



Sowing the Word



Jabbok River, looking east to Mahanaim on the right

Genesis 31-33

April 22nd, 2009

So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped *them* to understand the reading.

(Nehemiah 8:8)

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Helpful Study Resource:

Explore the Book by J. Sidlow Baxter

Commentary:

The commentary used with permission throughout
this booklet is:

With the Word Bible Commentary

by Warren W. Wiersbe.

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Outline

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Detailed Outline For This Week

VIII. Jacob (27-36)

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 - iii. Rachel and Leah's reassurance (31:14–16)
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 - i. Frustration (31:17–23): Laban learns that Jacob left
 - ii. Revelation (31:24–25): Laban is warned by God not to harm Jacob
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- E. Jacob wrestles with God (32)
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 - b. Jacob's fear (32:3–8) What he feared most , Esau's coming

- c. Jacob's prayer (32:9–12)
- d. Jacob's bribe (32:13–21): He attempts to bribe Esau
- e. Jacob wrestles with God (32:22–32)
 - i. The travail (32:22–26)
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 - iii. The testimony (32:30–32)
- F. Jacob pitches his tent near Shechem (33)**
 - a. Jacob presents himself to Esau (33:1–4):
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 - c. Jacob presents his flocks to Esau (33:8–12)
 - d. Jacob deceives Esau (33:13–17)
 - e. Jacob moves close to Shechem...sadly (33:18–19)
 - f. Jacob builds an altar to God (33:20)

Notes for Booklet

Chapter 31 Highlights and Helps by Pastor Jim

Time to come home...home to God

- For Jacob, it has been twenty years since he has been home. Now, it is time for him to head home. Yet, home is more than going back to his family. God is calling Jacob back to Himself, or maybe it should be said that God is not calling Jacob back, but forward in the relationship He has for Him.

Jacob sees the situation and hears God's voice

- This is new in the history of Jacob. Before, he did things totally on his own sight, totally on his own plans. Yet here...now God is speaking. He still sees the situation, but he also sees and hears God. This is wonderful progress. In our situations that we deal with, this is what we need to hear – we need God's guidance.

Jacob still seeks to return in his own strength

- The need is to go home, God has confirmed it – so Jacob sets in motion to make this happen. The sad thing is that he does not turn to the Lord and seek God's strength or help. Instead, he tackles going home in a "Jacob-like" way – he deceives. He steals away at a seemingly good juncture.
- It is this "Jacob-like" tendencies and strivings that God is seeking to deal with Jacob. It is interesting to note that Jacob allows Laban to catch Jacob, thus making his secret attempt unsuccessful. God confronts Laban, thus showing Jacob that it is not his strength that is rescuing him, but God's work.

The Mizpah Blessing or Mizpah Benediction? NOT.

- Many have used this section of scripture wrongly. It appears on matching jewelry for couples and more. The normal saying goes something like "The Lord watch between me and thee when we are absent one from another".
- Yet, looked at correctly and in context it is not a blessing of trusting each other into God's hands – the original Mizpah was because they did not trust one another and set up this pillar to say that they would not harm each other. Instead of witnessing to their friendship (as the "Mizpah Blessing" states), these stones witnessed to their mutual distrust of one another.

Chapter 32 Highlights and Helps by Pastor Jim

Jacob sees the Angels.

- God allows Jacob to see a camp of Angels traveling with him as he leaves Laban.
- It seems that God meant this to be an encouragement to Jacob to trust in Him and not in his own might. It is an amazing scene. Yet, it does not seem to impact Jacob greatly.

Jacob prays

- As Jacob hears of Esau's coming, his greatest fears are realized. He does well by turning to the Lord in prayer. This is progress in Jacob's life with God.

Jacob schemes

- It seems as Jacob finishes praying, he jumps back into handling things on his own and scheming to soften his visit with Esau.
- This is not to say that God does not call us to be wise in our life, that we should pray and also be wise – is true. Yet that wisdom should flow from our relationship with God, guiding by Him, even in practical things.
- Jacob does not seem to do this – instead, he prays and then jumps into handling things on his own, without God.

Jacob wrestles – and losses and in losing – he wins

- This is one of my favorite scenes in the whole Bible. Try to imagine it, God appears to Jacob as a man...and Jacob wrestles with Him all night.
- It is wild to imagine. Why did the wrestling take all night? God could have won the wrestling match in a moment. Yet, He did not – why? The simple answer is that God is waiting for Jacob to give up. He does not force us into such a decision. He waits for Jacob to come to an end of himself.
- As the wrestling nears morning, Jacob is still not giving up – so God incapacitates him. God touches his hip, so that Jacob can no longer wrestle. In a sense, this could have been unnecessary if Jacob had just surrendered earlier, but would not. Wonder what extremes we make God go to.
- Now, Jacob asks God to bless him. To ask for the blessing, is to admit you lost the battle. It is a picture of surrender. In that culture, the one who admits defeat would receive a blessing from

the victor.

- God says, he struggled with God and prevailed. How? He lost, how did he win? Simple, he won by losing. There is a great picture here – that this is how we win, but surrendering to God.

A new name – Israel

- *Jacob* means one who strives in his own might – to prevail and obtain.
- Yet God gives him a new name, that becomes descriptive of what God looks for and longs for Jacob to be. The new name, *Israel*, means one who is governed by God, led by God and provided by God.
- Israel is where Jacob is called to be...and we are called to be – where God is leading our lives!

Chapter 33 Highlights and Helps by Pastor Jim

Jacob meets Esau

- As he does so, he finds the meeting to be one that is a blessing and not a curse. Was it going to be this way without the offerings? It is hard to know, yet it is clear that Jacob sees God's favor and protection.
- Right now, there is a wonderful opportunity for Jacob to walk in his new name – his new character – Israel. Sadly, he does not.

As the tension ends – Jacob reemerges.

- Now that things are find with Esau, instead of walking in the dependence, guidance and power of God – Jacob falls back on his own ways.
- Jacob lies – he tells Esau that he will come and see him, and goes another way.
- Jacob pitches a tent and buys land near Shechem. This is not where God called him to and this is not the life God called him to.
- Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were called to live lives as Heb 11 describes it, of not possessing land here, but living on God's promises – fixing their focus on the city that has foundations that God has built. In this window of time, Jacob walks away from that and seeks to have a very “worldly” life.
- In many ways, Jacob reminds us here of Lot, who pitched his tent near Sodom and eventually lived in it.

Yet, Jacob still builds an altar

- There is a sad religious picture here – of one walking in his own ways, his own course and his own strength. Yet still trying to include God in that journey. God has made Himself real to Jacob and Jacob does not forget that – he just tries to bring God into his life, his own way instead of God's way. There is great folly here.

Q & A With Pastor Phil

Why did Rachel steal Laban's idols?

As we read Genesis 31, we discover that the relationship between Jacob and Laban had become very tenuous. Laban's countenance toward Jacob had shifted and Laban's sons also accused him of stealing their father's wealth. It is at this point that God again speaks to Jacob. In verse 3 of chapter 31, God gives Jacob a command as well as a wonderful promise, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you." This marks the end of a 20 year relationship with Laban that had been difficult for Jacob. No doubt God used this time to teach Jacob some important lessons.

Conferring with His Wives

Before Jacob left, he called Rachel and Leah and explained his grievance against their father. He also acknowledged that it was God who blessed him and caused his way to prosper. Rachel and Leah agreed that their father had dealt deceptively. In verse 16 they affirm to Jacob that he should do what God said to do. This is an important section in the account. Instead of commanding the women to depart with him, Jacob used a gentler approach. Perhaps he understood that he would be taking them from the only life they knew and even though Laban was a scoundrel, he was still their father. By conferring with his wives, he would leave Laban's house with their blessing.

A Sudden Departure

While Laban was away shearing sheep, Jacob gathered his family, his livestock and all his belongings and departed. Without anyone knowing,

Rachel stole her father's idols. On the third day, Laban was made aware that Jacob had left. He quickly assembled a group of men and pursued them for seven days. It would appear that Laban sought to deal harshly with Jacob. Verse 24 says that God specifically warned Laban to be careful how he spoke to him. Once Laban overtook Jacob, he confronted him concerning the household idols. Completely unaware that Rachel had them, Jacob made a rash statement concerning the guilty party. Without knowing, he essentially pronounced a death sentence over Rachel. This is something he obviously would have regretted in the event the idols were found in Rachel's possession. Laban searched vigorously, but Rachel had them hidden in the saddle on which she sat. She used the excuse that she was unable to rise because she was menstruating. This was probably untrue due to the fact that she was trying to conceal the idols. The contentious encounter ends with Laban and Jacob making a covenant. This was not a friendly covenant, but more or less a peace treaty.

The Pagan Influence

Rachel's decision to steal the idols could have been disastrous. Most commentators believe that the real reason Laban pursued Jacob was to retrieve his gods. Although Laban cited other reasons that may have played some significance, the idols are what he was really after. It is interesting to note that Laban requests that he and Jacob form a covenant after he is unable to locate them. Perhaps Laban looked to them for protection fearing that Jacob would return in the future. There is no doubt that idolatry was a pervasive influence. Although it was entirely fruitless, people placed their hope in them, but it was more than that. Many scholars believe that possessing the household idols also meant leadership within the family and also the right to an inheritance.

So Why Did Rachel Have Them?

Rachel is most often viewed as a woman of faith, so it's troubling to read that Rachel stole her father's idols. What use could she possibly have for them? The scriptures don't reveal Rachel's motivation for stealing the idols, but there are really only a couple likely possibilities. It could be that her desire for them was not so much spiritual, but practical. If the person possessing the idols was entitled to a greater inheritance, perhaps that was her motivation. Her father had completely consumed her money. In verse 14 she speaks of her lack of an inheritance within her father's household. It could be that Rachel envisioned the possibility of returning at a later date with Jacob to claim an inheritance. This

would not be outside the character of both Laban and Jacob as both men schemed to advance themselves. Perhaps it was her way of getting back at her father. Many commentators point to this as her motivation and in many ways this is what we want to believe because it seems like the lesser of two evils.

The Danger of Idolatry

It's easier to believe that Rachel took the idols, not because they were important to her spiritually, but because she hoped that she could use them to obtain a greater inheritance. This is a possibility. However, another explanation seems more likely. The idols were likely figurines of female deities that were believed to bestow fertility. In that day, having children was seen as a great importance. Living in an agricultural economy, there was a great need for additional laborers. It also meant that you would have caregivers in your old age. This was especially important in the absence of Social Security and the like. Because children were greatly desired, it is understandable that man would create idols that supposedly brought about fertility. This is something that Rachel struggled with. She longed for more children, but had difficulty bearing. She and her sister had become rivals in bearing children for Jacob. When you add to that the years of paganism that surrounded her upbringing, it becomes very likely that she took them for that reason.

The Lesson For us

Again, we don't know her motivation. It could be that she took them for both reasons or perhaps something altogether different. Nevertheless, there is a good lesson in it for us. Idolatry plagued the nation of Israel until it was taken into captivity. This is true of both kingdoms – Israel and Judah. We are not immune to this wrestling. Even for those who believe in Christ and have a real relationship, there are other things that we can look to and place our confidence in. We could be tempted to have other things on the side. Most of us probably don't look to a graven or molded idol, but there are a thousand other things where our trust could reside. The Bible specifically says in verse 34 that Rachel sat on these idols. In a sense she rested upon them. May the Lord reveal to us those things that we are "resting" in that are not of Him. May our rest be in the Lord Jesus Christ. Unlike the idols which are powerless and cannot hear or speak, our Lord is able to bear our full weight. He sees, hears and knows every aspect of our life and He is able to help us in our weakness.

With the Word Bible Commentary

Genesis 31

Escape. The family situation was not at all comfortable for Jacob or his wives, but he patiently waited for God's instructions before making a move. The seeking heart will always get a word from God when decisions have to be made. Read Psalm 25 in the light of Jacob's situation. Like his mother before him, Jacob did a right thing in a wrong way, and God had to intervene to protect him (v. 24).

Encounter. Jacob had a three-day lead on Laban, but his father-in-law finally caught up with him. No one can successfully run away from problems. Laban accused Jacob of a breach of social custom, while Jacob accused Laban of breaking his promises for twenty years. There was also the matter of the household gods, for whoever had them could claim possession of Laban's property.

Expedience. The two men never did agree, and their problems were not solved. Instead, they declared a truce and made a pile of stones the boundary beyond which neither would pass. It was called "the heap of witness" to remind Jacob and Laban that God was watching both of them. (The word *Mizpah* means "watchtower.") The so-called Mizpah benediction is not a correct interpretation or application of this passage.

It is better to declare a truce than to wage a war, but the best decision of all is for brethren to "dwell together in unity" (Ps. 133:1). See Ephesians 4:25–32 for directions.

—Wiersbe, W. W. (1997, c1991). *With the word Bible commentary* (Ge 31:1). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

With the Word Bible Commentary

Genesis 32

Jacob expected a battle and his concern was escape, not reconciliation (v. 8). He saw the army of angels protecting him, but even that didn't encourage his faith. *Mahanaim* means "double camp"—his camp and the camp of God's angels. Had Jacob recalled his experience with God at Bethel, he would not have been afraid of Esau (28:13–15).

One minute Jacob prayed for God's help, and the next minute he devised some new way to appease his angry brother. He reminded God of His great promises and then acted as though God had never spoken. This is the conduct of a believer who needed to be broken before God. He prayed to be delivered from Esau (v. 11), but his greatest need was to be delivered from himself.

Jacob was broken to be healed and weakened to be strengthened. When he surrendered, he won and became a "prince with God." His limp would be a constant reminder that God would be in control of his life. "God fights *against* us with His left hand and *for* us with His right hand," wrote John Calvin. When we let God have His way, it is the dawning of a new day (v. 31).

—Wiersbe, W. W. (1997, c1991). With the word Bible commentary (Ge 32:1). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

With the Word Bible Commentary

Genesis 33

Jacob had seen God and been given a new name, but the benefits of his experience didn't appear immediately. Sometimes he acted like Jacob ("the heel-catcher") and sometimes like Israel ("the prince with God"). Many of God's people fail to live up to their new life in Christ because they don't claim what they have by faith. God had to give Jacob a limp to encourage him to walk by faith.

In his attempt to appease Esau, the old schemer used several devices: bowing (vv. 1–7), bribery (vv. 8–11), outright lying (vv. 12–16), and then moving off in another direction (vv. 17–20). Esau went south and Jacob went east! Princes are not supposed to bow, and what about God's promise in Genesis 25:23 and 27:29?

One mistake often leads to another. Jacob ceased to be a pilgrim, purchased the land he was already given by God, built a house, and settled down. He built an altar and called on "God, the God of Israel" (note the new name); but that didn't prevent him from getting into trouble with the neighbors. Far better had he pressed on to Bethel.

—Wiersbe, W. W. (1997, c1991). *With the word Bible commentary* (Ge 33:1). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

