

Genesis 31: The Return Home

By
Peter Martin
February 16th, 2025

“Now Jacob heard the words of Laban’s sons, saying, “Jacob has taken away all that was our father’s, and from what was our father’s he has acquired all this wealth.” And Jacob saw the countenance of Laban, and indeed it was not favorable toward him as before. Then the LORD said to Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you.”

-Genesis 31:1-3

As we move through Jacob’s story, we come across another key element of character development that Jacob embodies really well for us, the return home. We must keep in mind when reading through the historic portions of the Bible, that these things were not just written to give us an accurate account of history, but are also recorded in such a way that we can discern universal examples that transcend the time periods and cultures of those who lived through these events. This is why the apostle Paul writes this about the history of Israel recorded for us in the Old Testament:

“Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.”

-1 Corinthians 10:11

I believe it is far too easy for us today to miss out on the deep lessons of these stories because we get caught up in the historicity of the events, or we get so distracted by the differences in the individual accounts that we miss their universal application. These generalized patterns are not only visible to us in the Biblical accounts, but we can even see them in normal narrative patterns recorded throughout human history.

In the classic hero's journey, the hero is called out from the comfort of home and through various encounters and trials, they begin to transform into the people that they are meant to be. This process usually ends with a return to their original home, which is what this particular story in Jacob’s life demonstrates for us. He fled the comfort of his parents home in Genesis 28, then he fell in love with Rachel in Genesis 29, he has been contending with the manipulation of his uncle for about 20 years where Jacob has built up his family and his wealth, and now God is calling him home.

We see this pattern throughout Scripture like in the life of Moses, who is driven away from his people, starts a family in the desert, and then returns to the Israelites in order

to lead them to freedom. We also see this with the people of Israel who are perpetually exiled from their land, redeemed in their wandering, and then returned to their land. As well as in the life of king David who is driven from the palace by the jealousy of king Saul, only to be brought back after the death of Saul in order to reign as king. Finally, this is ultimately fulfilled in the life of Christ:

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

-Philippians 2:6-11

Jesus leaves His heavenly home, descends to the earth and then all the way down into the grave, rescues His sleeping bride, and then reascends into the heavens. Because this pattern is reflected in the life of Christ, it should make sense to us that this becomes a key component of our conception of the hero's journey. The American author and literary professor Joseph Campbell compares various myths and stories from around the world, and throughout human history, and says this about this particular part of the hero's journey:

“When the hero-quest has been accomplished, through penetration to the source, or through the grace of some male or female, human or animal personification, the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy. The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds.”

Joseph Campbell - “The Hero with a Thousand Faces”

It wouldn't take long thinking about various books and movies to see this pattern for ourselves repeated in the various stories that we consume on a regular basis. It is ubiquitous in fairy tales, but even in more modern films like “The Matrix” with Keanu Reeves who is set free from the tyranny of the Matrix by the female protagonist, Trinity, only to be returned to the Matrix in order to set the other inhabitants free. Or even more recently in the Marvel Cinematic Universe where Captain America is pulled out of his

time in order to save his world, he goes on various adventures, and then in the movie “Endgame” he returns to his time and marries the love of his life.

Because this pattern is universally expressed, and ultimately fulfilled in Christ, it has much to teach us in our own pursuits of God and these points are expressed beautifully for us in the life of Jacob. As I have mentioned before, in stories this pattern is expressed only once in the hero’s journey, but in our lives, these patterns repeat themselves at various times. In these moments, we won’t necessarily be literally called back to the place of our childhood (though that might happen) but really what this symbol represents are the moments in our lives when we have to honestly confront our past, or bring to bear the lessons of our past on our current problems. If we learn this lesson well, we will be ready to face these moments in a way that moves us closer to God, but if we face them incorrectly, we will be moved further from God.

Learning From The Past

“Then the LORD said to Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you.”

-Genesis 31:3

The reason why the hero is called away from the comfort of their home in the beginning of their journey is because they lack what is necessary to fulfill their calling. This lack is represented in various ways, whether it is as simple as the call to be king, and they are single and in need of marriage, to needing money or resources, these various symbols represent much the same thing, the hero is incomplete in some way and needs to be perfected through their various trials in order to fulfill their calling.

“For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.”

-Hebrews 2:10

This passage is not saying that Jesus was in some way imperfect in His being, but that He was incapable of fulfilling His calling to save us unless He was willing to leave His home of heaven and suffer upon the earth on our behalf. In a similar way, Jacob has been called to inherit the promises made to Abraham.

“And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: “I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. “Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread

abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

-Genesis 28:13-14

This means that, on a practical level, if Jacob is to give the land of Israel to his descendants, he first must be married and have kids. Jacob is sent to the land of his mother in order to marry and have the children who will both inherit the land of Israel, and also continue the line that will eventually produce the Messiah. The amazing thing about Jacob's story, is that even though it is messy and filled with a lot of depravity and sin, (including his polygamous relationships with Rachel, Leah, and their handmaids), these events culminate in producing 12 sons who would become the leaders and patriarchs of the 12 tribes of Israel. Including Judah, who was the child of Leah, who would be the direct ancestor of Jesus.

None of this excuses the sins of Jacob, but it does show that God worked out His will and His plan for Jacob, even through the sins that he committed. Now, Jacob does suffer severe consequences for his behavior, which he does learn from, but God's will is accomplished, and Jacob is now free to return to the land of his father in order to fulfill God's calling in his life. As interesting as this is, there is a deeper truth present in this story that has a more universal application for our lives.

While Jacob did lack marriage in order to fulfill God's physical calling in his life, more important than the physical, God has intended a spiritual transformation for Jacob. Each one of us has specific physical callings from the Lord. God has a plan and a purpose for each of our lives, and that plan contains particular callings that includes careers, relationships, and even physical locations that we will live. However, unlike Jacob, the vast majority of us will not be informed by God what these specific callings will be. We will be mostly blind towards these things, and will be faced with many difficult decisions that we will have to try our best to make the wisest, most God-honoring decision and we will never be fully convinced as to which option is the "right" one. Because of this, it is better for us to look at this part of Jacob's life not in a literal sense, but instead to see his physical lacks as a symbol of the far more important spiritual calling that God had for Jacob as well as all those who will follow after Him.

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor...”

-1 Thessalonians 4:3-4

There are numerous things that Jacob learns in his time at Laban's house, and though he never learns any of these lessons perfectly, it is valuable for us to see how he confronted his problems using the lessons that he had learned in his time of wandering.

Becoming Independent

“So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to the field, to his flock, and said to them, ‘I see your father’s countenance, that it is not favorable toward me as before; but the God of my father has been with me. ‘And you know that with all my might I have served your father. ‘Yet your father has deceived me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not allow him to hurt me. ‘If he said thus: ‘The speckled shall be your wages,’ then all the flocks bore speckled. And if he said thus: ‘The streaked shall be your wages,’ then all the flocks bore streaked. ‘So God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me. ‘And it happened, at the time when the flocks conceived, that I lifted my eyes and saw in a dream, and behold, the rams which leaped upon the flocks were streaked, speckled, and gray-spotted. ‘Then the Angel of God spoke to me in a dream, saying, ‘Jacob.’ And I said, ‘Here I am.’ ‘And He said, ‘Lift your eyes now and see, all the rams which leap on the flocks are streaked, speckled, and gray-spotted; for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. ‘I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed the pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now arise, get out of this land, and return to the land of your family.’” Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, “Is there still any portion or inheritance for us in our father’s house? “Are we not considered strangers by him? For he has sold us, and also completely consumed our money. “For all these riches which God has taken from our father are really ours and our children’s; now then, whatever God has said to you, do it.” Then Jacob rose and set his sons and his wives on camels. And he carried away all his livestock and all his possessions which he had gained, his acquired livestock which he had gained in Padan Aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.”

-Genesis 31:4-18

The first difference that we can see in Jacob's character is that he has become more independent. Up until this moment, Jacob has been very passive and has not made any real decision for himself. Instead, he has only been reacting to the leadings of those around him. When he conspired to steal Esau's birthright, it wasn't really based on his own will or desire that he plotted against his brother, but more or less through the leading of his mother. This is also true of his "decision" to go to Haran, he didn't decide to go there in order to find a wife in his own wisdom, but was more or less sent out by his parents and driven by the fear of his brother. Then when he was in Haran, for around 20 years, he was merely reacting to the machinations of his deceptive uncle Laban and the sibling rivalry of his two wives.

Although God is the One calling him to go back home, we can make note of a significant change in Jacob's character and demeanor. In this account he is not merely responding to the call of God, but he has actually made this his own decision and has justified it with his own reasoning. Notice that he doesn't go to Rachel and Leah and say "God has called us back to the house of my father..." But instead he launches into a well articulated argument about why this is the best decision for his family. This is part of the fruit of God's transformative work within the life of Jacob. He has finally become his own man. He isn't being merely carried along by the decisions and behaviors of others, nor is he only tacitly submitting to the will of God, but instead he has had his reason and conscience trained by God to such an extent that the call of God now accords with his own wisdom and moral conscience.

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works."

-Titus 2:11-14

This is a key lesson that all the Christians must learn. God doesn't want merely obedient children, but instead He desires us to be genuinely "zealous for good works." This description is not that of legalistic Christians following the word of God simply because it is the Word of God, but instead Christians who genuinely agree with God's commands and are zealous to fulfill His will. This type of transformation is not skin deep, it is not just a changing of behavior, but instead it is only possible through a radical transformation of character.

"When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things."

-1 Corinthians 13:11

The apostle Paul writes this after he has given us a beautiful description of God's perfect love. While there are many lessons contained in this metaphor, one that we can derive from this is the nature of Christian maturity. It is perfectly fine for a child to do the right thing simply because they are afraid of consequences, but when a child leaves their home, this type of motivation is no longer effective. If someone never learns the importance of discipline, hard work, personal health, etc. Then the natural consequences of their ignorance will destroy them over time. To put it another way, the effect of maturity ought to be that the conscience of the individual is shaped to want correct things for themselves.

This is one of the things entailed in the command to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” (Matthew 22:37). The command is not merely to *obey* God, but to *love* Him. At the beginning of Jacob’s journey we see that he is willing to obey God in a quid pro quo kind of way:

“Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, “so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God.”

-Genesis 28:20-21

But his more mercenary approach to God seems to have shifted over the years spent with Laban. By going through the sufferings of being deceived and manipulated by his uncle over the years, Jacob learned to see the provision and faithfulness of God through it all. This is why he begins his speech to his wives like this:

“So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to the field, to his flock, and said to them, “I see your father’s countenance, that it is not favorable toward me as before; but the God of my father has been with me. “And you know that with all my might I have served your father. “Yet your father has deceived me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not allow him to hurt me.”

-Genesis 31:4-7

There is certainly more to this maturing process than this, but what we can learn primarily from Jacob’s example, is that if we want the past to bring us to maturity, we must learn to be aware and thankful of God’s provision for us even in our times of suffering. This might sound simple, but it is one of the more difficult spiritual disciplines to achieve. This is why king David in Psalm 103 begins his song of praise like this:

“Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget not all His benefits...”

-Psalm 103:1-2

This kind of thankfulness is not common, which is why David must command his soul to praise God and to “forget not all His benefits...” The faithfulness and the goodness of God is literally all around us, if we are willing to see it. And the more we choose to see it and thank God for it, the more we will love Him, and the more independent we are becoming in our character and our morality. But the more we choose to meditate on the negativity of our lives, the more miserable to helpless we will feel. This is why the Apostle Paul exhorts the church, from the depths of prison, like this:

“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.”

-Philippians 4:8-9

It would be so easy for someone in prison to feel out of control and give up the ideas of personal responsibility, but Paul doesn't. The reason why he is able to do this is not simply because he knows this is the right thing to do, but because his character has been shaped to respond to hardship in this way. This didn't happen naturally, but through a regular discipline of meditating on the sovereignty and the faithfulness of God.

Leading Well

“Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, “Is there still any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house? “Are we not considered strangers by him? For he has sold us, and also completely consumed our money. “For all these riches which God has taken from our father are really ours and our children's; now then, whatever God has said to you, do it.” Then Jacob rose and set his sons and his wives on camels. And he carried away all his livestock and all his possessions which he had gained, his acquired livestock which he had gained in Padan Aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.”

-Genesis 31:14-18

Along with this new found sense of personal responsibility, Jacob has also learned how to lead well. Unlike his brother who only led through force, or his uncle who only led through manipulation, Jacob has learned the lesson of how to effectively lead others.

“Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock...”

-1 Peter 5:2-3

Just as Jacob has learned the importance of willing submission and personal responsibility within his own life, he now wants to communicate this same lesson to his wives. He had seen the effects of leading like his brother Esau, who did have many followers and wealth, but only obtained these things through compulsion and intimidation. He had also seen the effects of Laban who was very wealthy and successful, but had done this through dishonest manipulation. While both of these men

were feared and were physically successful, no one respected or trusted either of these men, even Laban's daughters saw him for the deceiver that he was.

Instead, Jacob had learned from God how to lead people in a way that showed respect and created a relationship of mutual trust. Instead of ordering his wives to leave, or tricking them by telling them cleverly devised half truths, Jacob openly and clearly explains to Rachel and Leah his reasoning for leaving and then waits for them to respond to him. This type of approach, as simple as it might sound, is one that most leaders fail to implement, mostly due to their own fear.

We see in the early parts of Jacob's story that he has unfortunately absorbed a negative quality from his parents, he was conflict avoidant. Remember that Rebekah and Isaac had unfortunately created a home in which they were going behind each other's backs in order to do what they wanted. Jacob becomes a trickster, partly, in emulating his parent's behavior. Instead of directly confronting his father and asking for the birthright, he instead disguises himself as Esau and steals the birthright from his brother. He then ignores his faults before Esau and runs away from home rather than trying to resolve things with his brother.

Now, after seeing the results of this type of cowardice, Jacob has learned to confront people directly and how to negotiate with them boldly as opposed to avoiding conflict through intimidation or trickery. This shift in his character is also shown through his willingness to return home and confront his brother as well. While we will talk more about this in the next chapter, it is important to highlight how much bravery Jacob is showing by simply willing to journey home and face the wrath of Esau. Which is why his return home is the ultimate symbol of his ability to lead well and confront problems in boldness.

This is a lesson that we all need to learn. Everyone struggles with conflict in our lives and so we create our own unique forms of avoiding it. Some of us are more like Esau and avoid confrontation through a show of power and intimidation, while others are more like Laban and avoid conflict through manipulation and deception. Regardless of how we handle this problem, the desire of God in our lives is that we learn the courage necessary to confront people directly, with love and gentleness. This is the way to cultivate successful relationships built on mutual trust. But in order to learn this lesson, we have to challenge ourselves and see how we approach conflict within our own lives, and do our best to develop the courage necessary to confront our own issues.

However, this does not mean that Jacob learned this lesson perfectly.

“Now Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel had stolen the household idols that were her father’s. And Jacob stole away, unknown to Laban the Syrian, in that he did not tell him that he intended to flee. So he fled with all that he had. He arose and crossed the river, and headed toward the mountains of Gilead.”

-Genesis 31:19-21

In his heart, Jacob is still the trickster. While he had developed the courage necessary to talk to his wives directly, and even to go back home and confront his brother, he still tried to avoid a direct conflict from Laban. I do love that God wouldn't let Jacob get away with this though and He actually allows for this conflict to happen:

“But God had come to Laban the Syrian in a dream by night, and said to him, “Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.”

-Genesis 31:24

God could have easily told Laban to turn back, but instead He allows for Laban to overtake Jacob. God's only warning to Laban is for Laban not to speak to Jacob “good nor bad.” As a result, Jacob ends up having to confront his father-in-law:

“Then Jacob was angry and rebuked Laban, and Jacob answered and said to Laban: “What is my trespass? What is my sin, that you have so hotly pursued me? “Although you have searched all my things, what part of your household things have you found? Set it here before my brethren and your brethren, that they may judge between us both! “These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried their young, and I have not eaten the rams of your flock. “That which was torn by beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it. You required it from my hand, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. “There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes. “Thus I have been in your house twenty years; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. “Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the labor of my hands, and rebuked you last night.” And Laban answered and said to Jacob, “These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children, and this flock is my flock; 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? “Now therefore, come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.”

-Genesis 31:36-44

Even though God had to allow for this conflict to take place, the change in Jacob's character is unmistakable. He boldly confronts his deceptive father-in-law and speaks to him as a man. He doesn't lie or manipulate the facts, nor does he threaten Laban, instead he assertively lays out the truth of their relationship and waits for Laban to respond. Although Jacob is far from perfect, what he is exhibiting in this conflict is pretty admirable. He has the boldness to confront malevolence in his life, to speak the truth without compromise and to face his fears. This is a far cry from the old Jacob who wore lamb skins on his arms in order to trick his blind father.

This is again a boldness that can't be directly taught, it comes only from a character that is properly trained. Jacob had learned both from the positive lessons of God as well as the negative lessons of his father-in-law. And what he has noticed about Laban is that not only does no one trust or respect Laban, but because he was always trying to get one up on everyone else, he was a man who couldn't trust anyone else's word, this is why Laban demands a covenant with Jacob before they part, even though Jacob had done nothing wrong to Laban. For as much as Laban wanted to blame Jacob for his missing idols, it was his own daughter who stole from him, while Jacob remained innocent in this matter. I love how the famous playwright George Bernard Shaw put this when he talked about the consequences of lying:

"The liar's punishment is not in the least that he is not believed, but that he cannot believe anyone else."

-George Bernard Shaw - "The Quintessence of Ibsenism"

Laban can't help seeing plots and schemes wherever he looked because he himself was guilty of that very behavior. He is a man who, while he usually gets the better of those he dealt with, is nevertheless lonely in his own paranoia, and without any genuine love or trust. Symbolically, the parting between Jacob and Laban is a picture of Jacob parting with this cowardly part of his own character and pursuing a character of courage and integrity:

"This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. "The God of Abraham, the God of Nahor, and the God of their father judge between us." And Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac. Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his brethren to eat bread. And they ate bread and stayed all night on the mountain. And early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons and daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place."

-Genesis 31:52-55

Reconciling With The Father

“Then the LORD said to Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you.”

-Genesis 31:3

The final part of this pattern is the reconciliation with the father. In most stories, a return to the place of the hero's origin is sometimes depicted by a reunion with the father figure. This represents the hero's ability to correctly incorporate the wisdom from his past while rejecting the problems. We can see this in stories like Pinnochio, who spends the bulk of the story running away from the wisdom of his father, only to descend into the depths in order to rescue his father from the belly of the whale and ascend back to the surface with him. And it is only when they reach the shore that Pinnochio is granted his greatest wish of becoming a real boy. Symbolically this represents the path towards identity, which is learning to appropriately incorporate the wisdom of our fathers.

All of us come from complex backgrounds filled with both good and bad. Part of maturity is learning to reconcile with our past, meaning, we have to learn how to correctly incorporate the lessons from our past without being stumbled by them. When we are children, we merely absorb the lessons from our parents without being conscious of what we are learning. But when we begin to gain independence, we usually become arrogant and we tend only to see the problems with our past, and we usually aim our bitterness, justified or not, at the image of our fathers. While many of our criticisms might be correct, true maturity is only provided for those who can learn the right lessons from our past and apply them towards our future.

Jacob's home was filled with a lot of good and bad. While his parents were followers of God and did teach their kids a lot of good virtues, they were also conflict avoidant and used manipulation to try to get their way. As a result, their family fell apart and Jacob had to flee from his own brother. Over time of being on his own though, Jacob has clearly learned the lessons of his past and is ready to return to his father's home.

This transition for him is shown in a much more subtle way, but, we can see this process more clearly in Rachel and Leah in their interaction with their own father.

Separating From Dysfunction

“Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, “Is there still any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house? “Are we not considered strangers by him? For he has sold us, and also completely consumed our money. “For all these riches which

God has taken from our father are really ours and our children's; now then, whatever God has said to you, do it."

-Genesis 31:14-16

Anyone who has been married for any length of time knows that a conversation like this is incredibly difficult. When you grow up in a particular family, you often don't see very clearly the dysfunction that you have become accustomed to. As a result, when someone marries you, they approach your family dynamics as an outsider and can see more clearly the issues with your family that might be going underneath your notice. As a result, when you try to communicate about family dysfunction, these conversations are usually tense, personal, and rarely go anywhere positive.

And yet, Jacob seems to have reached a level of harmony with Rachel and Leah when it comes to their father. Jacob doesn't simply trash Laban, or characterize him unfairly, but instead he calmly lays out their father's behavior, and Rachel and Leah are able to accept Jacob's critique and see their father's failure with clarity. Notice that none of them treat Laban unfairly and none of them seek vengeance upon him. Instead they all come to the same conclusion, they have to leave the toxicity of their father's house.

This might sound contradictory to the overall point that I am trying to make that this event is actually a reconciliation with their father figure, but it actually isn't. Laban had used and mistreated his daughters their whole lives. We can see this in his name for Leah (which literally meant burden), to how he callously swapped his daughters on Rachel's wedding night and set up his daughters to be a part of a polygamous relationship, as well as how he constantly tried to steal their inheritance from Jacob. "Reconciling with the father" means that we are able to correctly incorporate the lessons from our past, for young men, this usually means that we were too dismissive of our fathers, for young girls, this usually means that they are too permissive of their fathers.

The true fruit of this process is that we can see our past clearly and honestly. That we can correctly see the dysfunction from our past and move away from it, but also that we can correctly see the wisdom of our past and move towards that. This is a lesson that Rachel and Leah are clearly learning, but, like Jacob, they have a lot of room for progress:

"Now Rachel had taken the household idols, put them in the camel's saddle, and sat on them. And Laban searched all about the tent but did not find them. And she said to her father, "Let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is with me." And he searched but did not find the household idols."

-Genesis 31:34-35

Symbolically, Rachel stealing her father's idols, and then lying about it, is a picture of her taking some of the dysfunction of her father's house with her into her husband's home. This is a difficult process to achieve, but it is one that we all must learn if we want to properly mature. If we spend our lives unfairly criticizing our parents, even if our parents were wicked in most ways, we will live our lives in bitterness, unable to see the good within our past. But, if we unjustly venerate our past and fail to truly see the dysfunction of our past, then we will carry it into our present relationships and corrupt them as a result. This process takes courage and honest dialogue with others, but it is well worth the effort.

Going Home

“And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight—”

-Colossians 1:21-22

This symbol has its ultimate fulfillment in our reconciliation with God Himself. As such, it is a common theme within many stories that the hero is longing for a return to their homeland after a time of exile, with the most famous example being the “Odyssey” by Homer. Since we are all alienated from our heavenly home, and the presence of our Father, we all experience an ache for a home that we have never known in an emotion commonly referred to as nostalgia. “Nostalgia” is actually a conjunction of two Greek words “nostos”, which means “return” or “homecoming” and “algos” which means “pain” or “longing”.

To put it more succinctly, this term refers to a type of pain created in our souls from a longing for “home”. It makes sense that most of us root this longing in our childhood since this was our most powerful time of innocence and wonder. However, since this longing is so potent in all of us, and since it is in actuality a longing for heaven, it is a potent source of idolatry in our hearts. This is another thing that Rachel's theft of her father's idols can symbolize for us. Our “father's gods” are in actuality our temptation to idolize our ideals of “home”.

The story that captured this point best was Frank L. Baum's “The Wizard of Oz”. In this story, Dorothy embarks on the classic hero's journey from East in Oz, to the palace of the Wizard in an attempt to get back home. When she encounters the wizard though, he appears in an otherworldly image and tells her she can't go home unless she kills the Wicked Witch of the West. After she succeeds, Dorothy discovers that the wizard is actually a petty magician from her world who used tricks to deceive the inhabitants of

Oz. This prompts her to accuse him of being a "...very bad man." To which the "wizard" replies:

*"Oh, no, my dear; I'm really a very good man, but I'm a very bad Wizard, I must admit."
Frank L. Baum - "The Wizard of Oz"*

This is the ultimate moral of this story. Dorothy and the rest of her companions have idolized various things, (brains, heart, courage, and home) and they seek their fulfillment in the wizard who is the ultimate father figure. Unfortunately for them, while the "wizard" is indeed a good man, he is a bad wizard. Meaning that a good man can be an excellent father, but he will always make for a bad god. All these good things that we seek on this earth can be good in their right place, but they will always make paltry gods, including our longing for home itself.

But what we can see in Jacob's story, as messy as it is, is the fulfillment of Jacob's dream of a ladder that leads to heaven, his true home. Our individual stories will have many different twists and turns, some of us will be raised in Christian homes, others will be raised apart from knowledge of God, but all of us will have to make the decision to be reconciled to our Father in heaven. And this reconciliation is a return to our true home.

The reason why so many of the figures of the Bible are depicted as exiles, like Jacob being kicked out of his home or the nation of Israel itself looking for their promised land is because we all have a longing for a true home. And intuitively, I think we all know that the home that we long for is greater than any we can find on this earth, which is why we all experience nostalgia.

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them."

-Hebrews 11:13-16

This is not to denigrate the homes that we come from, but instead, it is to exalt the homeland that we are yearning for. And unlike the heroes in these stories, we don't go home through acts of heroism and virtue, but we find our home through the finished

work of Christ. This truth allows for us to see the good in the upward call of God while maintaining confidence and assurance in what God has done for us.