

Outwitting A Cheat : The story of Jacob & Laban

The 'official' telling of this story:

Jacob's Flocks Increase

Genesis 30 : 25-43 NIV

²⁵ After Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Send me on my way so I can go back to my own homeland. ²⁶ Give me my wives and children, for whom I have served you, and I will be on my way. You know how much work I've done for you."

²⁷ But Laban said to him, "If I have found favour in your eyes, please stay. I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me because of you." ²⁸ He added, "Name your wages, and I will pay them."

²⁹ Jacob said to him, "You know how I have worked for you and how your livestock has fared under my care. ³⁰ The little you had before I came has increased greatly, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I have been. But now, when may I do something for my own household?"

³¹ "What shall I give you?" Laban asked. "Don't give me anything," Jacob replied. "But if you will do this one thing for me, I will go on tending your flocks and watching over them: ³² Let me go through all your flocks today and remove from them every speckled or spotted sheep, every dark-coloured lamb and every spotted or speckled goat. They will be my wages. ³³ And my honesty will testify for me in the future, whenever you check on the wages you have paid me. Any goat in my possession that is not speckled or spotted, or any lamb that is not dark-coloured, will be considered stolen."

³⁴ "Agreed," said Laban. "Let it be as you have said." ³⁵ That same day he removed all the male goats that were streaked or spotted, and all the speckled or spotted female goats (all that had white on them) and all the dark-coloured lambs, and he placed them in the care of his sons. ³⁶ Then he put a three-day journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob continued to tend the rest of Laban's flocks.

³⁷ Jacob, however, took fresh-cut branches from poplar, almond and plane trees and made white stripes on them by peeling the bark and exposing the white inner wood of the branches. ³⁸ Then he placed the peeled branches in all the watering troughs, so that they would be directly in front of the flocks when they came to drink. When the flocks were in heat and came to drink, ³⁹ they mated in front of the branches. And they bore young that were streaked or speckled or spotted. ⁴⁰ Jacob set apart the young of the flock by themselves, but made the rest face the streaked and dark-coloured animals that belonged to Laban. Thus he made separate flocks for himself and did not put them with Laban's animals. ⁴¹ Whenever the stronger females were in heat, Jacob would place the branches in the troughs in front of the animals so they would mate near the branches, ⁴² but if the animals were weak, he would not place them there. So the weak animals went to Laban and the strong ones to Jacob. ⁴³ In this way the man grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks, and female and male servants, and camels and donkeys.

I have to be honest, I'm not sure that the NIV is very clear in some places, and it's difficult to know whose sheep are what colour and facing which direction, when you read this story for the first time. So I want to do something a bit unusual this morning, and have the same story read to us again, but this time slightly differently. Here's an alternative telling of the story:

Uncle Laban was getting grumpy in his old age.

"It's time for me to go back home," Jacob said to him one day.

"You only had a few sheep and goats before I got here, and now you have many, many more because God has been with me. He has prospered the work of my hands. So now, let me take my wives, and my children and go back home."

"You have served me well," Uncle Laban said. "Name your price, and I will pay it." But I think he had his fingers crossed behind his back when he said that!

Jacob said, "I don't want any of your money. I'll tell you what. Let me care for your flocks a little bit longer. I'll take every black lamb and every spotted or speckled goat and separate them from the rest. Let them be my wages."

"It's a deal," said Uncle Laban.

But that very same day, Uncle Laban told his sons to go through his flocks and take out all the black lambs and spotted or speckled goats! And then he had his sons take them far away.

He was trying to cheat Jacob. Only, he must have forgotten that when it came to cheating, Jacob was a master!

So Jacob stayed with Laban's flocks even though all the black lambs, spotted or speckled goats had already gone.

But God was watching over Jacob ... and Laban didn't stand a chance of cheating him!

Where Jacob got this next idea from, I'm not sure, but when he took Laban's flocks down to the watering place, he put tree branches in front of them, which he cut with a knife, so that they were spotted or speckled.

He turned the flock to face towards the branches. When the mother sheep and goats started having babies, all their babies were spotted or speckled. How it worked, I haven't a clue - except that God must have had a hand in it!

So Jacob took all the spotted or speckled babies, and set them apart from the rest.

Whenever the strong, healthy animals were due to have more babies, Jacob put the spotted or speckled tree branches in front of them again. But when the weak animals were due to have more babies, he took the tree branches away.

This way, all the strong healthy animals kept having spotted or speckled babies - and these belonged to Jacob. But all the plain coloured animals had babies that were puny and weak - and these belonged to Laban.

So Jacob's flock grew and grew.

Is that a bit clearer? I hope so! You know, growing up, of all the stories told about Jacob, I can't ever remember hearing this one in Sunday school, although that's perhaps less surprising when you realise that it's all about mating sheep and goats! It seems a pretty strange thing to be preaching on, but there's actually quite a lot here, once you scratch beneath the surface.

This story, really, can be divided into three sections. The first is **Jacob's thoughts of home**.

Jacob has faithfully served his time out with Laban, even a second apprenticeship, although he is now an old man, with a large family to provide for, and it's high time he set up for himself. Working for Laban has been hard. Jacob was short-changed, cheated in the first bargain they'd made; yet he still honestly performs his engagements. You see a good man, though he might swear to his own hurt, will not change. Though others may have deceived Jacob, this will never justify him deceiving them. The rule of leading a good Christian life is to do as we **would be** done by, not as we **are** done by. Jacob demonstrates this in abundance.

Jacob retains his affection for the land of Canaan, not only because it's the place he was born, (his father and mother were still there and he longed to see them), but because it was the land of promise; he could never think of settling here in Haran. Jacob had a large family to take with him, but no provision had yet been made for them. He had wives and children with Laban, but notice that he asks for nothing else; he doesn't ask for a portion of his wives or maintenance for some of his children. His request is simply **"Give me my wives and children, for whom I have served you, and I will be on my way"**. You see Jacob understood that those who trust in God, even if they have a big family but a small income, can cheerfully hope that God will provide for all of their needs.

The second section is **Laban asking Jacob to stay**.

In love to himself, not to Jacob or his wives or his children, Laban tries to persuade him to continue as chief shepherd: **"If I have found favour in your eyes, please stay"**. You know, even churlish, selfish men know how to speak good words when it suits them; if it serves their own ends. Laban knew that his stock had increased abundantly with Jacob's good management, and even admits this, with expressions of respect both to God and Jacob: **"I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me because of you"**. I'm not sure about divination, but there's a lot to be said for learning by experience.

Laban had seen exactly how successful Jacob was at the job, but his craftiness and covetous behaviour takes advantage of the plainness, honesty, and good-nature Jacob shows. Thinking that he'd already won Jacob over by his fancy speech, instead of making a generous offer and bidding high to retain his loyalty (which he ought to have done), Laban suggests that Jacob can name his own price. Big mistake! **"Name your wages"** he says. He knew Jacob would be modest and ask him for less than he could rightfully expect, but that was only the half of it.

The third section is **Jacob's response**, and that's where I want us to be spending most of our time this morning, looking at this in a bit more detail. I think there are some valuable lessons to be learned here.

Jacob replies very modestly, because he feels bound by a duty to take care of his own family. Instead of asking for money, he says to Laban **"now, when may I do something for my own household?"** Faith and charity, though excellent things, must never detract us from the importance of making provision for ourselves, and the support of our families. We, like Jacob, must trust in the Lord and do good, but also provide for our own families too.

Jacob is willing to trust his future to God, which he knows extends itself to the smallest things, even the colour of Laban's flocks; and he seems content just to have the sheep and goats of a certain colour ... speckled, spotted and brown, whichever of these may be born at any time in the future. This, he decides, will be the most effective way to prevent Laban short-changing him again, but it also protects him from being accused of any cheating himself.

Laban agrees to this deal because he only has a few animals that are speckled and spotted in the first place. They were much rarer than the rest. If he separates them from the flock that Jacob would still be tending for him (the rest were all one colour, either black or white), it's unlikely that there would ever be many speckled, spotted or brown offspring, so Laban thinks he's basically going to keep Jacob's services for next to nothing. All the speckled, spotted and

brown animals he's already got are separated and given to Laban's sons, then they're sent off to live somewhere else which we're told is three days' journey away. That's how cold, jealous and scheming Laban has become by this stage, and the reason he wants to make absolutely sure that none of them can mix with the rest of his flock. He doesn't want to give Jacob any kind of unfair advantage or additional benefit at all.

Laban of course, is also assuming, as you would, that if the remaining flock (all of one colour, either black or white) give birth to more young, these would normally be the same colour as the parents, and so Jacob will end up having to look after them for nothing too, meaning that he'll remain in poverty for the rest of his life. Jacob however, knows the God in whom he has trusted, and we'll soon see that he's made the best deal he could ever have struck with Laban. If he hadn't, I think it's fair to say that Laban would have continued to exploit him. We're also about to see that God blesses honest humble diligence, but those who are found to be unjust or unkind in their dealings with others, won't find God being the same way with them. God recompenses the injured, and is a good paymaster to all who commit their ways to him.

So what was Jacob's policy to make this deal far more advantageous than it was ever intended to be? Well, he takes branches off some of the trees, peels them, and then puts these in front of the animals when they come to be watered, thinking, by the power of imagination, that this might somehow cause their offspring to be born the same colour as the branches they are looking at. Odd though that may seem to us, actually, this custom was commonly used by the shepherds of Canaan, who earnestly coveted cattle of this kind of motley colour.

Lets give credit where credit's due - Jacob was a master of his trade, and not only industrious, but absolutely ingenious. He knew all its lawful arts and mysteries, all the tricks of the job - although nowadays, we obviously understand that putting branches in a watering trough won't affect the colour of newborn sheep or goats! Well, Jacob starts to build his flock of speckled and spotted animals, and as he does so, he begins set them aside, turning them to face the rest of the animals so that he can repeat the process all over again. Now however, they're not just looking at motley coloured tree branches, they're looking at the rest of his motley coloured sheep and goats too!

When Jacob realises that this plan is succeeding (and let's be clear - it's not by placing tree branches in the water trough, but through the special blessing of God upon it), he starts to use only the stronger animals, so that he's amassing a pedigree flock for himself, and leaving the weaker ones for Laban. The bible says about this enterprise, **"In this way the man grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks"** ... wow, hat's off to Jacob!

The success of Jacob's plan was never sufficient to justify his actions **IF** there was anything fraudulent or underhand about it, but there wasn't. Jacob did everything he did under divine instruction. If you want to know how I'm sure about that, you need to skip forward to Genesis 31 where Jacob recalls a dream God had given him, which was all about this. The story here is about the honest improvement of a fair bargain, which God wonderfully prospered, delivering justice to Jacob who had been wronged by Laban, and at the same time fulfilling the promises that had been made about him. So what can we learn from this story?

- When we do more than is expected of us, we please God.
- When we don't do what is expected of us, we reap what we sow.
- Those who are faithful in the little things DO get entrusted with more.
- In Jacob's success, we see the outpouring of Gods grace.
- In Laban's downfall, we see that without God, we are left with nothing.
- Sin will always be punished, but obedience will always be rewarded.
- Whatever happens in life, Gods will and purposes cannot be thwarted.