty years? For seven years he worked to get a wife named Rachel and then Laban, her father, pulled a fast one on Jacob. Laban switched Rachel for Leah and therefore he had to work another seven years with this time being for Rachel. In the midst of those seven years with Rachel, Leah and two surrogate mothers (Rachel and Leah’s maid servants) God overcame their sin of polygamy and gave to him the promise.

Before Jacob left the Promised Land to go into exile he stopped at a place called Beth-el and there God revealed Himself to Jacob even as He had done to

Abraham and Isaac. The same promises that were given to Abraham and Isaac God sovereignly made to Jacob. God said, "I'll give you a nation, I'll give you a people. I will give you the possessions you need to serve Me. I will give you My presence and I will bring you back to the Promised Land. I will give you the land."

What have we seen? God has fulfilled His promises. Jacob now has the seed of the nation of Israel. He has eleven sons with a promise of another. So here are the twelve tribes. He has now for the last six years through God has overcome the treachery of Laban and has brought the sheep, goats, camels and everything that was needed to give to Jacob the resources God had promised him to do what God has called him to do. God's presence has always been with Jacob, even though Jacob has not acknowledged God for twenty years. He doesn't pray, praise or any of those things, but God stays after him. God continues to keep His promises.

In this study you will see the turning of a sinner toward the Savior. Jacob is not converted yet but in Genesis 31 you will see the turning. It is just like God's grace that drew you and all of a sudden that which you rejected you wanted to know more about, that which you ran from you started thinking about running to, that which disinterested you now started interesting you. The matters of God, eternity, glory and heaven became important to you. You are seeing that turn in Jacob's life in this test for this study. In this text we will find that glorious dynamic of the love of God that propels the Christian and the fear of God that gives the Christian reverence in the life of serving the Lord. It is the love of God that compels and the fear of God that restrains us so that we walk rightly with the name of the Lord upon us.

Jacob starts on a 300 mile journey back home to the Promised Land. We will walk through this text and pretty much let the text speak for itself. There will be a couple of things I will want to point out and then I'll give you three takeaways at the end. From the first few verses that have already been read, what is it that now causes Jacob to be ready to leave this place where he is getting rich and knowing he has yet to face an Esau? There are three things that move Jacob to want to leave. There are three motivating factors that come together in the first three verses of Genesis 31:1-3.

The first one is Laban's sons. They do not like looking at all of their future wealth leaving their father and going into the hands of Jacob. The word is out. They have malevolent purposes in mind for Jacob.

The second is Laban's countenance. Laban no longer looks with favor at Jacob. There is now a frown on the countenance of Laban when one mentions the name of Jacob.

Thirdly is God's Word. God has told Jacob to go back to the Promised Land. So Jacob who is now motivated calls his wives together, he meets them out in a field

and gives them the plan for the return. Let's look at Genesis 31. Genesis 31:4–16 says

[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 livestock of your father and given them to me. [10] In the breeding season of the flock I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream that the goats that mated with 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 mate with 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 out from this land and return to the land of your kindred.'" [14] Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to 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 indeed devoured our money. [16] All the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, whatever God has said to you, do."

You have just read a miracle. Here is Jacob who is now moved to go back to the Promised Land. He has been with Laban for twenty years in indentured servitude. God has given him a nation just like He promised. God has been with him just like He promised. God gave him the possessions that he would need just like He promised. Now God says He wants to take him back to the Promised Land. Let's go. Jacob explains the plan to his wives and there are two miracles that have happened here. Miracle number one is that Rachel and Leah agree with him. This is a new day in the family of Jacob. Miracle number two is that Rachel and Leah agree. What motivated them to agree?

There were three things that motivated them to agree. One is that it has not escaped their notice that they were nothing more than pawns in the hands of their father for economic gain. "Our father has dealt treacherously with us." The treachery of their father has motivated them to go with Jacob. Secondly, Jacob's plan sounded good to them. God has been absent in the words of Jacob, Rachel and Leah in all the chapters we have been studying. God hasn't been absent for He has been working but they haven't acknowledged it – no prayers, no praise. Thirdly, seven times they acknowledged in what was just read that this was God that has done this. So God's hand, their father's treachery and Jacob's plan has motivated Rachel and Leah to leave.

So the decision has been made so let's look at the flight for they now take off. They now leave Laban. Genesis 31:17–21 says

[17] So Jacob arose and set his sons and his wives on camels. [18] He drove away all his livestock, all his property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac. [19] Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods. [20] And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling 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.

They take off on this 300 mile journey and two steals take place. Number one is that Jacob steals a march on Laban. Jacob gets away without Laban and his sons knowing it. He gets a head start without him knowing. Secondly, Rachel steals the household gods. In that day they would have been small carvings that represent ancestors that one would go and worship, go to or appeal to for divination. Why did she steal them? Is she still worshipping these idols? I don't think so and you'll see that in just a moment by where she puts them. It's not worship that causes her to steal them. If you do a little extra Biblical research you'll find that the governing document of that society was called the Nuzi Tablets. These tablets governed how one functioned back then. In those tablets when a man died whoever had possessions of the household gods had right to everything left in his inheritance.

Do you see what Rachel is doing? She is hoping that when her father dies that she'll inherit what he has left. Praise the Lord God has done plundered him (Laban) and given to my husband all kinds of stuff but I'm not quite satisfied yet. I think I'll get the household gods that when in fact he dies I'll be able to come back and claim the rest of what he had. That is what I believe is governing Rachel in this act to steal the household gods. I don't think it's worship or even revenge, although that may be a part of it but this would allow her to get a hold of what is left of her father's things after he dies. So they now move ahead.

Now Laban finds out so now let's take a look at the pursuit that takes place. Genesis 31:22–24 says

[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, "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad."

Have you noticed something in this chapter? Laban is no longer just called Laban. Repeatedly in this text he is now called Laban the Aramean. In other

words, Laban is clearly not in the context of the covenant, in a relationship with God. Laban now hears that Jacob is gone along with his wives and children and this angers him so he pursues him.

There are five terms that are used that are describing Laban's pursuit of Jacob and all five of them are military terms. What is that telling you? Laban is not catching up to him to pat him on the back. Laban is after Jacob, pursuing him and trying to trap him. He is going to do him in. Then comes Divine intervention. God comes to Laban the Aramean. God basically tells him not to do anything to Jacob or say anything to him. God intervenes to stop the plans of Laban. So what happens? Let's take a look at the confrontation. Genesis 31:25–42 says

[25] And Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen pitched tents in the hill country of Gilead. [26] And Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done, that you have tricked me and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword? [27] Why did you flee secretly and trick 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, 'Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or 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 and said to Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. [32] Anyone 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 female servants, 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 on 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 berated Laban. Jacob said to Laban, "What is my offense? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me? [37] For 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 female goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. [39] What was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you. I bore the loss of it myself. From my hand you

required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. [40] There 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.”

Do you think Jacob has been saving up for that one? Laban has been told he can't say anything good or bad and so gives all these empty words with meaningless conversation but then Laban springs something on Jacob that takes Jacob by surprise which was 'why did you steal my gods?' He basically tells Laban to search his possessions and if anyone is found with them they will lose their life. That was the penalty for stealing something like that from someone. When Rachel stole the gods she put everybody in mortal danger. That was a capital offense under that same Nuzi Tablet. When Laban gets to Rachel's tent to search Rachel says "Excuse me for not getting up for the way of women is upon me." The camel's saddle is like a box and Rachel has the gods in that box sitting on top of it. I don't think Rachel is worshipping the household gods because that is not where you would put them if you are going to worship them. You don't sit on the gods you're worshipping and you certainly don't put them in a box. She learned from her father and what she didn't learn from her father she learned from her husband. She is covering all her basis.

So Laban doesn't find them and comes back out and Jacob just explodes with his pent up anger. You can just see all this pent up anger coming out of him for what he says to Laban in Genesis 31:36–42. Now you're here accusing me of stealing from you, for that's not true and how dare you do this! Laban is going to respond and they are going to end up with a covenant. Let's look at the conclusion of this text. Genesis 31:43–55 says

[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 for these my daughters or for 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 Jegar-sahadutha, 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 Mizpah, for he said, “The LORD watch between you and me, when we are out of one another's sight. [50] If you oppress my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no one is with us, see, 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, to do 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 in the hill country and called his kinsmen to eat bread. They ate bread and spent the night in the hill country. [55] Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned home.

The covenant is made and they pile up a heap of rocks. There is a name given by Laban and there is a Hebrew name given to it by Jacob. When Jacob left Bethel he put up a stone and now when he is coming back he puts up a stone. He calls the place Mizpah which means watchman. This is the giving of the Mizpah blessing where the Lord will watch between me and you while we're absent from one another. I see Christians needlepointing that and giving it away to each other. This is not a blessing of trust. They are basically saying to one another that they can't keep their eye on each other all the time so when one can't see what the other is doing, God can and if you do anything you shouldn't while I'm not around then God will get you. That is the idea behind the Mizpah blessing. It has nothing to do with God blessing while people are absent from each other. It is basically that God will keep you in line because I don't trust you. So they have the covenant meal and they depart from one another. Laban goes back and Jacob is going to go to the Promised Land. We will get to see him converted in the next study.

So what do we learn from this? We learn three things from the text. Remember how God promised a people and He gave it. What God promised He gave but as God leads Jacob back to the Promised Land, God is not only present with His people but will and can intervene on behalf of His people. As a Christian do you have enemies? Yes you have enemies – Satan, the world, the flesh (the enemy within) and you even have disappointments in situations. Please do not allow yourself to play the role of a victim or the role of a pity party. You have a God who is ever with you and who will never leave you nor forsake you. He not only can provide for you but He can protect you. He can and does intervene on behalf of His people. Jacob is in exile but God intervenes by saying "Laban, don't do it."

What God is doing for Jacob He did for Isaac, didn't He? Isaac took off down to another kingdom and was confronted by a King Abemilech. Isaac lied about his wife and called her his sister. How did God get Isaac back home? He came to Abemilech and said "Don't harm him. Don't take that woman. Make sure he keeps that wife and you send him back." Abemilech sent him back and even put riches on him. What God did for Isaac He did for his son Jacob. What God did for his father Isaac, He did for his grandfather Abraham. Abraham was in that

kingdom and he was there with Abemilech. God came to Abemilech with Divine intervention telling him “Don’t harm Abraham.” He sent him home. The Lord our God can and does intervene on behalf of His people, even when people are not His people.

It’s not just that the Lord works in the lives of His people to encourage you but the Lord can work in the lives of those who are not His people to protect you. Your trust is in the Lord. He is your Keeper. He is your Shade by day and your Light by night. He is your Shield.

The second takeaway from the text has to do with the most unused name of God in the life of Christianity and that is fear. Twice in the text the phrase “the fear of Isaac” is used. All the commentators are agreed on this. You have to use fear because of the etymology of the word for the roots of the word have a concept of trembling behind it. If you didn’t use the word fear here, the word you would immediately go to is awesome – the awesome God of Isaac, the unequalled God of Isaac, the One who has no counterpart, the One who has no equal. The Lord your God is awesome.

I’d like to look at one passage of Scripture on this and of course there are many. Isaiah 8:12–13 says [12] *“Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. [13] But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.”* It is the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom and that we tremble in His presence as well as rest in His love. Is it the love of God or the fear of God? Yes. The love of God propels you and the fear of God reverences you.

I know the Lord your God is your Father if you’re a Christian. I know His Son is your Savior and your Friend. I know you can call Him “Abba Father” but never let your relationship diminish your awe of God. This is the Thrice Holy God. This is the One who is the God of glory. This is the One who is to be the only fear of our life, to give Him awe and respect. Every fear in our life is to be banished. Go to Christ. Feast upon Christ. Trust in the Spirit. Go to the Word. God said to Abraham, “Do not fear.” This is what God says to us through the Apostle Paul, [6] *do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God* (Philippians 4:6–7 ESV).

God calls us to dismiss all the phobias of life. It is idolatry to let them control us. For what you fear is that which gives you direction and controls you. There is only One whom we are to tremble before. Amazingly the One whom we tremble before is our Father, who dwells within us by His Spirit, who upholds us. This is the challenge of worship and life as a statement of worship. When God’s people gather for worship there ought to be joy unbounded, love expressed and the animation that God is being praised by His people yet that joy must never

translate into triviality or superficiality when we come before God. This is the God of glory whom we praise. There is none like Him and our accessibility to Him should not give us a contemptible familiarity with Him.

I know the purpose behind the church sign I read on my vacation and I don't doubt the motivation but I cringed when I read the words. It said "10 o'clock Sunday, casual worship." There is nothing casual about the worship of God. We are to be reverent in our worship. Here is the key. There is reverence without morbidity and there is joy without triviality. How do you pull that off? You can't do it for only the Spirit of God can give it. It is where we realize the sacredness of what we do in worship and in life and yet as we live life we live it confidently and joyfully.

Did you know there was a very word developed to describe Christians? It was the word enthusiasm. The word enthusiasm comes from two Greek words – en + theos, which means 'in God.' When you're in God and God is in you there ought to be some animation here but we're not playing games when we worship. We are bringing to God the praise that He seeks and calls for, in Spirit and in truth. Only the Spirit of God can give us that. If you start trying to manipulate it from a platform you'll either go the way of a three ring circus in worship or you'll go the way of a funeral home in worship, but if we worship God with the elements He calls for and live with Him with the heart that He gives then God gives both the joy of exuberance and the reverence of awe and respect. May God grant it to us as His people.

Is God not awesome here? Laban's treachery? I don't think Jacob had much doubt that his plan would go over well with Rachel and Leah, mainly due to the treachery Laban did with his own children. God used Laban's sons to move Jacob back home. God used Laban's frown to move Jacob back home. God used a dream to move Jacob back home. God used Laban's treachery to get Jacob's wives to say "great idea, we're going with you." Look at this awesome God. There is all this stuff happening out there and we're all disappointed in what we see with the treachery, lies and deceit but there is a God who is so awesome that He works behind it. The frowns of life is the smile of God's providence as all things are being worked together for the glory of His people and only God can pull that off. Our God is an awesome God, Amen!

Here is the third and final takeaway. There is a sad farewell and a joyful hello. A sad farewell is to say goodbye to Laban. Laban leaves the pages of Scripture known as Laban the Aramean and I hope you never see him again, for as far as we know he lives out a life with the gods of this age and falls under the judgment of God in a Christ-less eternity. Laban has been with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and he has seen the hand of God and knows all the stuff about God but his heart remained unbowed. His heart and life remained in rebellion with no surrender. Please don't follow the way of Laban. Say farewell to him and we can certainly be brokenhearted about his rebellion but don't follow him.

We also see a birth taking place here. The Bible says "Whosoever will may come" and it also says "There is none who seek Him." Then how did we get to the Lord? The Lord says come but we can't come because we can't seek Him. We're dead in our sins. John 6 happens and that is that the Father draws us. Jesus says "No one can come to Me unless the Father draws him" (John 6:44). That is the word used to describe picking water up out of a well. You can go to a well and give it all the permission you want but the water won't come up out of that well due to the law of gravity but if you drop a bucket down into it then you overcome that and you get the water.

The Lord says "Whosoever will may come" but we're under the law and bondage of our sin, but watch how God has drawn Jacob. Pray-less, praise-less Jacob in fifteen verses used God's Name seven times. Something is happening. He who had no interest, who was self-reliant, self-centered, self-absorbed is now turning and he recognizes that he exists by God, God is with him and that God has stayed with him. He sees that God has plundered Laban and prospered him that he might serve Him and seven times he acknowledges that with God's Name. He declares that his confidence is in this God and that's where I invite you today, to that God.

Don't go the way of Laban. Come the way of Jacob. We will get to see Jacob's conversion in the next study. He will get a new name in another chapter. You can see God moving in his life. You can see God's grace drawing him. You can see his heart, his mind and all these things that are turning and changing. It is so exciting. It's what a mid-wife must feel as that birth is about to come forward. Here is Jacob just about to be born again. God's hand is upon it. God has the same thing for you. Did you see how God plundered Laban to give what He wanted to Jacob?

There is One greater than Jacob. His Name is Jesus. God has bound the strong man and now we're plundering his house and bringing it all to Jesus. Remember the stones that were piled up there toward the end of the Genesis 31? Laban's ancestors are going to cross that stone and attack Israel all over the place, the Babylonians, Assyrians and everybody. Israel will not go over there until the day that Christ comes and when Christ comes, Christ will cross that boundary, but He won't go over that boundary to harm the Gentiles. He will go over that boundary to rescue you from your sins. Now there has been a Stone that has been raised, a Rock in Zion, a Cornerstone of your salvation, Jesus Christ.

Will you go to the gods of this world? They can't even get out of a box. Rachel is sitting on the gods of this world. The idols of this age, the gods of the vain of

imaginings of men and the religions of men, can't deliver anything for they are gods in a box. There is a God who will set you free. Come! He is ready to save you. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word. If you are reading this and you have never yet come to the God of glory who will never leave you nor forsake you, who will bring all the things that you need to serve Him, come today! My God will supply all your needs, not the desires of the world, according to His riches in Christ Jesus, say “O God I know I’m a sinner and I have come to trust this Jesus this day.” Would you make that prayer and put your trust in Him? Father, we who know Christ today, may we be confident that we have a God who has not only provided us, but has plundered Satan and brought us and He has set up a stone that cannot be moved, our salvation and the Cornerstone Jesus Christ. Father, may we not fear anything. May we not give anything the privilege of governing our lives but how we praise Your Name with love and the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom. Give us the confidence to move in the love of Christ and give us the carefulness as we are governed and led by the fear of the Lord. Father, do that work by Your Spirit in our hearts and lives and we’ll give You the glory in Christ alone, Amen.

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