

Introduction

Jacob was surrounded by idolatry and by idolatrous practices:

{ His father-in-law and uncle, Laban, practiced some form of divination. In Genesis 30:27, the word translated "experience" is "divination," or "enchantment." He told Jacob, "I have learned by *divination* that the Lord has blessed me for your sake." Divination is from a root word meaning "whisper," and describes the way an enchanter spoke while interpreting omens.

{ Laban had household idols, called Teraphim. These were figurines in human form and were associated with superstition and magic.

{ Jacob's own beloved wife, Rachel, was involved in idolatry. Enamored of her father's household gods, she stole them as they fled.

{ Jacob's whole household was involved in idolatry. Later, in Genesis 35:2-4, you read,

Genesis 35:2-4 And Jacob said to his household and to all who *were* with him, "Put away the foreign gods that *are* among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments. Then let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone." So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods which *were* in their hands, and the earrings which *were* in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree which was by Shechem.

The "foreign gods" were idols, probably in the form of figurines, and the "earrings" spoken of were personal talismans or charms representing the idols.

= Jacob was a believer surrounded by idolatry and by idolatrous practices. Although surrounded, he did not succumb to them; he continued to serve the living God.

^ Jump ahead many centuries...First century Christians were surrounded by idolatry and by idolatrous practices. The Apostle Paul described Athens as a city given over to idols (Acts 17:16). The Apostle John told his flock, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

%o Jump ahead several more centuries, to our own time. Are idolatry and idolatrous practices still a problem, even in our modern world? They are indeed - perhaps moreso than ever before!

{ If you travel outside of the United States you see idolatry of the basest forms thriving in India, in Africa, in Asia, and in Central and South America.

{ Right here in Kings County there are household idols that figure prominently in many religious festivals.

{ Western culture in general is being beset by a rising interest and fascination with occult practices historically associated with idolatry. Visualization techniques are routine therapies today. Channeling has gained acceptance as many prominent professionals and celebrities speak of contacting spirit guides. In his excellent book, *America: The Sorcerer's New Apprentice*, author Dave Hunt writes,

"...Even as scientific and technological advancement is accelerating at an exponential rate, we are witnessing the greatest explosion of occultism of all time. Tens of millions of Americans eager to develop their full potential are being offered magical solutions to life's problems. This new belief system has gained such a wide acceptance and respectability in mainstream America that it has been given a name: The New Age Movement.."

{ Besides all these forms of idolatry and idolatrous practices, the Bible warns believers that *anything* which comes between you and God is an idol. In addition to material objects, such as a house, land, and cars, idols can be people, popular heroes, or those whom we love. Idols can also be immaterial things like fame, hobbies, occupations and recreations.

= Like Jacob, *you* are surrounded by idolatry and idolatrous practices! Like Jacob, although surrounded by them, you need not succumb to them, but can continue to serve the living God!

Some idols are easily identified; others are not. Some idolatrous practices are easily identified; others are not. Rather than identify particular idols and practices, you need to be able to recognize the signs in your life that you are serving idols rather than the living God. Once you realize that you are behaving like an idolator, then you will be ready to identify and deal with whatever your idol or idolatrous practice might be.

With Jacob you see the signs that indicate you are serving the living God rather than idols. With Laban and Rachel you see just the opposite - you see the signs that indicate you are serving idols rather than the living God.

#1 The Signs That You Are Serving The Living God Rather Than Idols

Jacob is an often criticized Bible character. While he had many significant faults, I am amazed at his resolve to serve the Lord despite marrying into a family of idolaters. His life showed at least three signs that he was serving God rather than idols: He was dissatisfied with the world, he was disinterested in wealth, and he was disciplined in his witness.

^ He Was Dissatisfied With The World

Genesis 30:25 reads, "And it came to pass, when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, "Send me away, that I may go to

my own place and to my country." After serving Laban for fourteen years for his two daughters, Jacob longed to begin journeying homeward. It seems that for some time he had been gripped with a growing dissatisfaction for his surroundings. The birth of Joseph simply brought it out into the open.

If *you* have a growing dissatisfaction for this world it is a good sign that you are serving the living God rather than idols. If you are homeward bound for heaven it is difficult to become too enamored of this world's material or immaterial idols or idolatrous practices.

‰ He Was Disinterested In Wealth

This may seem a contradiction, since Jacob left Laban a wealthy man. I didn't say he wasn't wealthy; I said he was *disinterested* in wealth. He never tried to become wealthy. At the close of fourteen years of service he is as poor as he was at the beginning, except for his wives and children, and in that condition of poverty he is willing to leave for home. In the end it is God Who prospers him as he trusts and obeys.

Genesis 30:26 "Give *me* my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me go; for you know my service which I have done for you."

Genesis 30:27 And Laban said to him, "Please *stay*, if I have found favor in your eyes, for I have learned by experience that the LORD has blessed me for your sake."

Genesis 30:28 Then he said, "Name me your wages, and I will give *it*."

Some commentators say that Jacob delayed following God's will on account of greed - coveting the wages Laban offered. That's not true. As you read on you learn that God had told Jacob in a dream that He would prosper him with the colored flocks and herds. Laban's offer must have seemed entirely in the plan of God for Jacob.

Genesis 30:29 So *Jacob* said to him, "You know how I have served you and how your livestock has been with me.

Genesis 30:30 "For what you had before I *came* was little, and it has increased to a great amount; the LORD has blessed you since my coming. And now, when shall I also provide for my own house?"

While disinterested in wealth, Jacob was devoted to work. He worked hard for his employer and actually made Laban wealthy. If he had not wanted to work hard, he could have found many excuses...

Genesis 30:31 So he said, "What shall I give you?" And Jacob said, "You shall not give me anything. If you will do this thing for me, I will again feed and keep your flocks:

Genesis 30:32 "Let me pass through all your flock today, removing from there all the speckled and spotted sheep, and all the brown ones among the lambs, and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and *these* shall be my wages.

Genesis 30:33 "So my righteousness will answer for me in time to come, when the subject of my wages comes before you: every one that *is* not speckled and spotted among the goats, and brown among the lambs, will be considered stolen, if *it is* with me."

Genesis 30:34 And Laban said, "Oh, that it were according to your word!"

Genesis 30:35 So he removed that day the male goats that were speckled and spotted, all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had *some* white in it, and all the brown ones among the lambs, and gave *them* into the hand of his sons.

Genesis 30:36 Then he put three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob fed the rest of Laban's flocks.

Jacob agreed to continue to oversee Laban's affairs, but he must be allowed to prepare for his own future prosperity. He would go through Laban's flocks and cull out the brown sheep and the speckled goats. He would put them off by themselves. Those would be Laban's. That would leave all the solid colored sheep and goats in a separate flock, the white sheep and the black goats. Those would be Laban's, too. The entire existing flock would be Laban's. Jacob would not breed from the existing brown sheep and speckled goats...But all future brown sheep born of the white sheep and all the spotted and speckled goats born of the black goats would be Jacob's.

Jacob was willing to start with nothing and to trust God to prosper Him according to the word he had received!

Genesis 30:37 Now Jacob took for himself rods of green poplar and of the almond and chestnut trees, peeled white strips in them, and exposed the white which *was* in the rods.

Genesis 30:38 And the rods which he had peeled, he set before the flocks in the gutters, in the watering troughs where the flocks came to drink, so that they should conceive when they came to drink.

Genesis 30:39 So the flocks conceived before the rods, and the flocks brought forth streaked, speckled, and spotted.

Genesis 30:40 Then Jacob separated the lambs, and made the flocks face toward the streaked and all the brown in the flock of Laban; but he put his own flocks by themselves and did not put them with Laban's flock.

Genesis 30:41 And it came to pass, whenever the stronger livestock conceived, that Jacob placed the rods before the eyes of the livestock in the gutters, that they might conceive among the rods.

Genesis 30:42 But when the flocks were feeble, he did not put *them* in; so the feebler were Laban's and the stronger Jacob's.

Genesis 30:43 Thus the man became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks, female and male servants, and camels and donkeys.

Many explanations have been given to account for Jacob's breeding practices. On a scientific level it may be that Jacob, a lifelong shepherd, had learned something about these animals and these branches that we still do not fully understand. Whether or not that proves true, Jacob clearly knew something of genetics and selective breeding - though he couldn't explain it in those terms. Solid colored animals have recessive genes for streaks and spots...By breeding the stronger of those animals, eventually their characteristics will become dominant.

More significant is that God had told Jacob to set up these branches, which he did as a symbol of his faith and obedience. Jacob trusted God for his prosperity.

Disinterested in wealth, Jacob became wealthy as a result of his hard work. Whether you become wealthy or not is God's business - you are still to be disinterested in wealth while working hard! Disinterest in acquiring this world's wealth is a healthy sign that you are serving God rather than idols.

^ He Was Disciplined In His Witness

You see this most fully in Jacob's rebuke of Laban in Chapter Thirty-one, verses 36 through 42.

Genesis 31:36 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?"

Genesis 31:37 "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!

Genesis 31:38 "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.

Genesis 31:39 "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.

Genesis 31:40 "*There* I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes.

Genesis 31:41 "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.

Genesis 31:42 "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."

For twenty years - the entire time Jacob had been with Laban - he had been disciplined in his witness. He had been careful not to do anything that would bring a reproach upon himself - even to the point of suffering personal loss and hardship. In the end he was able to glorify God, knowing he had done nothing to dishonor the Name of the Lord.

Maintaining your witness in a disciplined way is a sign that you are serving God rather than idols.

= Check your life for the signs we've discovered - Your attitude toward the world, toward wealth, and toward your witness say a lot about Who or what you are serving!

#2 The Signs That You Are Serving Idols Rather Than The Living God

Laban and Rachel were serving idols and engaging in idolatrous practices. Their lives gave signs of their decision to serve idols rather than the living God.

Laban's signs are somewhat obvious but we should point them out.

^ He Was Involved In Occultic Practices

We pointed out his "divination" earlier, spoken of in 30:27. Notice, though, the confusion: "I have learned by divination that the *Lord* has blessed me for your sake." Laban mixed the occult practices of his idolatrous culture with the worship of the true God.

Christians are doing this *today* - and it is still idolatry! Visualization, inner healing, astral projection, and other occult practices are being encouraged in many Churches. The mixture of idolatrous practices with the worship of the true and living God is an abomination.

%o Laban Manipulated Others For Personal Gain

Genesis 31:1 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."

Laban had been badmouthing Jacob to his sons - enlisting their support against Jacob should he need them. When we gossip or slander or backbite we are manipulating others for our own gain - and we are serving idols rather than the living God.

Genesis 31:2 And Jacob saw the countenance of Laban, and indeed it *was* not *favorable* toward him as before.

You can use your countenance as a tool to manipulate...

Genesis 31:3 Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you."

Genesis 31:4 So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to the field, to his flock,

Genesis 31:5 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.

Genesis 31:6 "And you know that with all my might I have served your father.

Genesis 31:7 "Yet your father has deceived me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not allow him to hurt me.

Genesis 31:8 "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.

Genesis 31:9 "So God has taken away the livestock of your father and given *them* to me.

Genesis 31:10 "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.

Genesis 31:11 "Then the Angel of God spoke to me in a dream, saying, 'Jacob.' And I said, 'Here I am.'

Genesis 31:12 "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.

Genesis 31:13 '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.'"

There are a lot of power struggles in the workplace as men and women seek to manipulate you for their own advantage. God is with you!

Genesis 31:14 Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, "Is there still any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house?"

Genesis 31:15 "Are we not considered strangers by him? For he has sold us, and also completely consumed our money.

Genesis 31:16 "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."

The way some parents manipulate their adult children is awful...At the same time, many adult children need to break free of their parents' manipulation, refusing the benefits that have strings attached.

People who manipulate others for their own advantage are not serving God! Sadly, though, many of them *pose* as servants of God...

^ Laban Was Dull To Spiritual Things

God revealed Himself to Laban in a dream and Laban *still* persisted in his idolatry!

Genesis 31:22 And Laban was told on the third day that Jacob had fled.

Genesis 31:23 Then he took his brethren with him and pursued him for seven days' journey, and he overtook him in the mountains of Gilead.

Genesis 31:24 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 31:25 So Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the mountains, and Laban with his brethren pitched in the mountains of Gilead.

Genesis 31:26 And Laban said to Jacob: "What have you done, that you have stolen away unknown to me, and carried away my daughters like captives *taken* with the sword?"

Genesis 31:27 "Why did you flee away secretly, and steal away from me, and not tell me; for I might have sent you away with joy and songs, with timbrel and harp?"

Genesis 31:28 "And you did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters. Now you have done foolishly in so doing.

Genesis 31:29 "It is in my power to do you harm, but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.'

When you are dull to spiritual truth you are serving idols rather than the living God.

‰ Laban Trusted In False Gods

Genesis 31:30 "And now you have surely gone because you greatly long for your father's house, *but* why did you steal my gods?"

Genesis 31:31 Then Jacob answered and said to Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I said, 'Perhaps you would take your daughters from me by force.'

What good is a god that can be stolen? Or one that can be sat on and remain silent when you are looking for it? Yet most of the world trusts in some false god for their eternal security! Our God is alive!

^ Laban Was A Spiritual Hypocrite

Genesis 31:43 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?

Genesis 31:44 "Now therefore, come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me."

Genesis 31:45 So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar.

Genesis 31:46 Then Jacob said to his brethren, "Gather stones." And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there on the heap.

Genesis 31:47 Laban called it Jegar Sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed.

Genesis 31:48 And Laban said, "This heap *is* a witness between you and me this day." Therefore its name was called Galeed,

Genesis 31:49 also Mizpah, because he said, "May the LORD watch between you and me when we are absent one from another.

Genesis 31:50 "If you afflict my daughters, or if you take *other* wives besides my daughters, *although* no man *is* with us; see, God *is* witness between you and me!"

Genesis 31:51 Then Laban said to Jacob, "Here is this heap and here is *this* pillar, which I have placed between you and me.

Genesis 31:52 "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.

Genesis 31:53 "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.

Genesis 31:54 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.

Genesis 31:55 And early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons and daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place.

Laban tries to appear spiritual, even calling on the Name of the Lord. It's all an act to try to save face. He was acting behind a spiritual mask...

Almost anyone can act spiritual during a meeting on the mountain. It's how they talk and walk afterward that are important. Jacob spoke in Hebrew and offered sacrifice. Laban spoke in Syrian and "returned to his own place."

People who are spiritual at Church but who are walking and talking carnally otherwise are serving idols.

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The signs that Laban was serving idols were obvious. The signs that Rachel was serving idols were more subtle. Some try to find excuses why she was justified in stealing the Teraphim, but there are none. While we can't be sure of all her motives, her possession of the teraphim was wrong and sinful.

Genesis 31:19 Now Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel had stolen the household idols that were her father's.

Genesis 31:20 And Jacob stole away, unknown to Laban the Syrian, in that he did not tell him that he intended to flee.

Genesis 31:21 So he fled with all that he had. He arose and crossed the river, and headed toward the mountains of Gilead.

Skip down to verse thirty-two:

Genesis 31:32 "With whomever you find your gods, do not let him live. In the presence of our brethren, identify what I have of yours and take *it* with you." For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.

Genesis 31:33 And Laban went into Jacob's tent, into Leah's tent, and into the two maids' tents, but he did not find *them*. Then he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's tent.

Genesis 31:34 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*.

Genesis 31:35 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.

Rachel's case is so very subtle. No one knew she was involved in idolatry; it was her secret. Could anyone have known? Was there any sign in her case?

I'll only suggest this:

Things weren't quite right with Rachel. She wouldn't dismount her camel. She said it was because she was on her period...But that doesn't really make too much sense. Nevertheless her father accepts her reason and forgoes searching her saddlebags.

I have found over the years that many individuals who once served the Lord with vigor begin offering lame excuses for "sitting down" instead of serving. Their reasons don't always make sense, but out of love you don't challenge them. Later on the idols they were sitting on are revealed...

Conclusion

We said earlier that anything that comes between you and God is an idol. The possibilities are endless; the potential is subtle.

The question to ask isn't "What are my idols?" We are too quick to think only of bowing down before statues. We are not prone to calling the things we pursue that take God's place by so strong a name.

The way to proceed is to look for the signs in your life that indicate who or what you are serving. The ones you want to find and cultivate are:

= A dissatisfaction for this temporary world...

= A disinterestedness in acquiring this world's wealth...

= And a disciplined effort to maintain your witness.