

Grudging God: Lessons from Genesis 31

“Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned.

Behold - the Judge is standing at the door!” - James 5:9

In 2014, as the ebola virus was causing illness throughout the nation of Guinea, word began to spread of a tribal healer in neighboring Sierra Leone who claimed to be able to heal the disease. Infected patients began crossing the border, seeking out the woman and her cure.

The healer then caught the ebola virus herself, and died on May 26, 2104.

The woman’s family and mourners then proceeded to wash the body and touch it during the burial, in accordance with local customs. As a result, according to an article in the *London Daily Mail*:

“The herbalist’s mourners fanned out across the rolling hills of the Kissi tribal chiefdoms, starting a chain reaction of infections, death, funerals .. .and more infections.”

Matters were made worse as the government enacted strict quarantines intended to stop the spread of the virus. Unfortunately, they also stopped commercial traffic, and thousands of citizens broke quarantine in an effort to find food once the shelves had gone bare - spreading the virus even further. As one medical official said:

“The ebola virus is deadly and unforgiving. The slightest mistake you make, you will get infected.”

365 people died of ebola in Sierra Leone in 2014.

In today’s passage, we read of a deadlier agent.

We see a disease that spreads almost immediately to those who are exposed to it, who then become willing carriers in bringing the infection to full bloom.

Jacob is the carrier of: The Grudge.

A grudge can lie dormant for years, building strength and waiting for an outlet.

A grudge looks for opportunities to partner up when others of its kind are around.

As we’ll see, a grudge can quickly lead a victim into a life-or-death situation.

All of which is avoidable - it doesn’t have to happen! And in examining today’s text, we’ll see the clues that show us the nature of the Grudge, and we’ll also find the ways to combat it in a Godly fashion.

I've highlighted three specific "symptoms" of this spiritual malady on your outline; read along with me on the right side as we see first how:

- Grudges blind us to - and reveal our discontent with - God's provision

Next, we'll see in our passage the ways in which:

- Grudges divide family and give excuse for open sin

And lastly, we see where its power resides as we discover how:

- Grudges are rooted in fear and a lack of faith, showing that we expect the worst

We're all susceptible, and the virus is all around us, so let's get right to our diagnosis as we discover the ways that:

1: Grudges blind us to - and reveal our discontent with - God's provision (v31:7 vs v30:43)

Jacob has been at it twenty years, and it's fair to say Uncle Laban hasn't been the most upstanding person when it comes to his business deals. Moreover, Laban's twists and turns

seem twice as deceitful when it's seen how he cheats his own nephew, a man he welcomed into his tent by saying:

"Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" (Gen 29:14)

Jacob sure has a laundry list of complaints against his uncle. Tricked out of the wife he labored seven years to have, he was then pressed into labor another seven years when Laban switched the brides on the wedding night. On top of that, now Jacob's cousins are accusing him of somehow taking the best of the flocks and herds he's spent another six years tending; and Jacob complains that Laban has changed the deal not once, not twice, but ten times!

Even God says:

"I have seen all that Laban is doing to you." (31:12)

Those are rough circumstances.

Imagine if you were Jacob.

Jacob can't exactly up and leave. Where would he go? Back home to mom and dad? His brother Esau is still there, managing the family business that should have been his own. How do you think that homecoming is going to go? Jacob's mother said to him:

*“...flee to my brother Laban in Haran,
... until your brother’s anger turns away from you ...
...then I will send and bring you from there...”* (Gen 27:43, 45)

But that was twenty years ago, and he hasn’t heard a word since.

Jacob also can’t complain about being done wrong by Family, considering it was doing the Family wrong that got Jacob in this mess to begin with. Maybe it wasn’t his plan to steal his brother’s blessing, but he knew exactly what he was getting into when his mother Rebekah told him to go impersonate his brother Esau in order to get the hands-on blessing from Isaac. And while Rebekah may have told Jacob she’d cover for him as she said:

“... let your curse be on me, my son, only obey my voice...” (Gen 27:13)

...we see that her good intentions haven’t worked out well at all for Jacob as far as dealing with family is concerned.

So Jacob has to sit down, shut up and roll with it unless and until he’s ready to face up with his past - and that’s a scary thing.

But how bad does Jacob really have it?

We see that God has given him a family. Jacob has two wives, their two handmaidens and, at this point, has sired eleven sons among them. Perhaps Jacob could be forgiven in thinking that having all these women as spouses is the way things are done. Obviously it was, just as his grandfather Abraham and his brother Esau had multiple wives or concubines. Jacob may even argue it was God's will for him because Laban forced Leah on him in place of Rachel.

But don't miss how well that's worked out:

- Abraham's concubine Hagar begat the nations that would fight with Israel to this day, and
- Esau's spouses were "a grief of mind" (Gen 26:35) to his parents

... so this is just another example showing how going along with the accepted customs of the times and tribes will often cause all manner of problems when they go against the will of God.

But we were speaking of God's blessings upon Jacob!

Aside from a huge family, we also see how Jacob has flocks and herds of such magnitude that Laban separates his own flocks and herds by a distance of three days in order to keep them far enough apart that they won't intermingle.

Now, just for a moment, consider if Jacob had stayed behind in Beersheba.

What sort of life do you think Jacob could have made for himself? He would have been known throughout the land as the thief of his brother's inheritance, as a man without honor, a liar and deceiver who stole his brother's blessing, a man with no respect for tradition. No man would hire him as a worker. No woman would take him as a husband.

But now? Now he's rich beyond measure, to such a degree that his own cousins envy him!

We need to ask the Lord to give us that Reality Check, to grant that we might see things the way He - and others - see things. We need to **Change Our Perspective!** If Jacob were able to get over himself and see everything the Lord had given him, he might exercise joyful, thankful contentment instead of resentment.

Is Jacob incorrect when he complains about his circumstances? Is he wrong when he says he's been cheated and deceived? No, he's not. These things have all happened. But they're not what's important!

How he - and we - react to these events in our lives will all come down to how well we believe in God's provision.

Grudges are prideful, because they show how we think we know our needs better than God. But we lack any power (Matthew 6:27) so we'll always find ourselves angry and frustrated at our inability to change the situation on our own. So instead, we need to **Change our perspective!**

Our first application is meant for us to use when we're in these situations; we need to

Seek what God has given us, in the time and at the place which He has led us.

Yes, Jacob had lost the home of his childhood and all contact with his family.

Yes, Jacob had not gotten a fair deal from his uncle and was increasingly frowned upon by his cousins, Laban's sons.

But the LORD had not left Jacob, nor turned his face from him - the Lord gave Jacob such success that his increase covered the land for a three-day journey!

This is always God's way!

Abraham was afraid of famine and of Pharaoh in Genesis 12, but God blessed him to such a degree that the Scriptures call him "*very rich, in cattle, in silver, and in gold.*" (Gen 13:2)

But Abraham and Jacob weren't looking at it from that angle - they didn't realize God had given them everything they needed for that time.

We should seek not just the things, and ways and means and resources we have at hand for that particular moment or test, but we need to cast a wider gaze backwards along the path. If we exercise a conscious effort to recognize all the ways in which God has steered us to this place, to this time, to this purpose; then we will realize that Scripture is true when it tells us:

"His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue." (2 Peter 1:3)

...and so it is that we can find both peace and encouragement if we would

Seek what God has given us, in the time and at the place which He has led us.

Sometimes we don't do that, though. Sometimes we're angry, or hurt - and rather than reach out to reconcile, rather than reach out to repent, instead we reach out to recruit. We'll start that little whisper campaign, we'll grumble to that friend or that relative. Then the next thing you know, it's shouting and finger pointing over the turkey and dressing - and that's because of the truth of our second point:

2: Grudges divide family (both blood and spiritual) and give excuse for open sin

(31:14-16, 19)

Jacob's been getting the cold shoulder from his cousins, and from Laban as well. Now the LORD tells Jacob it's time to go home. Here we see Jacob display a very common human trait - have you noticed?

Jacob has been commanded to leave - to change the order of things. Laban has never been a square dealer even in the best of times, but at this moment he's been giving Jacob the Evil Eye. Jacob can't disobey the LORD's command, so this is going to have to happen whether Jacob likes it or not.

Instead of looking at all the blessings in his life, and of the many years in Laban's tents, Jacob starts to look for flaws in his relationship with Laban. Jacob looks for reasons that would give him a justification and a motivation to go through with this hard thing, to demand from this sly Uncle his wages, his wives and his leave.

That's a very human thing, isn't it?

If only Jacob would have had confidence in the LORD! Even after all this time - even after the LORD has just told him:

"...I will be with you." (Gen 31:3)

.. .Jacob still fears what's ahead. Not because it's uncertain; but rather because Jacob thinks it **is** certain. Jacob thinks he knows what's coming; and he'd rather not have to deal with it.

His reaction highlights our own natural fears - fears of conflict, of being taken advantage of, of asserting ourselves to a higher authority. We will often seek "extra" reasons to justify doing a difficult thing God asks of us - but that is neither necessary, nor is it His will. And, as is always the case, adding on to the command of the LORD brings nothing but trouble.

Jacob wants some backup! So what does he do? He goes recruiting!

He enlists his wives as he presents his argument, secretly, out in the fields.

And what's their response?

Without hesitation, both sisters speak as one and say:

“Are we not considered strangers by him?

For he has sold us, and also completely consumed our money!” (v15)

Now let’s pause for a moment on those words, “*our money*,” because they’re very important. In Biblical times, a woman’s dowry was the only thing that was specifically and exclusively her possession. The dowry went along with the bride when she was married. The dowry was displayed in the form of ornaments and jewelry - braided into the hair, woven into her veils, fashioned into earrings and nose rings. With one look, a suitor knew what he was going to have to bring to the table - to show his ability to provide for this maiden at a level equal to that which her own father has done.

Laban, as the father, is obligated to provide each of his daughters with their dowry - and we know its value from the terms of the contract Laban struck with Jacob in Genesis 29:27:

“Fulfill her week (meaning Leah,) and we will give you this one (meaning Rachel) also for the service which you will serve with me still another seven years.”

So then, the dowry for each of Laban’s daughters was seven years’ wages - which in today’s terms would equal over \$200,000.00 ...

... per daughter.

And yet, according to Rachel and Leah, they have nothing - Laban has spent it.

So now, let me ask you - was Laban hurting for money? What do you think?

Laban was wealthy! In the previous chapter Jacob tells him:

"...what you had before I came was little, and it has increased to a great amount!

The LORD has blessed you since my coming!" (Gen 30:30)

Laban is on the hook for the dowry - but in the case of both Rachel and Leah, Laban has not met his obligations, even with all his wealth. It's not a matter of means, so what else could the reason be? The girls are certainly thinking about that. We see their opinion of how this money was spent as they complain in verse 16 of our passage:

*"For all these riches which God has taken from our father are **really** ours and our childrens' !"*

Like a disease, this grudge of Jacob's has spread - and it finds ready fuel to stoke a fire in the hearts of the daughters of Laban. See how it causes them to consider their father's misfortune as divine justice, and gives cover and justification for outright thievery.

See how they now view their own father as a dishonest robber, treating not only their husband but they themselves with contempt by failing to fulfill an oath which even the most simple of fathers should meet. Contracts and obligations were central to a person's integrity. Consider how Jacob's entire life was upended because of the law of inheritance that he

purchased from his brother for a bowl of stew. Isaac's household and everyone in it belonged to Jacob. It was a legal transaction, no matter what underhanded skulduggery took place to make it happen.

In Joshua 9, for instance, we see the kings of the border countries trick Joshua into a peace treaty by dressing a shabby vagabonds. Nonetheless, the conditions of the treaty had to be honored.

So when Laban repeatedly and consistently changes an agreement, it's not only a shock to a civilized person; to Jacob, dishonoring a contract is a very personal affront.

But the wives? The girls are committed to Jacob's cause, so Rachel takes the teraphim - and here's why that's an important clue into their frame of mind.

In a 1944 article of the periodical *Revue Biblique*, C. H. Gordon tells of an ancient contract known as the "Nuzi tablets" which describe how,

"in the case of a married daughter, (the teraphim) gave her husband the claim to her father's property."

So, then - Laban's inheritance would not go to his sons, but instead goes to whoever has possession of the household gods.

Rachel would surely know the story of how her husband came to live in the tents of Laban, because he had stolen the birthright of his brother.

What spite and anger Rachel must have felt, that she would steal the legal emblem of the inheritance of Laban's eldest son in order to hand it to Jacob.

Is it any wonder that Laban and his brethren would ride day and night for a week to overtake Jacob? Having lost the best of his flocks and herds, the only thing Laban has left to pass to his sons is their inheritance - now that has been taken as well!

Do you suppose Laban, after twenty years, had not also heard the story of Jacob's birthright? How easy it is for Laban to fall into anger, thinking - after all this time, after all Laban had done for this refugee - in the end, this leopard hasn't changed his spots! Here's another birthright taken by deceit and trickery at the hands of his nephew.

And remember, Jacob is unaware of Rachel's theft (v32.)

See how much more conflict arises from this?

Two men, each who sees themselves slighted, each standing in the certainty that they are in the right; and the result is a veritable screaming match breaking out in the back half of the chapter. Two decades of ugly, bitter resentment comes boiling over as each man shouts past one another.

Jacob snaps: “*Unless the God of my Father... .. had been with me, surely you would have sent me away empty-handed! God has seen *my* affliction... and rebuked *you* last night!*” (v42)

Laban screams: “*These daughters are *my* daughters! Add these children are *my* children! And this flock is *my* flock! All that you see is mine!!*” (v43)

How **could** this have gone? Laban said in verse 27:

“*.. I might have sent you away with joy and songs, with timbrel and harp!*”

That doesn't seem like that's an option now, does it? Two men, righteously indignant.

Do you see where Jacob's grudge has led him?

Grudges are presumptuous - and infectious! - because they display how we feel we deserve something which we don't have - and that's plain unvarnished covetousness (31:16.)

As is the case with Jacob, we certainly don't know the entire story. Jacob didn't know what had been stolen from Laban. Laban didn't know how deeply his daughters resented the loss of their dowries. In those most difficult times, we must take a moment to: **Change our perspective!**

Remember the truth that already “we have all things in Christ,” that our Father knows our needs. Instead of praying for strength to get through a conflict, or praying for victory in our own righteous cause, we might instead pray that we can look past ourselves to see how we may be a blessing to others.

Especially to those whom we have wronged. (But more on that later.)

So. Rather than trusting the LORD’s promise:

“I will be with you,”

Jacob instead enlists conspirators and steals away in the night, and his wives compound the harm by acting on grudges of their own. This points out an opportunity, a principle we can apply in our own lives, and it’s this:

We’ll have nothing to fear when we bring to mind the constant power and presence of God in our lives. (repeat)

If only he had changed his perspective!

I asked earlier, “Was Laban poor?” No, he was not.

And Jacob?

Jacob is far increased beyond the wealth of Laban. He doesn't need anything Laban possesses. Rachel and Leah had flocks and handmaidens and sons, living lives of plenty. They had camels, the desert equivalent of a Cadillac Coupe DeVille. They are all living lives they never dared dream of when they were just simple shepherd girls.

How far the LORD has brought them!

How greatly the LORD has blessed them, and those around them!

And why?

Because out of nowhere, unexpectedly, undeservedly, someone came and claimed them for his bride, paid the full price and wedded them, that's why.

Aren't we the same?

Have we forgotten how we were before our bridegroom came for us?

Are we still complaining of what we didn't get, when indeed we have all things in Christ?

Why do we hold a grudge?

We hold a grudge because we have forgotten that the LORD has carried us this far, and we doubt that He will finish the job - if He was ever there to start with.

But Scripture says we are to be:

"... confident of this very thing:

*that He who has begun a good work in you
will complete it
until the day of Jesus Christ.* ” (Philippians 1:6)

**We have nothing to fear when we call to mind the constant power and presence of
God in our lives.**

Without that confidence, we are swayed to and fro by anger, by bitterness, by envy and
covetousness. We become sullen and indignant, just like Jacob's wives.

Their indignance is laid squarely at the feet of our third point:

3) Grudges are rooted in fear and a lack of faith, and show that we expect the worst.

(31:31)

Verse 31 from our passage:

“Jacob answered and said to Laban,

‘Because I was afraid, for I said:

‘Perhaps you would take your daughters from me by force.’ ‘“

We started this chapter hearing the murmurings of Laban's sons, fearing they shall have no inheritance - listen as they say:

*"Jacob hath taken away all that was our father's,
and of that which was our father's hath he gotten all this glory." (31:1)*

Fear of a future which they feel was stolen from them.

They may well have learned those words at the table of their father. We've seen how Laban might fear a usurping from this nephew - one whom he's fed at his own table and to whom he's given his own daughters as wives.

Down from the high country comes Laban and his brothers, on a seven-day hot pursuit. Perhaps it might have been an entirely different meeting if it weren't for the LORD visiting Laban in a dream and saying:

"Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good, nor bad." (Gen 31:24)

Laban overtakes his quarry by the mountains of Gilead, and he and his calmly pitch their tents. Laban asks Jacob why he's taken this action to leave. Laban says "I would have liked to say goodbye to my family."

Laban makes a special mention that God Himself has instructed him to deal calmly with Jacob.

And did you notice that Laban even gave Jacob an out? An excuse? Read verse 30 where Laban says:

“Now, you have surely gone because you greatly long for your father’s house.”

And then Laban asks a simple question: *“Why did you steal my gods?”*

Imagine the amazement Jacob must have felt. Having ran in the night for fear of an argument - or worse - with his Uncle, he now finds himself face to face with Laban and all that’s said is that he’d like to have said farewell - but...

... but now there’s an accusation of theft. A very serious matter, and one of honor. Thieves are put to death.

Jacob knows nothing of what Rachel has done, and tells Laban to search until he is satisfied. But soon we see how the fear, the expectation of the worst, leads to heated confrontation.

Laban thinks Jacob has stolen the inheritance from his own flesh and blood, and is lying to his face when he claims to know nothing of this.

Jacob thinks Laban is using the claim of theft - quite possibly the first instance of theft recorded in the Bible, did you notice? Jacob fears Laban is using this as a reason to stop his escape. Perhaps Jacob even fears the idols will be mysteriously discovered among his company - and then Jacob would be put to death.

What then would happen to his house? Why, the daughters would have to return to their father's house - with all their goods and children, don't you know.

Do you understand now what each man fears?

Can you see now why each is expecting the worst from the other?

Even in the face of a furious rebuke from Jacob, we find Laban unable or unwilling to go any further against his family, as he says in verse 43:

"What can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne?"

Notice how he has left Jacob out of that equation. Even so, Laban proves what scriptures later tell us in Proverbs 26:

*"Without wood, a fire goes out;
without gossip, a quarrel dies down."* (Prov 26:21)

Laban defuses the situation by calling for a covenant. Even though each is convinced that the other is an oathbreaker, a man without honor, still they take the opportunity to come to terms. Jacob has, at last! - come to an end of his service to Laban.

Now Jacob, by experience, finally understands our third point of application, which is this:

God has gone before us to preserve us.

Did you get that? It took Jacob a few tries, so make a note of it, because it takes repeated doses for us to believe that:

God has gone before us to preserve us.

The story doesn't end there, of course. It's what happens next that should provide the most encouragement to us all. Jacob left his home with nothing, a man of shame and dishonor, a man hunted by a master hunter.

Now Jacob is returning, and hears how the hunter comes after him with four hundred men at his side. It is a moment for fear! Jacob is "greatly distressed!"

But!

But Jacob has learned his lessons - hear his prayer to the LORD as he acknowledges his fear and reminds God - and Himself - of the promises!

“Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother,

from the hand of Esau,

for I fear him;

lest he come and attack me

and the mother with the children;

For You said:

‘I will surely treat you well,

and make your descendants as the sand of the sea

which cannot be numbered for multitude.’ “ (Gen 32:11-12)

See how Jacob has learned to walk into positions of vulnerability with prayer! Jacob faces his past as a tradition-breaker and oath-stealer and steps forward with confidence in a covenant-keeping God!

See how Jacob now approaches conflict in a position of humility, bowing to his brother seven times, calling himself Esau’s “servant” as he calls Esau “my lord.”

See Jacob acknowledging his own role in circumstances and seeking to make amends in a spirit of charity as he says:

*"... if I have now found favor in your sight,
then receive my present from my hand,
inasmuch as I have seen your face as though I had seen the face of God -
and you were pleased with me!" (Gen 33:10)*

Rifts were healed and brothers reconciled when Jacob changed his perspective and trusted that the Lord would continue to bless his life, as was promised. This confidence allowed Jacob to drop his anger and his fear and approach his brother with prayerful, humble charity.

And how about us?

We may intentionally be distancing ourselves from God out of anger or fear, holding a grudge that He has done us wrong. Hiding from fear that He will bring the hammer down if we show our face to Him.

And as far as that goes - we're right!

We are rebellious and ungrateful, we have stolen and lied - we desire things which are not ours, that we can not have.

We desire the favor of God, and we know we don't deserve it.

It can't be stolen, or bargained for, because God is a God of Fairness - and Justice!

Yet today's message is one of hope because that God of Fairness is also a God of Mercy. As He sent dreams to Laban, as He sent love and compassion into the heart of Esau, as He turned Jacob's own heart to an attitude of reverence and reconciliation, so also has that same Father God sent a blessing upon us - upon you! Because:

*"The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy
forgiving iniquity and transgression..."* (Numbers 14:18)

If you are angry at God, if you're holding a grudge, if you think you deserve better, I'm here to tell you: You don't!

I don't. We ... don't.

But God the Father offers all that and more to you through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Forgiveness and reconciliation await you with outstretched arms.

Are you ready to lay down your anger? Are you tired of carrying that grudge?

Then **change your perspective** - look to the Cross and take hold of that which God freely offers in Christ!

Repent! And believe the gospel! The good news that God has come to make a covenant with you and reconcile you to Himself. Through the act of another Son, One who finds us in the desert and stands at our side, He sends forth from us a spirit of repentance and humility, allowing us to approach the throne of God to ask for forgiveness and grace.

Will you join Him? Will you set aside your grudges of fear? Grudges of anger?

Accept forgiveness from God through Christ Jesus -

And then we can rejoice at your side at what God the Father now says of you, and of all who believe:

*“And you, being dead in your trespasses, and the uncircumcision of your flesh,
He has made alive, together with Him (that is, Christ)
having forgiven you all trespasses,
having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us,
Which was contrary to us
And He has taken it out of the way,
having nailed it to the Cross.” (Col 2:13-14)*

Text: Genesis 31: 1-16

Outline points:

- Grudges blind us to - and reveal our discontent with - God's provision (v30:43 vs 31:7)
- Grudges divide family and give excuse for open sin (31:14-16, 19)
- Grudges are rooted in fear and a lack of faith, showing that we expect the worst. (31:31, 42)