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Session 18: Jacob and Laban (Gen. 29-31)

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Abstract

This session examines the narrative of Jacob and Laban in Genesis 29–31, focusing on their competitive and deceptive relationship in Paddan Aram. It outlines Jacob's entrance into Haran, the marriages to Leah and Rachel, his accumulation of wealth, and his eventual flight back to Canaan. The commentary emphasizes how God faithfully superintends the lives of the dysfunctional patriarchs, transforming Jacob's character and advancing His redemptive plan despite human deceit and frailty.

Outline

- I. Introduction to Genesis 29–31 (Jacob and Laban in Paddan Aram)
 - A. Geographic framework: Jacob flees Beersheba for the household of Laban (Rebecca's brother) in Haran
 - B. Narrative bracket: Marked on the outside by fleeing (fleeing Esau in ch. 29, fleeing Laban in ch. 31)
 - C. Structural divisions:
 - 1. Chapter 29: Entrance into Paddan Aram and Haran
 - 2. Chapter 30: Pivot of growth (increase in children, herds, and flocks)
 - 3. Chapter 31: Departure and covenant

II. Theological and Covenant Background

- A. The God of Bethel: Recall of God's revelation in chapter 28 and Jacob's vow
- B. Personal faith development: Jacob begins a personal relationship with the God of his ancestors
- C. Deception and struggle: Deception upon deception, continuing the conflict from the womb
 - 1. Struggle between Jacob and Laban
 - 2. Competition between Leah and Rachel
 - 3. Conflict between the daughters and Laban

III. Jacob's Stay and Laban's Deceptions (Chapter 29)

- A. Jacob's arrival and the well: Reversal of Abraham's servant's story (Jacob waters Rachel's sheep)
- B. Household reception: Laban's recognition of kinship ("my own flesh and blood")
- C. Seven-year agreement: Jacob agrees to work seven years for Rachel due to his love
- D. Wedding night trickery: Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel, citing local custom
- E. Second agreement: Jacob works an additional seven years to receive Rachel

IV. Competition and Procreation (Chapter 30)

- A. Rachel's barrenness and envy of Leah
- B. Children born through wives and maidservants (Bilhah and Zilpah)
- C. Ultimate credit to God: Jacob's recognition of God's sovereignty over the womb

D. Progenitors of the 12 tribes: Total count of 12 sons and Dinah

E. Use of mandrakes as a folk-custom aphrodisiac

V. Flocks and Financial Rivalry (Chapter 30)

A. Jacob builds his flock and plans departure

B. Laban's acknowledgment of God's blessing due to Jacob (divination)

C. The wages agreement: Spotted, speckled, and dark animals

D. Laban's trickery: Removing the animals and establishing a three-day distance

E. Jacob's white-bark branch manipulation: Relying on folk customs

F. Exceeding prosperity and wealth accumulation under God's grace

VI. Flight from Haran (Chapter 31)

A. Rising hostility from Laban and his sons

B. God's command to return to the land of Canaan

C. Agreement of Leah and Rachel based on their father's unfair treatment

D. Secret departure: Crossing the Euphrates toward Gilead

E. Rachel steals the household gods (teraphim)

VII. Laban's Pursuit and the Covenant at Gilead (Chapter 31)

A. Laban's dream: Warning from God not to say anything good or bad to Jacob

B. Overtaking and confrontation: Laban's accusations of theft and captor-like behavior

C. The search for the household gods: Rachel's deception using her menstrual period

- D. Jacob's angry defense and summary of his 20 years of faithful service
- E. Covenant and peace treaty: Setting up a pillar and a heap of stones
- F. Oaths sworn by the God of Abraham, God of Nahor, and "Fear of Isaac"
- G. Covenant sacrificial meal and peaceful departure

VIII. Theological Conclusion

- A. Dysfunction vs. Divine Sovereignty: God works through a deeply flawed family
- B. Context of the larger narrative: Understanding suffering in the higher purposes of God
- C. Modern application: Transforming challenging events for spiritual growth and joy
- D. Foreshadowing of future reconciliation (Jacob and Esau)