

CHAPTER 7

**LIFE WITH
A LOUSE**

Genesis 30:25–31:55

Let's talk about the Laban in your life. I know. You'd rather not. You'd rather talk about something—someone—more pleasant. Your Laban is

anything but pleasant.

Your Laban is demanding. He has the sensitivity of a rabid pit bull.

Your Laban is conniving. She breaks promises like a short-order cook cracks eggs.

Your Laban is deceptive. There's always a card up his sleeve or fingers crossed behind her back.

Your Laban is manipulative. He'll flatter you until he gets what he wants then move on to someone else.

Your Laban loves to be adored. "Enough of me talking about me. What about you? You talk about me."

Your Laban is streptococcus on the tonsils of your life. You'd like a day without him, but you're stuck. Your Laban is your in-law. Your Laban is your boss. Your Laban sits in the next cubicle or plays on the same team.

A future with no Laban, for the time, is not an option. Maybe you wonder why in the world God has a Laban in yours.

Jacob asked himself the question at least once a day for 5,110 days—the number of days he'd worked for the man. Fourteen years! He could not escape him. He'd married Laban's daughters, for goodness sake.

The original agreement was for seven years, but Laban pulled a wedding night shell trick, swapping Rachel with her older sister, Leah, and leaving Jacob with no option but to work seven more years.

In the Bible the number seven often signifies “complete.” Appropriate symbolism because Jacob surely felt like a complete fool working for less than minimum wage for a man who traded his daughters like a cattleman trades livestock at the stock show.

During the second set of seven years, Jacob saw

his family and his troubles multiply. He gained eleven sons and one daughter: seven children by Leah, one by Rachel, two by Rachel's maid, Bilhah, and two by Leah's maid, Zilpah. Jacob had arrived in Laban's camp with nothing, and after fourteen stress-filled years, his headaches had increased, but his bank account had not.

Ten times in six years Laban altered his method of computing Jacob's wages, leaving Jacob empty-handed (Gen. 31:41–42). Is this how God rewards his children? Is this how God keeps his promises? What happened to the ladder that led into heaven? Where are the ascending and descending angels? Why can't one of them pluck Laban and plop him into someone else's life?

Where is God in the midst of this chaos?

The answer came in the form of a dream—an odd one, but dreams often are. Jacob told Leah and Rachel about it.

In breeding season I once had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the male goats mating with the flock were streaked, speckled or spotted. The angel of God said to me in the dream, "Jacob." I answered, "Here I am." And he said, "Look up and see that all the male goats mating with the flock are streaked, speckled or spotted, for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land." (Gen. 31:10–13 NIV)

Set aside the curious comments about streaked, speckled, and spotted sheep. They matter, and we will return to them in a few paragraphs. But they matter less than the big news that God shared with Jacob: "I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you."

I have not turned away. I have not forgotten your plight. I have not dismissed your need. I . . . have . . .

seen!

Jacob was left with two options: trust God or grow anxious. He could either believe in the presence of heaven or heed the presence of problems. If you assume he focused on his problems, no one would fault you. Jacob has done little thus far to show his faith.

Yet we are about to see a change in the man. A change for the better (albeit momentary). We've waited a decade and a half to say those words! We've seen the swindler swindle his brother and cheat his father. We've seen the fugitive stumble into Laban's camp. We've seen the lover so drunk on love and liquor he wakes up with the wrong bride in a story as scrambled as a spilled Scrabble box. We've seen the passive husband sit in silence as his wives squabble and their hearts break. We've seen him reap what he sowed. But finally something within Jacob begins to stir. He turns in his resignation to his father-in-law.

After Rachel had had Joseph, Jacob spoke to Laban, “Let me go back home. Give me my wives and children for whom I’ve served you. You know how hard I’ve worked for you.”

Laban said, “If you please, I have learned through divine inquiry that GOD has blessed me because of you.” He went on, “So name your wages. I’ll pay you.” (Gen. 30:25–28 THE MESSAGE)

Laban was not a man of faith. He was not a seeker of God. Yet Laban was getting richer each year. He couldn’t figure out why. He sought an explanation through “divine inquiry.” He checked his tarot cards and consulted palm readers. He rolled dice and read tea leaves. Finally he realized the house of Laban prospered because of the presence of Jacob. “GOD has blessed me because of you” (Gen. 30:27 THE MESSAGE).

Life with a Laban can leave us wondering if we are making a difference. The truth is, we aren’t,

but God is! Wherever we go, we carry God’s blessings with us, blessings that overflow into the lives of others.¹ How good of God! He wants to bless even the Labans of the world. He uses the Jacobs to do so.

Jacob told his father-in-law, “You know well what my work has meant to you and how your livestock has flourished under my care. The little you had when I arrived has increased greatly; everything I did resulted in blessings for you. Isn’t it about time that I do something for my own family?” (vv. 29–30 THE MESSAGE).

In other words, “Laban, I took your business from a corner store to a multimillion-dollar operation. Whatever I touched, the Lord blessed. Under my direction your income has multiplied. But now it is time for me to care for my family.”

Laban, tight as the strings of a tennis racket, asked, “So, what should I pay you?”

Jacob said, “You don’t have to pay me a thing. But how about this? I will go back to pasture and care for your flocks. Go through your entire flock today and take out every speckled or spotted sheep, every dark-colored lamb, every spotted or speckled goat. They will be my wages. That way you can check on my honesty when you assess my wages. If you find any goat that’s not speckled or spotted or a sheep that’s not black, you will know that I stole it.” (Gen. 30:31–33 THE MESSAGE)

Remember the dream? In it God told Jacob to build a flock with streaked, speckled, or spotted animals. So Jacob obeyed. He offered to take as his wages a handful of dotted sheep and goats. Laban couldn’t believe his ears. No wonder Jacob was broke. A shepherd can’t get rich by taking just a few marked sheep and goats.

Laban thought Jacob was a fool. Jacob, however, was acting in faith.

“Fair enough,” said Laban. “It’s a deal.” But that very day Laban removed all the mottled and spotted billy goats and all the speckled and spotted nanny goats, every animal that had even a touch of white on it plus all the black sheep and placed them under the care of his sons. Then he put a three-day journey between himself and Jacob. Meanwhile Jacob went on tending what was left of Laban’s flock. (Gen. 30:34–36 THE MESSAGE)

Before Jacob had a chance to cull the flocks, Laban purged them of the speckled and spotted sheep. Together with his sons and workers, he scampered up and down the hills snatching the dark and spotted ones. Laban then sent the sheep off on a three-day journey to a distant pasture. Jacob was left with a fraction of his promised wages. Ever the shark, Laban cheated Jacob again.

Can’t we envision Laban, smug and pigeon chested with pride, talking to himself as he

swayed side to side on his camel. “Maybe your God forgot you this time, Jacob?”

Can't we envision Jacob coming ever so close to lashing out against Laban? It wasn't enough for the man to cheat him at the wedding. It wasn't enough for Laban to force Jacob to work for nothing. It wasn't enough for Laban to take advantage of his own son-in-law. Laban had to leave Jacob with next to nothing!

But Jacob didn't react in anger. Instead, he set about the task of building his flock. He took “fresh branches from poplar, almond, and plane trees and peeled the bark, leaving white stripes on them. He stuck the peeled branches in front of the watering troughs where the flocks came to drink. When the flocks were in heat, they came to drink and mated in front of the streaked branches. Then they gave birth to young that were streaked or spotted or speckled” (Gen. 30:37–39 THE MESSAGE).

What is going on here? Was this superstition? Folklore? Or was Jacob ahead of his time? Some scholars think so. “It has been recently proposed that . . . Jacob's stripping the bark from the branches may have exposed some nutrient that was then in the drinking water . . . thereby changing the colour of the coats of the young that they bore.”²

Over the next six years Jacob put this unique breeding plan to work. “[Jacob] got richer and richer, acquiring huge flocks, lots and lots of servants, not to mention camels and donkeys” (Gen. 30:43 THE MESSAGE).

God rewarded Jacob's faith! God used Laban to teach Jacob to trust God. Jacob didn't like Laban. He wanted to leave Laban. Yet he was better because of Laban.

Laban was Jacob's catfish. Research the phrase “catfish and codfish,” and you'll find this apocryphal, yet insightful, tale.

Fishermen struggled to find a way to deliver codfish to market. They tried freezing them, but the fish lost its flavor. They tried transporting them in a seawater tank. The codfish would be inactive too long, making it soft and mushy. Finally someone came up with a solution. Catfish and codfish are natural enemies. A catfish was placed in the tank. It chased the codfish during the transport, resulting in the delivery of healthy cod.

Great story. While there's no proof that fishermen use catfish, there's ample evidence that God does.

In Jacob's story Laban was Jacob's catfish.

And you? Might God be saying the same words to you he said to Jacob? "I see what is happening. I know about the manipulation. The unfairness. The disregard for your feelings or future. I see it. I see you. And I am using this experience to train you."

God is prone to do this. Scripture explains, "This trouble you're in isn't punishment; it's *training*, the normal experience of children God is doing what *is* best for us, training us to live God's holy best" (Heb. 12:8, 10 THE MESSAGE, emphasis in the original).

Are you being trained?

You, like Jacob, are part of God's delivery system of hope. You are a courier of his covenant. Yet, you, like Jacob, have your share of foibles and flaws.

So "God is *at work in you*, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13 RSV, emphasis mine). He will "equip you with everything good that you may do his will, *working in you* that which is pleasing in his sight" (Heb. 13:21 RSV, emphasis mine).

We are the rough stones; he is the lapidary. We are the bent timber. He is the carpenter.

Rather than grumble about the people who irritate you, see them for what they are—God's training tool. He is teaching you to trust him. He hasn't promised to give you striped sheep. But he has promised to . . .

- anoint you with the oil of gladness. (Ps. 45:7)
- supply all your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:19)
- bless you with good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over. (Luke 6:38)
- grant sufficient grace. (2 Cor. 12:9)
- make all things work together for good. (Rom. 8:28)
- defeat any weapon that is forged against you. (Isa. 54:17)
- provide streams in the desert. (Isa. 43:19)
- make a way when there is no way. (Isa. 43:16)
- turn sorrow into joy. (Ps. 30:11)
- bind up your broken heart. (Ps. 147:3)

At some point someone somewhere is going to boil your blood. He or she may not be a true scoundrel like Laban, but even those closest to you will let an insult fly now and again. The temptation is to retaliate, to use your head in a less-than-rational way. Don't give in. Don't fight Laban on Laban's terms. Respond to Laban with faith in God.

Jacob did. At the end of six years, Jacob had enough riches and had had enough of Laban. So he loaded up and left for Canaan.

Laban pursued him. He accused Jacob of being a thief. Two decades of frustration fired out of Jacob like a howitzer spits bullets.

I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten rams from your flocks. I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself. And you demanded payment from me for what-

ever was stolen by day or night. This was my situation: The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes. It was like this for the twenty years I was in your household. I worked for you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, 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 with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed. But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you. (Gen. 31:38–42 NIV)

Jacob had fulfilled his fourteen years. He absorbed the losses. Endured the bad weather and weathered the bad times. Laban did not disagree. He could not disagree. Jacob not only survived his season with Laban; he thrived. He had developed a deeper faith. He declared for all to hear, “God has seen my hardship.” God used Laban to shape Jacob.

Is God using your Laban to shape you?

You’d prefer a life with no Laban. Who wouldn’t?

But life comes with Labans. If this season has one chasing you around the tank, remember: God uses peculiar people to bring out the best in his people.

Try this: *Talk to God about your Laban.* Ask him, “Lord, what lessons are you teaching me through this catfish?”

And this: *Thank God for your Laban.* “When troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow” (James 1:2–3 NLT).

Life’s Labans can make you want to pull your hair out—but they can also make you desperate for God. And that’s an invaluable blessing. So the next time life gives you Labans . . . you know what to do!

Your Laban will not be around forever. The day is soon coming when you, like Jacob, will be released. Till then, trust God's purpose and promise. You'll be better because of it.