

**Genesis 30:25-31:21, No. 51**  
**"Pilgrimage: A Biblical Motif"**  
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We have another lengthy reading this morning and, moreover, one that will require some extensive comment on the text. We must have the whole before us to understand the parts.

**Text Comment**

v.26 Jacob had worked fourteen years for his wives and during that time his children had been born; now follow six more years in which he worked for Laban to build up his own flocks, not because Laban was intending that to be the result, but that is in fact what happened. So we read in 31:41. Now that Rachel had borne a child she was ready to accompany him to Canaan. The "my" before homeland should probably be taken as expressing Jacob's faith. It was the land that God had promised to him. After all, the Lord had kept the other promises he had made to Jacob at Bethel: protection, a wife and children. Jacob, however flawed a man, had been richly blessed by God.

This seems strange to us: Jacob's asking for his wives and children. But, even the Mosaic law required slaves to leave their wives and children behind when they left the service of a master, if they had acquired those wives and children during their time of service, and both Jacob and Laban seem to have viewed Jacob as Laban's slave. That is the way he had been treated, nephew or not.

v.27 Laban's reply, one commentator writes, "is a model of oriental courtesy and cunning." He rejected Jacob's request though he made the rejection sound like a request made to a superior. [Wenham, 255] "Divination" was a widespread practice in the ANE. Most texts that have been recovered from that time and place are divination texts, purporting to show how to discover the mind and will of the gods ahead of time. Divination presumes the presence of other spiritual forces controlling the world that are not under God's control, hence it was forbidden in Israel. [Waltke, 418]

However, God can use even pagan practices to accomplish his will, as he will do later, for example, with Balaam's prophecies in the wilderness. This is one of several places where pagans are forced to acknowledge that having the covenant people in their midst had been a cause of blessing to them. But, of course, this is, for Laban, a reason to keep Jacob, not to let him go.

v.28 "Name your wages" sounds very generous, but we have heard this before (29:15). We expect that Laban has something up his sleeve. Later we will learn that Laban changed Jacob's wages ten times (31:7, 12).

v.33 Jacob's proposal, we will soon learn, was not his own idea. The Lord had revealed it to him in a dream (31:10-13). But Jacob knew his man; he knew Laban would jump at this chance because it seems entirely to Laban's advantage. Normally in the near east sheep are white

and goats are black or dark brown. Black sheep or speckled goats were rare, certainly nothing like the 20% of the newborn of the flock that was the shepherd's normal hire. Jacob's offer to cleanse the gene pool of the speckled animals and dark sheep at the outset made the offer seem even more one-sided.

- v.36 Laban not only seized Jacob's offer to cleanse the gene pool, but, a cheat himself, took extra precaution to ensure that he wasn't cheated. He separated the animals himself, rather than let Jacob do it, and then separated all the speckled and dark sheep from Jacob's little flock by a distance of three days journey to prevent Jacob from any inbreeding of his animals with the speckled and dark animals. The distance Laban put between himself and Jacob was to backfire, enabling Jacob to escape at last and, meantime, to practice his breeding unnoticed and unhindered. We read of the dishonest man in Psalm 7:15: "He makes a pit...and falls into the hole which he has made." That was Laban's life story.
- v.43 There are two ways to explain the strategy. One is to say that God told him to do that in the dream; it just isn't said that he had. Or we may assume that the stratagem of the branches was just Jacob's weak faith laying some of his hope for success on magic, as Rachel had done with the mandrakes before. Thankfully, Jacob grew wiser and later attributed his prosperity to God and said nothing about the peeled branches. The dream, of course, should have taught him that and made the branches unnecessary. But we have learned not to put too much stock in the strength of Jacob's faith! By God's blessing Jacob succeeded in breeding multi-colored sheep and goats from monochrome stock and so transferred them into his ownership. What is more, the Lord ensured that the strong kids and lambs were his and the feeble were Laban's. So, like Abraham and Isaac before him, Jacob became rich while in exile, a stranger among strangers.
- v.2 Trouble was brewing. Jacob's prosperity worried and infuriated Laban and his sons who saw it, as cheats always do, as Jacob prospering at their expense, no matter that he did it himself according to a plan Laban had agreed to. Jacob had become *persona non grata*. This had happened, remember, to Isaac, whose prosperity had angered the Philistines (26:14).
- v.3 At just that time the Lord appeared to him and told him it was time to leave. But, Laban still saw his daughters and grandchildren as his. So Jacob had to ensure the loyalty of his wives before attempting his escape. He needed to know that his wives would side with him and not their father. It is a long speech, which is a demonstration of its importance, in part because it shows us a very different Jacob than we have seen so far, a Jacob who is a man of faith. Jacob gave all the credit to God for what had happened.
- v.4 The field was a better place to ensure that the conversation was not overheard by the wrong people. Note that Rachel still came first.
- v.15 The daughters were under no illusion about their father – "he sold us..." They were quite happy to follow Jacob elsewhere.
- v.19 This detail explains how Jacob got away without Laban knowing it. It was sheep-shearing time, a very busy time for sheep ranchers and a time when they were away from home.

[Sarna, 216] The “teraphim” that Rachel stole were household gods or images of one’s ancestors thought to provide blessing and protection. Rachel stole them, probably, with the thought of their added protection for herself and her son. Her faith was not so pure that it excluded pagan notions. But, then, all along we’ve seen God blessing very imperfect faith!

v.21 Paddan Aram lay to the north of the Euphrates. Gilead is the area east of the Jordan between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea.

Probably most attentive readers of this part of Genesis wonder why so much time and space was devoted to this history. Jacob’s years in Paddan Aram consume a substantial chunk of the Genesis record. Why it should be so is a question worth our asking. And it seems that, whatever the entire explanation may be, chief among the reasons for the amount of detail we are given is that these accounts, today’s reading and the reading last Lord’s Day, are illustrations of a fundamental “motif” in the instruction we are being given about the life of faith.

You know what a motif is. It is a main element or feature in a piece of literature or music that occurs and reoccurs and that is elaborated or developed in different ways throughout the entire work. Or, it is a figure that is repeated again and again in some visual art. A tune that appears repeatedly and in different forms in a symphony or concerto, for example, is a motif. Well, you have a motif in Genesis that occurs a number of times and is still being enlarged and elaborated in the book of Exodus. Indeed, this melody continues to be heard throughout the Bible. That motif, that repeated theme, is what we have here. The detail we are given serves to identify and emphasize the motif. Let me show you.

Jacob was summoned by God to leave Paddan Aram and go to Canaan and when Jacob did so he virtually retraced the pilgrimage his grandfather Abraham had made many years before when he left Haran to travel to Canaan. Jacob would make that journey with his twelve sons, the nation of Israel in the seed. What is more, for Jacob, as for Abraham, it was a summons that had to be answered in faith. In Abraham’s case faith was required because he didn’t know where he was going; in Jacob’s case because Laban would never have consented to his leaving and because Esau awaited him at home. Later on, Israel in Egypt would be given a similar summons and would have to launch out in faith, not knowing precisely where they were going, how they would escape Egypt without reprisal, how they would provide for themselves along the way, or what troubles they would encounter on their journey to the Promised Land.

Still more, in all three cases of God’s people making a journey to the Promised Land, troubles abounded. In Abraham’s case, when he arrived in Canaan he was met with famine, then with danger in Egypt. In Jacob’s case, as we mentioned, it was Laban and Esau, and in Israel’s case it was the Egyptians and others who threatened them along the way. And in each of these three cases, not only did God protect his people from their enemies, but by his provision and protection they came into the Promised Land not only safe and sound, but having plundered their enemies and their gods. Abraham came from Haran a man of means, but reentered the Promised Land from Egypt a man of real wealth. Jacob may have arrived in Paddan Aram with only the shirt on his back, but he left it a wealthy man and with Laban’s so-called “gods.” And, you will remember, that when Israel left Egypt at the exodus, she plundered the Egyptians. They were so happy to have the Israelites leave that they loaded them down with wealth. They were slaves but they left the land of their slavery a

wealthy people, well-provided for their journey to Canaan. Indeed, it is interesting that the word the ESV translates “has taken away” in 31:16 (“all the wealth that God has taken away from our father”) is *the same word used in Exodus 12:36 of Israel plundering the Egyptians the night of the Passover and the exodus.*

The identification of this motif is further demonstrated by the miraculous provision God made for his people in each case: the miraculous breeding of Jacob’s flocks here is matched with the ten plagues by which Israel was delivered from Egypt. Laban’s following Jacob to bring him back – of which we will read next time – will be, of course, matched by the effort of the Egyptian army to recover the Israelites after they had left. In each case God frustrated that effort and preserved his people in safety and brought them to the Promised Land. In other words, this is a story told more than once in the Bible. It will be told again in Ezra and Nehemiah when God brought the Jews back safely to the Promised Land after their exile in Babylon. In point after point the pilgrimages of Abraham, Jacob, and Israel *were the same!*

These cycles found in the history of the patriarchs, as we learn for example in Hebrews 11, are intended to reveal a pattern, to show us the nature of believing life. The striking similarities in wording, in situation, and in result; the very different circumstances in what are, nevertheless, very similar stories; and the repetitiveness all add weight to the great lesson, making the picture being painted more vivid and more impressive. And what is that picture? *It is of the Christian life as a pilgrimage*, a journey to the land where they will worship and serve the Lord most completely and freely. Enemies of superior strength seek to prevent us, circumstances may often seem to be against us, but God not only protects us, but by his strength enables us to plunder the world and its gods as we go.

We are, you and I, on that same journey to the Promised Land, not to Canaan, of course, but to heaven. But, then, even the patriarchs understood that. That is the point made so forcefully in Hebrews 11. They knew very well that the promise God made to them was not finally about a piece of real estate in the Levant. Canaan was the foretaste of a land, a place, a life much more wonderful still and one that never ended. They too were looking, as we are, for the *better* country, the *heavenly* city. Like them we encounter enemies on our journey; we have the same promise that God made to Jacob at Bethel, that he would protect him and keep him and bring him safely at last to his destination. And so completely will he bless our travels that we will finish our course far richer than we were when we began; indeed, like Jacob and Israel, so we read in Revelation 21, we will carry the glory of the nations with us into the heavenly country! Do you see how much there is here for our reflection, for our encouragement, and for our training in righteousness?

It must often have seemed to Jacob that he would never return to the Promised Land. One obstacle after another was placed in his way; Laban again and again seemed to get the better of him. After all, Jacob was in Paddan Aram twenty years and through that time had to endure a great deal of mistreatment. Twenty years is a long time. Imagine his discouragement. Imagine him wondering if he would ever see his parents again. Israel would be in Egypt four hundred years and suffer terribly in abject slavery in the latter years of her sojourn there. Both Jacob and Israel lived as slaves, a point that is emphasized in our text. The root of the word “servant” or “slave” is found three times in 30:26 alone, though only twice in the English translation! But, at the end, it was just as God had

promised: for Abraham; for Jacob, and for Israel! And so it has been for vast multitudes of God's people ever since, and so it will be for us if we do not lose our confidence in the promises of God.

Why all of this repetition in history and in the biblical narrative? Because all believers need to see their lives, *our lives*, in these same terms and no others. What this history is intended to teach us is the necessity of faith in the Word and promise of God, that very faith that is the subject of Jacob's long speech to his wives in chapter 31, the centerpiece or climax of the story of his sojourn in Paddan Aram. We must believe that God will be true to his Word, no matter appearances to the contrary, and we must act in the strength of that faith, as Abraham had, as Jacob did, and as Israel would. We too have been called to leave our homeland and set out for another country and we are to see our lives as a pilgrimage to the Promised Land.

When anyone sets out on that pilgrimage he or she finds difficulties all along the way. John Bunyan magnificently described those difficulties in his *Pilgrim's Progress*. Abraham did, Jacob did, Israel did. But these narratives teach us to expect such difficulties. When Paul, in Colossians 3:1 tells us, "Since you have been risen with Christ, set your mind on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God," he is just saying in a different way what we have already been taught in Genesis. We are going somewhere. The meaning of our lives is determined by their destination. And looking to God and heaven is the method of our travel day by day.

All the patriarchs lived long lives. One of the reasons for that was surely that they served in that way as better examples for us. We could see more clearly the nature of their journey, their lives as a pilgrimage, the many difficulties they would encounter, and how God would enable them to surmount those difficulties. No wonder this material is referred to so often in the rest of the Bible. Here is created the pattern according to which all biblical revelation subsequently is delivered. But, of course, every believer does not live more than a hundred years as the patriarchs did. The last time I preached on this history, nearly twenty years ago, the Lord's Day fell just two weeks after the murders at Columbine High School in Denver. Some of you will remember, you younger folk will not. Cassie Bernall, seventeen years of age, was reading her Bible in the school library when she was confronted by one of the teenaged gunmen, "Do you believe in God?" According to one account in the press she quietly replied, "There is a God and you need to follow along God's path." The shooter looked down at her, said, "There is no God," and shot her in the head. According to another witness she had replied, "Yes, I believe in God." The gunman asked, "Why?" but then shot her dead before she had a chance to reply. According to her classmate, Mickie Cain, the killers had first asked the whole room if there was anyone who believed in God and, knowing that an affirmative answer would mark her for death, she replied as she did anyway. [Colson, *Breakpoint*, April 26, 1999] Cassie had become a Christian two years before.

Two years is a short time in which to travel all the way to heaven, but it can be done and has been done many times. Indeed, many have made the journey far faster. Think of the thief on the cross, who was hung up to be crucified an unbelieving man and made the trip to Paradise in just the hours he hung on his cross.

It has always been a remarkable thing to me that Olympic athletes do such very different things for the very same reward. A sprinter might earn his gold medal in under ten seconds. A marathoner will take over two hours to win that same medal. And so it is in the life of faith.

But no one with Christian faith, no one who sees life in the terms in which it is taught in the history of the patriarchs and, in particular, in Jacob's own life story, can think it matters how long the journey takes. What matters is that our lives in this world are understood to be a journey to the Promised Land and that we never forget that. Surely no Christian will think that Cassie Bernall made a mistake in identifying herself as a Christian. If life is indeed a pilgrimage, a journey from this world to the next, a journey we have been plainly told will mark us out for trouble, our calling will be, must be, to take each step by faith in God and in the promises he has made to his us. The great question isn't whether a believer lives 17 years or 100; the question isn't whether Jacob should spend a few days as a virtual slave in Paddan Aram or twenty years, the only question that matters is whether she or he is *en route* to the Promised Land. What makes Jacob an example for us is not his sturdy faith, is not his wisdom – we've seen his weakness and his foolishness too often – what makes Jacob an example for us is that he was determined to reach the Promised Land. Most people never give the Promised Land a thought; for Jacob it was the meaning of his life. For all his failures and weaknesses, this is what made Jacob a believing man.

Believers in Jesus Christ, you and I brothers and sisters, are *exiles*. We are far from home. Many people you know have no other home than this world. How impossibly sad! It is our calling to tell them that this world can be no one's home; it is passing away. The so-called experts tell us that if only we have better education, if only we invest more money in medical research, if only we come better to understand ourselves and our society, we can bring in the day when no one will be unloved, when every life will be long and satisfying, and so on. We've all heard that talk. And any adult with an ounce of sense knows that it isn't true. The longing for home that fills every human heart will never be satisfied in this world, in this mortal life, in this human experience of conflict, disappointment, and death. All the talk that it can be our home simply reminds us of Milton's fallen angels who, upon reaching the black and burning pit try to convince themselves that the place isn't so bad after all! [Kilpatrick, *Psychological Seduction*, 132-133]

This world is no place to call home. It isn't what anyone really wants home to be. Think of the place of this world in the biblical narratives of pilgrimage. Home is 20 years in Paddan Aram being tricked and used by an evil man. Home is hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt being ground into the dust by people who didn't give a lick about you or about your welfare. *That's this world as a home*. This world in many ways is a terrible place. Death and every form of evil overshadow everything. But it is terrible only if it is the *only* place; *if there is no other*. If there is another place, a true home, we can both endure the hardships of life in this world, temporary as they must be, and enjoy the good things that we find here. There is a home for those willing to make the journey, a home that will not disappoint us in any way or at any time. The Bible calls it the Promised Land, Paradise, Heaven, the Better Country, and it calls it *Home*. Jacob's story is all about how he made it home. And that must be your story and mine as well; how we got home, how we took our wives and children with us, and others with them. This was the story of Jesus' life, remember, and we are followers of him.

Here is the reason for all this detail, for the long story of Jacob in Paddan Aram. There must be enough of a description of Jacob's life of faith for us to find our own lives in his; to be able to tell that we are living the same life he lived, making the same journey he made. Troubles along the way? You bet! At every turn. Twenty years of enduring the deceptions and rapaciousness of his

grasping uncle. Some further troubles caused as well by his own foolishness and lack of faith. But in all of that we are to see ourselves in Jacob. As one great preacher put it:

“Brethren! Be not hoodwinked out of your salvation by thinking that you have found out a softer and an easier path to heaven than the old path, and the king’s highway. There is no softer path to heaven than that which still bears the footprints of the Man of Sorrows.”  
[William Burns, *Revival Sermons*, 153]

The way was hard for Jacob; it was hard for Israel; it was harder still for the Lord Jesus. It has been hard for all the saints who have gone before us and who will come after. *But it is not the journey but the destination that tells the tale.* And twenty years of hardship or not, Jacob was at last on his way home. Here is the challenge of our text and so many others like it in the Bible. Is it obvious from the way we invest our time and money and by the subjects that fill our speech that we are on our way to another country? If the end were to come for us today or tomorrow, would it catch us dithering instead of *en route*, enamored of this dying world rather than having our eyes firmly fixed on the world to come, consumed by our troubles or bearing them in the confidence that there is no other way to the heavenly country than “through many tribulations”? That is all that I want any of you to be able to say of yourselves at any time, day or night: “I’m on my way home.”