

SHIFT Sermon Series: WEEK FIVE
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CONTINUING TO WORK FOR LABAN

In our lives, the reason why Jacob had to leave Canaan and live in Haran for a long time was because we have to spend a lot of time learning the truth and working on applying it. The birth of Jacob's sons represents us making gradual progress in living the truth (it's bearing fruit) and Joseph being born represents getting to a point where we're doing a pretty good job of living our beliefs. Imagine a woman who, over the years, has learned a lot about how to be a good wife and mother—what to do, what not to do. And she's put a lot of what she's learned into practice to the point where it's become habit. This is a large part of the goal of living in Haran and so, when Joseph is born, in the very same verse, Jacob says to Laban, "Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my country...." (Genesis 30:25).

But Laban isn't ready for Jacob to leave yet. And Jacob isn't actually ready to leave Haran yet. There's more that he needs to get from being there before he can go home. God does call him to go home but not until after another six years of working for Laban. The teachings of the New Church explain why Jacob has to spend such a long time living with and working for Laban.

When... a person is converted from an old person into a new one,... it does not take place in an instant as some people believe, but over many years. Indeed the process is taking place throughout the person's whole life right to its end. For his passions have to be rooted out and heavenly affections implanted, and he has to have a life conferred on him which he did not possess previously, and of which in fact he scarcely had any knowledge previously. Since therefore his states of life have to be changed so drastically he is inevitably maintained for a long time in an intermediate kind of good which partakes both of worldly affections and of heavenly ones. And unless he is maintained in that intermediate good he in no way allows heavenly goods and truths into himself. (Secrets of Heaven 4063:3).

Working for Laban means working with mixed motives or "an intermediate kind of good." Our motives can't be made pure in an instant and so we end up being in state of mixed motives for a long time. Even when we've made quite a bit of progress in living according to our beliefs, we still have a mixture of selfish and selfless motives for what we're doing. We want to be a good wife and mother and we also want to impress people with what a good wife and mother we are.

These mixed motives are part of how the Lord works with us—part of how the Lord provides Jacob with a lot of wealth. But they're not static. Though our motives remain mixed for a long time, if we're on the right track, the mixture should be gradually changing towards more good motivations and less bad ones. In the story we see a gradual separation from Laban taking place. Laban's and Jacob's flocks are set three days apart from each other and Laban's flock gradually becomes Jacob's flock, as Jacob works to

make all of the strong animals from Laban's flock have speckled and spotted offspring.

See the reading for Day 2 for an example of how our motivations can gradually improve.

WHY WE HAVE TO LEAVE LABAN

Eventually, though, Jacob has to entirely separate himself from Laban. At the beginning Laban seems very friendly. He's overjoyed to see Jacob when he first arrives and is eager to have him work for him. But then, time after time, he tricks and manipulates Jacob. The way he actually feels about Jacob is finally fully manifested in what he says later in the story when he chases after Jacob. He acts as though he just wanted to throw a goodbye party for them but eventually he says, "These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children, and this flock is my flock; all that you see is mine" (Genesis 31:43). Even though Jacob has worked for Laban for twenty years, Laban still sees all that Jacob's earned as belonging to him.

Our selfish motivations tell us the same thing. "You've only gotten where you are today because you were willing to look out for yourself." "If you don't make sure you tell people all the useful things you've done, nobody would notice." Laban claims credit for all the positive things in our lives and if we stay with him for too long he will take everything we have. Like Rachel and Leah, we can feel like our own father has sold us and tried to take all our money (Genesis 31:14-16).

Jacob says that Laban has "has deceived me and changed my wages ten times" (Genesis 31:7). This is exactly what selfish motivations do, in that they're never satisfied. "If you just get that promotion, then you'll be happy. Actually now that you've got that promotion there's a higher one you need to get if you really want to be happy." We can never get enough respect, or praise, or money, or power—Laban will keep changing the wages. So there comes a time when the Lord asks us to leave that behind.

God says to Jacob, "I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed the pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now arise, get out of this land, and return to the land of your family" (Genesis 31:12-13). God says, "I don't want you to stay in this mixed-motive place your whole life. Why don't you go home? Remember the vision I gave in the dream at Bethel and the covenant you made with me? I've got better things to offer you. Life can be more than just about getting ahead and impressing people."

LEAVING LABAN

How do we leave Laban? In many ways Laban is like dysfunctional family members or "friends" that we've hung out with for years. They're the people we eat too much with and drink too much with. They're the people who reinforce our bad habits. And leaving Laban is like trying to leave behind family members or friends who don't want us to change. They think they know exactly who we are and fully expect us to stay that way.

Leaving Laban is like saying “No,” to an old friend. “No I won’t come and hang out with you tonight at the bar, I’m spending time with my children instead.” “No I’m not going to use this conversation as an opportunity to show off how smart I am and how good I am at telling funny stories, I’m spending time listening instead.” Leaving Laban is being willing to say, “You may want me to do that but I think the Lord wants me to do this instead. This is how I think I need to approach parenting or what movies I watch and don’t watch or my finances, whether you agree with me or not.” This is hard to do—especially if it feels like people are going to be disappointed in us, or have their feelings hurt, or will guilt trip us about it, or criticize us for it. It can lead to strained relationships and awkwardness.

Leaving Laban is about putting distance between ourselves and those motivations and setting up boundaries. Jacob can’t control Laban but he can choose to distance himself from him. We can’t control the fact that part of us wants to do all we can to impress people but we can work on not acting on those inclinations and we can decide to listen more than we talk when we go to a party. Even when we try to distance ourselves like that, our desire to impress people or feel superior will come chasing after. We can’t control that. Laban will try to convince us that it’s pretty impressive how nice we were to let other people talk and that we’re clearly better than the other people at the party who did so much talking about themselves. But we can continue to make boundaries, just as Jacob set up a pillar and heap to mark the boundary between him and Laban.

And when we make these boundaries we need to make sure that we don’t look down on other people as a result. We need to remember that we are just as speckled and spotted ourselves. We’re not saying that we’re better than other people by choosing to try to make a change in our lives, we’re just trying to follow the Lord home and He “did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Mark 2:17). We’re just as in need of help as the next person. When we humbly choose to follow our God and make choices to live our lives differently, whether other people like it or not, He will protect us, just as He made it so that Laban could speak neither good nor bad to Jacob (Genesis 31:29).

Further Readings:

Secrets of Heaven 3993:8-9, 4145:3, 4067:2-4, 4073:2, 4077 ; Joshua 24:15