



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for October 21, 2007
Released on October 17, 2007

"Jacob and Rachel"

Printed Text: Genesis 29:20-35

Background Scripture: Genesis 29

Devotional Reading: Psalm 91

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT: Genesis 29:20-35

- 20** And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her.
- 21** And Jacob said unto Laban, Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her.
- 22** And Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast.
- 23** And it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her.
- 24** And Laban gave unto his daughter Leah Zilpah his maid for an handmaid.
- 25** And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah: and he said to Laban, What is this thou hast done unto me? did not I serve with thee for Rachel? wherefore then hast thou beguiled me?
- 26** And Laban said, It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.
- 27** Fulfil her week, and we will give thee this also for the service which thou shalt serve with me yet seven other years.
- 28** And Jacob did so, and fulfilled her week: and he gave him Rachel his daughter to wife also.
- 29** And Laban gave to Rachel his daughter Bilhah his handmaid to be her maid.
- 30** And he went in also unto Rachel, and he loved also Rachel more than Leah, and served with him yet seven other years.
- 31** And when the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb: but Rachel was barren.
- 32** And Leah conceived, and bare a son, and she called his name Reuben: for she said, Surely the LORD hath looked upon my affliction; now therefore my husband will love me.
- 33** And she conceived again, and bare a son; and said, Because the LORD hath heard I was hated, he hath therefore given me this son also: and she called his name Simeon.
- 34** And she conceived again, and bare a son; and said, Now this time will my husband be joined unto me, because I have born him three sons: therefore was his name called Levi.
- 35** And she conceived again, and bare a son: and she said, Now will I praise the LORD: therefore she called his name Judah; and left bearing.

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Describe Jacob's family life.
2. Compare and contrast marriage customs of Jacob's time with those of today.
3. Write a prayer committing some disappointing circumstance in life into God's hand and seeking guidance for dealing with the situation in a positive manner.

Introduction -- Actions and Consequences

If you want to spark an interesting discussion among Christians, ask people to share testimonies of discipline that may have been divine in origin. I have done this in various settings, and the results are both amusing and instructive.

The essential storyline often goes something like this: "When my coworkers, neighbors, or schoolmates engage in various 'low-profile' sins, whether speeding, shoplifting, or cheating on their taxes, they seldom get caught and often appear to benefit from their choices. For the most part, I resist such practices due to my faith and convictions. But the one time I decided to join their iniquity, I was caught red-handed and had to bear the shame."

I know this to be true in my own life. The one time I lied to my boss, I was exposed. The one time I joined my friends in an act of theft, we all got busted. The one time I drag-raced my buddies, the radar gun nailed me. It is not like I engaged in these activities all the time only to have my actions finally catch up with me. No, these were flukes. They were one-time acts of rebellion, and without fail, I never got away with them—and it's a good thing too!

Scripture teaches that God disciplines those whom He loves (Hebrews 12:5, 6). God loves us so much that He will not allow us to avoid consequences (immediately or eventually) when we tread sinful paths. We should not be alarmed when we do not escape cleanly from sinful endeavors. We should be deeply concerned, however, if we do continue to get away easily.

If discipline is a sign of divine love (and it often is), then God certainly loved Jacob. In today's lesson, God allows Jacob to suffer twice in order to straighten his crooked path.

Lesson Background

Last week we saw God shower His grace on Jacob by meeting him at Bethel. There God extended the promise He had made to Jacob's grandfather Abraham. Despite Jacob's legacy of deception, God gave him the honor of being the father of the chosen people through whom God would bless all nations. Jacob accepted this offer. Then he continued his northward journey to escape Esau and to acquire a wife from his mother's household.

In Genesis 29 we learn that Jacob arrived safely in Haran and was graciously welcomed into the household of his uncle Laban. Since Jacob would be staying for a while, working arrangements had to be made. Jacob had fallen for Rachel, the younger and more attractive of Laban's two daughters. So he offered to work seven years in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage. Typically, the groom was obligated to offer some kind of "bride price" to the bride's family. This would offset the work production the family would be losing by giving their daughter in marriage. In this case, seven years of labor was an agreeable arrangement to both parties, so a deal was made.

Jacob was so enamored with Rachel that the years seemed to fly by (Genesis 29:20). Jacob was then ready to claim his bride, pack his bags, and head back home to the promised land. Things could not have been going better for Jacob, but God was not finished with him. Jacob's character was about to be forged in the fire of divine discipline.

Rachel's Wedding Planned (v. 20-22)

1. How long did Jacob agree to work at first? How long did he actually work? (v. 20, 27, 30)

Verse 20 states that Jacob agreed to serve Laban, his uncle, seven years in order to marry Rachel. Under normal conditions, Jacob would have simply paid a bride-price to Laban in order to get Rachel as his wife. In today's text, Jacob is broke. He has no money. He has fallen in love with Rachel while he was living with his uncle. This is where Laban made the agreement with Jacob to give his daughter in marriage to him for seven years of work.

2. What happened on the night of the wedding? (v. 21-24)

Jacob has finished his seven years of service. He asks Laban for Rachel's hand in marriage in verse 21. This seems like a reasonable request from Jacob. Since Jacob fulfilled his part of the bargain, it was time for Laban to fulfill his.

“We see growth in Jacob’s character as he patiently served Laban for seven difficult years. Shepherding isn’t an easy vocation, and seven years is a long time, but Jacob’s love for Rachel took the burden out of the work and caused the time to pass quickly. It’s been well said that happiness consists of having someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to; and Jacob had all three” (Wiershbe, The Bible Exposition, Cook).

In Jewish custom, a marriage feast was announced, and many people came. The wedding was about to occur, but Jacob, the trickster was about to be tricked. He will not get the woman that he worked for.

Rachel’s Wedding Delayed (v. 23-30)

3. Why do you suppose Jacob did not know which woman he was actually marrying? (v. 23-25)

Jacob’s heart was with Rachel, so how did he end up marrying another woman? The Bible does not give details, but there are a few possibilities. After a time of feasting, it is possible that Jacob was somewhat inebriated from the customary consumption of wine. That being so, we can understand why the groom could be easily deceived into marrying the wrong woman. That they were sisters could mean that they were of similar size and build, making the deception easier to pull off.

“Eastern women were kept fairly secluded, and there was no such thing as ‘dating’ in that culture, but surely Jacob had gotten to know Rachel and Leah fairly well during those seven years. Why, then, was he so easily deceived? Granted the bridal chamber was dark and the bride was veiled, and perhaps she didn’t speak above a whisper, but in the intimacy of the marriage bed, how could Jacob not know who the woman was? Or maybe he was intoxicated by his passionate love. Was Leah a willing partner in the subterfuge or did her unprincipled father force her to obey him? And where was Rachel during the drama? We can imagine several possible scenarios but can be sure of none of them” (Wiersbe).

In the morning, Jacob noticed that he married the wrong woman. He married Leah instead of Rachel. He quickly reminded Laban about the agreement that they had previously made. It was natural for him to ask Laban why he had so brazenly deceived him.

4. What reason did Laban offer for his substitution of Leah? (v. 26)

Laban described the custom of the firstborn daughter. He stated that the oldest daughter must be given in marriage before the younger daughters can be given in marriage. This custom is still practiced in some cultures.

The issue is that Laban did not tell Jacob about this custom prior to making the agreement with him. Laban intentionally left Jacob uninformed of this practice. The explanation seems a rather feeble excuse for Laban's actions. Had Jacob known he would be forced to marry Leah, he would have no doubt made other arrangements regarding his marriage to Rachel.

5. How long did Jacob have to wait before he could marry Rachel? (v. 27)

Cunning Laban had another plan up his sleeve. He suggested to Jacob that he fulfill his honeymoon week with Leah, after which he could also take Rachel as his wife.

"Hereby [Laban] drew Jacob into the sin, and snare, and disquiet, of multiplying wives, which remains a [stain on his honour]....Honest Jacob did not [intend] it....He could not refuse Rachel, for he had espoused her; still less could he refuse Leah, for he had married her" (Henry, Matthew Henry's Commentary, Zondervan).

Laban was not going to part with both of his daughters for one price. Jacob was required to agree to work another seven years to claim the hand of Rachel.

6. Why did Jacob love Rachel more than Leah? (v. 30)

It is no secret that Rachel was Jacob's first love. After all, he worked so long and hard for her. For a total of fourteen years, he worked hard to one day have Rachel as his wife. One week after Jacob had fulfilled his marital duty toward Leah, he consummated his union with Rachel.

While we know nothing of the relationship that Jacob had before their marriage, we can imagine that it might have been better prior to the unfolding of these events. The circumstances that Laban had foisted upon his daughters and Jacob set up an impossible situation in their home.

Rachel's Womb Closed (v. 31-35)

7. In what way did the two wives attempt to compete with each other? (v. 31)

Having children was considered a sign of being blessed by the Lord. Trying to please their husband, both wives tried to bear children for Jacob. There was one problem; Rachel was unable to have children. Today's text shows that Leah had four sons. After she gave birth to each son, she thought that Jacob would love her more, but that was simply not the case.

8. What do the names of Leah's sons mean?

Names in ancient times had special meaning. Often, children were given a name to indicate blessing or a characteristic of that child. Leah's first son was named "Reuben," which literally means "see, a son." His name sounds like the Hebrew name for "he has seen my misery" or "he has seen my affliction." Leah's second son was named "Simeon" (v. 33). His name means "one who hears." Leah's third son was named "Levi." This name means "joined" or "attached." Leah's fourth son was named "Judah." This name means "praise." This was a reflection of Leah's declaration "Now will I praise the Lord" (v. 35).

9. How did Rachel handle not being able to have children? (30:1)

Remember that Jacob's first love was barren. This led to jealousy towards her sister, Leah. So great was her consternation that she pleaded with Jacob, "Give me children, or else I die" (Gen 30:1). At this point, Rachel permitted Jacob to sire children by her handmaid (v. 3-8). Leah followed suit and permitted Jacob to take her maidservant to his bosom as well (v. 9-13).

Finally, in response to Rachel's prayer, God opened her womb. The son who was born was named "Joseph." He became the favorite of both his father and mother. Several years later, Rachel died giving birth to a second son, Benjamin (Gen 35:16-20).

Conclusion

One may assume—based on the dream at Bethel, the warm reception at Haran, and the immediate identification of a worthy spouse—that Jacob had the world by the tail. All he had to do was wait a few years for Esau to drop his grudge. Meanwhile Jacob would marry the woman of his dreams and return home to claim Abraham's promise.

But just when it seemed that Jacob was free and clear, God allowed events to take an unexpected course. With a level of deception equal only to Jacob's own, Laban taught Jacob a lesson in integrity (although lesson-teaching probably was not Laban's intent). Jacob eventually had to reckon also with the legacy of his parents: the favoritism he learned from them, which he assimilated into his own marital relationships.

We wish we could say that Jacob "learned his lesson" fully. We wish we could say that he never again deceived or stooped to divisive favoritism. But he did. He later tricked Laban out of livestock (Genesis 30:37-43) and played favorites with Rachel's oldest son (37:3, 4).

But God still refused to abandon Jacob. Instead, He allowed Jacob's bad decisions to be his punishment (sometimes called natural consequences today). Jacob and Laban parted company after a dangerous encounter (Genesis 31). Jacob was forced to bow before the brother who was supposed to serve him (33:3). Jacob's favorite wife died in childbirth (35:16–20). Eleven of his sons deceived him into thinking that his favorite son, Joseph, was dead (37:12–35). Indeed, Jacob lived a long, hard life of wrestling with God and people—thus God's new name Israel for him, meaning, "he struggles with God" (32:22–28).

To struggle with God is a gift of grace to us all. It means that God has not abandoned us; He is still there for us to struggle with. It means that despite our imperfections God continues to guide and shape us. Divine discipline may not be our preferred means of relating to God, but at least it means the relationship is active.

Prayer

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we come to You humbly and thank You for Your discipline. It can be terribly uncomfortable to be on the receiving end of that discipline, yet there is no place more valuable to be. Thank You for not abandoning us. May we submit to Your discipline when You bring it, lest in resisting it we find ourselves resisting You. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember

Receive the Lord's discipline as a gift.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

In our lesson next week, we will learn about the reconciliation of Esau and Jacob. Study Genesis 33:1-20.

Lesson Summarized By

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