

I HAVE LOVED JACOB

by

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CHAPTER FOUR

LIFE WITH UNCLE LABAN

TWENTY years Jacob slaved for Laban.

Again have his detractors spared no vituperation in their misrepresentations of his experiences and sufferings. For example, here is how one Bible expositor approaches this event.

“Jacob reaches the land of his kindred. He hires to Laban, his uncle. This shrewd and sharp trader meets his match. The man who is always trying to get the better of other people will sometime find his match. Laban was a kind and congenial fellow to work for, but he would fleece you of your last penny. When Jacob met Laban, Greek had met Greek.”

When these vilifiers speak of Jacob’s relations with Laban, their “righteous indignation” reaches its loftiest heights. Utterly ignoring all Biblical facts, they excoriate him as an unprincipled schemer who took an unscrupulous advantage of his so-called trusting and confiding uncle, and cheated him out of a lot of his property.

If they will use as much time in careful and intelligent Bible study as they use in sinful fault finding, they will not let their fertile indignation carry them beyond the boundaries of the realm of truth; for the incontrovertible facts are against them.

“It was little which thou hadst before I came, and it is now increased into a multitude; and the Lord hath blessed thee since my coming.” Thus spoke Jacob to Laban (Genesis 30:30) and every word he said was true. And Laban himself knew it to be the truth; for he made the open confession that he had been prospered only because God had blessed him, *for Jacob’s sake*. Listen to Laban’s testimony, **“I have learned by experience that the Lord hath blessed me for thy sake”** (Genesis 30:27). What a startling admission, and what an unanswerable rebuke to those who even now seek to defame Jacob and make him out a blackguard of the most despicable character!

If you think that the life of a shepherd is a sinecure, and all the shepherd has to do is to play his flute while he idles on some grassy knoll under the shade of an old apple tree, you have much to learn. Hughie Call, in her book, *The Golden Fleece*, gives us a poignant insight into the life of a herdsman on the western hills of our own America. With the permission of her publishers, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, we are privileged to quote a few paragraphs:

I never think of the lines of the nursery rhyme, Leave them alone and they'll come home Wagging their tails behind them without smiling. Lost sheep seldom come home, and if they do it's an accident. You go after them, summer or winter. You flounder through snowdrifts, on horseback and on foot. You freeze your hands and feet, but you dare not turn back. Each hour's delay decreases your chance of finding the strays alive. It's a ten-to-one bet that the coyotes, in any case, will prove better hunters.

The word shepherd has always been a synonym of loyalty—which may account for the fact that in no other business is a man of the herder's caliber entrusted with assets representing so great an amount of capital. The herder is solely responsible for the welfare of approximately 1800 head of sheep. An hour's neglect or carelessness on his part could turn the balance from profit to loss on the entire year's operation, and nobody knows it so well as he. There are few sacrifices the herder would not make to keep his flock intact.

We have had herders who went to heartbreaking lengths to stay with their sheep. One, who shot himself accidentally while cleaning a gun, could have reached the ranch in an hour had he deserted his herd to do so. Instead, he drove his flock in and arrived at the ranch four hours later, on the verge of collapse from loss of blood. We rushed him to the nearest hospital, and when he had had a blood transfusion Tom asked him how he managed to travel that far. The herder told him quite cheerfully that he had crawled the last half-mile. And he told the truth. We found his loyalty patterned in a crimson ribbon on the snow along the trail.

If men are rewarded in the Hereafter for what they endure on earth, the herder has something to look forward to. Shepherding is the hardest, most harrowing work on earth. It is a year-round, 24-hour job.

In spring and summer there is the menace of noxious weeds—death camas, lupine, larkspur and loco weed. They spring up in different places every year, and the herder must be able to recognize them a jump ahead of the sheep and herd them in another direction. Death camas and lupine will poison and kill. Larkspur is fatal to young lambs. The loco weed drives sheep crazy. Once they get a taste of it, they will trace it down from season to season with the zeal and stealth of a drug addict. It has the most astonishing effect. A ewe will leap into the air and begin to race round and round in a circle. Unless she is captured and hobbled she will continue to run in circles until she dies from exhaustion. You can imagine a herder's dilemma should he find himself with a hundred locoed ewes on his hands.

Of all calamities in the sheep country, a pile-up is the most dreaded. It strikes with the speed and fatality of a bolt of lightning. The lead sheep will stumble or come head-long against some obstruction which cannot be got over quickly—a ledge, a steep hollow or a fence. The oncoming herd, unable to stop because of pressure from behind, climb up and up, trampling the first layer of sheep to the ground—the next layer and the next, until there is a writhing mountain of wool.

Sometimes as many as three to five hundred sheep perish from suffocation in a few moments. If the herder is on hand, half the sheep involved may be saved. He must drag them off bodily, so the outcome of a pile-up depends wholly upon his speed and dexterity. Should strayed sheep pile up, less than ten per cent may come out alive.

Seven long years Jacob slaved for Laban, on the promise he would have Rachel to wife. Then what happened? This shrewd and suave paragon of an uncle cheated Jacob and substituted Leah at the wedding; he claimed that the customs of the country did not sanction the marriage of the younger before the elder. What a piece of chicanery! Why did he not tell this to Jacob at the beginning, if he were the honest man that his defenders claim he was? Thus it was that he shrewdly disposed of his two daughters, and in addition, got fourteen years of hard labor from the unsuspecting Jacob who was such a schemer!

“The Ringstraked, The Speckled and The Spotted”
Genesis 30:35

And now Jacob tells Laban, “For fourteen years I have slaved for you, but now I have nothing for myself. You have gotten rich, you are increased with cattle, with land, with goods, and I have nothing. Isn’t it about time that I should begin to provide for my wives, for my own children?” And so a bargain was made; from that time on whatever cattle would be born which were ringstraked, spotted, speckled, would belong to Jacob; whatever would be born not speckled and not spotted would belong to Laban. And Laban enthused to the proposition, **“Behold, I would it might be according to thy word!”**

And that day Laban removed from the flocks under Jacob’s care, all the cattle, all the goats, that were spotted or speckled or ringstraked, and left only stock of solid color. Laban knew the law of husbandry, that a straight colored goat would produce a straight colored kid, and so he took far away, three days’ journey, all the speckled and spotted of the flock, to make doubly sure that there would be no mixture of the breeds. In other words, Laban was going to make sure once more that Jacob should be cheated out of his rightful reward for his labors of these many years; and by this very practice he was actually planning and wishing in his heart that Jacob should have nothing!

But here God invokes a higher law! The Angel of the Lord told Jacob to use the rods, to test his faith and obedience. And so Jacob took sticks from the trees and peeled them like peppermint sticks.

These rods he laid down in the troughs, so when the cattle came to drink they would gaze upon these striped sticks. But Laban could laugh at him, because Laban knew that the science of husbandry had proven that the color of the animals was determined by heredity and not by environment. But God had a law superior to the science of husbandry, and we read a remarkable statement in Genesis 30:39:

“The flocks conceived before the rods, and brought forth cattle ringstraked, speckled and spotted!”

We read again in Genesis 31:11-12:

“The angel of God spake unto me in a dream, saying, **“Jacob: . . . Lift up now thine eyes and see, all the rams which leap upon the cattle are ringstraked, speckled and grisled: for I have seen all that Laban doeth unto thee.”**

And so instead of Jacob cheating Laban as has been too many times charged by the superficial and the vindictive, it required God's assistance to prevent Laban from sending him home empty-handed! And let us be honest enough to follow the implication to its conclusion: if Jacob was a cheater, then he had God for his partner!

Read Jacob's magnificent defense as he thundered the words at Laban, when Laban in his heathenish greed accused Jacob of treachery. Is there anywhere a finer piece of dramatic literature than you will read in these verses of Genesis 31:38-42:

“This twenty years have I been with thee; thy ewes and thy she goats have not cast their young, and the rams of thy flock have I not eaten. That which was torn of beasts I brought not unto thee; I bare the loss of it; of my hand didst thou require it, whether stolen by day, or stolen by night. Thus I was; in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from my eyes, Thus have I been twenty years in thy house. I served thee fourteen years for thy two daughters, and six years for thy cattle; and thou hast changed my wages ten times. Except the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had been with, me, surely thou hadst sent me away now empty. God hast seen mine affliction and the labour of my hands, and rebuked thee yesternight.”

After Laban had gouged Jacob many times, the Lord led Jacob to strike a bargain that would recoil upon Laban's own head. And when the bargain was working out just as God had planned it, the Angel of God appeared to Jacob and said to him, **“Lift up thine eyes, and see, all the rams which leap upon the cattle are ringstraked, speckled, and grisled: for I have seen all that Laban doeth unto thee.”**

A Heathen Blasphemer

Now I submit that if Jacob's bargain with Laban was fraudulent, then it was immoral for God to send His angel not only to encourage Jacob but to approve of what he had done! After all, what did God owe Laban? Who was Laban? Only a heathen idol worshipper. Is there not really a moral principle involved here, and indeed in all of Jacob's experiences, which expositors have overlooked? This principle is exemplified many times in the history of God's dealing with Israel. For instance, when the Israelites were delivered out of the hands of the Egyptians, it was with God's direct knowledge and consent, that they **“spoiled the Egyptians!”** Who are we to measure God by our moral yardsticks?

The author was supply preacher one Lord's Day in a small city in the oil fields district of Ohio. He came to the church early and found a Men's Bible Class in session, which he joined. The teacher of the Class turned to me and stated that they had been discussing Jacob, and asked my opinion as to Jacob's character. The particular point was this transaction with Laban. I said to the teacher, “All about us in this state there are farms which are potential oil wells. Some of the larger oil companies have adopted the practice of sending engineers to make tests on some of these farm lands without the knowledge of the farmers. Whenever the engineers report that a farm has oil possibilities, the Company sends an agent to the farmer and offers him a price for his farm, let us say \$10,000.

“The agent does not tell the farmer that underground there may be oil worth a million. The farmer, anxious to get the \$10,000, agrees to the sale. Has the oil company cheated the farmer?”

The men laughed, and I was puzzled to know the reason. The teacher did not answer my question. The bell rang for the class to dismiss, and then I inquired from one of the men as to the reason for the laughter.

He looked at me with surprise, and said, “Don’t you know? Mr. B., our teacher, is one of the paid agents of the Oil Company, whose business it is to go around and buy farms just exactly as you have been telling it!”

Thus I had unwittingly exposed the inconsistency of this teacher. Is it not true even in the present day that every business transaction entered into by Christian businessmen has in it the element of uncertainty? One buys, because he thinks values are going up. Another sells because he thinks the price is high enough. Who is right?

You have heard that the railroad company is going to build a new depot in a different part of town. You hurry over to that part of town and you proceed to buy some property close by to where you think the depot is going to be set up. You do this because you expect that the property will enhance in value just as soon as the public knows that this depot is going to be built. You do not tell the owner of the land that you happen to know that there is going to be a new railroad station built near his property; he knows nothing about it. Are you cheating him? Of course there is also the bare possibility that the information which you received might prove to be false. In such a case your purchase of the land might involve you in heavy loss. If so, would the seller be cheating you? Is it a moral obligation that you must tell all that you know when you are undertaking a business transaction?

But having said all of the above, just so as to doubly prove our argument, we still fall back on what we believe to be clearly evident in the Scripture text itself, and that is that Jacob knew nothing of the laws of husbandry; that instead of his doing any conniving or scheming, it was God Himself Who told Jacob what to do, and it was God Who worked the miracle of causing the cattle to bring forth young that were ringstraked, speckled, and spotted.

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