

What Is Your Name? *Loved by God*

Genesis 29:15-35

(After the reading of the passage) – There is so much about this story in the life of Jacob that is both troubling and confusing to us as 21st C Southern California readers. Those of us who have grown up reading stories like this one in the Bible might ignore these things that seem strange to us in our world. But, I'm quite sure that those in our church family who are newer to reading the Old Testament will hear the reading of Genesis 29 and think, "What is going on in this Bible story? There's a lot of it I don't understand and what I think I understand, I don't like!" You may ask, "What can a Bible text like this one say to my life today?"

So, let me start by calling out some of the things that modern readers might find disturbing:

- Polygamy – Jacob first marries Leah and then Rachel – and it just seems to be accepted as normal.
- Primogeniture – This system that the firstborn should have rights simply because of birth order.
- Purchasing Wives – A father sells his daughters and no one objects! Indeed, the place of women in general in the time is a problem. Among them are that 1) a woman's value is determined by physical appearance, 2) daughters have no voice in their future, and 3) maids are virtual slaves.
- Promiscuous Lives – the main character seems to get so drunk and out of control on his wedding night that he doesn't even know who his wife is. It sounds like a fraternity party.

So, I want you to learn something now about how to read the Bible. When the Bible talks about these things that seem to be so wrong, it is not condoning them. It's merely describing the way things were in this fallen world at the time the story took place. Indeed, when you read the whole of the Bible, you constantly see how systems like polygamy lead to disaster in families and in societies. In fact, what you see in the Bible stories is how, as a scholar named Robert Alter has written, God subverts these institutions that are wrong and oppressive in the world.

I think we see God undoing the effects of sinful institutions as we read the story of Jacob: e.g., how God intentionally chooses the 2nd son instead of the first; how God knows and blesses the woman in the story who was viewed as unattractive and undesirable. Ever since sin entered the world in Genesis 3, God has been on a mission to undo the effects of sin in this world he loves and to make all things right. You need to learn to read the Bible with that ongoing mission of God, what we have called at LAC “God’s Biggest Story”, in mind.

So, as you read the Bible, read it on two levels: 1) The description of what happened. Simply because God’s Word tells us that something took place doesn’t mean that God approved of what happened. 2) The awareness of what God is doing -- God’s mission to complete his “biggest story”. God’s work in this world is a work in progress. Know this: The kinds of things we read about in this story – as well as the kinds of evils that exist in our own society – will be judged and brought to an end. What we see in this story one significant episode in the way God is at work, moving his creation from a time in which many, many things are wrong to a time when all things will be made right.

And, as ancient as this story is and strange as it may seem, I believe that, at its heart, it has a powerful lesson for us now. In fact, I think it addresses the weightiest issues you and I deal with in our lives here in SoCal. Can I find my reason for living in anything in this world -- or, where in this world can I find lasting happiness?

Setting the Stage for Reading Genesis 29

Two generations before Jacob was born, God had spoken to his grandfather Abraham and said, “Abraham, look at the brokenness and evil that fills this world. I am going to do something about it. I am going to redeem this world through your family, through one of your descendants (cf, Gen 12:1-4). In every generation of your descendants, one child will bear the lineage through which the savior, a Messiah, will come. One child after another in each generation will bear the Messianic line until one day, one of your descendants will be the Savior himself, the one through whom all the peoples of the world will be blessed.

So, Abraham was the first. The next child in the line was Jacob’s father Isaac. Then, even though Isaac’s first son, Esau, should have been the next child of the promise by the world’s standards, God said that Isaac’s 2nd son, Jacob would be the one with that blessing. It turned

out that Jacob got it through deception. As we saw in Pastor Tim's message, near the end of his father's life, Jacob dressed up as Esau and got the blessing.

As you might expect, when Esau found out about this, he was angry - and determined to kill Jacob. Jacob had to flee into the wilderness - as his partner in crime, his mother, sent him to her brother, Laban. When we meet Jacob in Gen 29, Jacob's life seemed to be in ruins. Not only did he no longer have a family to be the head of; he no longer had a family or an inheritance at all. What was he going to live for now?

Jacob - Hoping to find his life in romantic love -- *Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her (29:20).*

As he ran from his home in Canaan to Haran (headwatersresources.org/map-of-jacobs-journey-to-haran-and-back), about 650 miles away, Jacob was a man who had lost everything. And, one of the first encounters he has is with... Rachel, Laban's beautiful young daughter. She came out into her father's fields, and Jacob saw her. It's a fun part of the story. Jacob wanted her to take him back to meet Laban - but she couldn't because this huge stone first had to be rolled over the mouth of the well. It took three strong men to do this - but, after seeing Rachel, Jacob did it himself! Was this to impress her? Maybe - because soon it becomes clear that Jacob is smitten with her.

There are all sorts of signals in the text about how off-the-charts smitten Jacob is with Rachel. And, there is the poignant but telling statement where the text says, "*Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her (v.20).*"

It's clear that Jacob was a man driven by and overwhelmed with emotional and sexual longing for one woman. He had lost everything that he previously had lived for having no family, no inheritance, no nothing. And then he saw Rachel, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and he said to himself, "If I had her, finally, things would be right in my rotten life. If I had her, life would have meaning." All the longings of his human heart for significance, for security, for pleasure and for meaning -- he had no other object for them. They were all fixed on Rachel.

But his passion and idealistic hope led him into a trap – into the way most of us function when we become desperate. When Jacob met Laban, he encountered a man much like he had been. Jacob's Uncle Laban was a man who had figured out the system works. He knew how to use his place of prominence to get done what he wanted to get done – even to deceive. When we look at what happens, we see the disillusionment and devastation that almost always accompanies a search for that one true love that will solve all our problems.

Think about Laban's plot. Laban knew that Jacob offered to serve seven years for Rachel. He could see how desperate Jacob was. In those days, when you wanted to marry someone, you paid the father a bride price, which was somewhere two to three years of a man's wages. So, you can see that Jacob, right out of the box so absolutely lovesick that he is pawn in this deal – he offered 7 years!

Then, notice the conversation between Jacob and Laban. Jacob says, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." (v.18). Have you noticed how Laban responded? He never said, "Yes! It's a deal." No! he said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me" (v.19).

You know how this is, don't you? When we are desperate for something, we hear what we want to hear! Jacob wanted it to be a yes, so he heard a yes. But it was not a yes. Laban just said, "Okay, if you want to marry Rachel, it is a better idea than someone else getting her.

So, the seven years passed. Then, Jacob says, "Give me my wife. I want her and I want her now!" As was customary, there was a huge wedding feast. In the middle of the feast, the bride was brought heavily veiled to the groom. The man would take her into the marriage tent. And, almost certainly, Jacob was drunk, as was also usual. So, in that dark tent, Jacob consummated the marriage with the woman he thought was Rachel. But, the Bible succinctly tells us, "When morning came, there was Leah!" (v. 25).

Jacob, justly angry, jumped up and ran to Laban and said, "What is this you have done to me? I served you 7 years for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me (v. 25)? Laban only said, "It is our custom for the older girl to be married before the younger girl. But, you can work another 7 years for Rachel!" And, Jacob did it! Does that baffle you?

Is that what you would do? Jacob is obviously furious and the situation is ridiculously unjust. Why doesn't this strong man who had single-handedly rolled a huge stone over a well throttle Laban?

Here's how I see it. This scene replays what Jacob had done to his older brother. The word Jacob used for "deceive" was the very same word used when Jacob deceived Esau out of his blessing. And, what Laban said was: "In this place, it's not the way we do things to put the second born before the first."

I think that Jacob realized that Laban knew what he had done back in Canaan. Jacob knew that Laban had just done to him what he had done to his father and his brother. So, his outrage dies on his lips. He sees what it is like to have someone deceive and manipulate him. He meekly picks up and works another seven years.

Let me ask you: What is it that we want when we elevate the love partner to the position of God? We want that person to fill up in our hearts all the things that only God can fill. But, we will find that the person will not be able to be everything we thought that person would be. To have a person to commit ourselves to, to love and to cherish until death parts us – that's good. To think that person will be able to take the place of God in our lives will only lead to disillusionment. When you put any kind of Rachel into the place of God, someday you will wake up and find that she is Leah. That person or thing can never be God – it will always be Leah.

So, now let's turn our attention to Leah.

Leah – Hoping to find life her life in her family – "*Surely my husband will love me now* (29:32)."

I think most of us should be able to empathize with Leah. The only description we have of her is that she had "weak eyes". But, that's probably not a good translation. The Bible is telling us there was something unattractive about Leah because of her eyes. The way we should read 29:17 is "*Leah had ugly eyes but everything about Rachel was beautiful.*" So, think about her life: Leah was particularly unattractive to people in her society, and she had to live all of her life in the same home as her sister who was absolutely stunning.

I'm sure all the women here today are thinking right now, "*Thank goodness I don't live in a culture in which a woman's value is based on*

her looks. I'm thankful I don't think I have to look like the models in magazine ads in order to be loved and appreciated. Hundreds of years ago, people used to think like that but we don't do that here in SoCal!" Of course, you're not thinking that! Right? No, you know the truth: Judging people based on external things is one of the central features of our society too, isn't it?

So, Leah had grown up her entire life in the shadow of her beautiful sister, Rachel. And, even in her marriage, her husband had to be tricked into marrying her. Unhappy with her, he's going to have to work 7 more years because he really loved her sister. V. 30 summarizes the situation: "*Jacob's love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah.*" That means that Leah lived every day feeling rejected and unloved. Every single day she was condemned to see the man she most longed for in the arms of the one in whose shadow she had lived all her life. So, Leah thought, "If I give birth to a son, the thing most valued by men in our society, then my husband will love me. Then, finally things will be good in my life. I'll be seen and heard as valuable."

The way the Bible describes what then happens in Leah's life is deeply moving. In the four brief but poignant verses in 29:31-34, we learn a lot about who God is and what he is like. In v. 31, the Bible tells us that God enabled Leah to have a son. Then, he did the same three more times. I want you to look carefully at how Leah progressed in her life of faith from a point of thinking that life is to be found only if her husband loves her to a point in which she simply lives a life of trust in and gratitude toward God:

- Son #1: Reuben – "*because the Lord has seen my misery.*" Reuben means "God has seen." No one else even seemed to see this girl who felt so unattractive – but God sees. God saw her and loved her and blessed her. He sees you too, you know. But, still, Leah could only say, "*Surely, my husband will love me now.*" But, he didn't. Her life remained unfulfilled.
- Son #2: Simeon – "*because the Lord heard that I am not loved.*" Simeon means "the Lord has heard." No one else heard her crying, her inner pain – but God heard. And, he hears when we cry out to him in our pain. He wants us to bring our pain to him when we pray.
- Son #3: Levi – "*Now at last my husband will become attached to me.*" Levi means "attached". Leah was expressing, in her 3rd child's

name, her deep longing for a place of belonging, of refuge. The longing is a good one. And children are certainly a blessing. But, her heart needed something more.

- Son #4: Judah – “*This time I will praise the Lord.*” Judah means “to praise” -- or to thank. It has taken a lot of time – at least enough time for 4 pregnancies and births. But, at last, Leah gets it. The love of a spouse is good – having a child is good too. But, those things are not God. She needed to rest in God. And, the amazing blessing is this – Judah, Leah’s child became the child of promise, the one through whom Messiah would be born.

Our souls find rest in God alone. The deepest longing of a human heart is not for a spouse, a child, a new job, or anything else in this world. All those things are wonderful things and it is not bad to long for them and even to pray for them. But, they cannot be the deepest longing of our hearts. As David would say, “It is only when we delight ourselves in the Lord that we begin to discover the deepest desire of our human hearts (Ps 37:4), i.e., God himself.

“*This time!*” Leah said when her 4th son was born. It is totally different from her earlier responses. There is no mention of husband; no mention of a child. I think she had a breakthrough when she said, “*This time I will praise the LORD.*” At that point, Leah had finally taken her heart’s deepest hopes off of anything in this world – even things as good and important as her husband and her children -- and she has put them in the Lord

My Question for You Today: What good thing in your life are you tempted to treat as an ultimate thing? What do you think you have to have today if you are going to find your life – if you will be happy? I confess that I cannot know everything about all of us who are gathered here in this service, but I am quite certain about this: Most of us in this room have something that we think God just has to give us if we will be satisfied. Do you know what it is?

Something happened to Leah; God did something in her. There was a breakthrough. She began to understand what you are supposed to do with your desire for one true love. She turned her heart toward the only real beauty, the only real lover who can satisfy.

Look at the words of C.S. Lewis, a man who had spent his life looking for that thing that brings lasting joy:

Most people, if they have really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be found in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy...

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

This all points us to Jesus and says, "He is one you need to make your Lord if you will have a fulfilled life." Hear his words, spoken to all who would follow him:

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will find their lives."

Mark 8:34-35

Lord Jesus, for our sake you were condemned as a criminal: Visit our jails and places of incarceration with your pity and judgment. Remember all prisoners and their families -- bring the guilty to repentance and amendment of life according to your will and give them hope for their future. When any are held unjustly, bring them release, forgive us, and teach us to improve our justice. Remember those who work in these institutions; keep them humane and compassionate; and save them from becoming brutal or callous. We pray for those to whom the responsibility has been given to make decisions about the larger issues related to incarceration, security and our justice system – that they will have wisdom, grace and courage. And since you told us that what we do for those in prison, we do for you, constrain us to improve their lot. All this we ask in light of your mercy to us and in your name.

Amen