

Genesis 31¹

Moving On in God's Time

Introduction

A wealthy couple living in London was tired of all the conflict, violence, political and social turmoil that were haunting our world. They were tired of big cities; tired of hectic, frenzied living; tired of the rat race. So as retirement neared, they wished to get away from it all; to find a quiet, safe and secure place to dwell. They wanted to find a place with good climate, far from the hustle and bustle of this world.

They studied economic factors, political stability, population density, access to healthcare, and after exhaustive research and travel, they bought their dream retirement home off the coast of South America. The name of their chosen paradise was the Falkland Islands.

A month after their move in April of 1981, war broke out. The Argentinian military junta tried to gain control of the islands, which had been a British colony since 1841. The Argentinian military wrongly calculated that Britain would not have the will to respond militarily to their coup. But for the next 74 days, a full-scale war raged. The couple's dream of moving to a peaceful, safe, secure corner of the world proved to be a real nightmare!

As we plan to move from one season to another season in life, we all want to move on well. We want to move in God's time so that we can truly be in His next season for us.

(<http://fpcnashville.org/publication/whats-in-a-name-prince-of-peace/>)

In Genesis 31, we read of Jacob facing a crossroad moment in his life. He was in Paddan Aram, married with two wives and many children, and flourishing with many servants and livestock. But in the midst of all this abundance and prosperity, Jacob sensed the need to run away with all that he had. Why? Because his father-in-

¹ 1984 NIV

law (Laban) was beginning to have a hostile attitude towards him, and the sons of Laban were becoming increasingly envious of him.

So, Jacob sensed the need to flee from Laban. Some 20 years ago, he had to flee to Laban because he was running away from Esau who hated him for taking away his birthright by deceit. Then, he came to Laban with perhaps a little more than the shirt on his back. By the grace of God, he now had plenty, and perhaps, even more than Laban. But now, this disturbing question stayed uneasily on his mind—"Should I go away from Laban in view of this environment of increasing hostility and suspicion towards me?"

What's the will of God for Jacob—to move on to God's next season for him, or to remain in the place where he had flourished and prospered by the grace of God?

How do we know it is time to move on in God's will? Genesis 31 gives us some pointers to help us seek God's will, discern it and obey it as we go through different seasons in our life's journey.

I. Pointer I: When the opportunity to do greater good is over (vv. 1-2).

"Now Jacob heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, 'Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and from what belonged to our father he has made all this wealth.' Jacob saw the attitude of Laban, and behold, it was not friendly toward him as formerly."

Here, we see increased animosity from Laban's family—his sons were envious of Jacob; Laban's attitude towards him had also changed (he resented Jacob's prosperity at his expense).

Both Laban and his sons were unhappy with Jacob's success. Essentially, Laban's sons were accusing Jacob of stealing their inheritance. As a result, they became envious and bitter towards Jacob. Laban also treated Jacob differently. Six years earlier, Laban was willing to pay any price to have Jacob stay and care for his flocks (30:28, 31). But now Laban's attitude was quickly changing.

Joseph Ton was pastor of a Baptist church in Rumania, until he was exiled by the Rumanian government in 1981. He once wrote of his experience:

“Years ago I ran away from my country to study theology at Oxford. In 1972, I was ready to go back to Rumania. Some well-intentioned students pointed out that I might be arrested at the border. One student asked, ‘Joseph, what chances do you have of successfully implementing your plans?’”

He asked God about it, and God brought to mind Matthew 10:16—“I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves.” He sensed the Lord challenging him to return to “dangerous” Rumania, and he then decided to go back to his homeland.

He wrote later: “I began to preach boldly and widely soon after my return to Rumania, and harassment and arrests came. One day during interrogation, an officer threatened to kill me. Then I said, ‘Sir, your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. Sir, you know my sermons are all over the country on tapes now. If you kill me, I will be sprinkling them with my blood ... My sermons will then speak ten times louder than before. So, go on and kill me. I win the supreme victory then.’”

The officer sent him home. That helped to put this conviction in Joseph Ton’s heart as he said it in his own words: “For years I was a Christian who was cautious because I wanted to survive. I had accepted all the restrictions the authorities put on me because I wanted to live. Now I wanted to die, and they wouldn’t oblige. Now I could do whatever I wanted in Rumania. For years I wanted to save my life, and I was losing it. Now that I wanted to lose it, I was winning it.”

Joseph Ton had learnt this very important lesson—to let go, even of the safety and success we are enjoying, and go where the God leads is the surest way to do greater things in Him.

(<http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-kenneth-henes-stories-doubt-examplesoffaith-16803.asp>)

There will be a time when the opportunity to do greater good is over ... and to do greater things in God is to let go and let God move us on to His next season for us, even if it means leaving the place where we have flourished.

It's time to move on and not overstay at where we are...

II. Pointer 2: When God has clearly spoken through His Word (v. 3).

“The LORD said to Jacob, ‘Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.’”

The last recorded revelation that Jacob had received from God was 20 years earlier, while he was still in the land of promise (28:10-22). But now, Jacob received a divine directive to return to the Promised Land. He was directed and assured by God.

It seems to me that God doesn't often speak to us through a burning bush or with a booming voice. How then are we able to hear the timely voice of God to us?

One time I was driving with my wife beside me. As I was in some hurry, I wanted to listen to the radio to hear the traffic condition. But I also wanted to talk with my wife. So I turned the radio on low just enough to hear it in the background as I talked with my wife. Then when the traffic condition report was about to come on, I knew it was time to stop talking with my wife and turn the radio up so that I could hear the traffic condition report clearly.

In a similar way, we need to make sure we have turned our spiritual radio on every day. As we start our busy day, we still need to tune in to God so that when He needs to get an important message to us, we will hear it clearly.

Praying, reading and meditating on the Word of God are ways that can help us keep our spiritual radio tuned in to hear from God. We need to be still and listen to what God is speaking to us when the time comes. And He will give us the wisdom and guidance that we need.

Yes, it's time to move on when God clearly says so. And to know God's time for us to move on, we first need to constantly keep in tune with Him.

It's time to move on ...

III. Pointer 3: When there is affirmation from significant others (vv. 4-16).

These significant people can be our family members or some people important to us.

Jacob's wives approved of his intention to leave Laban. Jacob already knew for sure that it was right for him to leave—the Lord Himself had called him to return to Canaan.

Jacob laid out the facts to Rachel and Leah about Laban and God's divine providence. He describes the tension with Laban in 31:4-7a:

“So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to his flock in the field, and said to them, ‘I see your father's attitude, that it is not friendly toward me as formerly, but the God of my father has been with me. You know that I have served your father with all my strength. Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times.’”

Fortunately, God proved Himself to be faithful. In 31:7b-12, Jacob testified of God's provision of him during his years of serving Laban.

It wasn't really Jacob's own scheming that brought him prosperity and protection. It was the blessing of God! It is also worth noting that God told Jacob to go back to Bethel, back to the place where he first encountered the Lord in a personal way (31:13).

In 31:14-16, we read that Rachel and Leah agreed with Jacob's assessment. They said to him:

“Do we still have any portion or inheritance in our father's house? Are we not reckoned by him as foreigners? For he

has sold us, and has also entirely consumed our purchase price. Surely all the wealth which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and our children; now then, do whatever God has said to you.”

Rachel and Leah recognized divine justice in God’s taking the wealth of their father and giving it to Jacob. This might be the first time in quite a while when these two sisters agreed on anything. They could agree in uniting against a common adversary—their father Laban! Why? Because Laban had stolen their inheritance, treated them like foreigners, sold them, and used up the money from their dowry. They submitted themselves to Jacob’s leadership. By their submission, they were ultimately coming under the safety net of God’s leadership and authority.

When it’s the time for us to move on, the Lord often uses the significant people in our lives to affirm our decisions. So seek the counsel and perspectives of the significant people in our lives at our crossroad moments.

It’s time to move on...

IV. Pointer 4: When God helps us win over the opposition we face (vv. 17-42).

Jacob fled one day with his wives without the knowledge and consent of Laban. Three days later, Laban got news of it. He pursued Jacob and his people for seven days till he caught up with them. But before Laban caught up with Jacob, the Lord appeared to him in a dream and warned him “not to speak to Jacob either good or bad” (31:17-24).

Gen 31:25-30 reads:

“Laban caught up with Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen camped in the hill country of Gilead. Then Laban said to Jacob, ‘What have you done by deceiving me and carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword? Why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell me so that I might have sent you away with joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre; and did not allow me to kiss my sons and my

daughters? Now you have done foolishly. It is in my power to do you harm, but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful not to speak either good or bad to Jacob.' Now you have indeed gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods?"

Laban presented himself as the aggrieved master and father. But the truth is that he was only concerned about his wealth and false gods.

The story reaches its height of tension when Jacob ignorantly allowed Laban to search for his gods in vv. 31-35. Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them. So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two maids, but he did not find them. Then he entered Rachel's tent. Now Rachel had taken the household idols and sat on them. Laban felt through the whole tent but did not find them. What a demonstration of divine protection!

After Laban's fruitless search, Jacob unleashed 20 years of pent-up frustration in 31:36-42:

"Then Jacob became angry and contended with Laban; and Jacob said to Laban, 'What is my transgression? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me? Though you have felt through all my goods, what have you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two. These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten the rams of your flocks. That which was torn of beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself. You required it of my hand whether stolen by day or stolen by night. Thus I was: by day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. These twenty years I have been in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock, and you changed my wages ten times. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had not been for me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my

affliction and the toil of my hands, so He rendered judgment last night.”

Thus, Jacob defended his faithful service to Laban. But notice something here—Laban did not disagree with Jacob. He couldn't argue with the fact that Jacob had more than paid for his wives and flocks.

To be sure, Jacob had not always been an angel. He had lived his life relying on trickery and deceit to get what he wanted. Laban turned the tables on Jacob, forcing him to take a dose of his own medicine. Jacob now knew how Esau felt.

It's time for God to use Jacob's life in a new season and in a greater way.

William Wilberforce was one of five members of the Clapham Sect (the aristocratic circle of Christian activists) who held seats in the House of Commons from the late 1700s. He regarded slavery as a national crime, and engaged himself in an anti-slavery campaign unprecedented in English history.

But the English ruling classes viewed him and his like-minded peers as radical and dangerous revolutionaries.

As a parliamentarian, Wilberforce laboured to submit anti-slavery bills for 18 years, but was repeatedly defeated in Parliament. Finally, the act abolishing the slave trade was passed in 1807.

In the summer of 1833, Parliament passed the second reading of the Emancipation Act, ensuring the end of slavery in the British Empire. Three days later, Wilberforce died.

By the grace of God, Wilberforce was able to endure repeated setbacks in his many anti-slavery efforts, and finally, won over the opposition in Parliament. This victory paved the way for the implementation of many more social reforms in England in the ensuing years.

Indeed, when God helps us win over the opposition we face, He has intention to use us or our legacy in a greater way.

(<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-53/william-wilberforce-and-abolition-of-slave-trade-did-you.html>)

God helps us win over the opposition we face for this one purpose—to move us forward into His new season for us so that He can use our lives in a greater way.

It's time to move on...

V. Pointer 5: When God provides a closure of peace and goodwill (vv. 43-55).

Our story concludes with Laban saying to Jacob in v. 44: “So now come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.”

In essence, Laban is saying: “I cannot trust you out of my sight. The Lord must be the watchman between us if we and our goods are to be kept safe from each other.”

In response, Jacob set up a stone as a pillar (v. 45), and a heap of stones was erected as a monument (v. 46). Laban managed to get Jacob to swear before his God to several particulars:

- Jacob promised never to mistreat Laban's daughters and never to take any other wives in addition to them (v. 50).
- Both Laban and Jacob covenanted that they would not go past the heap of stones to harm each other (v. 52).

The covenant of peace and goodwill was sealed by a meal shared by Laban, Jacob and other relatives (vv. 53-54).

Having agreed to these matters, Laban said farewell to his daughters and their children. Blessing them, he returned to his home (v. 55).

Laban and Jacob had vowed to co-exist in peace and goodwill. It was a good closure to a long and often stormy relationship between the two men. What a happy ending indeed!

When I was a new Christian, I struggled to move on and grow in my spiritual journey. A key cause of this struggle was my problem in loving and forgiving my father.

One morning, my father suffered a stroke and had to be hospitalized. There was massive bleeding in his brain and he slipped into a coma. The doctor could not turn his condition around. Later, God led me into the ICU where he was hanging on to his last moments with the help of a life-supporting system.

I held his hand and said, “Pa, I have found it so hard to love and forgive you. But I know I am wrong and I have asked Jesus to forgive me. He also loves you and wants to forgive you. If you are listening and can understand me, you can pray to Jesus and say in your heart, ‘Jesus, I believe in you and I now ask you to forgive my sins and bring me home to be with you in heaven.’”

I was not sure if he heard me, or understood me even if he did hear me. But I felt a great sense of peace upon me then and I said to him, “Pa, I love you.”

With that, I settled things with my father; I had a closure of peace and goodwill with him. He died a few hours later.

Throughout the bereavement, I mourned for the death of my father. More than that, I celebrated the death of my own unloving and unforgiving spirit because God had granted me a closure of peace and goodwill with my father just before he passed away. So now, I could move on with strength for the future, and not with weakness of the past.

Not long later, the Lord led a Baptist pastor to meet up with me. The Lord used him to reassure me of my salvation and strengthen me in my faith. I returned to church to worship the Lord and to fellowship with His people on a regular basis. Before that, I was a backslidden Christian and had been away from church for a long time. That was, and still is, one of the major turning points in my journey with the Lord.

A good closure in peace and goodwill will help us move on with strength for the future, and not with weakness of the past.

Conclusion

When Jacob first came to Laban, he was running away from Esau. This time, when God called him to leave Laban and go back to Esau, he was really not running away even though in his human weakness, he tried to leave Laban secretly. In reality, God was calling him to move on, not to run away.

God was calling him back to face Esau as a changed person. He had experienced a taste of his own medicine—from having deceived Esau to being deceived by Laban. But he would be touched by God on his journey back to Canaan at Peniel (Gen. 32). There, he would be changed—from Jacob the deceiver to Israel the progenitor of the 12 tribes of the Jewish nation.

Yes, as Jacob turned towards Canaan, he was obeying God's next season for him, not running away but moving on in God's time.

Is it God's time for you to move on? How do you seek, discern and obey His will in this? Genesis 31 gives us five helpful pointers:

- When the opportunity to do greater good is over
- When God has spoken clearly
- When significant others affirm what God has spoken
- When God helps us win over our opposition
- When God provides a closure of peace and goodwill

Is it time for you to move on to God's next season for you?

Seek, discern and obey God's time and will for you to move on to His next season for you so that you can do even greater things in Him. Amen!