

CCLEB SERMON NOTES



SUNDAY NOVEMBER 23, 2025
GENESIS 31:1-55

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WHY IS TRUSTING THE LORD SO HARD?



It's sometimes easy to forget that we live lives created to be in a trusting relationship with God isn't it? I think many times in my day to day life, the details of my life, good and bad, easy and hard, sometimes eclipse that perspective, at least to some degree. When things are good, when Sheri and I are at great coffee shops or at the ocean, or enjoying nature, or find a flush of beautiful edible mushrooms, or have a beautiful moment with one of you, or of course spending time with our grandson Isaac.. those good experiences can sometimes eclipse my perspective.



Likewise when things are hard, perhaps tough relationships, or perhaps depression or anxiety, or health issues... those things also can sometimes eclipse my perspective...

The perspective that I sometimes lose is that it is God's highest desire for me is to be in a trusting relationship with him - trusting his proven covenant faithfulness. And that his desire for me as his prized creation is that his presence thru Jesus will bless me, and keep me, and be with me from now thru eternity.

What God wants for me, for us, is captured in the Hebrew benediction “May the Lord bless you...”

May the Lord bless you and keep you
May the Lord make His face shine upon you
and give you peace

Numbers 6:22-26

In **Genesis 31** it has now been twenty years since the LORD appeared to Jacob at Bethel in a dream where he saw the stairway between earth and heaven. It was here that his faith journey began. And it was here the LORD made clear his intentions for Jacob in **Genesis 28:15**. In essence, that the LORD would bless him and keep him.

This was an invitation. The implied invitation in that verse is for Jacob to trust the LORD's covenant faithfulness. The implied invitation in this passage for you and I is for you and I to trust the LORD's covenant faithfulness. Why is trusting in the LORD's covenant faithfulness so hard? Do we lose perspective?

Genesis 31 opens with Jacob becoming aware that he is no longer being seen by Laban and his sons favorably. Now “favorably” needs defined here because to Laban Jacob has been a resource to be exploited for Laban's own gain. And what has changed is that Jacob has now exploited Laban and his family for Jacob's own gain. Laban doesn't like that.

Note here: exploiting another for your own gain is not right. **Jeremiah 22:13a** NASB says “Woe to him who builds his house without righteousness and his upstairs rooms without justice”.

Now in the case of Jacob and his father-in-law Laban – they are both guilty of exploiting each other without righteousness and without justice to build their own house. For the majority of the twenty years Jacob worked for Laban – Laban – the elder wiser snake -cobra had the upper hand in exploiting Jacob.

Overtime Jacob gained the upper hand and **Genesis 30:43 NASB** tells us Jacob became exceedingly prosperous.

This growth in wealth was noted by both Laban and Laban's sons and it was their impression that Jacob had “robbed our father...” **Genesis 31:1-2**

Well wait, wasn't it God that blessed Jacob and his flocks thru the miracles of the spotted, speckled and streaked animals? Yes it was. And if it was God then why is it wrong? Jacob took advantage of God blessing by manipulation. God gave Jacob the advantage with taking the spotted-speckled-streaked but Jacob manipulated it for his gain. As if God's blessing needed Jacob's help. Which means, that Jacob didn't trust that what God was doing was enough, so Jacob manipulated the flock to further his advantage – see **Genesis 30:41-42**. And the result is that now Jacob is exceedingly prosperous and Laban and Laban's son's are not happy.

And the LORD is aware that Jacob is no longer looked on favorably, and very interestingly the LORD speaks to Jacob in **verse 3** and tells him to “return to...”. And note at the end of what the LORD says, the LORD ends with “and I will be with you”. “Be with you”.

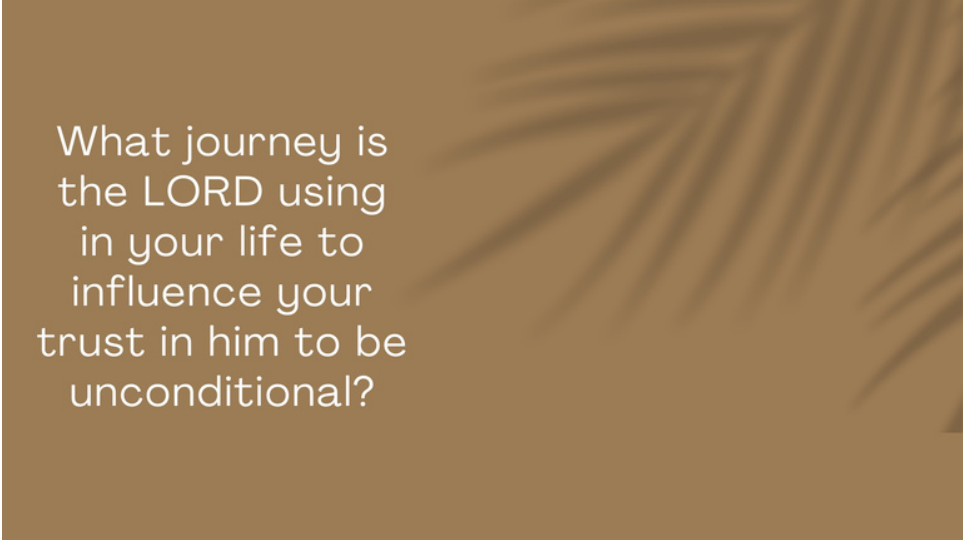
In other words, the LORD is saying to Jacob “after twenty years of working for Laban, I am sending you home, trust me, I’ll be with you.”

So Jacob feeling the heat and hearing from the LORD takes action as we see in **Genesis 31:4-12**.

Jacob is talking to his wives to convince them to come with him back to Canaan. And what Jacob tells his wives appears to be an accurate recounting of all that happened over the past twenty years where God took care of Jacob. But Jacob fails to mention how Jacob manipulated the flock to his advantage. Jacob tells the parts of the story that highlights what he wanted highlighted, the parts that make Jacob look good, but omits his own manipulation. He does that twice in this chapter.

In **verse 13** God addresses in Jacob an issue that is still unresolved – Jacob’s conditional trust in the LORD. In **verse 13** God mentions Bethel the place of the dream and stone monument, where Jacob made a vow to the LORD. That is not just a casual mention of Jacob’s vow – Jacob’s vow is center in what the LORD is doing here. Why? Because Jacob’s vow was conditional. **Genesis 28:20-21**.

The LORD wants Jacob’s trust in him to move from conditional trust to unconditional trust. The LORD’s plan was to use Jacob’s journey home to influence that. Pause there for a moment, what journey is the LORD using in your life to influence your trust in him to be unconditional?



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Well Jacob’s wives Rachel and Leah heard all that Jacob had to say about leaving for Canaan, it seems in **verses 14-16** that his wives didn’t need convincing to leave with Jacob. They know from observing the character of their father Laban that they will not get any inheritance. They know that Laban exploited them also in essence wrongly selling them to Jacob for profit like foreign woman were sold for profit. A terrible practice.

Consumed

Root: אָכַל

Transliteration: 'āḵal

Meaning: to eat, devour, consume

This is the standard Hebrew root used
both for literally “to eat” and figuratively
“to consume, destroy, use up”

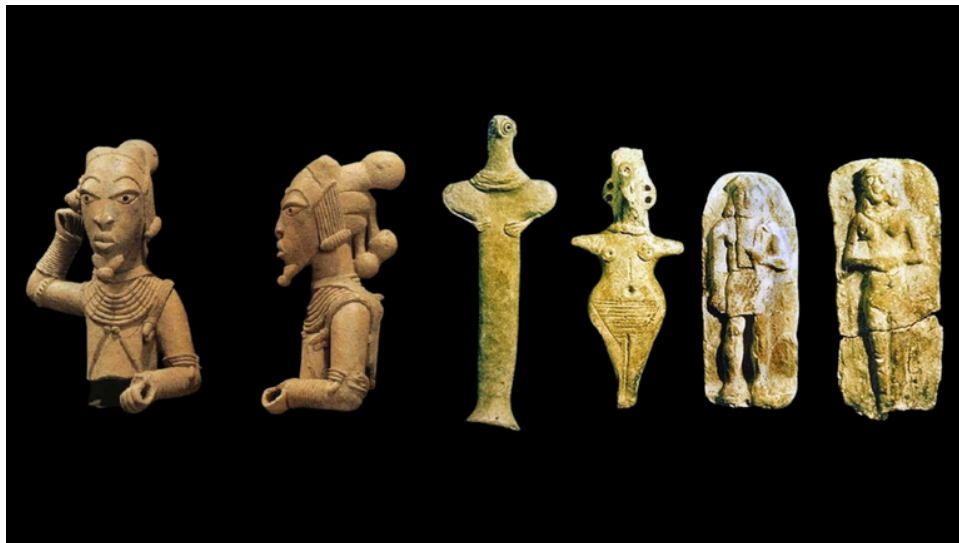
And Rachel and Leah also know that Laban had foolishly, as it says in verse 15 NKJV consumed the profit. The Hebrew word used here for consumed shares the root word for eat but in a foolish sense like to devour selfishly. In Proverbs 30:14 it portrays consumed or devoured as a wicked exploitation.

Now in the cultural context the dowry that Jacob paid for Leah and Rachel – 14 years of service – that dowry was in part to go to the daughters. The daughters watched their father squander that dowry on himself – consume it – and they knew they would get nothing. So why stay?

Now from a narrative perspective, Rachel and Leah's mentioning of themselves being sold for profit and, and Laban eating the profit, are the same two actions of selling and eating that Esau engaged in with Jacob in **Genesis 25:33-34**. These stories of deception just keep repeating don't they?

We see then in **verses 17-19** that Jacob and his family and all the flocks leave for Canaan, but in the process of leaving, Rachel steals Laban's household idols.

This is not a surprise to me that that Laban has household idols. The majority of the ancient near east was polytheistic – meaning they worshipped many gods. These household idols are “teraphim” and could be from the size of little figurines to full human size.



These teraphim represented the many gods that were believed to govern the crops, and fertility and protection. And some people sought direction from these teraphim. These particular teraphim that Rachel stole may have been what Laban had consulted in **Genesis 30:27**. Interesting the term divination in Hebrew has the same consonants as the Hebrew word “snake”. Snakes that we know from **Genesis 3** lie and deceive – which is what we see Rachel do in upcoming verses, lie and deceive.

Divination

Hebrew Word:

נִחָשְׁתִּי (niḥašti)

Root:

נָחַשׁ (nāḥašh)

Meaning:

- To practice divination, observe omens
- Related in meaning to hissing, whispering, or seeking signs

Hebrew Word:

נָחַשׁ (nāḥašh)

Meaning:

Snake / serpent

So what motivation would Rachel have to steal Laban's teraphim? We don't know her motivation for stealing the idols -perhaps she was fearful leaving her land and family and wanted the comfort of her father's idols- like Linus' security blanket? We just don't know. However that she valued them enough to steal them is indicative of where Rachel was in her own faith journey with the LORD. And If Rachel's husband's faith was conditional, certainly that could negatively influence her faith in the LORD as well. There is a lesson there.

In **verses 20-21** NASB we see Jacob once again deceiving and fleeing. This is a repeat of what Jacob had done with Esau twenty years prior. Jacob deceived Esau then Jacob fled – and look at how that ended for Jacob. And now twenty years later, Jacob deceived Laban and now is fleeing back to where Esau is, the first person he deceived. The LORD has a crazy sense of humor doesn't he? We see in this chapter and the next that Jacob has to reconcile with both people he deceived, Laban and Esau.



So let's revisit the LORD's instruction to Jacob on returning to Canaan? **Genesis 31:3, 13**. As you can see in those verses there is no instruction for Jacob on how to leave other than to leave and go home. But what there is here is these verses is covenant language – "I am with you". Jacob has the LORD's assurance that the LORD will be with him. Jacob surely distrusted Laban, and rightly so, but Jacob's actions of further deceiving Laban in how Jacob left indicates that Jacob distrusted the LORD to take care of him as he left. This is the conditional trust part of Jacob that the LORD is wanting to be unconditional trust.

So here is a map of where Jacob was and where he and his wives and flocks fled to.

We know that Laban pursued Jacob, catches him, and this is how Laban responds to Jacob deceiving him once again, and fleeing. **Genesis 31:22-29**

Note the three days in **Genesis 31:22** and the seven days in **verse 23** In ancient Hebrew thinking this combination of three and seven seems to indicate an end of a season or a divinely governed transition. Jacob had been 20 years in exile under oppression, and now that season is over. Three marks the critical stage, seven marks the covenant conclusion. (There is much much scholarly support for this, see sermon notes).

Three & Seven

In ancient Hebrew thinking this combination of **three** and **seven** seems to indicate an end of a season or a divinely governed transition.

Three marks the critical stage, **seven** marks the covenant conclusion.

So at this divinely governed transition point in Jacob's life the LORD warns Laban in a dream—in Hebrew it sounds more like “Guard yourself lest you speak with Jacob good or evil”. This is an idiom meaning “Laban don't interfere.” However, references to good and evil are **Genesis 1** and **Genesis 4** language. Evil from Genesis context is Satan, the opposer, the opposition, dragging back into the darkness of chaos what God had ordered or ordained, blessed and called good. In other words, the Lord who is watching out for Jacob steps in and intervenes on behalf of Jacob and warns Laban the snake, “don't mess with the good journey that I have ordained in Jacob”.

“Guard yourself lest you speak
with Jacob, good or evil.
Don't mess with the good journey
that I have ordained in Jacob”

The apostle Paul in his first century letter to the Roman believers emphasizes this divine ordination on Jacob's life in **Romans 9:11-13**. God clearly chose and ordained Jacob to be the covenant bearer and the father of the twelve tribes of Israel and the LORD was not going to let Laban mess with that.

Let's move on. Now we know that where Laban caught up with Jacob and where this interaction between Laban and Jacob is in Gilead. We know from future maps of the promise land that Gilead is within border of what is the later 12 tribes of Israel. So the important thing to see is that Jacob is no longer a foreigner in Aram, now Jacob is in the land God told him would belong to his descendants. This is the land the LORD talked about in **Genesis 28:15**.

So Jacob has fled back to the land of promise, Laban and his armed men catch up with Jacob there, and Laban confronts Jacob with the exact same question Jacob asked Laban in (**Genesis 29:25**) “What have you done?”. We have noted before that this question, “What have you done?” is the same question used by the Lord to confront Eve in the garden, used by the LORD to confront Cain after he murdered Abel, to confront Abraham for his deception with Pharaoh, and Abimelech and to confront Isaac with his deception with Abimelech. What have you done? Deception and treachery will always be exposed.

Now I confess I have some sympathy here for Laban, not much but some, and it has to do with grandchildren. Sheri and I miss our grandson Isaac when we are not with him. Imagine Laban saying goodbye to all his grandchildren. Picture little Joseph here, and Joseph's ten older brothers, and Joseph's sister Dinah.. they are all part of this scene – they are Laban's grandchildren and he is going to miss them.



Now in **verse 30** we are still in the middle of the confrontation, Laban had asked Jacob why he stole away his daughters and grandchildren and then asks the question in the end of **verse 30** "but why have you stolen my gods?"

Jacob responds in **verse 31** to why he left the way he did admitting to his fears, he was afraid. Jacob didn't trust God enough to not let his fears control him. Remember, "fear" has its place- we live in a scary world with mortal bodies, fear helps us stay alive. But fear is never to take over us, fear is never to become us, or control our decision making. Here Jacob admitted that "fear" of Laban's repeated treachery drove Jacob's decision making. Look, Jacob's fear is not irrational from a human perspective, Laban is a snake! But from a worldview that involves a partnership with a faithful God, God is greater than Laban's potential treachery. So what could Jacob have done? Trusted the LORD's covenant faithfulness to protect him and work out the details of his leaving regardless of Laban's track record of treachery. "Trust in the Lord with all.." Again the LORD had told Jacob in **Genesis 28:15**.

Now regarding the "stealing of Laban's household gods". In **verses 32-35**. A few interesting things here from this section.

Interesting that Rachel has now taken on the role of thief, liar and deceiver. Have you ever heard the saying that people marry their equal? That's Jacob and Rachel.

It's also interesting that Rachel coveted the idols enough to steal them but also disrespects the idols enough to sit on them, especially during her cycle where she would be considered unclean (unless of course she was lying about that as well).

Also interesting - it's hard to overlook that Jacob's death pronouncement on the "idol thief" in **verse 32**. This is seen by some as a link to Rachel's early death during childbirth of her son Benjamin in **Genesis 35:18-19**.

Now back in **Genesis 31:36** when Jacob learns the idols were not found - Jacob launches into a self-righteous protest of his innocence.

And Jacob after 20 years of Laban - lets it all out. Jacob is back in the land of promise - God brought him back there, Laban pursued him into that land, Jacob knows that God is with him and now in **Genesis 31:36-41** Jacob lets Laban have it, finally.

Verse 36 - In Hebrew where it says "chase" it includes the root word "fire" - presenting the imagery of a roaring wildfire devouring everything in its path.

Verse 37 - Jacob in essence calls on all the people watching this interaction to serve as witnesses and judges in a trial of his innocence.

Verse 38 - Jacob presents himself as a faithful, blameless servant.

Verse 39 - Jacob presents himself as "self-sacrificial" - enduring his own loss for the sake of Laban.

Verse 40 - Jacob presents himself as enduring great hardship under harsh oppression.

Verse 41 - This is Jacob stating that Laban has been unjust and unrighteous in how he treated Jacob as a son in law and employee - Jacob is the victim.

Now I confess that there is a little bit of me cheering for the underdog Jacob here as he finally gives Laban the tongue lashing my flesh wants Laban to have. And when you look at how Jacob described his 20 years with Laban, for the most part Jacob is not wrong in what he describes in **verses 36-41**, Jacob is just not complete in his description. Jacob really paints himself here as a faithful, blameless servant who is self-sacrificial, long-suffering, and the victim of oppression and an unfair regime. But it is convenient that now that Jacob is back on home turf and has God in his corner, Jacob left out his own lying and deception and manipulation. Hrmmm?

In **verse 42** Jacob rightly goes on then to give God credit for his accumulated wealth, stating that God saw the abuse that Laban had done to Jacob and that is why God appeared to Laban and told him not to interfere.

Jacob is wrong in his interpretation of why God appeared to Laban. What Jacob gets wrong here is that the LORD doesn't intervene because Jacob is a righteous, self-sacrificing, longsuffering victim of abuse. Rather the LORD intervenes because of the LORD's covenant faithfulness! The covenant faithful Lord said he would be with Jacob, keep Jacob, and bring Jacob back to the land- so the LORD intervening is the LORD keeping his word despite Jacob also being a deceiver. The LORD intervenes on behalf of Jacob because Jacob is the chosen covenant bearer – who the LORD still has some character work to do in – that's what is coming in **chapter 32** – the LORD doing intense character work in Jacob.

Now the story and chapter is not over. But before we move on to the last section of **chapter 31** – let me address the unique name for God that Jacob uses in **verse 42**. “...fearsome God of Isaac”.

Who is the fearsome God of Isaac?

In Hebrew this is Pashad Yitzaq and it means “The Fear of Isaac”.

Fear in Hebrew can mean “terror”, however it mostly means “awe” or “reverence”.

So the “Fear of Isaac” is the God that Isaac revered and trusted and obeyed.

In Hebrew this is Pashad Yitzaq and it means “The Fear of Isaac”. Fear in Hebrew can mean “terror”, however it mostly means “awe” or “reverence”. So the “Fear of Isaac” is the God that Isaac “revered and trusted and obeyed”. Let me go back to our original question, “Why is trusting the LORD so hard?”



Now the last section of **chapter 31** Laban and Jacob are still in Gilead on the mountain, the confrontation between them is still hot and fresh, and I imagine them feeling what you and I feel during a confrontation... blood pumping, uncertain what is going to happen next. But now we see in the next verses the confrontation moves to resolution between Jacob and Laban.

Genesis 31:43-44. So we see Laban - still full of pride and Laban says “everything you see is mine” - But despite his pride Laban heeds the LORD’s warning to not interfere and takes a supportive position of Jacob leaving with his daughters and grandchildren. Even to the point of making a covenant with Jacob.

Now as you recall a covenant of this time period involves cutting animals in half and both parties walking the trail of blood between the halves. So we have the animals of the covenant, we have a stone that Jacob erects as a memorial as we see in **verse 45**, and we have a pile of stones that the entire extended family participates in making - which is their witness of the covenant - each stone represents a witness to the covenant. And I wonder if just perhaps this three part picture, covenant blood, stone memorial, and pile of witnesses is an early picture of the death and resurrection of Jesus? We have Jesus the blood of the covenant, the tombstone memorial, and the pile of witnesses - the witnesses of the resurrection - stones that “God created (through the death and resurrection) into true children of Abraham (**Luke 3:8b**)

Verse 47-52. So this heap and memorial stone also serves as a physical boundary - between two tribes that become nations and both Jacob and Laban invoked divine oversight of this boundary and memorial. Take note here. Sometimes resolving family issues involves firm clear boundaries.

The last scene we have of this story (**verses 54-55**) between Jacob and Laban is one of peace that they never had in 20 years. They share a covenant meal that is followed by a night of covenant rest. Sleeping in the same place was a physical demonstration that the hostility between them was over and they are now at peace. Covenant meal followed by covenant rest.

Thoughts for your meditation and application: The implied invitation in this passage for you and I is for us to trust the LORD’s proven covenant faithfulness. If we are not trusting in the LORD’s covenant faithfulness what are we trusting in?

Four Questions

ONE

Why is trusting the LORD so hard?

TWO

What journey is the LORD using in your life to influence your trust in Him to be unconditional?

THREE

Is fear controlling your choices?

FOUR

Is there anywhere in your life you are not trusting that what the LORD is doing is enough, so you are “helping the LORD”?

And lastly as Jacob and Laban only had rest after they entered a covenant - the same is true of you and I. True “rest” only follows accepting the “covenant” relationship with God through Jesus. Do you want that rest?

Hear is my prayer for you in your walk with the LORD:

May the Lord bless you and keep you
May the Lord make His face shine upon you
and give you peace

Numbers 6:22-26

SUPPLEMENTAL

NOTES:

Genesis 31:1 This is another Genesis story that is influenced by someone overhearing a conversation not meant for them. Sarah, Rebekah, etc..

Genesis 31:2 “attitude” in Hebrew is more like “face or countenance”.

Genesis 31:8 “the speckled shall be your wages”.. the verb form of speckled is “naqad” meaning to “puncture or pierce”. I wonder if this is an early allusion to Jesus being pierced, paying the wages for our sins?

Genesis 31:8 “streaked” is actually “ring- streaked” and is verb form is “to bind” as in the binding of Isaac where the LORD also miraculously provided. Jehovah-Jireh.

Genesis 31:11 Why does God speak in dreams in Genesis so many times? Perhaps because they didn’t listen while awake? ☹ Or were not able to receive while awake?

Genesis 31:22 three & seven – email me if you want an article on this with references.
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Genesis 31:31 “afraid”. Fear inspired manipulation /deception summarizes Jacob’s life to this point. He wants the Eden blessing but is willing to take matters into his own hand to have it.

Genesis 31:36 Now for those of you who like Hebrew literature this is a very poetic rhythmic lament, presented in a chiasmic structure.

A: 36-37 Protest of Innocence/ legal defense.

B: 38-39a Faithful blameless service.

C: 39b Self-sacrificial

B1: 40-41 Hardship endured

A1: 42 God’s vindication and legal defense.

Genesis 31:46 “ate” in Hebrew is zevah and it is a ceremonial meal involves both sacrifice (burn the fat on alter) followed by eating the meat together.

Sources:

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