

Intro

I don't like a lot of fuss, for example I don't always know how to handle complements. It is encouraging to receive them of course, but in the moment it makes me feel uncomfortable & I don't always know how to respond. One affect of this is that I can be weak in the area of giving complements & showing appreciation. Since I don't like a lot of fuss I don't like to make a lot of fuss, especially if it feels like someone is fishing for complements. It's probably something I need to get over...

One of the things that challenged me in this story is the way Laban treated Jacob. Of course he did a lot more than not show appreciation but this was one aspect of Laban's mistreatment of Jacob that comes through over the next two chapters. As well as not appreciating Jacob, Laban also had a controlling, manipulating & detached nature which also caused him to mistreat Jacob & his own daughters. R. T. Kendall writes of Laban; *"He was controlling. There is nothing more exhausting than having someone around who wants to control you. There is no real fellowship. You feel your relationship is based upon the degree to which you allow that other person to control you... He was cruel. He was a bully who knew Jacob was at his mercy... He was cold, detached, unemotional & insensitive. How else could a father treat his daughters like Laban did?"*

I believe one of God's purposes in showing us characters like Laban in his Word, & characters like Jacob & the others, is to give us a mirror image of what we can be like at times. For if truth be told none of us are immune to the flaws & sins we see in these very real people. As A. W. Tozer wrote; *"An honest man with an open Bible & a pad & pencil is sure to find out what is wrong with him very quickly."* Yet at this point what we need to understand deeply is that this is God's grace at work! This is not God pointing out wrong to condemn us, rather this is God diagnosing our condition so he can heal, transform & free us to be happy & holy in him. The more I read & study the Bible & the more I allow it to read & study me the more I believe in its sufficiency to work deep heart transformation as the Holy Spirit applies it... Yet at the same time Scripture also teaches us how to cope when characters like Laban mistreat us in life.

The story of Jacob seems to move from one battle to another as the scene of struggling sisters gives way to a struggle between a father & son-in-law. In this struggle we see 1. Jacob Reasons. 2. Laban Cheats. 3. Jacob Plans. 4. God Blesses & this is my four stepping stones through today's reading.

1. Jacob Reasons (25-33)

In these verses we find Jacob reasoning very fairly with Laban to a point they seem to agree. Jacob's ideal was that he would be allowed to return home with his wives & children. That was his initial request. Laban of course knew he was onto something good with Jacob & was never going to agree to this easily. So for

the first time Laban shows a level of appreciation for all Jacob's hard work, even if it was indirect appreciation, & gives him the opportunity to name his wages in order to keep him. This highlights the controlling & manipulating side of Laban. Laban wanted Jacob to stay dependant on him in order to keep him. We don't know entirely what was going on in Jacob's mind at this point... What we do know is that Jacob made his request, obviously seen it was a no go from Laban's end, & so adapted to a proposal which would at least ensure he had something to his name.

I think Jacob was very smart here & I also see evidence that God is redeeming his scheming mind. Unsurprisingly Laban was not going to let him go without a fight so instead of fighting fire with fire Jacob adapts to a plan which essentially loosen Laban's controlling grip on his family. Instead of allowing Laban to keep complete control Jacob takes a level of control by offering his proposal. All this reminds me of the words of Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 10:16; **"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."** In this world we will come across characters like Laban & we as disciples of Jesus need to learn how to deal with them without sinking to their level. I think we need to reflect more on what it means to be wise as serpents & innocent as doves as we depend in prayer for God to make us so.

2. Laban Cheats (34-36)

Laban seemed fully onboard, just like he did when he seemed to agree to Jacob marrying Rachel, but of course Laban being Laban had to cheat by removing all the goats that were striped & spotted etc. He seemed to think this would put an end to Jacob's plan which if so really showed his own ignorance. I do wonder if Jacob had already factored this possibility in because the following verses simply present Jacob getting on with it with a seemingly quiet confidence that things will work out anyway.

3. Jacob Plans (37-42)

There are some characters you just can't reason with so you just have to find a way of outwitting them without losing your integrity. I think this is partly what Jesus means by being wise as serpents & innocent as doves. The Africa Bible Commentary notes the following; *"Recognising what Laban done, Jacob did not pick a fight with him. He was a planner, not a fighter."* Now I don't know how Jacob's plan worked apart from the truth he was blessed by God. After all the years of working with the animals I'm sure Jacob learned much about breeding them & I'm sure he used whatever he knew to his advantage but there are no scientific reasons to why his particular method worked. I find Philip Eveson's comments helpful here;

"Jacob was now left to look after pure white sheep & black or dark brown goats, which under the agreement all belonged to Laban. In order to have flocks of his own with which to return to Canaan, he would need to find a way of breeding multicoloured animals. Jacob devised two main methods of breeding,

which he used simultaneously. Firstly, he peeled the bark from branches of poplar, almond & chestnut trees in such a way as to form white strips. He put these striped wooden rods near the water troughs so that when the goats came to drink & mate, they would give birth to spotted kids. Jacob also put the dark goats in front of the white sheep when they mated & found they produced dark sheep. Jacob acted on the common belief that doing this would have an effect on the colour of the animals conceived. The results had more to do with the laws of heredity than with his clever scheme. It is reckoned that about two-thirds of the animals would have had the spotted or dark gene, which would have produced some twenty-five per cent multicoloured animals. Secondly, Jacob only used the best of Laban's animals for this type of breeding. This meant that Jacob's spotted kids & dark lambs were stronger than Laban's monochrome flocks. In all this Jacob displayed not deceit but ingenuity. He also acknowledged later the hand of God at work."

Whatever way you understand these verses Jacob's plan & experience of looking after the animals assured him his plan & future was not ended by Laban's cheating. In the next chapter (31:10-12) Jacob also told his wives God had given him a dream during this season concerning the flocks. It was Jacob's experience of working with these animals coupled with hearing from God that gave him a quiet confidence that enabled him to get on with things in a dignified way. I believe that in Christ God can instil such quiet confidence in us so that when Laban's cheat or mistreat us in some other way we are enabled us to keep a clear head, stick with the plan & get on with things in a dignified way worthy of the gospel of Jesus. Not a loud, boastful, God's is on my team, confidence but a quiet humble confidence that enables us to keep our heads & keep going with the knowledge God will bless our flock. He will bring the needed increase & he will lead us home with an inheritance.

Another thing I thought as I read over this account is that deceitful schemers can make good redeemed planners. So let's not give us on ourselves or others too quickly for look what God's hand of redemption done in Jacob. Remember before his journey to Paddan-aram Jacob had a lot in common with Laban, but God called him at Bethel & has been in the process of redeeming him ever since & here we find Jacob using his mind in a more positive way. Jacob is not out to cheat Laban, he's simply learned what he was up against & is using his redeemed gift of planning to secure a future for his family in the plan of God.

4. God Blesses (43)

As we move into the next chapter in a couple of weeks we'll see that Jacob acknowledged this increase was in fact down to God being with him. The key verse in this whole section (30:25-31:55) is 31:42 when Jacob says; **"If the God of my father, the God of Abraham & the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me way empty handed. God saw my affliction and the labour of my hands rebuked you last night."**

Back in Genesis 15:13-16 God spoke to Jacob's grandfather Abraham & said; **“Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgement on the nation that they serve, and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”** Notice that what God revealed to Abraham happened to Jacob on a small scale here. His escape from Laban with great possessions foreshadowed the deliverance of Israel from Egypt pointing us once again to the bigger unfolding story of Scripture of which this story is part. The Exodus of course became symbolic of an even greater deliverance from an ultimate Laban who is out to cheat us & control us, but we have a God in heaven & Deliverer in Christ who devised a plan which outwitted him once & for all & therefore has secured our escape from Satan so we can return home to God with abundance. As Jesus our Deliverer & Shepherd says; **“The thief comes to kill, steal & destroy. I came that they may have life to the full.”**

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Sources used for this sermon

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