

Genesis 29-30: The Children of Jacob

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The nation of Israel is named after Jacob who was the grandson of Abraham. God told Jacob and his mother Rebekah that Jacob would be the next patriarch, the child of the promise. The nation of Israel would come through Jacob and his descendants. Nevertheless, Isaac loved his brother Esau best and wanted to give the birthright to Esau. This situation prompted one of the great soap operas of all time with all parties sneaking around eavesdropping, scheming, and deceiving. Their actions beg the question, "Can you steal what God has promised to give you?" When Isaac sent Esau out to kill wild game for a feast to celebrate the giving of the birthright, Rebekah was eavesdropping. She and Jacob hatched a plan to deceive the blind Isaac into giving the birthright to Jacob instead. Jacob proceeded to dress up like Esau, put extra hair on his arms, and try to talk like Esau to trick Isaac. In the process, Jacob not only repeatedly lied, but even profaned the name of God. When Isaac asked him how he got the wild game so quickly, Jacob replied, "Because the Lord God caused it to happen". When Esau got back and discovered that Jacob had received the birthright dishonestly, Esau vowed to kill Jacob. Therefore Rebekah sent Jacob far away to live with her brother in Paddan-aram using the excuse that he needed to go there to find a good wife.

It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time

When Jacob got to the area of Haran, Jacob's uncle's daughter Rachel was at a well there. For Jacob, it was love at first sight. She took him to see Uncle Laban, and he stayed there for a month. Then Laban asked Jacob what remuneration he would need to work for him. Since Jacob loved Rachel, he offered to serve Laban for seven years as a dowry for his younger daughter Rachel. The time passed quickly in anticipation of the future wedding, and fulfillment of his dreams of a life of bliss with his true love. Little did Jacob know of the plans of Laban, one of the shrewdest guys in history. How could Laban both keep this sap working for him for nothing, and marry off his homely daughter Leah at the same time?

The Deceiver is Deceived

One of the great ironies in the Bible took place at this point in the story. Jacob's name literally meant supplanter because at birth he had hold of Esau's heel trying to pull himself in front of Esau. Because of his deceptive actions later, the name Jacob came to mean trickster or deceiver. Through the sovereignty of God, Jacob had come to live under the authority of the supreme deceiver Laban. Jacob was going to get a major dose of his own medicine. It seems God had brought Jacob here to be taught a lesson. During the next 20 years Laban would trick Jacob into working for him for free for 14 years, then during the next six years change the deal with him ten times. After the first seven years of hard labor, finally his wedding night was at hand. His promised bride was veiled, it was dark, and they kept filling up his wine glass and making toasts. That night Jacob "went in to her". This is a euphemism meaning the marriage was consummated. The next morning he woke up with a hangover, but that was the least of his worries---laying in the bed with him was Leah, the homely sister. Laban had pulled a fast one on him. When Jacob protested to Laban, he said something like, "Didn't you read the fine print in the contract? It says you can marry Rachel unless the older daughter is unmarried. If you want Rachel, the beautiful one, you must work another seven years." Why didn't he just leave? First, he passionately loved Rachel, and this was the only way he could have her. Second, he needed a hangout which was a refuge from murderous Esau. Jacob stayed for his own purposes, but God used the circumstances to change the character of Jacob. After twenty years of working for Laban, Jacob would be ready to answer his calling and return to Bethel where he had pledged to serve and obey the Lord. At that time, God would change his name to Israel, and the future nation would be named after him.

Can't We Just All Get Along ?

You can imagine the potential problems associated with having two wives. Mark Twain was arguing with a Mormon about whether polygamy was unbiblical. The Mormon demanded a passage against it whereby Twain said no problem, and quoted Matthew 6:24, "No man can serve two masters". It was even worse because Laban gave each daughter a maid who would become a wife by proxy to Jacob. He found himself with four wives in Genesis 30. Leah figured out immediately that Jacob loved Rachel and not her, yet Leah was convinced that her happiness was based on Jacob's love, which could only be gotten

by having his children. In Genesis 29:31-35, Leah had four sons in rapid fire succession, but did that make her happy? No, after each son she says “maybe now he’ll love me”, but the indication is that he did not.

Meanwhile Rachel was terribly jealous of her sister, and yelled her desperation to Jacob, “Give me children or else I die”. You would think that the one happy person would be Jacob because he was having a boatload of sex, but he burned with anger as well blaming it on “God who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb”. In Genesis 30:3, Rachel resorted to what I call the “brood mare” strategy of giving her maid Bilhah to Jacob so that she could have children by proxy through her. Rachel procured two sons in this way—Dan and Naphtali. Leah, always competitive, sent her maid Zilpah in to Jacob and she produced two more sons for Leah. Game on, let the competition continue for Jacob’s affections. This Jacob guy must have been some kind of sexual athlete to keep up with their demands. The end result was that in about thirteen years of marriage, Jacob had 11 sons and a daughter from four different mothers (the twelfth son, Benjamin came much later). Leah had six sons and one daughter, Rachel had one son, Bilhah had two sons, and Zilpah had two sons. Can you imagine the rivalry, the schemes, the lobbying from twelve children divided up between four different mothers and all lived in the same tent?

When Momma Ain’t Happy, Ain’t Nobody Happy

Even with all that sex, nobody was happy, in fact they were all frustrated and angry.

Why was everybody unhappy? I can think of a few good reasons:

1. Polygamy was not a part of God’s plan. God created the man/woman relationship to be a marriage between one man and one woman. By perverting God’s will, man set himself up to fail. 2. They had unrealistic expectations. All marriages are begun with good intentions. Everyone expects their marriage to be ideal, but after the honeymoon the problems begin. Often one spouse marries expecting the other to change and he/she doesn’t, and the other expects he/she to stay the same and they change. The point is each member expects the other to be perfect or become perfect, but all they really have control over is themselves. There is too much focus on their spouse’s weaknesses because of a selfish perspective. 3. Their idea of fulfillment and happiness was erroneous. There was an obvious lack of a relationship with God. They were caught up in their circumstances instead of living above their circumstances. Both Leah and Rachel thought their happiness was determined by Jacob’s affections and their child bearing ability. Jacob thought the birthright, wealth, and being the head of a big family would make him happy. In the Bible, joy and fulfillment come from knowing and serving God.

Tribes and Feuds

Throughout the history of Israel there was a continuous problem with conflict from within. The roots of this problem were born right here in Genesis 30. The consequences of Genesis 30 were huge in the life and history of Israel the nation. Remember that Moses wrote the book of Genesis after the Exodus from Egypt, and while they were on their way to the Promised Land. Moses wanted his audience to know that it was not right to practice polygamy, it was not right to intermarry with pagans, and they were not to tolerate idolatry. As you can discover in Genesis 34-38, when the sons of Jacob grow up, they make the mistake of doing all these things with disastrous consequences.

As the story of Jacob and his children continued in Genesis we can read that Jacob loses control of his family. In ch.34 they had the slaughter at Shechem, in ch.35 Reuben slept with one of Jacob’s wives, in ch.37 one group of brothers conspired to murder Joseph and end up selling him into slavery, and in ch.38 Judah marries a pagan Canaanite and has nasty sons (not to mention his regular visits to the pagan prostitutes in the temple).

You may know that the twelve sons that Jacob had with these four women in Genesis 30 became the TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL. What were the long term consequences of having four wives, and children with each wife? Immediately for Jacob it meant loss of control and respect, and nobody was happy. For the children it meant mass murder, theft, kidnapping, idolatry, prostitutes, and apostasy of the worst kind throughout the history of Israel. This was a terrible price to pay for the craving for wealth and recognition. Jacob’s desires and the contest of childbearing between Leah and Rachel began the history of the twelve tribes of Israel down a dangerous path that they have never recovered from, and won’t until Christ returns.

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