

Commentary

Session 5

Home!

God is with His people, giving direction for living.

GENESIS 31:2-16

FIRST THOUGHTS

Nothing stirs the heart like a longing for home, especially for those who've been away for an extended time. For most, home holds fond memories of love, acceptance, faith, and laughter. It is also the place we turn to when needing rest and direction. There really is no place like home.

(In PSG, p. 46) **What makes a place feel like home? What makes the longing for home such a strong emotion?**

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

GENESIS 30:25–31:55

After Jacob completed his agreement with Laban, he requested permission to return home (30:25-43). Fourteen years had elapsed, and he hoped his brother's wrath had abated. He had two wives, two concubines, eleven sons, and a daughter. Jacob was ready to apply his skills for his own prosperity. However, Laban feared losing his son-in-law's talent. He believed God had blessed him because of Jacob. So he made a counteroffer. Following some haggling, the two con-artists reached an agreement. If Jacob continued to shepherd Laban's sheep he could keep any speckled or spotted lambs. Laban attempted to thwart Jacob by removing animals he thought might breed such lambs. Jacob, in turn, attempted to outsmart Laban by folk methods. However, God blessed Jacob and God made Jacob extremely wealthy.

Laban's wealth did not multiply like Jacob's. Consequently, his sons felt their inheritance was in jeopardy. Realizing Laban's hostility, Jacob decided to leave and return home (31:1-21). He met clandestinely with Leah and Rachel and informed his wives that their family must return to Canaan. While Laban was away, Jacob and his family slipped across the Euphrates River and headed towards Canaan.

When Laban discovered Jacob's departure, he pursued him for a week before catching him in the hill country of Gilead (31:22-35). Although Jacob had reached the frontier of his homeland, Laban's arrival threatened to prematurely end his homecoming. God intervened and warned Laban to approach Jacob with caution. Unbeknown to Jacob, Rachel had stolen her father's idols. But when Laban searched her tent, he failed to uncover them because she sat on them during the search. Thereafter, the two protagonists ended their rivalry and made a covenant with each other (31:36-55). Only Esau remained as an obstacle to Jacob's return home.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

OBEDIENCE REQUIRED (GEN. 31:2-3)

VERSES 2-3

² And Jacob saw from Laban's face that his attitude toward him was not the same as before. ³ The Lord said to him, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you."

Laban retained Jacob's services on terms determined exclusively by Jacob (Gen. 30:31). Under the terms of the contract, Jacob's revenue soon outstripped Laban's own profits. Consequently, Laban's sons feared losing their inheritance. They began to complain openly that Jacob was deviously draining assets from their father's estate (31:1). Jacob realized he no longer was welcome in his father-in-law's house. Laban now looked at him with resentment and regret.

The Lord demonstrated His faithfulness by instructing Jacob to return to the land of his fathers. For years he had been locked into a back and forth struggle of deceit with Laban. At the moment Jacob was winning, but disaster loomed as Laban's bitterness grew. Unlike Laban, God was faithful. Jacob's destiny rested in God's nature, not Jacob's behavior.

At Bethel, God had made four promises to Jacob (Gen. 28:13-15). First, God promised to give the land of Canaan to Jacob and his descendants. The *land of your fathers* recounted to Jacob that God had made the same promise to Abraham and to Isaac. So now God intervened and instructed Jacob to return to that land. Second, God had promised Jacob's descendants would be as numerous as dust. He certainly had a good start toward that promise with eleven sons and one daughter. Third, God had promised to bless all the peoples on earth through Jacob and his offspring. This was a messianic prophecy that Christ fulfilled. Fourth, God had promised He would not leave Jacob. Once more, God repeated this truth: *I will be with you*.

This last promise is one God makes to all of His covenant people. He emphasized it in Jesus by the name *Immanuel*, "God is with us" (Matt. 1:23). He is present in every believer through the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-17). Believers can be thankful for God's faithfulness.

(In PSG, p. 49) **How has God demonstrated His faithfulness in your life?**

OBEDIENCE DECLARED (GENESIS 31:4-13)

VERSES 4-5

⁴ Jacob had Rachel and Leah called to the field where his flocks were. ⁵ He said to them, "I can see from your father's face that his attitude toward me is not the same as before, but the God of my father has been with me.

Jacob met with Rachel and Leah and recounted the actions he had taken in obedience to God, giving God credit for his prosperity. To alleviate any suspicion a large gathering might arouse, only Leah and Rachel were summoned. Bilhad and Zilpah were not included in the meeting because of their lower status. The discussion took place out in the field for secrecy. Symbolically it denoted the beginning of separation from Laban.

Jacob reasoned with his two wives using logical arguments and impassioned language. He began by laying out the deterioration of his relationship to their father. Laban's current loathing of Jacob was obvious. He now viewed Jacob as an adversary rather than an asset.

In contrast, Jacob acknowledged God's providence in his life. He identified God as *the God of my father*. The identification revealed both the magnitude of his father's faith and his own spiritual deficiency. Isaac had never

vacillated in his devotion to the one true God. On the other hand, Jacob had yet to fully commit to his father's God. His wives worshiped the gods of their father as well as the God of his father. Nevertheless, his decision to return to Canaan was a major step in Jacob's pilgrimage that would climax in the encounter at Peniel (Gen. 32:24-32). Despite Jacob's spiritual imperfection, God had been faithful. Just as He promised, God had been with Jacob.

VERSES 6-8

⁶ You know that with all my strength I have served your father ⁷ and that he has cheated me and changed my wages ten times. But God has not let him harm me. ⁸ If he said, 'The spotted sheep will be your wages,' then all the sheep were born spotted. If he said, 'The streaked sheep will be your wages,' then all the sheep were born streaked.

Jacob worked twenty years for Laban (Gen. 31:38). During the first seven years his desire to marry Rachel propelled him to work exceedingly hard. During the next seven years he labored to complete his obligations in acquiring her after Laban's deception in substituting Leah as Jacob's bride. The last six years he labored to improve his personal wealth and status. In each case he directly *served* Laban. The terminology implies his work benefited Laban. However, at no time did Jacob slack off. Indeed, he seems to have developed a strong work ethic during this period of his life.

After noting his consistent hard work in serving his father-in-law, Jacob pointed out Laban's duplicity. First, Jacob accused Laban of cheating him. Laban's futile attempt to remove all the sheep he thought might benefit Jacob (30:35) validated this charge. Second, he charged Laban with changing his wages. He supported this charge with specific examples. It is unclear if *ten times* is literal or an idiom for "many times."

The conjunction *but* in verse 7 introduces a profound statement of faith. Jacob attributed his safety and prosperity to God rather than to his own skill or cunning. Moreover, he omitted the qualifying "of my father" or "my fathers." Jacob's pilgrimage of faith had taken another step forward. He now testified that the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac was *God*. In time, his name would be added to form the triad the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob (Ex. 3:6).

Jacob's purpose was not to prove Laban's treachery but to illustrate God's providence. Laban's intrigue always backfired on him. If he established that Jacob receive *spotted sheep* as his wages, *then all the sheep were born spotted*. When Laban changed Jacob's salary to *streaked sheep*, from then on *all the lambs were born streaked*. Each time Laban switched the terms of the agreement, the coloration of the lambs born thereafter also changed to the new specification.

VERSE 9

⁹ God has taken away your father's herds and given them to me.

The expected lifespan of domestic sheep is ten to twelve years. During the six years of Jacob and Laban's working agreement, Laban's flocks would have suffered significant loss through natural attrition. Since all the newborn lambs were given to Jacob as wages, dead animals were not being replaced. Consequently, Laban's flocks easily could have been less than half the size they had been when the agreement was made. In stark contrast, Jacob started with zero sheep, but each year acquired all the lambs born that year. By the sixth year most of his sheep would have been breeding. Their offspring also added to the growth of Jacob's flocks. Moreover, very few of his sheep would have died. His sheep now outnumbered Laban's.

Jacob employed the best techniques of animal husbandry in building his flock. He also used methods with no scientific value. But he recognized that neither scientific breeding nor mysterious incantations could produce results of the magnitude he had experienced. Only God could orchestrate such supernatural outcomes. Therefore, he plainly stated *God had taken away* Laban's sheep and *given them* to Jacob.

VERSES 10-12

¹⁰ “When the flocks were breeding, I saw in a dream that the streaked, spotted, and speckled males were mating with the females. ¹¹ In that dream the angel of God said to me, ‘Jacob!’ and I said, ‘Here I am.’ ¹² And he said, ‘Look up and see: all the males that are mating with the flocks are streaked, spotted, and speckled, for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you.

The chronology here is unclear. Most likely Jacob recounted *a dream* he had before his agreement with Laban to show his request for speckled or spotted lambs as his wages came from God, not his own brilliance.

The relationship between *the angel of God* and God Himself is ambiguous. In some cases a distinction seems to exist between God and the angel of God. In other cases the angel of God seems to be none other than God. Here *the angel of God* denotes some manifestation of God Himself (see v. 13). Jacob knew that God had spoken to him on that occasion.

God addressed *Jacob* by his name. This demonstrated God’s complete knowledge of the man and His desire for intimate, personal relationships with people. Jacob’s reply, *Here I am*, acknowledged reception of God’s call. Moreover, it indicated that Jacob awaited God’s further communication.

Jacob’s prosperity was the blessing of the Lord, not merely the result of Jacob’s insights into animal husbandry. As the angel of the Lord continued speaking, He called upon Jacob to comprehend God’s role in his success. *Look up and see* parallels “saw in a dream” in verse 10. The dream foretold what would happen. The exhortation challenged Jacob to comprehend how it happened. Jacob understood and was anxious for Rachel and Leah to appreciate what really occurred. Therefore, he said only enough about breeding streaked, spotted, and speckled lambs to identify what he attributed to God.

For I have seen are God’s words. They pose a common theme in Scripture. God is a God who acts, but His actions are based upon His knowledge of a situation. His knowledge always is complete and accurate. In this case, God had caused Jacob to prosper and Laban to decline because He had observed Laban’s treatment of Jacob. Laban’s behavior had been unsatisfactory in God’s eyes.

God had promised Abraham that He would curse those who treated him with contempt (Gen. 12:3). As the promise passed from generation to generation, it remained intact. Consequently Laban’s conduct fell within the scope of those cursed by God. That is to say, it was behavior that warranted and received God’s punitive judgment.

VERSE 13

¹³ I am the God of Bethel, where you poured oil on the stone marker and made a solemn vow to me. Get up, leave this land, and return to your native land.”

The angel of God had not appeared to Jacob merely to disclose that Laban’s losses were divine punishment. The primary purpose of the event focused on Jacob. The time had come for him to *return* to Canaan. The angel of the God now identified Himself as *the God of Bethel*. Two decades earlier, Jacob camped at Bethel on his flight from Esau’s wrath (28:10-22). That night he had a dream in which he saw angels going back and forth between heaven and earth. In that earlier dream God spoke to Jacob and made him heir to the promises made earlier to his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. God concluded that appearance with a new promise specific to Jacob. He said, “I will bring you back to this land” (28:15).

God recalled Jacob’s response to the revelation. He had erected a *stone marker* and *poured oil* on it. Then Jacob said, “If God will be with me and watch over me on this journey ... and if I return safely to my fathers’ house, then the LORD will be my God” (28:20-21). Jacob’s current prosperity provided evidence that God had been with him. Moreover, God’s “I have seen” (v. 12) corroborated His pledge to watch over Jacob. Now it was

time for Jacob to return to his *native land*. Jacob had been born in Canaan. His *native land* was Canaan, the land God promised to give to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Jacob informed his family that God was the one directing him to return home. Believers honor God by obeying His commands, knowing that He has their best interests in mind.

What are some ways that God directs believers today?

OBEDIENCE AFFIRMED (GEN. 31:14-16)

VERSE 14

¹⁴ Then Rachel and Leah answered him, “Do we have any portion or inheritance in our father’s family?”

Leah was the older sister and Jacob’s first wife. Yet the name of the younger sister, *Rachel*, repeatedly appears first. This reflects Jacob’s greater affection for her and accentuates the prominent role she plays in subsequent events (31:19,31-35). On this occasion the two wives were in total agreement. They spoke with one voice to raise rhetorical questions that expressed their attitude about going to Canaan. The two women were from the region of Haran and had not lived anywhere else. Jacob’s announcement meant they would be uprooted from everything and everyone they knew to move to a foreign land.

The first question the two sisters asked implies they already sensed alienation within their *father’s family*. The term *portion* has legal connotations and commonly denotes a share of an *inheritance*, often as a technical nuance for a portion of land. The sense of the question is, “When our father dies, we will not receive any of his land or possessions.” They appreciated that their future unmistakably rested with their husband, not their father.

VERSE 15

¹⁵ Are we not regarded by him as outsiders? For he has sold us and has certainly spent our purchase price.

The two sisters categorically stated that their father regarded them *as outsiders*. The Hebrew word can refer to a foreigner or a stranger. It also could be a technical term for a prostitute (Prov. 2:16; 5:20). All of the uses contain a component of something unknown or unfamiliar. Hence, Rachel and Leah accused their father of viewing them in terms contrary to those a father should hold towards his daughters.

The sisters answered their own question, and for the first time, revealed their opinion of their father’s arrangements for their marriages. The word translated *purchase price* refers to the bridal compensation customarily paid to the bride’s family by the groom’s father. In Jacob’s case, he had labored for fourteen years to obtain the two sisters. But the two women here did not use the term for the bridal compensation. Instead, they used the word for silver, a term for the recognized standard of trade in that era. The sisters believed that their father sold them as he would any other commodity. Furthermore, they felt he had wasted the payment he received from Jacob and denied them its benefits. It is unclear what benefit from Jacob’s labor they supposed was theirs.

Rachel and Leah’s attitude toward their father concerning the circumstances of their marriage does not imply disapproval of their husband. Both women desired Jacob’s affection and tried hard to win it. The narrative of their marriages to the same man exhibits some of the evils inherent in polygamy. These well may have contributed to the sisters’ perception of their fathers’ arrangements with Jacob. Nevertheless, they both were committed completely to their marriage.

VERSE 16

¹⁶ In fact, all the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. So do whatever God has said to you.”

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Rachel and Leah declared their allegiance to Jacob and his God, recognizing that God had used Jacob to provide them a future. Jacob had summoned his wives to show them that everything he had acquired had been earned legitimately. They told him they considered his *wealth* to be divine restitution for their father's mistreatment. Moreover, the inclusion of their *children* in their answer infers they now saw themselves as members of Jacob's family rather than Laban's. Even more significant is their faith in God. God was not just "Jacob's God." He is *God*, and they attributed their current status to Him. Therefore, they would go to Canaan because God had instructed their husband to go there. Believers can take steps of faith based on God's past faithfulness.

(In PSG, p. 53) **How did God's past faithfulness influence the decision made by Rachel and Leah?**

KEY DOCTRINE

Stewardship

God is the source of all blessings, temporal and spiritual; all that we have and are we owe to Him (Deut. 8:17-18).

BIBLE SKILL

Memorize a verse and apply it to a real life situation.

Memorize Genesis 31:3 in your favorite Bible translation. Compare it to Genesis 26:3; Exodus 3:12; Deuteronomy 31:23; Joshua 1:5; 3:7; Judges 6:16; 1 Kings 11:38; and Isaiah 43:2. Note that the promise in each verse is made in conjunction with either a task God has assigned or a time of trouble. Write a couple of sentences in a journal stating how this verse can help you in a specific situation today.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Bethel," available digitally in the Winter 2018-19 Biblical Illustrator for Explore the Bible at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.com.

Discipleship Guide

SESSION 5

HOME!

Genesis 31:2-16

FOCUS ATTENTION

DO: On a board, write “*Home is where _____.*” As the group arrives, invite members to suggest different ways of completing the statement. Invite those with electronic devices to search the Internet for the phrase and words to complete it.

REVIEW: Use **Pack Item 2** (*Outline of Genesis*) to briefly review the concept of “home” in Jacob’s life. Review Jacob’s deception in Session 1 and his leaving home in Session 2. Recall the initiation of his new home with Rachel and Leah in Session 3.

SAY: *Jacob longed for home, after working twenty years for his father-in-law, Laban, and for the fulfillment of God’s promise to give him a bright and secure future in Canaan.* Remind the group of God’s promise by reading aloud Genesis 28:13-15.

TRANSITION: Use information in *Understand the Context* (p. 45) to summarize the relationship between Laban and Jacob’s plan for his exit. Say: *Before Jacob could put his plan into motion, he needed the support of his family. Today’s Scripture describes how Jacob gathered his family together and poured out his heart by sharing God’s vision for their lives.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 31:2-3, asking the group to listen for reasons Jacob began to make a major life change. Mention Laban’s displeasure and ask: *What steps might a person take when he or she first senses jealousy and hostility?*

- (31:2) Laban retained Jacob’s services on terms determined exclusively by Jacob (Gen. 30:31). Under the terms of the contract, Jacob’s revenue soon outstripped Laban’s own profits. Consequently, Laban’s sons feared losing their inheritance.
- (31:3) The Lord demonstrated His faithfulness by instructing Jacob to return to the land of his fathers. For years he had been locked into a back and forth struggle of deceit with Laban. At the moment Jacob was winning, but disaster loomed as Laban’s bitterness grew. Unlike Laban, God was faithful. Jacob’s destiny rested in God’s nature, not Jacob’s behavior.

GUIDE: Distribute copies of **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Memory Verse Bookmark*). Lead the group to read the verse aloud in unison. Identify God’s command and promise in the verse.

SAY: *Following God’s command wasn’t as simple as it might sound. Jacob left many broken bridges when he left home.* Invite volunteers to read aloud Genesis 27:33 and Genesis 27:41 to recall fractured relationships with his father, Isaac, and his brother Esau. Say: *Whenever God calls, staying put may seem like the safe choice, but answering God’s call is the right decision. Even when faced with uncertainties, the best place to live is in the center of God’s will.*

DISCUSS: *What hindrances might keep believers from knowing and following God’s will for their lives? From page 47: How has God demonstrated His faithfulness in our world today?*

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 31:4-13, while the rest of the group listens for specific details in the passage. Discuss how the details enhance understanding of Scripture.

- (31:4) Jacob met with Rachel and Leah and recounted the actions he had taken in obedience to God, giving God credit for his prosperity. To alleviate any suspicion a large gathering might arouse, only Leah and Rachel were summoned. It denoted the beginning of separation from Laban.
- (31:6-8) Jacob worked twenty years for Laban (Gen. 31:38). During the first seven years, his desire to marry Rachel propelled him to work exceedingly hard. During the next seven years, he labored to complete his obligations in acquiring her after Laban's deception in substituting Leah as Jacob's bride. The last six years he labored to improve his personal wealth and status. However, at no time did Jacob slack off. Indeed, he seems to have developed a strong work ethic during this period of his life.
- (31:9) The expected lifespan of domestic sheep is ten to twelve years. During the six years of Jacob and Laban's working agreement, Laban's flocks would have suffered significant loss through natural attrition. Since all the newborn lambs were given to Jacob as wages, dead animals were not being replaced.
- (31:10-12) Jacob's prosperity was the blessing of the Lord, not merely the result of Jacob's insights into animal husbandry. As the angel of the Lord continued speaking, He called upon Jacob to comprehend God's role in his success.

STUDY: Direct the group to search Genesis 31:4-13, locating specific actions Jacob mentioned to his family. Comment that these actions demonstrate how Jacob had been obedient to God and how God was directing him to return to Bethel. Direct attention to information under Day 3 on page 50 that explains the laws of heredity that led to Jacob's success in breeding his flock. Stress that Jacob gave God credit for his prosperity, which was the blessing of the Lord, not merely the result of Jacob's efforts or insights into animal husbandry.

REFLECT: Lead the group to focus on the dream Jacob described in verses 10-13. Direct attention to **Pack Item 5** (*Poster: Dreams in Genesis*) and distribute copies of **Pack Item 10** (*Handout: Dreams in Genesis*). Recall when God revealed Himself in a dream and renewed His covenant promise to Jacob and his descendants (Session 2, Gen. 28:12-15).

EXPLAIN: Direct attention to the phrase "angel of God" (v. 11). Explain that it referred to God Himself. Like He had done before (Gen. 28:10-15), God divinely let Jacob know that He would bless him regardless of what deceitful actions Laban took. Observe how God remembered Jacob's commitment (v. 13). Ask: *How do the ways Jacob honored God in these verses compare to how a person might honor God today?* (p. 47)

SAY: *The key to God's blessings was Jacob's response: he immediately answered when God called. The presence and power of God falls on believers when they declare their complete obedience to Him and Him alone.*

READ: Instruct the group to read silently Genesis 31:14-16, underlining how Rachel and Leah described their relationship with their father.

- (31:14) Leah was the older sister and Jacob's first wife. Yet the name of the younger sister, Rachel, repeatedly appears first. This reflects Jacob's greater affection for her and accentuates the prominent role she plays in subsequent events (31:19,31-35). On this occasion the two wives were in total agreement. They spoke with one voice to raise rhetorical questions that expressed their attitude about going to Canaan.
- (31:16) Jacob had summoned his wives to show them that everything he had acquired had been earned legitimately. They told him they considered his wealth to be divine restitution for their father's mistreatment. Moreover, the inclusion of their children in their answer implies they now saw themselves as members of Jacob's family rather than Laban's. Even more significant was their faith in God. God was not just "Jacob's God."

TRANSITION: Unlike all their previous disagreements, this time Rachel and Leah reached the same decision. Together, they made four conclusions.

DO: Write the four conclusions on the board: (1) *No inheritance* (v. 14); (2) *No longer part of family* (v. 15); (3) *Recognized God's divine plan* (v. 16), and (4) *Committed to Jacob's God* (v. 16). Form four teams. Assign one conclusion to each team. Direct teams to search the information under Days 4 and 5 on pages 50-51 and describe the conclusion to the entire group.

DISCUSS: *How did God's past faithfulness influence the decision made by Rachel and Leah?* (p. 47)

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

REVIEW: Review the bulleted summary statements under Apply The Text (p. 48). Lead the group to identify the statement that challenges them the most.

SHARE: Call attention to the third question set under Apply The Text (p. 48): *Share with others in the group ways God has been faithful in the past. Discuss how those past experiences give confidence for taking faithful action in the future.* Lead the group to record insights gained from the sharing and discussion in the margins.

PRAY: Lead in a silent prayer, thanking God for His direction in the coming year.

AFTER THE SESSION

Pray for each member of your group to be open to God's direction for the new year and that they will seek His guidance with major decisions.

Teaching Plan

Session 5

HOME!

God is with His people, giving direction for living.

GENESIS 31:2-16

MEMORY VERSE: GENESIS 31:3

READ Genesis 30:25–31:55, First Thoughts, and Understand the Context. Make notes about pivotal events/actions in the relationship between Jacob and Laban.

STUDY Genesis 31:2-16, using Explore the Text. Observe how God remembered Jacob’s commitment (Gen. 31:13). What lessons about commitment can believers learn from this? (PSG, p. 47) Focus on specific influences for Jacob’s decision to return home.

PLAN the group time, identifying ways to help the group reflect on the importance of seeking direction from God. Use the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study, More Ideas, ideas included in *QuickSource*, and those included at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras.

GROW from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible).

GATHER the following items: Personal Study Guides; and Pens for each group member. Make copies of: **PACK ITEM 8** (*Handout: Memory Verse Bookmark*); and **PACK ITEM 10** (*Handout: Dreams in Genesis*). Prepare to display these Pack Items: **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline of Genesis*) and **PACK ITEM 5** (*Poster: Dreams in Genesis*).

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

DO: On a board, write “Home is where _____.” As the group arrives, invite members to suggest different ways of completing the statement. Invite those with electronic devices to search the Internet for the phrase and words to complete it.

REVIEW: Use **Pack Item 2** (*Outline of Genesis*) to briefly review the concept of “home” in Jacob’s life. Review Jacob’s deception in Session 1 and his leaving home in Session 2. Recall the initiation of his new home with Rachel and Leah in Session 3.

SAY: *Jacob longed for home after working twenty years for his father-in-law, Laban, and fulfillment of God's promise to give him a bright and secure future in Canaan. Remind group of God's promise by reading aloud Genesis 28:13-15.*

TRANSITION: Use information in Understand the Context (PSG, p. 54) to summarize the relationship between Laban and Jacob's plan for his exit. Say: *Before Jacob could put his plan into motion, he needed the support of his family. Today's Scripture describes how Jacob gathered his family together and poured out his heart by sharing God's vision for their lives.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 31:2-3, asking group to listen for reasons Jacob began to make a major life change. Mention Laban's displeasure and ask: *What steps might a person take when he or she first senses jealousy and hostility?*

GUIDE: Distribute copies of **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Memory Verse Bookmark*). Lead the group to read the verse aloud in unison. Identify God's command and promise in the verse.

SAY: *Following God's command wasn't as simple as it might sound. Jacob left many broken bridges when he left home. Invite volunteers to read aloud Genesis 27:33 and Genesis 27:41 to recall fractured relationships with his father, Isaac, and his brother Esau. Say: Whenever God calls, staying put may seem like the safe choice, but answering God's call is the right decision. Even when faced with uncertainties, the best place to live is in the center of God's will.*

DISCUSS: *What hindrances might keep believers from knowing and following God's will for their lives? From the PSG (p. 49): How has God demonstrated His faithfulness in your life?*

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 31:4-13, while the rest of the group listens for specific details in the passage. Discuss how the details enhance understanding of Scripture.

ILLUSTRATE: Lead group to reflect on the concept of a family meeting. Invite volunteers to describe a family meeting. Use information on pages 50–51 to supplement discussion and introduce Jacob's meeting with his family.

STUDY: Direct the group to search Genesis 31:4-13, locating specific actions Jacob mentioned to his family. Comment that these actions demonstrate how Jacob had been obedient to God and how God was directing him to return to Bethel. Direct attention to information under Verses 10–13 on page 50 of the PSG that explains the laws of heredity that led to Jacob's success in breeding his flock. Stress that Jacob gave God credit for his prosperity, which was the blessing of the Lord, not merely the result of Jacob's efforts or insights into animal husbandry.

REFLECT: Lead the group to focus on the dream Jacob described in verses 10-13. Direct attention to **Pack Item 5** (*Poster: Dreams in Genesis*) and distribute copies of **Pack Item 10** (*Handout: Dreams in Genesis*). Recall when God revealed Himself in a dream and renewed His covenant promise to Jacob and His descendants (Session 2, Genesis 28:12-15).

EXPLAIN: Direct attention to the phrase "angel of God" (v. 11). Explain that it referred to God Himself. Like He had done before (Gen. 28:10-15), God divinely let Jacob know that He would bless him regardless of what deceitful actions Laban took. Observe how God remembered Jacob's commitment (v. 13). Ask: *How do the ways Jacob honored God in these verses compare to how a person might honor God today?* (PSG, p. 51)

SAY: *The key to God's blessings was Jacob's response: he immediately answered when God called. The presence and power of God falls on believers when they declare their complete obedience to Him and Him alone.*

READ: Instruct the group to read silently Genesis 31:14-16, underlining how Rachel and Leah described their relationship with their father.

TRANSITION: *Unlike all their previous disagreements, this time Rachel and Leah reached the same decision. Together, they made four conclusions.*

DO: Write the four conclusions on the board: (1) No inheritance (v. 14); (2) No longer part of family (v. 15); (3) Recognized God's divine plan (v. 16), and (4) Committed to Jacob's God (v. 16). Form four teams. Assign one conclusion to each team. Direct teams to search the information on page 53 of the PSG and describe the conclusion to the entire group.

DISCUSS: *How did God's past faithfulness influence the decision made by Rachel and Leah? (PSG, p. 53)*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

REVIEW: Review the bulleted summary statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 54). Lead the group to identify the statement that challenges them the most.

SHARE: Call attention to the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 54): *Share with others in the group ways God has been faithful in the past. Discuss how those past experiences give confidence for taking faithful action in the future.* Lead the group to record insights gained from the sharing and discussion in the margin on their PSGs.

PRAY: Lead in a silent prayer, thanking God for His direction in the coming year.

PRACTICE

Pray for each member of your group to be open to God's direction for the New Year and that they will seek His guidance with major decisions.

Contact group members, reminding them of the Summarize and Challenge activity through which they reflected on God's faithfulness in the past (PSG, p. 54). Encourage them to share their insights from this activity with others, including how past experiences give them confidence for taking faithful action in the future.

Affirm associate members of your group (people who are leading in other areas that at one time were part of your group) by sending them a note of appreciation. Make sure to include them in any future fellowship or ministry activities planned by your group.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Before the group arrives, draw a large outline of a house on the board. As members enter, invite each to list one word or concept that means "home" to them inside the outline of the house. Refer to the paragraph on PSG page 46. Ask: *What makes a place feel like home? What makes the longing for home such a strong emotion?*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

To supplement the study of Genesis 31:2-3, refer to the Bible Skill on page 49 of the PSG. Invite volunteers to

read Genesis 31:3 from various Bible translations. Then call for volunteers to look up the verses listed in the Bible Skill. Note that the promise in each verse is made in conjunction with either a task God has assigned or a time of trouble. Encourage the group to complete the journal activity during the week.

To enhance your discussion of Genesis 31:4-13, direct a volunteer to read the Key Doctrine (Stewardship) on PSG page 51. Guide volunteers to explain how they have seen effective stewardship in their own lives. Call for them to identify other Bible stories or passages where God blessed His people.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

To supplement the review idea under Summarize and Challenge, highlight the session summary statement in the PSG on page 46 (God is with His people, giving direction for living). Lead in a time of silent prayer for the New Year, encouraging group members to pray about specific areas of their lives in which they need God's direction.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Sing or read the words to "We Look Behind at All You've Done," by Ken Bible. Ask the group to pay special attention to phrases that apply to God's direction for Jacob, especially the second verse. Ask: *What words would you use to describe God's direction for your life?*