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PERSPECTIVE ON THE WORKPLACE

SERIES: WRESTLING WITH GOD: THE JACOB NARRATIVE

By Scott Grant

Parting ways

When the publisher of the weekly newspaper that I edited called me into her office one afternoon, I thought it was for something routine. Yes, we had our differences. I believed that the advertising department should not be allowed to influence the way the editorial department reported the news. She thought otherwise. So after walking into her office that afternoon, I walked out of it without a job. I was fired.

With the benefit of hindsight, I later came to see that the Lord was at work. He led me to a deeper relationship with him through six months of unemployment. He led me to a better job working for a better newspaper. And he led me to a church where I became involved in ministry for the first time. I later came to appreciate what I only weakly grasped at the time: God was with me, and God was for me. I lost a job, but what I gained was priceless.

Jacob also left a job behind, and he also has a story of God's faithfulness to tell. The narrator of Genesis reported in Genesis 30:25-31:16 that the Lord revealed himself to Jacob in Haran and enabled him to become successful despite oppressive working conditions. Jacob recognized the Lord's care for him and therefore came to life spiritually. In Genesis 31:17-55, Jacob finally leaves Haran. From the hills of Gilead, some 300 miles from Haran, he reflects on his years of toil.

Jacob, then, grants us a perspective on the workplace that we in the Silicon Valley sorely need. The workplace here seems to dominate our lives. It tantalizes us with hopes of fulfillment that usually die a slow and painful death. On the one hand, we fear that God will abandon us and leave us to fend for ourselves. On the other hand, we fear that he will involve himself and tamper with our dreams. We need to know, then, that God is with us in our careers, acting on our behalf and forming us for himself.

The passage is framed by the word "arose" (Genesis 31:17, 55). First Jacob arose to leave Laban; then Laban arose to leave Jacob.

Jacob flees from Laban

Then Jacob arose and put his children and his wives upon camels; and he drove away all his livestock and all his property which he had gathered, his acquired livestock which he had gathered in Paddan-aram, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac. When Laban had gone to shear his flock, then Rachel stole the household idols that were her father's. And Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him that he was fleeing. So he fled with all that he

had; and he arose and crossed the Euphrates River, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead. (Genesis 31:17-21)

Against all odds, Jacob became wealthy in Haran, in the land of Paddan-aram. He plundered Laban, just as his descendants would plunder the Egyptians when they left for Canaan (Exodus 12:35-36). Now Jacob, in obedience to the Lord, leaves Haran for Canaan, in the manner of his grandfather Abraham (Genesis 12:5). He is returning not just to Canaan but to “his father Isaac.” He will once again have to face a father who withheld from him the love he craved. Jacob’s connection will no longer be with his wives’ father, Laban, but with his own father, and with the God of his father.

Before leaving, Rachel, Jacob’s wife, steals her father’s household idols. Her father has stolen her husband from her and her share of the purchase price, so she steals his idols from him. Although she has told Jacob to do what God has told him, she is not ready to cast her lot completely with the God of Jacob’s father, especially with a difficult journey in front of her. Rachel’s stealing of the idols from her father echoes Jacob’s stealing of the patriarchal blessing from his father, though, of course, the idols will profit Rachel nothing.

Laban is identified as “the Aramean” for the first time since Jacob’s arrival in Haran. Although at first he called Jacob “my bone and flesh,” Laban’s place is not with the family of God (Genesis 29:14).

Just as Jacob fled from Canaan to Haran, he now flees from Haran to Canaan (Genesis 27:43). In each case, he fled from someone who meant him harm, first Esau and then Laban. Jacob, it seems, isn’t safe wherever he goes.

When he crosses the Euphrates River, he has 300 miles of desert ahead of him. He sets his “face” toward the familiar hills of Gilead, which border the Promised Land. Haran has forced him to face into himself. Now he sets his face, and he turns his heart, toward home. Before he gets there, he will have to cross another river, the Jabbok, where he will see the “face” of God before seeing the “face” of his brother (Genesis 32:22, 30; 33:10). Hope and fear will be his companions for the long journey home.

Fear in the workplace

Like Jacob, many of us feel that we’re not safe wherever we go, especially in the workplace. On the one hand, we’re afraid of losing a job. On the other hand, we’re afraid of getting stuck in a job. A career is a magnet for dreams. Anyplace where dreams are gathered, there will you find your heart—what you really believe. Your experience in the workplace, then, is telling you something about yourself. Perhaps it is showing you that you’ve been running from something—from your past, from a certain destiny, maybe from God himself. But now, like Jacob, you’re ready to face up to your past, to face into God and to accept the destiny of his design, even if it feels that you have to traverse 300 miles of desert to do so. Such thoughts fill you with both hope and fear.

Laban pursues Jacob

When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, then he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him a distance of seven days’ journey, and he overtook him in the hill country of Gilead. God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream of the night and said to him, “Be careful that you do not speak to Jacob either good or bad.” Laban caught up with Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen camped in the hill country of Gilead. Then Laban said to Jacob, “What have you done by deceiving me and carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword? Why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell

me so that I might have sent you away with joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre; and did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters? Now you have done foolishly. 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 speak either good or bad to Jacob.’ Now you have indeed gone away because you longed greatly for your father’s house; but why did you steal my gods?” Then Jacob replied to Laban, “Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. The one with whom you find your gods shall not live; in the presence of our kinsmen point out what is yours among my belongings and take it for yourself.” For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.

So Laban went into Jacob’s tent and into Leah’s tent and into the tent of the two maids, but he did not find them. Then he went out of Leah’s tent and entered Rachel’s tent. Now Rachel had taken the household idols and put them in the camel’s saddle, and she sat on them. And Laban felt through all the tent but did not find them. She said to her father, “Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is upon me” So he searched but did not find the household idols. (Genesis 31:22-35)

When Jacob fled Haran, he set his sights on the hill country of Gilead, east of Canaan (Genesis 31:21). He is some 300 miles from Haran and only a few miles from Canaan when Laban catches up to him. From the hill country of Gilead, he’s close enough to see the land of Canaan, which the Lord promised to him and his descendants. He’s close enough to touch his dream of freedom, but the 20-year nightmare reaches out and pulls his hand back at the last minute.

Unbeknownst to Jacob, God had warned Laban in a dream; the idiom involving not speaking to someone “either good or bad” means to bring no harm on the individual (Genesis 24:50, 2 Samuel 13:22). The Lord is intervening to prepare the way for Jacob’s return.

Tension builds as the two men camp next to each other in the hill country. Will there be war? Will Laban bring Jacob back to Haran? Or will Laban obey the Lord and leave Jacob be?

Every sentence in Laban’s complaint up to verse 29 reveals his hypocrisy. Laban says to Jacob, “What have you done ... ?” echoing Jacob’s words to Laban when Laban substituted Leah for Rachel (Genesis 29:25). Laban accuses Jacob of carrying away his daughters like “captives of the sword,” but Laban had held his daughters and Jacob captive and at this time threatens force (Genesis 31:14-16). Laban accuses Jacob of deceiving him, but Laban made a habit of deceiving Jacob. Laban intimates that he would have sent Jacob away with a party, but the last party Laban threw for Jacob resulted in Jacob’s captivity (Genesis 29:22). Laban complains that Jacob did not allow him to kiss his family, but such a gesture on Laban’s part would have been a hollow one, for he viewed his daughters as commodities.

Laban would very much enjoy doing to Jacob everything that Jacob has done to him. Laban accuses Jacob of acting foolishly, but Laban is the one who is beginning to look foolish.

Finally, Laban brings his dream out in the open. He claims he has the power to harm Jacob, but he yields to the Lord, whose greater power he has come to acknowledge. After recognizing the Lord, Laban appears somewhat sympathetic, acknowledging that Jacob longed to return to his father’s house. He even arrives at something that has the appearance of a legitimate complaint—the theft of his idols.

The verb translated “steal” in verse 30 opens and closes Laban’s complaint. Literally, Laban in verse 26 said to Jacob that “you stole my heart” by carrying off the women.

Jacob responds to the accusations that he stole Laban's daughters and stole the idols. First, Jacob says he left with his wives without telling Laban for fear that Laban would take his daughters "by force." Second, Jacob knows he didn't take the idols and invites Laban to go through his belongings. In fact, Jacob is so certain that Laban won't find the idols that he invokes the death penalty for anyone found in possession of the idols.

The narrator informs us that Jacob was unaware that Rachel had stolen the idols. Jacob, the master of deceit, is deceived by his wife. He had worked seven years for Rachel. He was lured into 20 years of servitude by his love for her. Now Jacob, because of his rashness, is in danger of losing her, though he does not know it.

As readers, we know more than either Laban or Jacob and are thus drawn into the story, anxious about the outcome. The tension builds as Laban rifles through Jacob's tent, Leah's tent and the tents of the two maids. Finally, he enters Rachel's tent. Only now are we informed where Rachel had been keeping the idols. She had put them in the saddle of her camel and was sitting on them.

The search through Rachel's tent is reported as being more painstaking. Laban "felt" through everything. Years earlier, Isaac "felt" Jacob, but Jacob succeeded in deceiving his father (Genesis 27:22). Now Rachel is deceiving her father, who is feeling for the truth.

Rachel remains seated on the camel, concealing the idols and claiming that she can't get down because she's having her period. The story makes a laughingstock of Laban's "gods." First, they are stolen. Second, they are impotent to make themselves known. Third, in being relegated to the status of a sanitary napkin, they are desecrated.

The God that Jacob is coming to know can't be stolen, for there is no image of him to steal (Exodus 20:4). He makes himself known, both in judgment and in salvation (Exodus 6:7). People "find" him when they "search" for him with all their hearts (Jeremiah 29:13). No matter how men and women respond to him, he remains holy.

Three times the narrator tells us that Laban "did not find" the idols. Laban comes off as utterly foolish, his gods as utterly impotent.

Haunted by the past

Even if we manage to extricate ourselves from the Labans of this world, an uncertain future awaits us. We wonder: Will something, or someone, from our past come back to haunt us? Will the nightmare reach out and pull our hand back at the last minute? Will some hole in our resume, or some mistake or some reference from a hypocritical employer catch up to us? Will someone else's mistake under our watch, like Rachel's theft of the idols, taint us? Will our own rash promises do us in? We feel the tension of the Jacob story in our own lives as we wonder what will happen.

Earlier this month the past came back to bite former New York Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik, who was nominated by President Bush as secretary of homeland security. He withdrew his name from consideration because of the questionable immigration status of a former household employee. Numerous other allegations against him also surfaced.

Forces outside your control—be they capricious employers or the fluctuating economy—seem to dictate your destiny. The Lord, however, has been intervening in the affairs of your life, perhaps without your awareness. That means that the Labans of this world, contrary to appearances, don't have the upper

hand. God has the upper hand. He has the only hand that matters, and he raises up and overthrows the Labans to accomplish his purposes in your life. God even, as in this story, overcomes the mistakes of close associates and our own rash decisions to get us where he wants us, even if we must live with certain consequences.

In the end, the Labans will come off as foolish and their gods as impotent.

Jacob's triumph over Laban

Then Jacob became angry and contended with Laban; and Jacob said to Laban, "What is my transgression? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me? Though you have felt through all my goods, what have you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two. These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten the rams of your flocks. That which was torn of beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself. You required it of my hand whether stolen by day or stolen by night. Thus I was: by day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. These twenty years I have been in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock, and you changed my wages ten times. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had not been for me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed God has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, so He rendered judgment last night." (Genesis 31:36-42)

Jacob, feeling vindicated by Laban's dream and by his failure to find the idols, vigorously defends himself. Jacob "became angry." Having little choice as Laban's "slave," Jacob has kept it all inside for 20 years. Now, sensing for the first time that he has the advantage, Jacob unloads.

First, Jacob says, Laban's accusation that he stole the idols has been proved false. Second, Jacob recounts his meticulous and above-and-beyond service in Laban's behalf. Custom dictated that a shepherd was not responsible for losses among his flock attributable to attacks from wild beasts, but Jacob nevertheless incurred such losses himself (Exodus 22:10-13). Jacob was also accountable for theft during the night, which was considered a less serious matter. Third, Jacob bore tremendous physical burdens in caring for Laban's flock. Fourth, Laban changed Jacob's wages. Jacob says, in so many words, "You're the one who has stolen from me."

Jacob's response culminates neither with a defense nor an accusation but with a theological observation that summarizes his 20 years in Haran. With verse 42, the Jacob-Laban story reaches its climax.

Jacob recognizes the Lord's faithfulness to the promise of Bethel to be with him (Genesis 28:15). The "fear of Isaac," a unique title for the Lord, evokes the worship that he deserves. It also relates to Jacob's encounter with the Lord at Bethel, where Jacob "was afraid" and said, "How awesome is this place" (Genesis 28:17). (The word translated "awesome" stems from the verb translated "was afraid.") In the current setting, Laban's "fear" of the Lord is preventing him harming Jacob.

Laban indicated that if Jacob had been forthright about his departure, he would have sent him away with "joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre." Apart from the Lord's intervention, Jacob says, Laban would have sent him away "empty-handed." The Mosaic Law demanded that Hebrew slaves be set free after six years and that they not be sent away "empty-handed" (Deuteronomy 15:12-13). Because God has been for him, Jacob did not leave Haran empty-handed.

God, in helping Jacob become prosperous in Haran, had told him in a dream that he had "seen all that

Laban has been doing to you” (Genesis 31:12). Jacob now acknowledges that God has “seen my affliction and the toil of my hands” and that he has responded not only by helping him become prosperous but by rendering “judgment last night” in Laban’s dream.

In surveying 20 years of affliction in Haran, Jacob says that God has seen him and acted on his behalf. He therefore understands affliction in a different way. He is able to say, “God has been for me.” For Jacob, as he finally extricates himself from Laban, that seems to be enough.

Letting the boss have it

Have you ever wanted to unload on a supervisor? Have you at least daydreamed about it? Have you rehearsed your speech in your mind? But you didn’t go through with it, did you? You held back for two reasons: first, because your supervisor can make things most unpleasant for you; and second, you think you’re supposed to be nice to people. But maybe one day, after the tables of power have turned, the first reason is no longer a factor and the second reason...well, you just forget about the second reason. You let him have it: “These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten the rams of your flocks. That which was torn of beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself. You required it of my hand whether stolen by day or stolen by night. Thus I was: by day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. These 20 years I have been in your house; I served you 14 years for your two daughters and six years for your flock, and you changed my wages ten times.”

Feels good, doesn’t it? Are you finished? If you are, you’re one verse short of a speech. What happened to verse 42? You failed to recognize the point of the Jacob-Laban story. You failed to recognize God’s sovereignty. Moreover, you failed to tell your supervisor about God’s sovereignty.

Here’s what you need to recognize: God has been faithful to you in the workplace, even if it’s been brutal for 20 years. You have not left empty-handed. Whether or not you have become wealthy, you have earned a paycheck. God has seen your affliction and the toil of your hands, and he has come to your aid. You can say, “It was hard, but God was with me.” And you can watch for the opportunity that God creates for you to tell your story to others.

The covenant of Mizpah

Then Laban replied to Jacob, “The daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne? So now come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.” Then Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. Jacob said to his kinsmen, “Gather stones.” So they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. Now Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me this day.” Therefore it was named Galeed, and Mizpah, for he said, “May the LORD watch between you and me when we are absent one from the other. If you mistreat my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no man is with us, see, God is witness between you and me.” Laban said to Jacob, “Behold this heap and behold the pillar which I have set between you and me. This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass by this heap to you for harm, and you will not pass by this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.” So Jacob swore by the fear of his father Isaac. Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his kinsmen to the meal; and they ate the meal and spent the night on the mountain. Early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons

and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place. (Genesis 31:43-55)

Laban ran down Jacob, but now Jacob—or, more accurately, the Lord—has backed Laban into a corner. Pitifully, Laban continues to assert that his daughters, the children and the animals belong to him but realizes he can't do anything about it. All he can do is propose a covenant, in this case a treaty of non-aggression, which is tantamount to acknowledging Jacob's superiority (Genesis 21:22-24, 26:26-31).

Jacob takes a stone and sets it up as a pillar, and he orders his kinsmen to gather other stones into a heap. The pillar and the heap memorialize the covenant, act as witnesses to it and serve as boundary markers. Significantly, stones re-enter the Jacob narrative.

When Jacob camped at Bethel, on his way to Haran, he took a stone and used it for a pillow. After his encounter with the Lord that night, Jacob “took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar” (Genesis 28:18). The Lord appeared to him in a hard place of transition, as he was leaving the Promised Land, and Jacob memorialized the event by converting the stone, which had represented the difficulty of his position, into a pillar that commemorated the Lord. When he returns to the Promised Land, he will once again set up a pillar (Genesis 35:14).

When Jacob arrived in Haran after a difficult journey, he removed a large stone from a well in order to make time with Rachel (Genesis 29:10). Although by all appearances the Lord had led Jacob safely to Haran and to Rachel, Jacob neither acknowledged the Lord nor converted the stone into a pillar.

Haran was every bit the difficult place that Bethel was—and more so, because it lasted 20 years, not just one night. It also deserved a pillar that memorialized the Lord's presence. Jacob missed the opportunity to recognize the Lord at the beginning of his sojourn in Haran. Now, on the verge of returning to the Promised Land, and having seen that the Lord has been with him in his conflict with Laban, Jacob once again takes a stone and sets it up as a pillar.

Laban and Jacob have the same name for the place, Jegar-sahadutha and Galeed, which mean “heap of witness” in Aramaic and Hebrew, respectively. Another name, “Mizpah,” is attached to the place. It is a play on the word “watch,” which features prominently in Laban's appeal that the Lord will monitor the agreement: “May the Lord watch between you and me when we are absent from one another.” Of course, the Lord has been watching all along, and he has ruled in favor of Jacob.

Laban warns Jacob against mistreating his daughters or taking additional wives, which would have diluted their and their children's inheritance. Once again, Laban comes off as a hypocrite, for he mistreated his daughters and forced Jacob to take two wives (Genesis 31:14-16, 29:27).

Laban, a polytheist, most likely is invoking a multitude of gods. The word used for “god” (*elohim*) can be singular or plural. In this case, it's most likely plural. Laban mentions the gods of Abraham and the gods of Nahor, which are further identified as gods of their fathers (before Abraham entered into covenant with the Lord, he and his father, Terah, most likely worshiped pagan gods). Jacob, on the other hand, swears by only one God, the God of Abraham, who is once again identified as the fear of Isaac.

For Jacob, who left the land of Canaan with a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the Lord, there is now only one God: the God of his father.

The two men consecrate the covenant with a traditional sacrificial meal.

As Jacob was leaving the Promised Land, he “spent the night” alone in Bethel, encountered the Lord in a dream and set up a pillar the next day (Genesis 28:11, 18). Twenty years later, near the end of his return trip, he sets up a pillar and spends the night just outside the Promised Land, this time with a family. A lonely man on the run, with no apparent future, returns as the patriarch of the family that will bless all nations.

Laban kisses and blesses his daughters and grandchildren, as tradition called for, but nothing in the narrative would lead us to believe these gestures carry any meaning for him. Just as Jacob “arose” to leave Laban, Laban arises to leave Jacob (Genesis 31:17). When Rachel bore Joseph, Jacob wanted to return to his own “place,” his own country. Laban, who detained Jacob for another six years, now returns to “his place.” Jacob’s 20 years of exile have come to an end.

Remembering God’s faithfulness

Your workplace, like Jacob’s Haran, deserves a pillar. At first, like Jacob, you didn’t think so. God was there, but you didn’t see him. At first, you thought you could push all the stones out of the way and get what you wanted. At some point, you came up against a Laban-sized stone that wouldn’t budge. When you needed God to be there, you saw that he was there. Your workplace deserves at least a mental memorial to God’s presence.

Employers may swear by a multitude of gods, with the almighty dollar leading the pantheon. From their perspective, anything that serves those gods is accepted without question. We may enter the workplace, like Jacob, with a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the Lord, but as he reveals himself to us and acts on our behalf, we know that for us there is but one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We swear allegiance to him and him alone.

As we do so, we have something to offer the world, a new perspective and a new way of working that places Jesus Christ at the center of what we do.

God is for us

This story tells us that God is with us and for us in the workplace. It also reminds us of Paul’s words in Romans 8:31-39: “If God is for us, who is against us?” It does not matter whether Laban is against us, for nothing “shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

You are a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, and when you go to work, even if you’re working for Laban, you’re working for Jesus. Therefore, God is watching over you to vindicate you in the end. You will not leave this place empty-handed; you’ll leave with a faith more precious than gold, which, though tested by the workplace, will be honored by God (1 Peter 1:7). And you will inherit the entire new creation, where, in the imagery of Revelation 21, the streets are paved with the gold that this world values.

Today it may seem that you’re working for Laban, even though in reality you’re working for Jesus. One day, there will be no confusion. Laban will return to his place, and you will arise to serve your Lord in the new and better place.

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