

A Heap of Stones

Genesi 31:22-55

Today is the last we will hear about Laban, and that really is a good thing. There is very little about Laban that is commendable. There is little about his character that is worthy of imitating. Because of that, my one commentator who has given me so much wisdom and understanding in the book of Genesis but who finds so much of it inappropriate for preaching consistently rejects this passage for sermon material, saying that “One may well question whether this chapter offers suitable matter for preaching.”

But since I obviously don’t agree, and am preaching on this passage, it is worthwhile to start with the question, “Why?” Why study Laban? What can we learn from a wicked, deceitful man? I have a simple answer to that question. We can learn about wicked and deceitful men! And we need to learn about such people, because this fallen world is filled with them.

Contrary to popular, liberal theology, everyone is not basically good. In fact, just the opposite. Everyone is basically evil. Only by the grace of God, are some men less evil than others. And only by the grace of God are those who are born again as Christians made to grow in actual righteousness and godliness.

The reality of life is that we live in an evil age, which means, among other things, that this age is characterized by evil. That description is given in,

Gal. 1:3 “Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

So, in Christ, we are rescued from this evil age. Rescued from its dominion. Rescued from slavery to sin. Rescued from the condemnation of the law. But we still live in the world, and we still come face to face with evil men, men whose minds and eyes are blinded by the god of this evil age!

2 Cor.4:4 “...whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.”

And Paul reminds us as believers that once, we, too, were unbelievers. He writes that,

Eph. 2:1 “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience.”

And the reality is that if we are to obtain wisdom, we must learn to understand the ways of evil men. So our study of Laban is, therefore, edifying, particularly so that we will be able to heed Jesus’ warning in,

Mat.10:16 “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”

Let’s study Laban in an attempt to be wise as a snake but innocent as a dove. Let’s try to understand the nature of a wicked man, for with Laban, we have a,

I. PORTRAIT OF A WICKED MAN.

His wickedness has been clearly identified, clearly addressed, and clearly condemned. I won’t repeat what we’ve already studied. But let’s look close enough in our text this morning to understand his wickedness that’s here.

The context is that Jacob has finally left Laban. After 20

years, at God's command, Jacob, along with his wives and children, have left Laban's house in order to return to Canaan, the promised land. They left secretly, which in my opinion, was a very legitimate thing to do. Jacob had proven himself trustworthy, yet he had been the repeated victim of Laban's deceitful treachery. So Jacob left while Laban was out shearing his sheep, and he and his family were able to get a three day head-start.

v.22

Remember, though, despite Laban's treachery, God had richly blessed Jacob. So Laban wasn't about to let him go freely. As soon as he realized Jacob was gone, he pursued him.

v.23

And he wasn't dissuaded even when God himself appeared to him.

v.24

We read that Laban overtook Jacob, and the two camped in the same place, ready for the confrontation.

v.25

What do we learn about Laban from that? The word I've chosen is,

A. Vindictiveness.

Vindictiveness is the spirit of a man disposed to seek revenge. It is the fury of a man controlled by spite, wanting to cause harm to someone whom he believes has harmed him. It is the intention to get even, settling the score. In Laban's eyes, he had a score to settle with Jacob. His vindictiveness is reflected in the words of his sons, obviously demonstrating the same spirit as their father, words we studied last week,

Gen. 31:1 "Now Jacob heard the words of Laban's sons,

saying, "Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and from what was our father's he has acquired all this wealth."

That vindictive attitude wasn't missed upon Jacob, either, as we also saw.

Gen.31:2 "And Jacob saw the countenance of Laban, and indeed it was not favorable toward him as before."

Vindictiveness is such an ugly thing, and so wicked. I won't attempt to speak about it with any of my own words, for nothing can be clearer than God's own words which we find in,

Rom. 12:17 "Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. 18 If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. 19 Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. 20 Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Beware the smallest beginnings of vindictiveness! Beware the smallest sensations of vengeance and getting even, and never, never retaliate evil for evil. But that is precisely what Laban is doing here. After 20 years of cheating, deceiving and oppressing Jacob, he won't even let him leave in peace. He follows after, presumably to inflict vengeance, perhaps even unto death, which would explain why the Lord appeared to him to keep him from such evil.

But even with the Lord's warning, look at what Laban does say to Jacob?

v.26-28

I have one word to describe that.

B. Hypocrisy.

Absolute, unmitigated, uncontrolled, unrestrained, unbridled, uninhibited hypocrisy. It just doesn't get any plainer than this. Remember how Laban's daughters evaluated their own father?

Gen. 31:14 "Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, "Is there still any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house? 15 Are we not considered strangers by him? For he has sold us, and also completely consumed our money."

That was an accurate evaluation. Laban sold them into marriage, and wasted upon himself the rich returns he received from Jacob's servitude. They realized they had no share in their father's inheritance, and were no better than foreigners to him.

But Laban here expresses his concern for his daughters, as if Jacob was the one oppressing and enslaving them.

v.26

That from a man who sold his daughters into marriage to his own material gain. The attempt to express compassion for his daughters is so outrageous that it is laughable. His hypocrisy is so thinly veiled, everyone but he himself must see it plainly.

v.27-28

To which we could properly respond, "Yea, right." As if that is what really bothered Laban! But such hypocrisy is a mark of the wicked man. And right along with it,

C. Boastfulness.

Notice how Laban relates to Jacob the Lord's appearance to him.

v.29

Talk about a political spin. The Lord rebukes Laban. He

authoritatively warns him against speaking or doing evil to Jacob. And Laban presents it as God showing mercy upon the poor and defenseless Jacob by protecting him from the hands of the strong and mighty Laban. Laban turns the Lord's rebuke into an occasion to boast. "I have the power to harm you." "But I won't."

It's like a twelve year old bully intimidating a classmate by saying, "I could beat you up with one hand behind my back. But I won't." Such boasting, is of course, always vain. It is empty intimidation. Empty words. So it is with the wicked. Then Laban ends.

v.30

It's hard to evaluate that verse, except to say there is incredible sarcasm. Laban is mocking Jacob for doing a very good and honorable thing, and in fact, doing something God commanded him to do. Go back to his father's house.

But Laban is being so condescending here, because as we've just seen, the last thing he's interested in is Jacob's welfare. For twenty years, he's taken advantage of Jacob, and that certainly didn't end when Jacob left. He gives Jacob a false compliment, acting as if he accepts Jacob's reasoning for leaving, for one purpose. So he can accuse Jacob of stealing the household gods, the teraphim. "But why did you steal my gods?" I call that,

D. Self-righteousness.

Laban is a deceitful, treacherous, wicked man, who uses his own daughters and son-in-law for his own worldly gain. He steals from them, by changing Jacob's wages and by requiring those 14 years service. And then he personally accuses Jacob of theft. If ever we have an example of the pot calling the kettle black, it is here. Today we call that projection!

Such incredible self-righteousness, to be so oblivious to his own sin and his own greed and covetousness. So blind to his own faults, yet so quick to falsely accuse and condemn Jacob. His self-righteous, boastful, vindictive hypocrisy is so manifestly evident! And the warning of Jesus comes so quickly to mind.

Matt. 7:3 “And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? 5 Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

Of course, we can’t study Laban and just say to him, “You hypocrite. How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?”

We must, of course, apply that warning to ourselves. Even in studying Laban, you must apply these words to yourself, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”

So what we have here is a portrait of a wicked man, a man whose only concern in life is his own well being. Such a man certainly embodies the spirit of our age as well. If you want to understand the world in which you live, and if you want to understand some of the people with whom you have to live in this world, then understand the nature of wickedness as the Bible reveals it through the examples of wicked men.

But then, put it away. Put away such wickedness. Identify it and study it so that you can put it to death! Then replace that wickedness with godliness and righteousness. In that regard, let’s look at the contrast with Jacob. Here the exhortation is that

you should strive with all your might, by God’s grace, to reflect this,

II. PORTRAIT OF A RIGHTEOUS MAN.

What are the parts of that portrait? What exactly is righteousness? We see a lot of it here. First,

A. Truthfulness.

Jacob is truthful here. Sure, he had left secretly, in a wise attempt to avoid this confrontation, but when he spoke to Laban, he spoke truthfully. Despite the fact that Laban could well be described as an enemy.

v.31

He left secretly as a protection for his wives, to protect them from being kidnapped by their own father, kept against their will. There is certainly the sense that Jacob’s fear was well-founded. At the very least, Laban was certainly capable of doing precisely that which Jacob feared. But God is on Jacob’s side, so Jacob rejects any impulse to hide behind falsehood. He tells Laban exactly what his motivation was. And he does so with,

B. Integrity.

That’s the second word I’ve chosen to describe Jacob’s godliness from this encounter. Specifically, his integrity is revealed by his response to Laban’s accusation of stealing the teraphim. Jacob knew that it was a false accusation, at least for himself. He was obviously wrong not to suspect his wives, but it’s hard to fault a man for thinking well of his wife.

But his response demonstrates his own integrity. He would require justice for the guilty.

v.32

And he allowed Laban to search.

v.33-35

Scripture doesn't give us answers to hypothetical questions, such as, "What would have happened to Rachel if Laban had found the teraphim?" We don't know if Jacob would have handed over his own wife for execution, or if Laban would have actually carried out that sentence upon his own daughter.

However, you can't defend Rachel's theft, for although the teraphim were idolatrous, they did belong to Laban. And even if her excuse for not standing up in Laban's presence was legitimate, she goes deeper into sin by not revealing her theft. Stealing is a sin. And refusing to confess compounds the guilt.

But God uses all of that for Jacob's protection, and we hear nothing more of this after this account. And Rachel, herself, would soon die, giving birth to the twelfth and final son, Benjamin. However, because of the way this is recorded in Genesis, the focus is not on Rachel, but on Jacob. And Jacob's actions are praiseworthy. He responds to the false accusation of an enemy with integrity! And he does so with a,

C. Clear conscience.

v.36-37

Finally, he rebukes Laban. Perhaps this should have come years ago, but again, he is no doubt attempting to honor his father in law. But his anger is justified, a righteous indignation, the understandable consequence of the pent-up emotions through those long years of bearing the frustration of Laban's oppression. His pointed question of rebuke to Laban is appropriate, and his self-defense is done with a clear conscience.

He has done no crime worthy of being hunted down! He has taken nothing from Laban, after demonstrating his own willingness to give back to Laban anything that was stolen. And he calls his own people to judge between himself and Laban.

Unlike Laban, there is no vindictiveness here. No hypocrisy. No boastfulness and no self-righteousness. For Jacob has a clear conscience. He has done nothing wrong!

Defending yourself against false accusations is extremely hard, but the one absolute necessity is this sense of a clear conscience. If you ever find it necessary to defend yourself in a similar way, be sure that you search yourself first, so that you can say, "I have done nothing wrong." If you can't, then your defense quickly becomes hypocrisy. A righteous man, however, is one with a clear conscience, one with nothing to hide.

The basic reason that Jacob had such a clear conscience before Laban is because through his work for Laban, he had proven his own,

D. Trustworthiness.

So his words to Laban are not self-righteously hypocritical, but a powerful witness and a just rebuke.

v.38-41

It's an incredible reputation. Jacob was so conscientious with Laban's animals that under his careful oversight, there were no miscarriages. That's astounding. The calves were born alive, because Jacob was a faithful shepherd and took care of the sheep, even as they gave birth.

The reference in verse 39 to torn animals is that the custom was that a shepherd would not be held liable for the death of a

sheep if he could kill the attacking animal and bring the torn beast back to the owner, demonstrating that he done all that he could to save the sheep, even though he was unsuccessful. Jacob, however, wasn't even given that protection. He bore the loss himself of any flocks killed by wild animals, whether it was his fault or not, presumably replacing Laban's flocks with some of his own. If any sheep were stolen, Jacob himself bore the cost, not Laban the owner.

He speaks of his hardships in his work, again a very difficult thing to do, for it is so easy to appear self-righteous and self-serving. Jacob avoids that appearance, and accurately describes his work on Laban's behalf.

v.40-41a

He had proven himself trustworthy, and still Laban cheated him.

v.41b

And then he witnesses to Laban, testifying to his own,

E. Dependence upon God.

v.42

He rebukes the wicked Laban, and he declares God's faithfulness all in the same breath. God had been with him, and for that reason, and that reason alone, he prospered. And he rebuked, or judged, Laban.

The whole context seems to indicate that Jacob's accusation against Laban was valid.

v.42a

Therefore, his dependence upon God is honorable.

v.42b

God has set the situation right. What a powerful rebuke given by a righteous man to a wicked man. We see then that Laban makes no attempt to deny Jacob's accusations or to defend himself. Jacob's words have silenced him, and done away with any justification for his actions. Instead, he responds by seeking peace.

Interestingly, it is the direct rebuke which brings about this desire for peace. In our day, we would usually think that Jacob's continued silence would bring peace. But ignoring a conflict doesn't make it go away. Jacob didn't ignore it, and because he was able to give such a godly self-defense, because he, himself was above reproach, because he had fully depended upon God to justify him before Laban, Laban was humbled to a man who could do nothing but seek peace.

He does it by asking for a covenant. And we have here,

III. A PORTRAIT OF A COVENANT.

Laban initiates that covenant, that agreement or contract which would establish peace between the two men.

v.43-44

Now, I can't say definitively whether Laban's motives were sincere. That is, whether he is fully humbled and seeking genuine reconciliation with Jacob, or whether he remains cynical and hypocritical, seeking the covenant only because he has been defeated. I think it may well be a combination of the two, a genuine desire for reconciliation, but still self-serving motivation. But whatever the case, we see that,

A. God causes the wicked hypocrite to seek peace.

Laban seeks the covenant as a witness between himself and Jacob. It would be a lasting symbol of peace between the two men.

In typical fashion, they marked the place with a heap of stones, a place which would forever mark the agreement. That heap of stones would also serve as a table upon which to eat the covenant meal, a solemn feast that was used to fully seal the covenant.

v.45-46

Each man named the place in his own native language. Laban in Aramaic and Jacob in Hebrew.

v.47

Laban's Aramaic name means "heap of testimony." Jacob's Hebrew name means "heap of witness." The two names are very close in meaning.

Laban agrees with Jacob's name, and adds a third name.

v.48-49

Mizpah means "the watchtower," representing the fact that this covenant would serve as a watchtower over both men, watching them even when they aren't able to watch each other. Laban may well have been sincere here, though I should note again, however, it was he, Laban, who needed the watching! Jacob had proven his character already.

But Laban makes the covenant very explicit. He calls upon the Lord to judge between them, and he makes the implications clear for Jacob.

v.50

It would be a covenant of peace.

v.51-53a

It's impossible to tell if Laban fully realizes that the same standards shall be applied to him, and if he doesn't, his hypocrisy just grows and grows. But nonetheless, regardless of Laban's motivation, which we do not infallibly know, we do know how Jacob responded.

B. God causes the godly man to grant peace.

Peace is a worthwhile goal, and Jacob agrees to this covenant. Actually, since he had done nothing wrong up this point, this covenant adds no additional responsibilities to him, but it does demonstrate his willingness to be at peace, a very noble ambition.

And the covenant does formally declare that God will be the judge. God will set the wrongs right. Which, of course, is only what Jacob has wanted for 20 years! So he enters the covenant with Laban, and the two men left at peace.

v.53b-55

We hear of Laban no more, thankfully. But we should still study him, for he is an accurate portrait of a wicked man. You may well have to deal with such people in your own life, and to follow Jacob's example in those dealings would be the best course of action you could take.

But by way of application, to apply the conditions of this covenant to yourself, be sure to realize that in all your dealings with people, God is your witness. God will judge all your disputes. God will reveal what is wrong and show what is right. In simple words, your sin will find you out.

But on the positive side, let me end with this exhortation, an exhortation applied to Christians, to those saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. This is how you should live among the wicked men of this evil age,

1Pet. 3:8 “Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; 9 not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. 10 For “He who would love life And see good days, Let him refrain his tongue from evil, And his lips from speaking deceit. 11 Let him turn away from evil and do good; Let him seek peace and pursue it. 12 For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their prayers; But the face of the LORD is against those who do evil.” 13 And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed. “And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.” 15 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; 16 having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. 17 For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.”

May it be so for each one of us.