Jacob Flees from Laban

“Gotta stop that man!” That’s the first line in a song from the musical “How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying”. That part of the song is sung by a group of jealous office workers who are fearful that a young co-worker is moving into an executive role at the company where they work. The play is based on the book of the same name which is a satirical critique of the sharp elbow style of climbing the corporate ladder in business. The main character named J. Pierrepont Finch starts out working in the mailroom of the World Wide Wicket Company and quickly rises to the level of Vice President of Advertising. Last week we saw jealousy between 2 sisters causing family strife and our study of Genesis chapter 31 shows that men are just as capable of that emotion.

The chapter begins with Jacob hearing that Laban’s sons were accusing him of stealing from their father. The truth was the opposite: Jacob had increased Laban’s wealth through his stewardship of the livestock for which he was responsible. Laban’s sons were not harmed by Jacob’s success, indeed they stood to gain from it as heirs of their father’s estate. Probably the reason they were envious of Jacob was that he had exposed their failure to manage Laban’s herds and flocks. Laban had probably been satisfied with the results his sons had produced because he had never seen what a properly run operation looked like. Rather than trying to learn from Jacob and improve their skills, they sought to discredit Jacob by accusing him of theft. Laban was not able to view the situation objectively siding with his sons rather than insisting that they work harder.

Jacob decided that it was time to strike out on his own. He received confirmation of this decision in multiple ways. First, his relationship with Laban, never a positive one, had deteriorated further. Jacob was in the delicate position of being an employee of his father in law and the family/business dynamics had become untenable. Next God told Jacob to go back to Canaan. Jacob had worked for Laban for 20 years during which time God had been preparing Jacob to be the leader of the family that would eventually become the 12 tribes of Israel. While Laban was a dishonest man, you could say that God used him as sandpaper to smooth out Jacob’s rough edges. God reassured Jacob that he would be with him on his journey back home. Ray Pritchard points out that Jacob had left home as a young man, penniless and alone. He would be returning older, wiser, wealthy and in the company of his large family. Finally, his wives agreed that it was time to leave. Rachel and Leah found something upon which they could agree, united in their resentment of Laban.and probably jealous of their brothers’ claim on his estate.

While Jacob had certainly matured in 20 years, he was still Jacob so he was not up front with Laban that he was leaving, choosing to depart with no warning. Since he worked for Laban, this was the same as quitting without notice. He would also be taking Laban’s daughters and grandchildren away. Laban pursued Jacob and his family catching up with them near Gilead. God protected Jacob by coming to Laban in a dream warning him not to say anything to Jacob that would escalate their confrontation. Laban appeared to be more distressed about losing his idols than losing his family. When accused of stealing them, Jacob became indignant and 20 years of frustration came pouring out as he defended his actions as the manager of Laban’s livestock. Had he known that Rachel had taken the idols, he may have been more circumspect in his response to Laban. He said that anyone who took Laban’s idols would not live. Shortly after Jacob’s return to Bethel Rachel died giving birth to her second son Benjamin (35:19). There are several opinions about why Rachel took the idols. Idol worship was present in this family going back to Terah (Josh. 24:2) so Rachel may have participated in this heathen custom. Some believe the opposite, that Rachel took them away so that her father would no longer worship them. She may have thought that Laban could use some power of divination from the idols to determine their whereabouts and stop them from leaving. She may have taken them simply out of spite. Finally, she may have perceived some monetary value since they may have made from valuable materials.

At the end of the chapter, Laban and Jacob strike a truce of sorts that allows Jacob to leave in peace with his family. Laban probably never saw his daughters or grandchildren again. It was a terrible price to pay for his behavior as an employer, father and father-in-law.