

Jacob: Blessings and Consequences

Lesson 5

Gen. 29:31-30:24

Review

Last week the Lord fulfilled the first part of His promises to Jacob when Jacob arrived safely at Laban's household in northwest Mesopotamia. Laban welcomed Jacob and after one month agreed Jacob could marry Rachel in 7 years. Laban deceitfully substituted Leah during the wedding night and told Jacob he needed to work 7 more years for Rachel. Jacob learned how painful it is to be deceived by a trusted family member.

Scene 1: The Lord blesses Jacob and Leah with children but not Rachel (29:31-35)

- Verse 30 said that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, which is sad but not surprising since Laban arranged their marriage by deceit. Moses said the Lord saw this situation and gave Leah the blessing of a child, while Rebecca remained childless. (28:31-32.) This does not mean whether or not a woman gets pregnant always involves direct intervention by the Lord. As we discussed in an earlier lesson, Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel are special situations because the circumstances of their pregnancies were important signs of the covenant's reality and fulfillment. Leah demonstrated faith by giving credit to the Lord, indicating that she had adopted Jacob's faith. Jacob must have wanted to have children because Leah hoped the birth would prompt Jacob to appreciate and love her as much as Rachel. "Reuben" means "See! A son!" or "Wow! A son!" Some commentators think the "See!" has a double reference to Leah's excitement at having a child and her belief that the Lord "saw" her plight.
- The same cycle happens a second time, with Leah again giving credit to the Lord and attributing the blessing to being loved less than Rachel. (29:33.) "Simeon" is derived from the word for hearing, and indicates Leah believed the Lord had heard her prayers.
- The third time through the cycle, Leah repeats the hope that Jacob will be attached or joined to her because she has had three sons. (29:34.) The precise meaning of "Levi" is unknown, but commentators believe it sounds similar to the word for "join to" or "attach."
- The fourth time through the cycle, Leah simply declares praise to the Lord. The name "Judah" means "he will be praised." Leah does not explain why she stopped referring to Jacob's lack of affection. Perhaps Jacob had learned to appreciate Leah more. Perhaps Leah grew less dependent on Jacob's romantic feelings as it became clear to all concerned that she was an important part of their household. From a financial perspective, being the mother of Jacob's first four sons put them and Leah in the dominant position with regard to inheritance compared to Rachel.

Scene 2: Rachel's jealousy causes dysfunction, but the Lord continues to bless the family with more children (30:1-24)

- 29:31 introduced the story of Leah four children by saying that the Lord saw her plight. Following those births, 30:31 says that Rachel saw she was not having any children and became jealous of Leah. Now Rachel is the wife allowing circumstances to frustrate her. In fact, she tells Jacob to give her children or she will die. Not being able to have children when you want them is

a very heavy cross to bear. But Rachel's strategy of making an impossible demand on Jacob rather than taking her frustrations to the Lord, and saying that she would die if she did not have children, are not spiritually mature decisions.

- From Jacob's perspective, Rachel's statement implies he is the problem, and so he does not respond well. (30:2.) He angrily and defensively attributes Rachel's childless state to the Lord.
- Rachel proposes the same cultural strategy that worked out so poorly for Sarah: using a maidservant as a surrogate wife. (30:3-6.) Apparently, Rachel also prayed. (30:6.) The phrase so "I can have a family" indicates Rachel does not view Leah and Jacob's children as Rachel's family line, showing one of the inherent problems in the practice of multiple wives. For Bilhah, moving from maidservant to surrogate wife was a step-up in social status, but that does not mean she wanted to participate in this plan, and it seems unlikely Rachel and Jacob gave her a choice. After Bilhah has a son, Rachel claims the boy as hers for purposes of status and inheritance. Rachel claims that the birth means "God" has vindicated her and heard her "plea" or "prayer." This indicates Rachel used prayer along with her cultural solution and is a positive sign. The name "Dan" alludes to the word "vindicated."
- Not satisfied with one child, Rachel chooses to have Jacob continue sleeping with Bilhah, and Bilhah has a second son. (30:7-8.) Rachel claims that birth shows she had a great struggle with Leah and prevailed, so she chose the name "Naphtali," which loosely means "struggle." Moses does not record anyone agreeing that Dan and Naphtali's birth vindicated Rachel, so I think there is room to disagree with Rachel's victory claim. Dan and Naphtali, however, are certainly part of the Lord's promised covenant blessing for Jacob's line. This episode sadly shows that women could sometimes use the male-biased rules of that culture to abuse other women.
- Leah probably viewed Rachel's names as taunting and responds poorly by resorting to the same cultural strategy, and so Zilpah became a second surrogate wife. (30:9.) Leah named the boy Gad, which means good fortune. It is the first time Leah has not made birth comment referring to the Lord.
- Zilpah has a second son. (30:12-13.) Leah claims that she is happy and names him "Asher," which means "happy one." Leah may feel happy, but one could question whether she is on a path to healthy happiness. At this point, both sisters appear focused on their perceived competition in a highly destructive way, a point underscored by the next episode.
- The next episode began with Leah's son Reuben finding mandrake plants. (30:14-18.) Commentators say this plant had roots that vaguely resemble human legs and it had a reputation as a fertility aid. In other words, another cultural strategy. Rachel saw the mandrakes and requested some of them. (ESV; KJV; NIV.) Leah responded sharply that Rachel took away Leah's husband, so Rachel should let Leah have all the mandrakes. Perhaps this means that, at some point, Rachel demanded that Jacob stop sleeping with Leah to make sure that Leah did not have more children. Rachel proposed a deal: Leah can sleep with Jacob that night if Rachel can have the mandrakes. Leah met Jacob returning from the field to make sure the deal was honored. Even though Leah's tactics clearly involved some sinful motives, Moses reports that the Lord heard Leah and she had another son. Leah acknowledged God's role in the birth with the name Issachar, which may allude to "my hire," i.e., the mandrake transaction, and "there is reward." Although Leah's acknowledgment of the Lord's role is positive, her conclusion that the Lord rewarded her for using her maid as a surrogate seems suspect. It seems more likely that

the Lord had compassion for Leah as someone who was put in a difficult domestic situation by her father and sister.

- Next Leah had a sixth son. (30:19-20.) Leah proclaimed the baby to be a gift from God and expressed the hope that Jacob will honor her. The name Zebulun may be a pun alluding to both “honor” and “gift.”
- Leah had her seventh child and first daughter. (30:21.) Her name was “Dinah.” Although no birth pronouncement was provided, her name is similar in derivation to Dan and probably meant “judgment.” Perhaps Leah was claiming that, in light of the most recent births, she was the wife who had been vindicated.
- Moses reports, after all this time, the Lord remembered Rachel and enabled her to become pregnant and have a son. (30:23.) The specific mention of the Lord’s involvement creates bookends with the Lord’s original enablement of Leah’s first child. (29:31.) Rachel gave credit to God saying that God had taken away her “disgrace” (NIV; ESV), meaning the basis on which people scorned or looked down upon her. There is a theme of the Lord helping whichever wife felt “downtrodden.” The name “Joseph” means “may he add” and expressed the hope for another son. After Leah having 7 children (6 boys and 1 girl), Bilhah having 2 boys, Zilpah having 2 boys, and Rachel having 1 boy, it appears that Leah and Rachel finally were able to acknowledge that their children were blessings from the Lord. These 12 births represent initial and partial fulfillment of the Lord’s promise to give Jacob many descendants. Although the Lord disciplines His people, He also dispenses blessings even though their behavior and motives are far from perfect.

Scene 3: The Lord blesses Jacob with material prosperity (30:25-43)

- After Joseph’s birth, Jacob asked Laban to let Jacob return to Canaan with his family. (30:25-26.) Jacob later indicates that he worked for Laban a total of 20 years. He attributed 14 of those years to the bride payment for Leah and Rachel, and 6 of those years to the deal made in this chapter. (31:38, 41.) That indicates Leah had 7 children in 7 calendar years with some time between child 4 and child 5 when she saw that she had stopped having children. For that math to work, Leah must have gotten pregnant as soon as feasible between her other children.
- Laban asks Jacob to stay and reveals that he had learned by “divination” that the Lord was blessing Laban because of Jacob. (30:27-28.) The Mosaic Code prohibited “divination” and “sorcery.” (Lev. 19:26.) Laban owned idols, so it is not surprising that he would also engage in divination. (Gen. 31:19.) Laban’s receipt of blessings due to association with Jacob is consistent with the Abrahamic covenant. (28:14.) One would hope this vicarious blessing would cause someone like Laban to worship the Lord, but Laban seems focused merely on gaining more material wealth. Laban gives Jacob a second opportunity to name his wages, albeit from a stronger negotiating position.
- Jacob shows his own negotiating skills. (30:29-30.) He reminds Laban that the Lord’s blessings have increased Laban’s wealth, but asks when Jacob would be able to build his own wealth. It is a polite way of saying that Jacob does not want to work for wages, he wants equity or an ownership interest. Jacob readily crediting the Lord as the source of the blessing is a positive spiritual sign.
- Laban asks Jacob what he wants. (30:31.) Jacob’s offer is difficult to understand. The most natural reading of English translations is that Jacob proposed to keep the adult speckled or

spotted, and certain dark-colored animals currently in the flock plus future offspring that looked the same way. (30:31-32.) But commentators uniformly say that Jacob actually proposed to keep only future **offspring** that was speckled, spotted, or dark-colored. Commentators believe that animals Jacob proposed would be his were also the less common colors. If the commentators are correct, Jacob's offer was very generous. He was proposing to start with a flock that did not have any speckled, spotted, or dark-colored adults. Jacob promised to give back any solid sheep or goats found among his sheep. One practical advantage of the proposal is that Laban and Jacob could both easily verify whether they were honoring the deal. (30:33.) To me, the best arguments for the commentators' view are (1) Jacob prefaced his offer by saying "don't give me anything," which fits with the idea that he was not asking Laban to transfer ownership of existing animals; and (2) if Laban was supposed to give Jacob the existing speckled, spotted, or dark-colored sheep, having his sons remove them would be such a huge theft that it is hard to believe Jacob would have continued to work with Laban.

- Laban accepted Jacob's terms. (30:34.) But he immediately departed from the terms by having his sons be the ones who removed the speckled, spotted, or dark animals, and his sons moved them three days away, presumably to make sure that none of them wandered into the flocks where Jacob could claim them. (30:35-36.)
- At this point, Jacob was not surprised and did not complain. (30:37-42.) He was content to build his own flocks through speckled, spotted, and dark offspring. But he did try to stack the deck with two cultural breeding techniques. He created striped poles by stripping bark from branches. The idea was that what the animals saw when they were mating would influence whether their offspring were speckled, spotted, or dark. He also selectively used this technique with stronger animals in the hopes that the animals he could keep would be born from better stock. Verses 42-43 imply that Jacob's technique was successful, but this must be reflecting Jacob's perspective at the time, because he will later take a different view. (31:6-13.)

Applications

- This chapter shows how the Lord began to fulfill the covenant promises of becoming a nation, having prosperity, and being a blessing to others. (Gen. 12:1-3; 26:3-5; 27:27-29; 28:3-4, 13-15.) This divine blessing occurred even though (1) Jacob arrived with little resources and Laban repeatedly tried to take advantage of Jacob; (2) Jacob and his wives' faith was far from perfect. The message that the Lord can deliver blessings to imperfect followers despite opposition was important for the Israelites as they contemplated invading the Promised Land.
- The chapter also shows how tempting it is for believers to use cultural techniques that are inconsistent with faith. For example, Laban and Jacob acknowledged that the Lord's desire to bless Jacob was the reason Laban's flocks had increased after Jacob's arrival. If so, Jacob's sketchy breeding program was unnecessary at best and hypocritical at worst. Similarly, early in chapter 30, Jacob and Rachel's conversation acknowledged that the Lord was sovereign over the births in their family, so their use of surrogate wives and mandrakes was also a destructive waste of energy and hypocritical. It is easy for us to see that their cultural techniques were misguided because our culture no longer practices them. But the takeaway is that every culture has practices that are incompatible with faith and those practices seem so natural to the people immersed in that culture that constant vigilance is needed to discern when cultural practices are incompatible with faith, and even then spiritual courage is required to trust the Lord alone.

- The competition between Leah and Rachel shows how easy it is for even believers to let our longing for the blessings we don't have negate our enjoyment of the blessings we do have. It is sad that these sisters often seemed to view their relationship competitively. Believers are exhorted to look after others' interests. (Phil. 2:4.) Because God is all-powerful, blessings are not a limited zero sum game. Dwelling jealously on other people's blessings is a form of criticizing God's choices for our lives. (Matt. 20:1-16; John 21:22.) Focusing on all that God has done for you is generally more encouraging than focusing on how other people seem to be doing. (Psalm 73:21-28.)