STUDY QUESTIONS
Lesson 32 — Genesis 31:1–55
Jacob flees from Esau

Monday

1. What do the words of Laban’s sons (vs. 1) imply about Jacob’s character?

2. Why were Laban’s sons angry at Jacob? Was their anger justified?

Tuesday

3. Why would Jacob have called Leah and Rachel away from their tents to the field for a conference? What does this imply about their servants?

4. What does verse 9 teach about a believer’s understanding of how events unfold? Did Jacob think of God as “too busy” to supervise his fortunes?
Wednesday

5. Jacob received clear guidance from God in a dream (vs. 11). Should believers be guided in this same way? Why or why not?

6. Does God see our afflictions even before He does anything to change them (vs. 12)? What does this verse have to say about God’s timing?

Thursday

7. What do you think were Rachel’s intentions in stealing her father’s household idols (vs. 19)? Was she necessarily thinking of worshiping them? If not, what was her goal?

8. Why do you think Jacob left Padan Aram without telling Laban?

9. Do you believe Laban was being truthful in vs. 27 about his kind intentions?
Friday

10. Is Jacob completely innocent in the matter of the “birthright sale”? Defend your answer.

11. What is the unintended humor in verse 30? Why didn’t Laban see it?

Saturday

12. Is verse 49 a fond wish of affection between relatives? If not, what is it?
INTRODUCTION
Here God introduces “the children of Israel.” They are born amid deception, intrigue, hatred, and envy. The chapter is an excellent brief for God’s original and perfect design: one man, one woman, and an exclusive relationship.

COMMENTARY
30:1. Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister, and said to Jacob, Give me children, or else I die! Like many an unwise spouse, Jacob discovers that Rachel is not the unmitigated joy he expected her to be. After watching her sister present Jacob with four fine sons, her jealousy causes her to lash out against Jacob, demanding that he give her children. Since it was clear that Jacob was anything but infertile, he finds her attitude offensive and immature, reckoning that childbearing is a matter that is firmly in God’s hands. While marriage remains a special gift from God to the human race, one of its benefits lies in its ability to surface hidden flaws in people. God never designed mates to serve as substitutes for Himself. No human can meet all our spiritual and emotional needs. God intends that we learn this lesson before we are married, but Rachel had not learned it yet.

30:2. Jacob's anger was aroused against Rachel, and he said, Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb? Jacob, who has proven no spiritual giant at this point in his life, at least knows his limits. It is clear that he is feeling an unreasonable pressure coming from the direction of Rachel, and he, perhaps intemperately but with justification, points her in the proper direction.

30:3. Rachel issues a proposition: Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, and she will bear a child on my knees, that I also may have children by her. She is so desperate to become a mother that she invokes the practice of giving her maid to her husband. Just as Sarah had done, she longs to see a child born from the union that would make her (legally, at least) a mother. Like Sarah, Rachel wants to give God a helping hand. If he can’t make her pregnant the ordinary way, she will make it easy for Him. Such thoughts will become as futile in her life as they were in Sarah’s. (On my knees is a figure of speech meaning, “in my behalf.” It represents adoption through a proxy mother, and was an estab-
lished legal custom in the ancient Near East. It at least suggests Rachel’s presence at the birth.)

30:4–6. Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Then Rachel said, God has judged my case; and He has also heard my voice and given me a son. Therefore she called his name Dan. When Bilhah soon becomes pregnant, Rachel feels vindicated by her proposal. She names her son Dan, meaning “judgment, vindication.” In Hebrew Scripture, judgment is typically thought of in terms of civil rather than criminal cases. The plaintiff, in this case Rachel, had appealed to God for a verdict favoring her petition for a child.

30:7–8. Rachel’s maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, With great wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and indeed I have prevailed. So she called his name Naphtali. This arrangement is continued, and Rachel is soon able to claim a second son through Bilhah, a boy that Rachel names Naphtali, “wrestlings, struggles.” The child marks a victory over Leah in their rivalry for Jacob’s attention. Rachel sees life as a struggle that must be won at the expense of others. This, of course, is a recipe for disaster. One of life’s most basic lessons is that of contentment. God desires that we recognize one bedrock fact: once a person has a knowledge of God, anything else acquired is secondary. The author of Hebrews would later stress this point in his letter: “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (13:5).

30:9–11. When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took Zilpah her maid and gave her to Jacob as wife. And Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, A troop comes! So she called his name Gad. Rachel’s joy proves somewhat premature, however, for Leah soon adopts Rachel’s strategy and offers Jacob her maidservant Zilpah as a wife. The young servant bears Jacob another son whom Leah, the legal mother, names Gad, a word meaning “luck.” (Her interjection in vs. 11 should probably be translated, “What good fortune!” Leah considers the birth of this child to be a stroke of good luck for her, since it seemed to indicate that Yahweh is still smiling on her. This does not mean that Leah had abandoned a belief in the sovereign power of Yahweh and saw the world as a place that depended entirely on good and bad luck. For believers, “fortune” is not absolute. It merely describes (from a human point of view) the favorable circumstances that result from God’s work behind the scenes. Even Jesus was not reluc-
tant to say, “By chance a certain priest was going down on that road” (Luke 10:31).

30:12–13. Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. Then Leah said, I am happy, for the daughters will call me blessed. So she called his name Asher. Leah’s run of good fortune continues when God quickens Zilpah’s womb a second time. The new son Leah named Asher, “happy,” to reflect her joyous condition.

30:14. Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes. At this point, Jacob is the father of eight sons. He is also the husband of two not entirely happy wives, in spite of Leah’s claims. When Reuben harvests some mandrake plants and brings them to Leah, Rachel asks for some. These plants were widely believed to be an aphrodisiac (Aphrodite, goddess of love in Greek mythology, was known as ‘the Lady of the Mandrake’). It is not entirely clear in the context whether these plants were intended to elevate the libido of Jacob or Rachel (or both).

30:15. Leah said to her, Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son’s mandrakes also? What is clear is that Leah still finds Rachel a troublesome rival and resents her deeply. (She is less concerned about Bilhah and Zilpah. They are given the honorific title wife (vs 4), but everybody understands that they hold a secondary status as concubines. Their sons are Jacob’s heirs only because they are the legal children of Rachel and Leah.)

Rachel said, Therefore he will lie with you tonight for your son’s mandrakes. Rachel pours oil on the ruffled waters of Leah’s emotions when she grants her the privilege of having Jacob sleep with her for the evening. Whether Rachel acted as general referee in such matters, or whether Jacob slept with Rachel routinely is not clear. No one seems to have thought of consulting Jacob concerning the matter. This family takes pleasure in bartering each other away at every opportunity. They do not show much regard for each other.

30:16. When Jacob came out of the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, You must come in to me, for I have surely hired you with my son’s mandrakes. And he lay with her that night. Leah, having paid her fee, invites Jacob into her tent as he returns home from the day’s labors. She claims her prerogative on the basis of her sale of the mandrakes to Rachel. And though Rachel possesses the mandrakes, it is Leah who becomes pregnant—not once, but twice.
30:17–18. In answer to her prayers, Leah is enabled by God to conceive another son for Jacob. This one—Jacob’s ninth and her fifth—she names Issachar, “wages,” since she had “hired” his father. She connects her pregnancy with the virtuous act of giving her maidservant to Jacob.

30:19–22. Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son. And Leah said, God has endowed me with a good endowment; now my husband will dwell with me, because I have borne him six sons. So she called his name Zebulun. Her sixth child she names Zebulon, “dwelling,” since she expects that bearing Jacob so many sons will encourage him to leave Rachel’s tent and move in with her. Her last child turns out to be a girl, Dinah, who will figure prominently in the narrative in Genesis 34.

30:22–24. Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. And she conceived and bore a son, and said, God has taken away my reproach. At last, after ten sons and one daughter were born to her husband’s other wives, God exhibits his compassion upon Rachel. In answer to her prayers (v. 22) she becomes pregnant and delivers a son named Joseph. So she called his name Joseph, and said, The Lord shall add to me another son. Better, “May the Lord add to me another son.” In this she continues to exhibit a measure of immaturity, for it is discontent rather than thanksgiving that dominates her. She wants to catch up with Leah and deliver more sons to her husband. Rachel looks at the world through a very self-centered lens.

30:25–26. And it came to pass, when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me go; for you know my service which I have done for you. With eleven sons, one daughter, and 20 years of labor behind him (cf. 31:38), Jacob at last decides to return to Canaan. He has heard nothing from home that would indicate that a return is safe, but his experience with Laban may have convinced him to take his chances with Esau! At least now, in view of his increasing prosperity, he can offer his brother gifts of appeasement.

30:27–28. And Laban said to him, Please stay, if I have found favor in your eyes, for I have learned by experience that the Lord has blessed me for your sake. Then he said, “Name me your wages, and I will give it.” Laban is not ready to part with him, however, and invites Jacob to name his price for staying in Paddan Aram. When Laban says, “I have learned by experience,” he uses a form that probably should
be translated, “I have learned by
divination.” Divination was an oc-
cult practice that involved the in-
terpreting of omens, sometimes
involving the use of animal sacri-
fices (see Ezek. 21:21). All such
behavior God would later forbid
to the nation Israel (Lev. 19:26;
Deut. 18:10). Whether Laban re-
fers to some such practice or
merely means, “I figured this out,”
is hard to determine. If La-
ban did participate in divination it
may reflect his limited knowledge
of Yahweh’s character. At any
rate, he has decided that his
prosperity has resulted from Ja-
cob’s presence with his family.
His offer to raise Jacob’s wages is
suspicious. A company that
raises a person’s salary only upon
a threat of resignation reveals
that they have been taking ad-
vantage of their employee all
along.

30:29–30. The Lord has blessed
you since my coming. And now,
when shall I also provide for my
own house?” Jacob is impatient to
leave. He wants to live his own
life, and by this time he has
(more or less) concluded that his
uncle is a crook. There is more
yet to discover, however.

30:31–32. Jacob said, You shall
not give me anything. If you will
do this thing for me, I will again
feed and keep your flocks: Let
me pass through all your flock
today, removing from there all
the speckled... and the spotted
and speckled among the goats;
and these shall be my wages.
Jacob agrees to stay, accepting as
his wages the speckled and spot-
ted sheep and goats of Laban’s
flocks. This would have, in effect,
allowed God to judge between
Laban and Jacob when it came to
a fair wage. Jacob has at last
come to the point where he has
learned a modicum of trust in
God. Unfortunately, Laban’s de-
ceit was going to intervene again.

30:33. So my righteousness will
answer for me in time to come,
when the subject of my wages
comes before you: every one that
is not speckled and spotted
among the goats, and brown
among the lambs, will be consid-
ered stolen, if it is with me. Jacob
had become enough of a shep-
herd to know that unspotted
rams plus unspotted ewes would
yield unspotted offspring. He was
content to trust God to make his
flocks increase, and if unspotted
animals were discovered there, it
would show that Jacob had stolen
it. Since he was an honest man,
this caused him no discomfort.
Laban, on the other hand, was
anything but honest.

30:34. Laban said, Oh, that it
were according to your word!
This NKJV rendering strongly sug-
gests that Laban is strongly sug-
gest ing dishonest intentions on
the part of Jacob: “I wish I could
count on you to do that very
thing!” However, most recent
versions take the Hebrew to be a
statement of agreement: “Good!
Let it be according to your word.” This makes more sense in the context. Laban is happy to agree with Jacob’s idea. His fertile and devious mind already has a plan going, a plan that will keep Jacob poor and under Laban’s thumb.

30:35–36. The spotted and speckled animals Laban carefully and dishonestly segregated from the flock and removed them away from Jacob.

30:37–40. The patriarch, undeterred by behavior he had no doubt come to expect from his uncle, attempted to increase the spotted animals by prenatal manipulation. He peeled bark away from trees near the watering troughs. Thus he tries via prenatal influence to increase the percentage of speckled and spotted animals in his own flocks. This action has precisely the same effectiveness as Rachel’s mandrakes—which is to say, none at all. Jacob’s attempts at “genetic engineering” are merely recorded, not approved.

God is the one who increases the speckled animals and blesses Jacob, a fact that he will later acknowledge (31:9). Again, we see Jacob being the manipulator. He still has not learned that God can be trusted to keep His promises.

30:40–43. Moses records the net outcome of Jacob’s dealings with Laban: Thus the man became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks, female and male servants, and camels and donkeys. In spite of the best that Jacob can do and the worst that Laban can do, Jacob continues to prosper. The time is soon coming, however, when Jacob will want to get away from Laban and get on with his life.