



Lesson 19

Jacob and his Family

In our last lesson we saw how Jacob had to flee for his life from Esau. He went to his uncle's home in Haran and worked for him for many years. He married Laban's two daughters, Leah and Rachel. Laban was a deceiver who tricked Jacob and in this Jacob saw how badly he had behaved in deceiving Esau.

Jacob's family

After Leah had born four sons to Jacob, Rachel became desperate for a child herself. She gave her maid, Bilhah, to Jacob as a concubine and she bore him two sons. Leah then acted similarly giving her maid Zilpah to Jacob. She had two sons also; Leah had more children and finally God allowed Rachel to have sons. Between them these four women had twelve sons and they were the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. Here is a list of them all.

	Mother	Son
1	Leah	Reuben
2	Leah	Simeon
3	Leah	Levi
4	Leah	Judah
5	Bilhah	Dan
6	Bilhah	Naphtali
7	Zilpah	Gad
8	Zilpah	Asher
9	Leah	Issachar
10	Leah	Zebulon
11	Rachel	Joseph
12	Rachel	Benjamin

Chapter 30 tells us that this was a family in which there was much jealousy between the wives. Initially Leah was fertile and bore sons but Rachel was barren. She was very envious of Leah and of the sons she gave Jacob; she said to Jacob, "*Give me children, or I shall die!*" (30:1). Because she remained barren, she gave her maid, Bilhah, to Jacob as another wife. Bilhah bore two sons. Rachel called the first Dan, which means judging, and the second Naphtali, which means 'wrestling', because she said:

"With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have won."
Genesis 30:8

How sad this all was and what a very foolish thing to do. She tried to sort out her family problem herself without praying to God about her barrenness and relationship with Leah and because two sons were born to her maid she thought she had won! God's answer was to give sons to Leah's maid Zilpah and then more to Leah. One of the reasons He did this was because Leah prayed to Him and He answered her prayer.

"And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son."
Genesis 30:17

Finally, after she had her sixth son she said:

"God has endowed me with a good endowment; now my husband will honour me, because I have borne him six sons." Genesis 30:20

It seems that Leah's example of trusting in God and praying about her problem finally influenced Rachel. She too prayed to God; He listened to her, answered her prayer and she bore Joseph.

"Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb."
Genesis 30:22

Although God allowed polygamy in the Old Testament, it always brought family troubles and disharmony. Abraham had problems between Sarah and Hagar, now his grandson, Jacob, has to try to keep the peace between two wives and two concubines!

Jacob returns to Canaan (31:17-55)

Jacob's deceit of his father, Isaac, had caused much trouble in Isaac's family. Now he had found trouble and strife in his own family. In his distress about these things God was teaching him about the distress he had caused others. But Jacob had more problems ahead.





After he had lived with Laban for about 14-15 years, he decided to return to the land of Canaan. Remember that he had made a solemn promise to God that he would do this (chapter 28:21). However Laban asked him to stay. He knew that God was with Jacob, since Jacob had lived with him Laban had become rich and so he said:

“If I have found favour in your eyes, please stay. I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me because of you.”
Genesis 30:27

Notice that Laban had not prayed to God about this, rather he had practised witchcraft which was strictly against God’s laws.

The two men agreed terms on which Jacob would stay longer with Laban. He would continue to look after Laban’s flocks and herds (Jacob was an excellent herdsman and shepherd). Laban would give him all of the animals that were speckled and spotted in colour; all the pure colour animals would be Laban’s.

But Laban tricked him. He took away all the speckled and spotted animals and hid them from Jacob so that they could not reproduce. He was a greater deceiver than Jacob. Jacob told his wives ‘your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times’.

We can imagine how indignant and hurt Jacob felt but once again he must have understood how Esau felt when Jacob tricked him out of their father’s blessing and inheritance.

However God was with Jacob and increased his flocks and herds whilst Laban’s became weaker. Finally Laban and his sons became very angry with Jacob. God spoke to him and told him that it was now time for him to return to the land of Canaan.

“Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am!' And he said, 'Lift up your eyes and see, all the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted, and mottled, for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred.'”
Genesis 31:11-13

Jacob gathered all his family, his herds and his wealth and left. But he had still not learned his lesson! He waited until Laban was away on business and left without telling him; *‘Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee’*.

When Laban found out he was very angry. He collected his men and followed after Jacob until he caught up with him. It is clear that he intended to harm Jacob but God spoke to him and warned him not to and so he said to Jacob:

“It is in my power to do you harm. But the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.'”
Genesis 31:29

So the two men made peace; as well as a being a deceiver, Laban was a bully and a boaster. He claimed that everything that Jacob had taken belonged to him, even though Jacob had worked 20 years for it all! Jacob’s response teaches us a lesson on how to cope when we meet people like Laban. Laban spoke many words, Jacob spoke a few. Laban boasted of what he could do and what was his. Jacob said that it had been the Lord God who had looked after him and protected him in spite of Laban’s bad treatment of him.

Finally the two men made a solemn agreement to go their separate ways and never to see each other again.

SUMMARY

In this lesson we have learned:

- God is like a father with his children. He disciplines us in our lives for our own good.
- Polygamy was allowed in the Old Testament but always brought trouble within families.
- However bad life was for Jacob with Laban, he always trusted in God and looked to return to God’s land.

