

Leah and Rachel
Genesis 29:15 – 30:24

Turn to Genesis 29. We will continue the Genesis stories that we began here last summer, the stories of Abraham's family, and how God took care of this family because God wanted to bring his blessing to all the nations. These are family stories, and they are honest. Let's read. Gn 29:15.

After Jacob had stayed with him for a whole month, Laban said to him, "Just because you are a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be." Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It's better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me." So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her. Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her." So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her. And Laban gave his servant Zilpah to his daughter as her attendant.

When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?" Laban replied, "It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work." And Jacob did so. He finished the week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. Laban gave his servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her attendant. Jacob made love to Rachel also, and his love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years.

Jacob deceived and cheated his brother and father, and now Laban did the same to him. Polygamy – the writer of Genesis does not condemn polygamy because he already wrote Genesis 2, and we can all see that two becoming one flesh again does not work for three or more people. The biblical writers do not condemn what their readers can figure out.

When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, "It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now." She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too." So she named him Simeon. Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." So he was named Levi. She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "This time I will praise the Lord." So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children.

When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I’ll die!” Jacob became angry with her and said, “Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?” Then she said, “Here is Bilhah, my servant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and I too can build a family through her.” So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife. Jacob slept with her, and she became pregnant and bore him a son. Then Rachel said, “God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son.” Because of this she named him Dan. Rachel’s servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, “I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won.” So she named him Naphtali.

When Leah saw that she had stopped having children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, “What good fortune!” So she named him Gad. Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. Then Leah said, “How happy I am! The women will call me happy.” So she named him Asher.

During wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” But she said to her, “Wasn’t it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son’s mandrakes too?” “Very well,” Rachel said, “he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son’s mandrakes.” So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him. “You must sleep with me,” she said. “I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes.” So he slept with her that night.

God listened to Leah, and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son. Then Leah said, “God has rewarded me for giving my servant to my husband.” So she named him Issachar. Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son. Then Leah said, “God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons.” So she named him Zebulun. Some time later she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dinah.

Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, “God has taken away my disgrace.” She named him Joseph, and said, “May the Lord add to me another son.”

Let’s go over the Leah and Rachel story. We’ll do this in 7 parts.

1, Leah’s Trouble and Rachel’s Trouble – Gen 29:31

When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. Leah cannot get Jacob’s love, and Rachel cannot have children. Leah can have children, and Rachel has Jacob’s love, but they are both unhappy because of what they do not have.

God enabled Leah to conceive. Every patriarchal wife was barren: Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. The slave girls were not, Hagar and Bilhah and Zilpah did not need their wombs opened. The first three generations of the promise family should each have been the last, but God acted. Leah was not loved, God felt sorry for her, and enabled her have children.

2, Leah Names her Sons – Gen 29:32-35

Listen to Leah's heart in these four name explanations: 1, *"It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now."* 2, *"Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too."* 3, *"Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons."* 4, *"This time I will praise the Lord." Then she stopped having children.*

Leah knows God is being good to her, she's very grateful. But she wants her husband to love her, and be attached to her, and that's not happening. After the fourth, Leah said, "This time I will praise the Lord." That's a high point. She gave God thanks for what she had, never mind what she did not have. On the whole, Leah was more content than Rachel.

It's possible that Jacob never forgave Leah for going along with Laban's scheme to fool Jacob on his wedding night. But when he grew up, Esau his brother was his father Isaac's favorite, and he was his mother Rebekah's favorite, and Jacob's favorite was Rachel. After four children Leah stopped, and it does not say why, but we get a hint a little later.

3, Rachel Responds with Bilhah – Gen 30:1-8

When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!" Jacob became angry with her and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?"

Rachel is jealous of Leah, she is unreasonable with Jacob, and Jacob gets angry at her. That's sort of how our lives go, isn't it. Here are the two names Rachel gave Bilhah's two sons: One was Dan, because *"God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son."* She took Bilhah's son as God being good to her.

She called the second son Naphtali, because *"I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won."* Rachel is competing furiously with her sister, and finally she has come out ahead.

4, Leah Responds with Zilpah – Gen 30:9-13

When Leah saw that she had stopped having children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Listen to how Leah names these two sons: The first was Gad, because she said, "What good fortune!" The second she named Naphtali, because she said, "How happy I am! The women will call me happy."

Again, Leah seems more content, genuinely thankful actually for the good things she has. Jacob is not treating her any better, never does, and her sister doesn't have much time for her either. So she enjoys what she has, which are all these boys.

5, Leah hires Jacob for a Night – Gen 30:14-16

During wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." But she said to her, "Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?" "Very well," Rachel said, "he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes." So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him. "You must sleep with me," she said. "I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he slept with her that night.

This sounds to me like the reason Leah stopped having children was that Rachel convinced Jacob to not go to Leah's tent any more. Leah buys Rachel's permission for Jacob to spend the night with her. Sad stuff. The Bible always describes polygamy as an unhappy business.

6, God Listened to Leah – Gen 30:17-21

God listened to Leah, and she became pregnant. It does not say God enabled her to conceive, it seems more like she wanted Jacob to come to her again. On the other hand, what Leah really wanted was Jacob's love, and Genesis never reports that. But Rachel told Leah that Jacob could come to Leah that night, and Leah had two sons, which means normal relations between Leah and Jacob continued past just that night.

Here is how Leah name these two sons: First, Issachar, because *"God has rewarded me for giving my servant to my husband."* So she named him Issachar. The second was Zebulun, because *"God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons."*

Every child is a gift from God, and Leah takes them all like that, and so does Rachel. On the other hand, Leah still wants something from her husband that she's not getting, and she hopes her childbearing will achieve. After her first child she said, "Sure my husband will love me now," but it did not happen. Six sons did not change that.

7, God Remembered and Listened to Rachel – Gen 30:22-24

Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, "God has taken away my disgrace." She named him Joseph, and said, "May the Lord add to me another son."

Finally God gave Rachel what she always wanted. She named him Joseph because “*God has taken away my disgrace.*” These names all come from the heart, and they are a powerful story.

God remembered Rachel, listened to her, enabled her to conceive. The Bible often talks like this, and I want you to notice this here. We might take that line to mean that until now God had forgotten about Rachel, and until now was not listening to her prayers. In the Bible that’s not what it means. The Bible says “God remembered” and “God listened” *when God decides to act.*

God was certainly remembering and listening to Rachel all along, but the Bible often uses these words when God decides to act. Think of Leah. What she wanted was for Jacob to love her, be attached to her, honour her. That never happened. Does that mean God was not remembering or listening to Leah? Certainly not, he was also being good to her, just not what she wanted most.

In Genesis, there are many stories of brothers that do not get along. This story tells us that this happens to sisters too. There are many problems in the family that carried God’s blessing to all.

These sons are the patriarchs, the origins of the tribes of Israel. God’s plans to bless the world through Abraham’s descendants took a big step forward with this story. This is not a model home, is it? Not a chance. The twelve patriarchs themselves were sometime unpleasant people, but so were their parents. This is how God works.

Bilhah and Zilpah. They have a painful role in this story, because they do not get to keep their children, they are not even called their children, they do not even get to name them. And the ones doing this to them more Rachel and Leah than Jacob. Rachel and Leah view Bilhah and Zilpah as extensions of their own bodies.

It sounds like neither God nor the writer of Genesis are aware of this awful injustice. But remember Hagar in an earlier story. Sarah sent her away, and Hagar was in big trouble, and God came to her and helped her. She named God, “The God Who Sees Me.” She was surprised that God saw her. No one else did. Genesis gives several important names to God, and Hagar’s is one of them. There are many human problems in this story that God did not fix. But he knows, and the writer of Genesis knows.

What I like most about Leah and Rachel is that they grew up in Laban’s home, and he did *not* worship the God of Abraham and Isaac. But Jacob did, and so Leah and Rachel did too. They always knew God was in their story. It comes up again and again, in their heartfelt names.

Even Rachel at the end: “*God has taken away my disgrace, may Yahweh add to me another son.*” And God really was in their story. He was involved with all three in this marriage, and the slave women, he was with them, he paid close attention, and helped, and was good to them in spite of their failures.

It is no good having devotions every morning if we don't see God as a major player in the things that shape our days and lives. He is such a great God. He does not have to fix us to use us. He's so gracious with our daily shortcomings, and he's on our side. This was the promise and blessing to Abraham's family.

We here have inherited this very promise, this very blessing. What God did for that troubled family, he does for every family that comes to Christ. He is doing these things for all of us every day. Through Christ we inherited all this. That's very good news! Amen.

PRAYER: Our Father in heaven, the God who sees us, this is an encouraging story. It tells us that you are in the middle of all kinds of painful and messy situations, and that you are faithful. And when you decide that you are going to bless people and take care of them and use them to take your plans forward, then you do that. And we have inherited this very promised blessing, because you wanted to do this for all the nations. Thank you for telling us the shortcomings of the original family of blessing, it is so encouraging for us. We praise you and give you glory. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.