

Genesis 29:13-30, No. 49
“The Elementary Principles of the World”
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Jacob had arrived in Paddan Aram and had met Rachel at the well. She then ran home and told her father and Laban had come to the well to meet his nephew.

Text Comment

v.15 One of the techniques the writers of Hebrew narrative employed was that of the *leitwort*, or key term. In a day before chapter headings or tables of contents or, for that matter, even paragraph divisions, by repeating a word or related words throughout a passage, they identified their theme and connected the smaller sections to the entire passage. The key term in the narrative of Jacob in Paddan Aram, is the Hebrew verb "to serve" (עבד). The verb occurs eleven times in chapters 29-31 and the related noun several times more. The hearer of the text as it was read would notice the repetition of the word. The word can refer to service or work in general or to something more servile and slave-like, as is the case here. Jacob's time in Paddan Aram would prove to be an exile in servitude, as Israel's in Egypt would later prove to be. The irony is that this was the essence of the blessing that Jacob obtained by deceit, that "the older brother would *serve* the younger." Jacob would now find out what it is like to have to serve a cruel master. [Sarna, 203]

Laban's question may sound to us quite friendly, but with his question, he was betraying the obligations of family. Jacob didn't come to Paddan Aram to work for Laban. He should never have demanded that Jacob earn his keep. The dollar signs had already appeared in Laban's eyes; he saw an opportunity here.

v.16 Leah means "cow," and Rachel means "ewe," appropriate enough names for a shepherd's family. But both girls would be treated by their father as domestic animals to be sold for a profit.

v.17 "Weak" or "soft" doesn't refer to poor eyesight but to a lack of that luster so prized in the East. Rachel's description as a girl with a beautiful figure and a lovely face suggests that she was altogether more attractive than Leah.

v.18 Jacob obviously had learned quite soon what kind of man Laban was and what he was going to have to offer in exchange for his daughter.

v.19 In light of Jacob's precise "I will work seven years for your younger daughter Rachel," it is significant that Laban did not expressly say that he would give *Rachel* to Jacob in exchange for his labor. He said only, "It is better than I give *her* to you than to someone else..." The impression is that he was already hiding his true intention, but Jacob did not realize that. His reply was ambiguous and Jacob foolishly took it for a binding commitment. [Sarna, 204]

- v.20 “A few days...” Remember his mother, Rebekah, had told Jacob to stay with his uncle Laban “a few days” (27:44).
- v.21 Why should Jacob have to ask for Rachel again? Did Laban really need to be reminded that Jacob's seven years were up? Laban clearly wasn't waiting for the day when he could give his daughter to Jacob and see the young couple happy together.
- v.24 Ordinarily a wedding in those times involved a large feast, doubt attended with drinking. The celebration was ended by the groom taking his bride, who had remained veiled throughout, to the wedding chamber. In Jacob's case his family was not present and that made it much easier for Laban to deceive him. Obviously other were in on the plot, certainly Leah herself. Perhaps befuddled by wine, the veil also kept Jacob from discovering the trick before it was too late. Laban deceived Jacob by blinding him, just as Jacob had taken advantage of Isaac's blindness to deceive him.
- Zilpah is mentioned parenthetically as part of Leah's dowry. But she will figure significantly in the family history as it unfolds. She will be the mother of Gad and Asher. Zilpah, by the way, is an old Arab form of the French name “Courtney.” Both names mean “short nose.”
- v.25 Esau spoke in the same aggrieved tone when Jacob deceived him (27:36)! Laban had exchanged daughters to deceive Jacob, as Jacob had exchanged sons to deceive his father.
- v.26 The mention of the reversal of situation between the younger and the older must have struck Jacob as a terrible reminder that what had been done to him he had himself done to his father and his brother.
- v.27 Both his financial necessity and his desire for Rachel left Jacob with no alternative but to submit to Laban's demands. The gloves had come off. Laban had him over a barrel. No pretense remains that Laban has any true affection for or interest in his nephew. So much for Jacob's hopes of returning immediately with his new bride to Canaan. At least he got to have Rachel right away and not at the end of the seven years of working for her. But imagine Jacob and Rachel's thoughts as they endured what was supposed to be the weeklong festive celebration of that first marriage; and imagine Leah's thoughts, knowing what Jacob thought of her now. Her father *had sold her* with no thought whatever of her affections or feelings or her future happiness. And similarly, Laban had been happy to place Rachel in a situation in which a romance that might well have bloomed into something remarkably lovely now was overshadowed by rivalry with her sister. By his abuse of everyone involved he saw to it that the home that both of his daughters would occupy would be embittered and that the two sisters themselves would be antagonists of one another.
- v.29 Bilhah would become the mother of Dan and Naphtali.
- v.30 The next seven years are not said to have passed like “a few days.” The house was divided; Jacob loved one wife and not the other; and we shall see in the next paragraph the trouble caused by the rivalry between the two wives. These were not people who lived happily ever after.

It is important to observe that when Moses wrote the Pentateuch, God's law forbade the marrying of a wife's sister during the wife's lifetime. No effort was made to rewrite the story to make it conform to the Law of Moses. This is what happened warts and all, sad to say.

Now, coming so soon after Bethel, and the promises that God made to Jacob there, we naturally wonder how this disaster can be squared with those divine promises of blessing and protection. We appreciate that Jacob needed to be punished for what he did and surely this punishment perfectly fit his crime against his father and his brother. But, there is more here than just Jacob's punishment. We are going to find divine providence overruling Laban's deceit and bringing great things from it. Eight of the twelve tribes of Israel would trace their ancestry back to the unloved Leah and her maid, Zilpah. Surely there is a great lesson in that. God blesses and uses the poor, the weak, even the unloved to extend his grace to the world. What did Paul say? "God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him." [1 Corinthians 1:26-29]

Further, God promised Jacob many descendants, and God fulfilled that promise by overruling both Jacob's and Laban's sin. To some degree, every single promise God makes to his children is kept by means of his overruling our sins.

What is more, there is another picture of larger reality here. Jacob was deceived and spent fourteen years working effectively as a slave. His was bitter servitude in some ways. He knew that he was a prince, but he lived as a slave. But the result of that long servitude would be that Jacob will eventually leave Paddan Aram a wealthy and a powerful man. Just as Abraham left his exile in Egypt with great wealth; just as Israel will leave her long, bitter sojourn as slaves in Egypt with great wealth, so Jacob here. Why? Because God was with him. The Lord's favor does not make us immune to suffering, but it guarantees a happy ending! That's the Bible in a nutshell.

In many ways we believers live a life of servitude in this world. We cannot spread our wings as we wish. Our convictions are not publicly vindicated as we want them to be. Our glory as the people of God is kept a secret from the world. Hard labor is required of us, the reward for which labor we cannot yet see. We encounter many things in this world – our own sins chief among them – as slaves experiencing servitude – Paul calls himself a bond-slave of sin – but the day is coming when, like Jacob leaving Paddan Aram after his twenty years of servitude there, we will enter upon our inheritance, we will leave our servitude and enter the full liberty of the sons of God. And it will happen – for us as it did for Jacob – because God was with us. All of that is true and important, but these are themes we have considered already in the previous material.

There is something else here that is important for us to ponder, a perspective crucial to a Christian's view of the world and of life in the world. In Galatians 4 Paul twice described the unbelieving world as enslaved to the "elementary principles of the world." The striking thing is that, according to Paul, both Jews and Gentiles are enslaved to those elementary principles. Jews who abhorred idolatry and Gentiles who practiced idolatry with relish were equally enslaved to these principles. Much ink has been spilt in an effort to explain that phrase, but I think the best way to understand it is to think of it as a virtual equivalent to what Paul calls in another place "the spirit that is now at work in the sons

of disobedience.” Think of these “elementary principles” as simply *the way unbelievers think*. One of those principles, for example, would be *the current climate of opinion*, whatever it is at whatever time and in whatever culture. There is a way of thinking that will always be inimical to the truth of God but natural to people in that time and place, so natural that they are hard-pressed to think in any other way. [Cf. Bruce, *Galatians* NIGTC, 204]

We deal with these elementary principles every day, all day. People think in a certain way. They pass judgment in a certain way. Their values are shaped by their culture and by the climate of opinion. Down deep, of course, and the Bible makes this clear in many ways, there is a visceral distaste for God, a spirit of rebellion against him. They have no reverence for God or fear of him, but are sure that they deserve his favor. The climate of opinion is different from place to place and time to time, but always alike in that fundamental way. It wasn't long ago that Americans had very different values than they do now. In my lifetime I've witnessed a profound moral and spiritual shift in American thought. You young people live in a world in which the climate of opinion is vastly different from what it was in your grandparents' day. And that should force you to realize that the way your contemporaries think, today's climate of opinion, is sure to change again. It always does. People today are sure, absolutely sure that *they* are right, but those coming after them will reject the way people now think and be just as sure that *they* are right. So it has been from the beginning. People are moral creatures because they have been made in the image of a moral God. But how they express, how they define, and how they defend their morality changes from generation to generation and place to place; but, for the unbeliever, always in a way that preserves their rebellion against God.

And that is what we see here as we see it everywhere in the Bible and everywhere in human experience. *The life of Jacob is the life of Christians in the world*. He is a representative believer in so many ways. This is why the Bible mines this material over and over again for lessons that are vital to the faith and life of God's people whenever and wherever they live. And in this respect also: *that believers encounter the culture of the unbelieving world as a hostile culture that it must offend and that must be offended by it*.

Take Laban here. What he should have said in v. 15 was, “You are my nephew. While you live here in Paddan Aram, I'm going to set you up in a home of your own,” precisely what Jacob will ask Laban to do later (30:25-34). But Laban betrayed the family bond and treated Jacob as an indentured servant, rather than a member of his family. [Waltke, 404] As we said, the key word in this passage is “serve” or “work,” and that is how Jacob was treated and how he lived, as a servant, a worker. For the next twenty years Jacob would pay dues to Laban. This is despicable, though it is hardly unusual anywhere in the world at any time to find people acting selfishly.

But what is more interesting is that in verse 26 Laban defended himself to Jacob, after his cruel deceit, by saying, “It is not our custom here...” Literally, he said, “Such things are not done here...” You can hear his offended tone in as he says, “*It just simply isn't done!*” Laban assumed the role of the victim as if it were Jacob who had violated the sacred principle.

Now, to be sure, there was blatant hypocrisy here on Laban's part. If he had really felt that he couldn't give the younger daughter before the older (and that is not by any means certain), he certainly could have told Jacob that beforehand. The deceit was the proof of Laban's evil intent.

What is more, there isn't the scintilla of a suggestion that Laban made an effort to marry his elder daughter to someone else during those seven years that Jacob was working for Rachel. The implication of the text is that Laban saw this as a way of getting both his daughters married while making a financial killing in the bargain. What do you suppose Rebekah would have thought if she had known how her brother was treating her son?

But v.26 it is a perfect picture of the offended virtue of the world in the face of the higher standards of biblical ethics. The world says and must say to us, in a thousand ways, "*It simply isn't done!*" *Think of Laban as the epitome, the perfect picture of fallen man and woman, a lover of himself, thoughtless of others, utterly indifferent to God, but always ready to pass judgment on anyone and everyone else!*

Think of our culture's elementary principles and its climate of opinion. Whether it is Christian marital ethics or sexual ethics, whether it is abortion or euthanasia, whether it is our insistence on objective truth – truth the same for everyone at all times – or universal moral standards, whether it is our theological exclusiveness – there is but one name under heaven by which men must be saved – or a hundred other things, the world barks at us, "It simply isn't done!" And by this means they deflect any criticism of the hypocrisy and inconsistency or the cruelty and hopelessness of modern American life which are the inevitable consequences of our climate of opinion. C.S. Lewis made this point brilliantly in Books 4 and 5 of *Mere Christianity*. Everyone's life has a moral cast to it; everybody is always rendering moral judgments; he cannot escape it, for he is made in the image of God. But the clarity of moral vision differs profoundly. Here is Lewis:

"...when a man is getting better he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his badness less and less. ... Good people know about both good and evil: bad people do not know about either."

"Those who are seriously attempting chastity are more conscious, and soon know a great deal more about their own sexuality than anyone else. They come to know their desires as Wellington knew Napoleon, or as Sherlock Holmes knew Moriarty; as a rat-catcher knows rats or a plumber knows about leaky pipes. Virtue -- even attempted virtue -- brings light; indulgence brings fog."

Because he did not know God and so did not seek true goodness, Laban was a man who lived in a moral fog. And we can be sure that had someone else been there to tell Laban what a wretch he had been, to Jacob and to his daughters, how impossibly selfish he had been, how thoughtless of those whom he ought to have loved deeply and whose welfare should have been uppermost in his mind, Laban would have been deeply offended. "It just isn't done," he would have said. "How could I have allowed Jacob to dishonor Leah, my dear daughter," he would have said. People are slaves to self-justification because they are slaves to the elementary principles of the world!

Only Jacob here is made to face the true evil of what Laban had done. Not primarily because he was Laban's victim – everyone is offended when he or she is the victim, that tells us nothing of the person's moral insight – but because he was forced to see his own behavior in

that of his uncle. The deceiver had been deceived. This may well be why we hear no reply from Jacob when Laban defended himself. Jacob saw only too well how his own deceit had been exposed. He wasn't befogged; he knew his sin only too well! He now knew what Esau felt when Jacob had pulled the rug out from underneath his older brother. The trickster had been tricked and Jacob got what he deserved. Christians see that, the world is very unlikely to.

And what is true of individuals is also true of entire cultures. The more corrupt and sinful a culture becomes the less capable it becomes of moral judgment. But, no matter; 100% of the time it will pose as a defender of truth and justice, as a moral judge of the highest principles. It cannot help itself because it is inescapably moral – as all human beings are – but in bondage to the elementary principles of the world. Remember how at Sodom the evil men of that place condemned Lot as judgmental, “holier-than-thou,” because he refused to go along with their plans to rape his guests! What Lot was proposing *simply wasn't done* in Sodom.

And, of course, in our modern Sodom, people think and speak the same way. Things that a generation ago would have been repulsive to the vast majority of people are now accepted as perfectly normal, even signs of human flourishing! And when criticism is raised, the spokesmen for the culture say, “What you are saying is simply not said here. What you propose to do is simply not done here. We simply do not pass judgment in that way here.” The 21st century has its Labans aplenty, men and women who abominate and despise those who dare to criticize and condemn their wickedness. This is the true inheritance of the so-called enlightenment!

Laban had his morals, such as they were, but they served him rather than the other way around. And the modern intellectual has so often proved to be just like Laban in this same way: high-sounding, affronted by the criticism of others, but profoundly hypocritical in his own life. Voltaire, supposedly the enlightenment's champion of human rights, was so eaten up by bitterness and hatred that even his embarrassed friends referred to him as “the genius of hate.” [In Thomas Reeves, *The Empty Church*, 75] Just like Laban, Jean Jacques Rousseau, one of the apostles of modern western life, could raise himself to pontificate on the moral instruction of children but, at the same time, treat his own children like dirt. Rousseau once wrote a book on the moral education of young people – the kind of thing that excites intellectuals today (teach them that truth is self-constructed, that truth is whatever you choose it to be; teach them the virtues of a sexually open or gay or transgendered lifestyle; teach them that abortion liberates women enslaved by their maternity; teach them the “kindness” of assisted suicide, the evil of distinctions based on gender, and the other cardinal moralities of our day) – but Rousseau himself, fathered five children by a woman he made virtually his slave and then, against her wishes and because he didn't want his public to know he had fathered children out of wedlock, and, no doubt because he couldn't be bothered, sent his offspring by her – five babies, none ever given a name, to virtually certain death at a home for abandoned children. As soon as they were born they were abandoned. Laban looks like a model father when compared to Rousseau!

Do you get my point? Laban is mankind, he is everyone, and, especially, he is every person who is enslaved to the elementary principles of the world, the typical way people think, the climate of opinion by which they live their lives and justify their behavior. Laban is as surely 21st century man as he was man near the beginning of the 2nd millennium B.C. What I am after this morning is

spiritual intelligence. And I wish especially to speak to those of you who are younger, people for whom our present American culture is all you have known, the world and the way of thought with which you are familiar. The great danger of these elementary principles is that you have to do nothing to succumb to them. They are in the air your breath and the water you drink. They are confirmed by everything you watch on television or by the movies you see. Your unbelieving friends can't explain them and almost certainly can't defend them, but they assume them as a matter of course. And those principles make people into Labans; into a thousand different kinds of Labans.

But Christians are not to be like Laban, not like him at all. The elementary principles of the world are precisely that way of thought we are to reject root and branch because it does not originate in the truth of God and is not consistent with reality as God has made it. Because those principles are false they enslave rather than liberate. God calls upon his people to think as the world *does not* think and to behave as the world *does not* behave. The grace of God liberates us from bondage to the elementary principles of the world; it is the truth as it is in Christ that sets people free! So young people and young adults especially, you be sure that you are thinking your way through life, observing what people say and do around you and subjecting those observations to critical examination. Forget the climate of opinion. How solid a foundation for life is the current American climate of opinion? Well, it will no longer be the way people think a generation from now; it will have been replaced by something equally wrong, but equally convincing to a new generation. Both Jacob and Laban were sinners; they both sinned in almost exactly the same way, the Bible makes that clear. That is not the difference between them. The difference was, as it always is, that *Jacob knew he was a sinner*, felt the weight of his moral failure, and sought God for salvation. Laban remained clueless, justifying himself to the end. That is always the fundamental difference between the children of God and the children of this world!

Don't you be among those too many Christians nowadays who find themselves rushing to accommodate the elementary principles, the climate of opinion of the world in which they live. They hang their heads when a Laban tells them that "Such things are just not done." Laban for all his moral posing, knew nothing about good and evil. For all his offended virtue, he had no virtue. For all his abuse of his daughters and his nephew, he received in due time, the just deserts of his sins, as we shall see – rejection by his daughters and the loss of all he hoped to gain from Jacob. So will be the fate of this culture of ours. We must take our cue from the Word of God – bear the reproach of the world with confident and patient reflection, endure our slavery as we await the day of his appearing. Those who trust in him will never be put to shame!