

Couples in the Bible – Jacob and Rachel

Today we continue our Couples in the Bible series and today I'm going to read you a passage from Genesis 29.

The Bible is not a very politically correct book, in fact it when it comes to marriage and family it is probably the most unsentimental of all books. It is very realistic about life and marriage—it basically says that; it is always hard and sometimes devastating not to be married and it is always hard and sometimes devastating to be married.

Integrating this biblical understanding with our culture is very difficult. Outside Christian circles there's a tremendous amount of fear and cynicism about marriage, and with good reason, because it is always hard and sometimes devastating to be married.

On the other hand, inside Christian circles there is a tendency to romanticise marriage. “Ah, marriage, that's what life's about. *Marriage, family, kids, white picket fence.*” But the Bible says both of those attitudes are wrong, because the Bible does not show us Jesus pointing to marriage saying, “*This is what you need.*” But rather pointing to *Jesus Christ* as the thing we need.

Today's couple is **Jacob and Rachel** and some would argue that it is one of the more romantic stories in the bible. But I will leave you to decide that, because Leah is also an integral part of the story, which sort of take all the romance away. And remember as we look at this story we will be asking, **what part does this story play in the big bible story**, why is it included here? We can't read the whole story so we will start when Jacob starts working for Laban, his uncle.

Let's get on and read Genesis 29:15-35:

Genesis 29:15-35

¹⁵Laban said to him, "You shouldn't work for me without pay just because we are relatives. Tell me how much your wages should be."

¹⁶Now Laban had two daughters. The older daughter was named Leah, and the younger one was Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel had a beautiful figure and a lovely face. ¹⁸Since Jacob was in love with Rachel, he told her father, "I'll work for you for seven years if you'll give me Rachel, your younger daughter, as my wife."

¹⁹ "Agreed!" Laban replied. "I'd rather give her to you than to anyone else. Stay and work with me." ²⁰ So Jacob worked seven years to pay for Rachel. But his love for her was so strong that it seemed to him but a few days.

²¹ Finally, the time came for him to marry her. "I have fulfilled my agreement," Jacob said to Laban. "Now give me my wife so I can sleep with her."

²² So Laban invited everyone in the neighbourhood and prepared a wedding feast. ²³ But that night, when it was dark, Laban took Leah to Jacob, and he slept with her. ²⁴ (Laban had given Leah a servant, Zilpah, to be her maid.)

²⁵ But when Jacob woke up in the morning—it was Leah! "What have you done to me?" Jacob raged at Laban. "I worked seven years for Rachel! Why have you tricked me?"

²⁶ "It's not our custom here to marry off a younger daughter ahead of the firstborn," Laban replied. ²⁷ "But wait until the bridal week is over; then we'll give you Rachel, too—provided you promise to work another seven years for me."

²⁸ So Jacob agreed to work seven more years. A week after Jacob had married Leah, Laban gave him Rachel, too. ²⁹ (Laban gave Rachel a servant, Bilhah, to be her maid.) ³⁰ So Jacob slept with Rachel, too, and he loved her much more than Leah. He then stayed and worked for Laban the additional seven years.

³¹ When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he enabled her to have children, but Rachel could not conceive. ³² So Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, "The LORD has noticed my misery, and now my husband will love me."

³³ She soon became pregnant again and gave birth to another son. She named him Simeon, for she said, "The LORD heard that I was unloved and has given me another son."

³⁴ Then she became pregnant a third time and gave birth to another son. He was named Levi, for she said, "Surely this time my husband will feel affection for me, since I have given him three sons!"

³⁵Once again Leah became pregnant and gave birth to another son. She named him Judah, for she said, "Now I will praise the LORD!" And then she stopped having children.

A Family of Grace, a Family of Suffering

First of all, there are a couple things you have to know as background of this story. In our original plan you would have known some of this stuff as Matt should be preaching on Abraham and Sarah today, however due to a late baby arrival we have things slightly out of order.

Family of grace

Remember from Adam and Eve's story last week, we see God's grace right from the beginning. So we need to recognise that Jacob came from a family chosen by grace. Jacob's grandfather was Abraham and one day God comes to Abraham and says, *"Abraham, look at the world. Do you see the misery? Do you see the cruelty? Do you see the injustice, the disease, the tragedy? Do you see death itself? I'm going to do something about it. I'm going to heal it. I'm going to redeem it all. And I'm going to do it through your family. One of your descendants will be the Messiah."*

Family of suffering

But also, this is a family filled with suffering. I don't have time to tell the whole story of the mess the family was in - the whole Esau and Jacob debacle - you can read that for yourself. You will note as I said before the Bible is very real and honest when it comes to marriage and family.

Through all the 'stuff' that happened in his life, Jacob comes to the conclusion that his life is over. He isn't sure if it is God that messed up, if he's the one who messed up, or if his father or his family messed up. But he is pretty sure he will never fulfil his destiny now. He's got no faith. He's got no money and no home. He's not in his homeland. It's all over. So that's the background.

Remember this is part of God's big story, the fall, the life where we make our own decisions, and where God is slowly putting into place his plan for redemption.

Laban's Plot

This is where our passage kicks in with Laban. Laban is Jacob's uncle, and Laban brings Jacob in to his family initially as a sort of charity case. Jacob's been

working for him for a month or so as a shepherd. And Laban recognises something. He looks at Jacob and thinks, *'this guy's a good shepherd. This guy's got management capabilities'*. He realizes that if appoints Jacob as foreman, he could expand his operation and he could make a huge amount of money - as long as he doesn't have to pay Jacob too much. So he comes to Jacob and he says, *"I'd like to negotiate a contract. What do you want in order to work for me?"* And Jacob says, *"Rachel."*

This played right into Laban's manipulative plan.

Let's jump back to earlier in the chapter so that we understand the context.

As Jacob wandered around lost, he would hang out at the local drinking hole – literally - the well where shepherds would come to water their sheep. That was where he first set eyes on Rachel.

Rachel was not only a shepherdess but very attractive. In biblical times, sheep were a sign of wealth. Having a good number of sheep would be the equivalent of driving a nice car. As soon as Jacob set eyes on Rachel, he was impressed! Hmmm, Hmmm Nice car!!!

So what does he do? In 29:7, he suggests to the other shepherds at the well,

"Don't you guys need to take those sheep somewhere? I see Rachel coming and I want to talk to her. Why don't you guys just water your sheep and disappear?"

These guys were not willing to play the game, they want to stay and watch the show and check out Rachel for themselves.

Now this is where things get amusing. Jacob pretends he has not seen Rachel and does not know who she is. Verse 10 tells the story:

"When Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother."

Rolling the stone normally took several men, but once Jacob sees Rachel coming with her flock of sheep he single-handedly rolls back the stone. This is their first encounter.

Laban knew there was chemistry so knew how to manipulate Jacob. So he employed Jacob and therefore solved his first problem of making a lot of money.

The second problem is Leah. Laban had two daughters, the older was Leah, but Leah had weak eyes.

We don't really know what 'weak eyes' means but if you look at the context, what it's really saying is that Laban had two girls; one is beautiful and other not so much. Whatever Leah looked like Rachel was drop dead gorgeous, well at least Jacob thought so, as verse 11 reads; *Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud!* From one kiss Jacob was overcome with emotion, physically exhausted, he sobbed for joy. His journey had ended, he was now in the right place, and had met his soul mate.

That might be all very romantic but Laban still had a problem.

Laban next problem is his fear that he will never marry Leah off and be stuck with her for the rest of his life. Not the nicest, most sensitive Dad in the world.

So as we read, Jacob worked for Laban for seven years and inadvertently marries Leah instead of Rachel. Don't you hate it when that happens??

Most of us will be thinking, poor Rachel, poor Jacob, but more importantly poor Leah! What a mess. All because of the greed and manipulation of these two deceiving men, Leah finds herself living in hell, with a husband who was deceived into marrying her.

The last verses of this passage are the most sad I know of anywhere in the Bible. While she felt blessed that she could have many children (Rachel couldn't), every time she names one of her children she says: Now maybe my husband will love me. Now maybe I'll have some meaning in life.

- And she names Rueben because Rueben means, "I'm seen."
- And Simeon means, "I'm heard."
- And Levi means, "I'm attached."

And every time a child comes along she says: Now finally, I'll be visible. Now finally, I'll be heard. Now finally, he'll cleave to me. Surely now my husband will love me now. But it never happens.

But then in the last verse, this is what we read.

³⁵Once again Leah became pregnant and gave birth to another son. She named him Judah, for she said, "Now I will praise the LORD!" And then she stopped having children.

God's Big Story

So what can we learn out of all this and how does it fit in to the God's big story.

There is good news and bad news.

It is not difficult to see the bad news, it's everywhere in this story.

- We continue to see the ongoing consequences of our actions. Sin is never just something we do and then move on, we don't do sin - sin does us. What goes around comes around. Jacob's life was a mess from the beginning, and the mess followed him wherever he went. Sin is like dropping a boulder into calm water. The shock waves go out forever, through all our relationships, yes even generations.
- Relational dysfunction – everyone is just looking after themselves
- We see Jacobs disappointment, after 7 years of working he wakes up after the high of his wedding and 'it was Leah'.
- And Leah was disappointed because no matter what she did, how many sons she produced for Jacob, she was never loved – that is all she wanted.
- And Rachel was disappointed because she couldn't have a child until many years later.

Plenty of bad news, but in the grace of God there 'gooder' good news.

Good News:

1. God works with weak people.

The bible can cause a fair bit of confusion sometimes. There will be some people saying, *This is the stuff I hate about the Bible. Here you've got Jacob, he is just a con-man, and look how he's oppressing women. Polygamy, bigamy. Women being used, abused and sold. This is what I hate about the Bible.*

Now, we could spend a little bit of time on that. In every place, the Bible condemns bigamy and polygamy—in every part of God's law. This text shows us the complete misery that comes when women are treated like this; if you think the bible in any way condones that behaviour, you are not reading the Bible properly. That's a real problem.

Do you know why it churns people up when they read the Bible and see all this stupidity and foolishness? Because we think the Bible should be a book of virtues. We think the Bible should be a series of inspirational stories with nice role models. We think the Bible should be a series of stories of heroes. If that is what we want, that proves that we don't understand the gospel, we don't understand the good news.

If you think the Bible should be a book of virtues or inspirational stories of role models we should be imitating, that means you think that Christianity is like all the other religions. Every other religion says god is at the top of the ladder. He's put a ladder down between you and heaven, and he's standing at the top of the ladder and he's saying, "Ok, do your stuff. Do good. Live right. Imitate the heroes. If you try real hard you can come up the ladder to heaven, one rung at a time."

But Jesus said, you'll never make it up the ladder. The bible is saying; look at all these guys in here. Look at all that they have—revelation from God, miracles in their lives—they have all kinds of incredible things that happen to them and yet they mess up again and again and again. Our God, the Christian God, is not a God who stands at the top of the ladder, but one who sent his Son down to be the ladder. He's not a God who says *perform for me*. But he says my Son, Jesus Christ, will come down and live the life you should have lived and die the death you should have died. And that's the reason why Bible stories are not a series of stories of role models to imitate, but of weak people, like you and me. God works with weak people. That's good news.

2. God works in the weakest

He doesn't just work *with* the weakest but he works *in* the weakest. This is what is so astounding about Leah. One thing we can easily miss as we hear her cry out to God and talk about how she wants her husband to love her, is that she uses words that commentators over the years have been struck by.

There are two words that are used for 'God' in the Old Testament. The one word is the Hebrew word translated *Elohim*. It's a generic name for God. It just means God, and everybody used this word. All religions, all people, everybody used this word *God*. It meant "the great one."

When God came to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob he gave them a new name. He gave them a personal name. It was the name Yahweh. This word, *Yahweh*, was a name he only gave to people to whom he was giving the story of salvation.

So every place the word *Yahweh* shows up in English Bible you don't see the word *God* translated, you see 'The Lord' some translation will write is in capitals.

And Leah, trying to deal with the hell she is living, feeling like, *How do I get out of this situation? I always knew I was plain. I always knew that in the world's eyes I was nothing. And now every day it's just pushed in my face. How am I going to survive this?* And every time she has a child her hopes rise; *"now my husband will save me. Now my husband will love me."* And she looks at her child, but she also says, every time, *the Lord, Yahweh.*

But we need to ask where did Leah hear about this name? She must have heard the promise, the promise of salvation. She began to understand the idea of the Lord, Yahweh, the God who will save by grace.

And what's so fascinating is that initially her hope is in her husband, that is until the very end. At the very end something changes. After each birth she says, *"Now my husband will love me."* *"Now my husband will love me."* *"Now my husband will love me."* But then at the end it says she gave birth to another son and she said, *"This time I will praise the Lord."*

And at that moment she got her life back. At that moment, Laban and Jacob and all the people who had used and abused her fell away.

And more than that, look—who was the child? It was Judah. God comes to Leah and says, *"You'll be the mother of Jesus,"* because Judah was the seed. Leah became the seed—Leah the outsider, the Leah the ugly, Leah the rejected.

The Old Testament shows us what the New Testament spells out clearly. **God loves those who others don't love.** God is attracted to the weak because of his gracious nature and he wants the ones that no one else wants.

That's the good news.

- That's the reason why God chooses the foolish to shame the wise.
- God chooses the weak to shame the strong.
- God chooses the things that are despised, so that we might understand God's grace.