

Genesis 29:21-35
Laban's Treachery and God's Compassion

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain (William Cowper, 1773).

If you have been a believer for even a little while, you will agree that God does move in mysterious ways. That which seems right and fair to us, is not always so to Him. And the converse is true as well. What may seem absolutely wrong from our perspective, when seen in the light of eternity, will have proved to be in perfect harmony with God's impeccable justice and holiness.

In possession of both the birthright and his father's blessing, Jacob had arrived in Paddan-aram in search of a wife. His journey had been long, but it had been rewarded. He had found Rachel, a beautiful young woman who, fortuitously, also happened to be his cousin. Her father, Laban had agreed to the match, and the wedding date had been settled upon. But first, Jacob needed to work seven years to compensate

Laban for the dowry he did not possess. Fortunately for Jacob, he was very much in love with Rachel, and the time passed quickly. And finally, the day Jacob would take his bride had arrived.

An Unexpected Surprise

Having worked his seven years, Jacob was certainly ready to be married to his love, Rachel. So, “Jacob said to Laban, ‘give me my wife, for my time is completed, that I may go in to her’” (v. 21). This was not a gently made request. He was impatient. Jacob demanded his wife. He had grown tired of waiting. Seven years was a long time to burn in the constant presence of the woman he wished one day to wed. And notice that Jacob referred to Rachel as his wife, not as Laban’s daughter. This understanding of the marriage relationship, that once a couple had been betrothed they were effectively married, was a later element of Jewish practice, but it seemed that in this case Jacob was already presuming upon that sentiment. The tone of Jacob’s language reflected his frustration and impatience. Seven years had been long enough, even if it had seemed like only a few days (Genesis 29:20).

Whatever Laban thought of Jacob’s tone, Scripture does not record him offering Jacob an answer. The shrewd Jacob ought to have recognized that as a bad sign. That Laban did not immediately bring Rachel to Jacob was certainly an indication of his sinister motives. Rather, instead of promptly giving Rachel to Jacob, “Laban gathered all the men of the place and made a feast” (v. 22). That is, rather than bestowing to Jacob his wife upon the moment, Laban insisted on having a large wedding feast to celebrate the occasion. Natural as this may have appeared, as we will see, his main objective was to buy time and to take advantage of the sleepy, and probably somewhat inebriated, Jacob later that night.

According to the social customs of the day, brides wore a veil until they entered the bridal chamber (Genesis 24:65). So she certainly was when, “in the evening he took his daughter Leah, and brought her to him; and Jacob went in to her” (v. 23). In keeping with the customs of the culture, “Laban also gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah as a maid” (v.24). Laban knew that he was marrying his elder daughter to Jacob. Her maid would accompany Leah in her new life.

It seems to have been understood that the act of sex with a virgin compelled a man to marry the girl. Though this precept was not yet codified into law, it was certainly expected in the culture, and eventually would become part of the Mosaic Law.

“If a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged, and lies with her, he must pay a dowry for her to be his wife” (Exodus 22:16).

“²⁸If a man finds a girl who is a virgin, who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her and they are discovered, ²⁹then the man who lay with her shall give to the girl’s father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall become his wife because he has violated her; he cannot divorce her all his days” (Deuteronomy 22:28-29).

Thus, Laban knew that once Jacob had taken Leah into his bed, he was obligated to marry her, and to keep her as his wife. He could not later divorce her by arguing extenuating circumstances. Laban’s plan had worked well. The feast was over, or perhaps the last few guests were still lingering over their wine.

It was probably late in the evening, when the bride and groom retired to bed. Leah was veiled, and it was Laban who escorted her to the bridal tent.

Yet, while those facts may have been sufficient to keep Jacob from recognizing Leah by sight, surely those elements could not explain why Jacob did not notice her voice. After all, that was what had nearly given him away when he had deceived his own father. Did the couple not speak? That seems unlikely. So perhaps Jacob may have had too much to drink, and simply did not have his wits about him as he waited in the marriage tent, excited about taking Rachel into his arms.

In any case, like the ruse Jacob had played on Esau and Isaac, this secret could not be kept forever. “So it came about in the morning that, behold, it was Leah! And he said to Laban, ‘what is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you deceived me?’” (v. 25). The irony of the deceiver being deceived is unmistakable. The perpetrator of subterfuge had now become its victim. Jacob had pretended to be the elder son in front of Isaac, now Leah was represented as the younger daughter to Jacob.

As is often the case in Scripture (and in extra-biblical writings as well), no mention is made of the bride’s position in all of this. Was Leah willing to be a pawn? Had she not been told that Jacob had actually been expecting her sister? That her maid went with her surely was a sign to Leah that the marriage was to be legitimate. Scripture gives no indication that Leah was any less a victim of Laban’s actions than Jacob and Rachel.

Jacob’s question to Laban was reminiscent of similar questions we have heard before in comparable circumstances.

“¹⁸Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, ‘what is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹Why did you say, “she is my sister,” so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go’” (Genesis 12:18-19).

“Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, ‘what have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done’” (Genesis 20:9).

“⁹Then Abimelech called Isaac and said, ‘behold, certainly she is your wife! How then did you say, “she is my sister?”’ And Isaac said to him, ‘because I said, “I might die on account of her.”’
¹⁰Abimelech said, ‘what is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us’” (Genesis 26:9-10).

In each of those cases the patriarch had been the deceiver and a pagan the victim. But now the roles were reversed.

Jacob described the act of deception in a word that implied the personal betrayal by a family member or close friend. But, in fact, Laban may have believed himself to have been acting in an honorable cause, even if he did so dishonorably. Laban argued that he had no choice but to uphold the customs of his

people. ²⁶Laban said, ‘it is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also for the service which you shall serve with me for another seven years’” (v. 26-27). The language makes it clear that these were social protocols not to be taken lightly. Abimelech had used the same phrasing in describing his view of Abraham’s deception (Genesis 20:9).

In other words, while it may have been true that in Canaan a younger sibling could replace the older, that was not true in Paddan-aram. We might wonder why then, did Laban not inform Jacob of this custom beforehand? Laban certainly had no problem with Jacob taking Rachel as his wife *after* he had married Leah. After seven *years*, would Jacob have really objected to waiting another seven *days* had he known of the particular social requirements? Scripture does not clarify this for us. Laban’s behavior can, therefore, be interpreted as either a worthless attempt to cover a blatant lie, as Abraham and Isaac did when they exposed their wives to other men, or more nobly as when Jacob’s sons tricked the men of Shechem who had violated their sister into being circumcised, and attacked them when they were recovering from the procedure (Genesis 34).

However we look at Laban’s motives, his actions did accomplish two things. First, he ensured that both of his daughters would be married, since he must have been confident that Jacob would not leave until he had wed the wife of *his* choosing. Second, he was able to obtain another seven years of labor from his industrious nephew.

Jacob had no choice but to agree. And Scripture does not record him making a protest. Yet, this time he got paid (if that is what we can call Rachel) upfront. This was an act of trust on Laban's part, and it is to Jacob’s credit that he continued to serve Laban for the full seven years even after he received Rachel. He did not run away. He did not shirk his responsibilities. ²⁸Jacob did so and completed her week, and he gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife. ²⁹Laban also gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maid. ³⁰So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and indeed he loved Rachel more than Leah, and he served with Laban for another seven years” (v. 28-30). So, Jacob spent the next week completing the marriage customs associated with taking a bride, and then he was given Rachel as his wife as well. Scripture makes no mention of another feast, so it may have been a rather business-like affair.

Scripture is silent on the matter of polygamy, perhaps a sign that it had become so common as to have become part of the culture, regardless of God’s command in the garden. Also, we cannot overlook the favoritism that again was associated with Jacob. Jacob “loved Rachel more than Leah” (v. 30). Before, it was the special treatment he had received from his mother, whereas his father had preferred his brother. Now, it was Jacob who showed preferment. His exclusive love for Rachel and neglect of Leah had both short-term and long term consequences. The short-term we will see beginning in this passage, but the long-term consequences were even more significant. His preference for his son Joseph would eventually lead the entire extended family of these Hebrews into four hundred years of slavery in Egypt (Genesis 37:3). And, yet, even in that experience, we can see that God was working. Always working in His mysterious ways.

An Unexpected Blessing

Jacob had been tricked into taking Leah as his wife, and he could not have been pleased at having to labor another seven years to get Rachel. But he was not alone in this unhappy marriage. Leah, too, must have been miserable. Not only was she married to a man that did not love her, but she had to spend her days watching at close range the love Jacob showed to Rachel. Her experience must have been dreadful.

That a man who was married to two women would prefer one over the other was human nature. No doubt that was part of the reason God forbade such relationships when he authored the institution of marriage in the beginning. But as sin continued to flourish, and polygamy became widespread even among God's own people, eventually the obvious consequences of such behavior had to be addressed in law. ¹⁵"If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, ¹⁶then it shall be in the day he wills what he has to his sons, he cannot make the son of the loved the firstborn before the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn" (Deuteronomy 21:15-16).

But God was watching the forlorn Leah. Indeed, the narrator specifically stated that it was God Who noticed that Leah was unloved. "Now the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren" (v. 31). Apparently either Jacob did not notice, or he did not care. Also, we must remember that to a woman in this culture, being able to bear a child was a measure of self-worth. To be able to bear a son was a matter of great pride. Other than changing Jacob's heart, there could have been no other blessing God could have given Leah that would have pleased her more.

This, and the succeeding pregnancies, probably occurred during the seven years when Jacob was still working for Rachel. And one thing we must first take away from this narrative, is that Scripture distinctly states that children are a divine provision. The only references to Jacob in this passage are to Leah's hopes that the birth of her sons will compel him to love her. Nowhere was Jacob portrayed as being the reason for the births of the children, though he certainly must have played his paternal role.

The word used for 'unloved' is strong. It could even be translated as 'hated' as in the case of Joseph's brothers,

³Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. ⁴His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms.

⁵Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. ⁶He said to them, 'please listen to this dream which I have had; ⁷for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf rose up and also stood erect; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf.' ⁸Then his brothers said to him, 'are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?' So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words" (Genesis 37:3-8).

As Agur, the son of Jakeh, the oracle said it,

“²¹Under three things the earth quakes,

And under four, it cannot bear up:

²²Under a slave when he becomes king,

And a fool when he is satisfied with food,

²³Under an unloved woman when she gets a husband,

And a maidservant when she supplants her mistress” (Proverbs 30:21-23).

Such was the domestic world of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel.

Whether Jacob’s feelings toward Leah were a result of conflicting personalities, general incompatibility, or some other factor, it certainly must have been much more than a lack of physical attraction. Perhaps Jacob resented Leah because of the role she had played, even if unwittingly, in deceiving him. Yet, whatever his feelings were for Leah, Jacob honored his marital duty toward her. Though he had married Leah only because he had been tricked into doing so, nonetheless Jacob engaged in sexual relations with her. “Leah conceived and bore a son and named him Reuben, for she said, ‘because the Lord has seen my affliction; surely now my husband will love me’” (v. 32). The name of the child was an exclamation of joy and pride, “see, a son.”

Her affliction had been seen by God, as God had seen the pain of Hagar,

“⁷Now the angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness . . . ¹⁰the angel of the Lord said to her, ‘I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count.’

¹¹The angel of the Lord said to her further,

‘Behold, you are with child,

And you will bear a son;

And you shall call his name Ishmael,

Because the Lord has given heed to your affliction’” (Genesis 16:7, 10-11).

And as God would see the pain of Hannah,

“¹⁰greatly distressed, prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. ¹¹She made a vow and said, ‘O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head’ . . . ²⁰It came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son; and she named him Samuel, saying, ‘because I have asked him of the Lord’” (1 Samuel 1:10-11, 20).

God looks on those in distress, and He works His ways mysteriously.

But, in fact, only the first part of Leah’s speech was correct. Indeed though the Lord had seen her affliction and given her a son, that had not led to Jacob loving her. So the Lord continued to watch, and the Lord continued to listen. As God had chosen the second born Jacob instead of his brother Esau, so now God chose the unloved Leah over the beloved, and more beautiful, Rachel. So, “she conceived again and bore a son and said, ‘because the Lord has heard that I am unloved, He has therefore given me this

son also.’ So she named him Simeon” (v. 33). If the birth of her first son had not been enough to win Jacob’s affection, Leah certainly hoped that the successful birth of a second son would. Sadly, Leah was not to be the last parent who unsuccessfully looked for the birth of a child to repair a fractured marriage.

And “she conceived again and bore a son and said, ‘now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.’ Therefore he was named Levi” (v. 34). The phrasing here, “now this time,” seemed to indicate Leah’s increasing frustration at not being able to convince Jacob to love her. In addition, we can note that apparently Leah had not yet given up on gaining Jacob’s love. Certainly three sons would be enough, she must have believed. And also notice that Leah still referred to Jacob as ‘my husband,’ a description that Rachel, no doubt, would have disputed.

“And she conceived again and bore a son and said, ‘this time I will praise the Lord.’ Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing” (v. 35). Following the birth of her fourth son, Leah at last departed from the obsession over her own grief and instead praised the Lord. Scripture gives no reason for her ceasing to bear children, though we can assume that Jacob, with four sons in hand, had no need to be concerned for the family line and withdrew his attentions from the wife he did not love.

Despite Laban’s treachery, and despite Jacob’s lack of compassion and pity, God had worked in this dysfunctional marriage to produce two sons who would have significant impact in the life of the nation of Israel. From Levi, the third born, would come the line of Levitical priests. Both Moses and Aaron were descendants of Levi. Also, it would be from the line of Judah that the monarchy would emerge. Thus both the priesthood and kingship, the two fundamental elements of the nation of Israel, had their origins in the troubled relationship of Jacob and Leah.

Takeaways

“Seek the Lord while He may be found;

Call upon Him while He is near.

⁷Let the wicked forsake his way

And the unrighteous man his thoughts;

And let him return to the Lord,

And He will have compassion on him,

And to our God,

For He will abundantly pardon.

⁸For My thoughts are not your thoughts,

Nor are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord” (Isaiah 55:6-8).

The ways of our God are inscrutable. He works His sovereign will in ways that we cannot understand. Therefore let us not judge the workings of our God, but rather “seek the Lord” and “call upon Him” while we can. As Jacob must have wondered what God was doing during these fourteen years, so we might also wonder at what God is up to in our own circumstances. May God give us the grace to simply trust Him and follow in obedience.