

Whence Came a Prince

Bible Study Guide

“History is but the gradual unfolding of a divine master plan, many details of which must forever remain a mystery to mortals.”

E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis*

Read Genesis 30:25–43 Up to His Old Tricks

1. Jacob was eager to return home...and no wonder, with a conniving father-in-law like Laban! What does Genesis 30:27 suggest about Laban’s understanding of God? Compare Genesis 29:15b to Genesis 30:28. Now contrast those similar statements of Laban’s with Paul’s comments in 1 Thessalonians 2:3–5. What might those New Testament verses tell us about the character of a godly man...and the character of Laban? As you look at the sins described in Leviticus 19:11, it appears Laban committed them all! According to Genesis 30:34–36, how did Laban trick Jacob yet again?

2. In Genesis 30:37–43 we learn that Jacob responded to Laban’s trickery with a clever ruse of his own. Was Jacob simply practicing selective breeding...or was he being devious like his uncle? Perhaps the positive results came not from human actions but from heavenly blessings. What promises did Isaac, Jacob’s father, bestow on him, as noted in Genesis 27:28 and 28:3? And in Genesis 30:30, to whom did Jacob give credit for his growing family and flocks? What insights might this offer about Jacob’s spiritual maturity at this point in his life?

READ GENESIS 31:1–13 Attitude Adjustment

3. Laban’s sons?! Why haven’t we heard about them before Genesis 30:35?! Robert Alter, in *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, explains that Laban’s sons were not introduced “until the point where they serve the unfolding of plot and theme.” Like his male offspring, Laban became openly hostile toward Jacob. Yet it took the intervention of a third party—recorded in Genesis 31:3—to point Jacob in the right direction. What promise did God make to Jacob here? Read Genesis 28:15, when God spoke to Jacob twenty years earlier. Sound familiar? Throughout history, God has made the same vow to those he loves. Look up the following verses and note to whom the same promise was made: Genesis 26:24; Deuteronomy 31:6; Joshua 1:5; Isaiah 41:10. How might that promise, ringing through the centuries, encourage you today?

4. Jacob arranged a meeting with Rachel and Leah, then discussed his predicament with them. Do you find anything in his statements—Genesis 31:5–9—that is untrue or unfair? How did spending two decades squirming beneath Laban’s thumb shape the character of Jacob? In Genesis 31:10–13 he briefly described hearing from an angel in a dream. Derek Kidner, in *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, helps us understand: “The angel of God is once again a term for God Himself.” God reminded Jacob of the vow Jacob made at Bethel, as recorded in Genesis 28:20–21. In what ways did the Lord fulfill Jacob’s “requirements”? And what evidence do you find of Jacob’s honoring his vow—to claim the Lord as his God—in these opening verses from Genesis 31?

READ GENESIS 31:14–18 United We Stand

5. Notice something at the start of this passage: Rachel and Leah spoke with one voice. Envy was put aside, and sibling rivalry forgotten. Instead of fighting over Jacob, the sisters were united in their desire to defeat a common enemy: their father. Verse by verse, how did the two women describe Laban’s treatment of them? Did they leave the decision of what was to be done next in Jacob’s hands...or in God’s? What do the following verses teach us about trusting God’s plans for us: Psalm 33:11; Proverbs 16:9; Jeremiah 29:11?

6. Jacob wasted no time putting God’s plan into action. Note what he took (everything that belonged to him) and where he headed (home). Warren Wiersbe, in *Be Authentic*, notes, “Jacob fled with his family like a criminal escaping justice. This was an act of fear and unbelief, not an act of faith.” Do you agree with his assessment? Or disagree? How might departing at once have demonstrated a genuine act of faith for Jacob? Genesis 31:13 might help answer that question. How does Galatians 3:7–9 describe faith—as it relates to Abraham, to his descendents, and to us?

READ GENESIS 31:19–24 *Stealing Away*

7. Rachel timed her theft well: sheepshearing was an arduous task requiring her father to be away from home for several days. As to Rachel's motives, commentators offer myriad opinions, from calling her a trickster like her father and husband to suggesting Rachel had a nobler purpose in mind, such as turning Laban away from idolatry. Household idols—*teraphim*—were thought to offer protection on a journey and almost certainly represented some claim on Laban's property. Based on all that happened before this brash act, what reasons might you offer for Rachel's unexpected thievery? Is stealing ever justifiable? What do the following passages tell us: Matthew 19:17–19; Romans 13:8–10; Ephesians 4:28?

8. Rachel was not the only deceiver in this getaway scene; Genesis 31:20 sounds like Jacob of old: running away rather than facing his foe. How is this clandestine escape similar to Jacob's fleeing for his life in Genesis 27:42–28:5? And in what ways is this journey decidedly different from the earlier one? Though Jacob fled from his brother, then fled from his uncle, there was One from whom he could not flee. Read Psalm 139:7–12. How would you describe your experience with God? Are you always aware of his presence?

READ GENESIS 31:25–42 *Having His Say*

9. Oh, the drama! When Laban caught up with Jacob and confronted him, he blurted out a series of questions and accusations without giving Jacob a chance to get a word in edgewise. In the midst of Laban's tirade he revealed a surprising fact: he did not intend to harm Jacob. What reason did Laban give for withholding his vengeance? And how does that further demonstrate the promise of Genesis 28:15 unfolding? Some of Laban's comments were downright ludicrous, yet he saved the most telling comment for last, as noted in Genesis 31:30. What was Laban truly interested in recovering: his daughters? his grandchildren? or his gods? And why might that have been the case?

10. Genesis 31:31 seems to affirm Wiersbe's observation that Jacob fled because of fear. Is that how you read Jacob's words here...or was he trying to quell Laban's anger? For a fearful man, he quickly became very decisive; the next verse finds him making a drastic pledge. As Gerhard von Rad writes in *Genesis: A Commentary*, "Now the scene becomes completely sinister, for Jacob unwittingly pronounced the death penalty on Rachel." While her father searched his daughters' tents for the missing household gods, Rachel hid the idols by sitting on them. If she was indeed menstruating at the time, her actions demonstrated her contempt for her father's gods; read Leviticus 15:19–20 to find out why.

11. Just as Laban railed at Jacob moments earlier, now it was Jacob's turn to vent. Jacob began by firing questions at his uncle without waiting for answers, then made several straightforward statements, as recorded in Genesis 31:36–41. How does this list of grievances compare to Jacob's earlier accounting for the two sisters (Genesis 31:6–13)? Note how Jacob identified the one true God in Genesis 31:42, in marked contrast to Laban's many gods. The following verses make a strong case for one all-powerful God: Deuteronomy 6:4; 1 Corinthians 8:5–6; Ephesians 4:4–6. In a postmodern culture that embraces religious diversity, what assurance do we have that there is but one true God?

READ GENESIS 31:43–55 *Mine, Mine, Mine*

12. Devious as ever, Laban insisted, "All you see is mine." Yet as E. A. Speiser states in *The Anchor Bible: Genesis*, without Laban's household gods, "He could not press such a claim in a court of law." Instead the two men pledged an uneasy truce, though each man gave the witness heap a different name. Genesis 31:49 includes a familiar benediction. Who could have imagined that such comforting words originated during a peace treaty between two enemies! How might Proverbs 25:21–22 help us understand Jacob's willingness to enter into this covenant with his nemesis?

13. As noted in the closing verses of this chapter, Laban bestowed a blessing on his grandchildren and on his daughters...but not on Jacob. In *Genesis: The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Clyde Francisco points out, "Laban was neither qualified nor inclined to do this." Given the evidence in Scripture, do you believe Laban departed a changed man...or the same old scheming Laban? What makes you say that? Many of us have a "Laban" in our lives—an employer, a relative, a neighbor—who is too busy serving his own interests to serve others. Identify your "Laban." Can you bring yourself to wish him well, or do you simply wish him gone? In Luke 21:15, what does Jesus promise to give his disciples when they face their enemies? What "words and wisdom" has the Lord given you to handle the Labans in your life?

READ GENESIS 32:1–23 *A Formidable Force*

14. After standing up to Laban, Jacob prepared to bow down to Esau. He sent messengers ahead, who returned with sobering news: four hundred men were coming to meet him—"the standard number for a regiment or raiding

party,” according to Robert Alter. Proverbs 18:19 describes the sort of situation facing Jacob. He thought of a practical solution first (divide the family and flocks), then wisely employed a prayerful solution (calling upon God). Note all the aspects of Jacob’s prayer in Genesis 32:9–12—his attitude, his confession, his entreaty. Psalm 91:14–16 and Jeremiah 29:11–13 outline God’s response to the heartfelt prayers of those who love him. Consider your own prayers to God. Are they humble? contrite? sincere? What can you learn from Jacob about facing your greatest fears?

15. Having prayed, Jacob planned. He organized his servants and sent them ahead bearing gifts of livestock. As described in Genesis 32:20, what outcome was Jacob hoping his generosity might produce? Now look at Genesis 27:41, Esau’s last words regarding his brother, Jacob. Does the outcome Jacob wanted seem likely? After transporting his wives, maidservants, sons, and possessions safely across the watery Jabbok, Jacob remained behind. Clyde Francisco comments, “He returned to be alone with his thoughts and surely with his God. How often did Jesus make such retreats!” See Matthew 14:13; Luke 5:16; and John 6:15 for proof. What are the clear advantages of seeking solitude at such a stressful time? How might you follow Jesus’s—and Jacob’s—example in this regard?

READ GENESIS 32:24–32 *Wrestling Match*

16. According to your translation of Genesis 32:24, with whom or what did Jacob wrestle through the long night? How is his adversary identified in the next verse, Genesis 32:25? Compare that to the account of this scene in Hosea 12:3–5. So...did Jacob wrestle with a man, an angel, or God? To what end might the identity of his wrestling partner be intentionally concealed? Whether it was God himself or a messenger sent by him, clearly the God who promised to protect Jacob is also the God who wrestled with him—a very curious circumstance! John Calvin in *Genesis* explains, “He supplies us with more strength to resist than he uses to attack us. We may rightly say that he fights against us with his left hand and for us with his right hand.” It is no small thing to fight against God, as Jeremiah 21:5–6 makes clear. Have you “wrestled” with God on some issue in your life? Did you sense him both opposing and supporting you? What was the outcome of your spiritual wrestling match?

17. After wrestling physically, Jacob and “the man” wrestled verbally as daybreak approached. What did Jacob demand of his opponent before Jacob would let him go? Here the stranger’s identity is revealed, for as Calvin said, “It is in God’s nature alone to bless us.” Consider how God blessed Abraham and his descendents in the following verses: Genesis 12:1–3; Genesis 17:15–16; Genesis 26:24. And in Numbers 6:22–27 God specifies exactly how a blessing is to be spoken. What blessing was given to Jacob by “the man,” and what did it signify? The blessing came with a slight curse as well. How was Jacob afflicted and to what possible end?

READ GENESIS 33:1–20 *Brotherly Love*

18. Jacob’s trials had only begun; next came his dreaded brother, Esau! What purpose might Jacob’s division of his family have had? Note that he went ahead of them and performed a common court ritual: he bowed seven times. According to Genesis 33:4, what was Esau’s response? What might explain his change of heart? Speiser suggests, “Esau’s resentment had long since vanished,” but Calvin believed Esau was “divinely transformed from a wolf into a lamb.” How would you account for such an unexpected reconciliation between these two brothers?

19. A generous offer of flocks was extended, refused, then insisted upon by Jacob. His heartfelt gratitude is eloquently expressed in Genesis 33:10b. Compare that verse to Genesis 32:30. Yet in Exodus 33:18–23, what does God tell Moses he must not do? What might Jacob have meant, then, by “seeing the face of God”? Figuratively speaking, have you ever “seen the face of God” in someone’s countenance? Describe that encounter.

20. After such a warm reunion, Jacob seemed reluctant to continue traveling with Esau by his side. Study Jacob’s words in Genesis 33:12–17. Was he being cautious? considerate? cagey? Some commentators see Jacob’s reticence as deceptive, others as a polite refusal. What would you say? Here’s one telling observation by John Hartley in *New International Biblical Commentary: Genesis*: “When these two brothers parted, no boundary stone had to be erected, as was the case with Laban.”

[Note: Genesis 34 will be explored for my next novel, *Grace in Thine Eyes*.]

READ GENESIS 35:1–15 *Back to Bethel*

21. Before they could complete their final journey back to Bethel—the place where Jacob dreamed of a ladder of angels and made his pledge to God—the large household of Jacob had to purify themselves. According to Genesis 35:2, what did they need to get rid of? And what specific items might that include? (Hint: think of Rachel!) Although earrings were not of themselves idolatrous, Robert Alter tells us, “Earrings were often

fashioned as figurines of gods and goddesses.” They were buried under an oak; so was something of much greater value, as noted in Genesis 35:8. John Hartley tells us, “This death report is surprising, for rarely does the Hebrew Bible recount the death of a woman, especially a handmaid.” One rabbinic interpretation suggests that Jacob also received news of another death at the same time—that of his mother, Rebekah—although she is in fact never mentioned again in the patriarchal narratives. Why might that be the case?

22. Genesis 35:9–10 sounds very familiar. Compare this blessing to the one in Genesis 32:26–28. How might this further confirm the identity of Jacob’s wrestling partner? Another important comparison must be made: that of Genesis 35:11–15 and Jacob’s first encounter with God at Bethel as described in Genesis 28:13–14 and 18–19. How has Jacob changed from the first time he poured oil on a stone at Bethel twenty years earlier?

READ GENESIS 35:16–20

23. The final trial of Jacob’s journey was the hardest of all. How did the midwife console the laboring Rachel in her travail? Rachel named her son *Ben-Oni*, meaning, “son of my trouble.” Jacob, however, gave him a different name—*Benjamin*—translated, “the son of my right hand,” which Matthew Henry interprets as “set on my right hand for a blessing.” This is the only son whom Jacob named. Why do you suppose he did not honor his beloved Rachel’s request but instead chose a different name for their son?

24. Jacob’s enduring affection for Rachel is clear in Genesis 48:7. Yet his growing respect for Leah, his first wife, is evident later as well. What does Genesis 49:31 reveal about Leah’s final resting place? And what might that suggest about Jacob and Leah’s marriage relationship in their many years together after Rachel’s tragic death?

25. Finally, what has this complex story of a man and his relationship with God (and with far too many women) meant to you personally? Which scene was the most moving? the most harrowing? the most instructive? Consider one important lesson the Lord has taught you through these chapters of Genesis. And why not choose one meaningful verse from this study—perhaps Psalm 33:11—to commit to memory or include in your journal.

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