**THE GOD OF PADDAN ARAM** (Jacob Builds His Family)

Genesis 29:1-30:24, Key Verse: 29:35a

*“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.”*

Today we begin to examine the picture of Jacob’s life on his own in Paddan Aram after he left his home. In some ways it looks like an ordinary human struggle to establish oneself. Jacob works for his uncle and marries and starts a family. His life is not easy. Jacob the deceiver learns what it’s like to be on the receiving end of deception, and the way he marries produces a lot of conflict and misery. But everything comes out as it should for Jacob to become the father of 12 tribes. From the way God helped Jacob we can learn something of the mystery of God’s ways in his redemptive work. God is patient and broad-minded in the way he uses people’s environment to mold them.

Actually in today’s passage, the character who teaches us the deepest spiritual lesson may not be Jacob but rather Leah. Leah gives us an example of personal spiritual growth through the conflict and suffering of life. And the contrast between her and Rachel teaches us a very clear lesson about the need for thankfulness. Today let’s learn the God of Paddan Aram.

1. Jacob marries (29:1-30)

The previous passage ended with Jacob making a vow to the Lord after seeing the vision of the stairway at Bethel and hearing God’s promise. Jacob said, “If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wearso that I return safely to my father’s household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.” After this, Jacob was strengthened and continued his journey to the east.

Jacob came across a well in a field with several flocks of sheep lying near. He found that the shepherds were from Haran, so he asked about his uncle Laban. To his surprise, they knew Laban. Not only that, they pointed to a beautiful shepherdess coming with a flock of sheep and told him that she was Rachel, Laban’s daughter. When Jacob saw Rachel with her father’s sheep, some kind of superhuman strength came over him and he rolled the stone away all by himself to water Laban’s sheep. Then he kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud.

This was the first demonstration that God was with Jacob as he had promised. Was it a coincidence that Jacob wound up at the very well where Rachel came to water her father’s sheep? No way. God was leading Jacob every step. When Jacob saw Rachel and realized God’s leading, after his long and lonely and fearful journey from his home, he must have been overwhelmed and his emotions poured out like a flood. We cannot say that Jacob was as prayerful or conscientious as Abraham’s servant had been when he prayed at the well for God to show him the right wife for Isaac. But nonetheless, God was with Jacob.

Rachel went to get her father, and Laban came and embraced Jacob and welcomed him into his home as his own family. Right away, Jacob started to work for his uncle, taking care of his sheep. Laban let this continue for a whole month. Then he finally said, “Just because you are a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be.” And what was Jacob’s answer? “I’ll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel.”

Wow. What do you think about this? We could say that Jacob is very stupid to work for seven years with no wages just to marry who he wants. But here we can see Jacob’s greatness. Jacob was a man of “one thing”. He could give his very life to get the one thing he wanted. He wound up investing 14 years of his life to get Rachel (30).

We can say that Jacob was a man who knew the value of what he desired. In the case of Isaac and Rebekah, Abraham’s servant had come with ten camels loaded down with riches and gifts as the bride price for Rebecca. Jacob, on the other hand, came with nothing. He knew he had no right to just ask for Rachel’s hand in marriage. But he showed that he understood the value of what he was asking for, by investing his life and his time. If you really know what your life goal should be, if you really know what you want to achieve, there is no shame in committing and investing the time to achieve it, no matter what people say. Some people only want things that they can get without paying. They are lacking the courage necessary to do something of significance.

Laban agreed to Jacob’s terms, and seven years pass by in just one verse, verse 20: “So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.” Though Jacob had fallen in love with Rachel at first sight, he wasn’t easy-come, easy-go. Often, when people get suddenly inflamed with passion or infatuation, their passion soon cools down just as quick. But Jacob’s devotion to Rachel was constant.

Also, very importantly, Jacob did not try to sleep with her before marriage. Unlike Esau, who already had taken two Canaanite wives, Jacob was not a slave of impulsive desires. He knew how to delay his gratification. I believe that through seven years of working for Laban he really learned to master his passions.

So Jacob finished his contract, and then he said to Laban, understandably, “Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her.” So Laban called together all the people of that area and threw a big wedding party. But in the evening, Laban secretly swapped out Rachel for Leah and, to make a long story short, Jacob woke up the next morning, and there was Leah!

Some people have asked how it was possible for Jacob not to notice the change. It’s actually not hard to understand how it could happen. In many cultures, there is a tradition of having bride be heavily veiled on the wedding day. Also, the wedding party probably would have had lots of wine. Laban probably made sure that Jacob drank enough for his perception to be somewhat impaired. Last but not least, there were no streetlamps or electric lights of any kind in those days, so once the sun goes down, in the tent at night, it’s going to be completely dark. Actually, we could see some poetic justice in this. As Rebekah had Jacob impersonate his brother Esau to steal his blessing, Laban had Leah impersonate her sister to steal her blessing. Jacob the deceiver finds out what it’s like to be deceived.

When Jacob discovered what Laban had done, he said, “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.” Of course, this custom of not giving the younger daughter first is just an excuse. Laban’s motive for this deception is clear. Jacob was a good worker, and Laban was blessed because of him, so when the seven years were nearly over, Laban started thinking about how he could keep Jacob. Laban cooked up the switch as a way to get seven more years out of Jacob—and also solve Leah’s marriage problem.

Surprisingly, Jacob agrees to Laban’s new deal. In some way Jacob is very humble. When he found out that he had been tricked, he could have demanded Rachel and then left. He certainly had not intended to work seven years for Leah. But Jacob looks kind of meek. I’m not really sure what it means. Maybe Jacob also had some compassion on Leah, so now that the deed was done, he felt it wouldn’t be right to leave her destitute. Anyway, this time Jacob got his payment in advance. He married Rachel as soon as he finished the bridal week with Leah. Then he worked for Laban for seven more years.

So this is how Jacob wound up with two wives. The question is, is this a good way to establish a family? I’m going to have to say no. In those times, it was not considered strange to marry multiple wives, or even to see women as bargaining chips more than human beings. But we can see the fruit of this kind of marriage, with jealousy and brokenness in the family life—especially for Leah, the unloved wife. Jacob’s polygamy is not an example we want to follow. One man, one woman, one marriage “till death do us part”—that is the best.

And yet, God worked through all of this to make Jacob the father of 12 tribes, and then to change the hearts of his 12 sons, who were not naturally good men, until they could be the patriarchs of Israel. God works to accomplish his purpose in the life we actually have, not some idealized life that we think we could have had if we had made better choices. So faithfulness is more important than playing “What if” games and daydreaming about how we could have done better.

1. Rachel and Leah (29:31-30:24)

Jacob’s feeling never actually changed; he always loved Rachel more than Leah. How sad for Leah; can you imagine how low her self-esteem must have been? She would always be thinking, “I could only marry because my father switched me with my beautiful sister.” It seems Jacob didn’t do anything to make her feel better.

But then God looked down from heaven and had compassion on Leah. When he saw that Leah was not loved, he gave her his own blessing, opening her womb and giving her children. It is God who opens the womb and God who closes it.

Leah’s spiritual struggle was reflected in the names of her sons. She named the first son Reuben, which sounds like “*he has seen my misery.”* Leah said, “It is because the Lord has seen my misery.” Indeed she was miserable. To be unloved is true misery. Leah acknowledges that it is the Lord who has blessed her when he saw her misery. But she also said, “Surely my husband will love me now.” She hoped that giving Jacob sons would change him and he would begin to love her more.

She had the same hope when her second son, Simeon, was born: Simeon means “one who hears.” Leah said, “Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too.” When her third son was born, she named him Levi, which means “attached” saying, “Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.” But it didn’t happen. Jacob didn’t become any more attached to Leah, even though she became a source of such abundant fruitfulness for his household.

What can we learn from Leah’s sorrow? One thing, which I have also experienced personally, is that we should not stake our happiness on the hope that a certain person will be changed. Leah was not the first or the last wife to live in desperate hope that her husband would be changed. Then what can we do? Of course, we all need to be loved. But we should start with the love of God, and then give love to others first. That’s how we can learn how to build real love relationships.

It seems that through all Leah’s struggle, the Lord never said anything to her audibly. He just gave her son after son after son, while Rachel remained barren. Finally, on the fourth son, something changed in Leah’s heart. Let’s read chapter 29 verse 35: “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.”

The name “Judah” means “praise.” “This time I will…” do what? “…praise the Lord.” Giving praise, or thanks, is so important. We can even say that it is the essence of Christian life. “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” No matter how devoted and hardworking we may look on the outside, if our heart is dark and unthankful, we are not revealing God’s glory. Based on this name “Judah”, the whole nation of Israel later became known as “Jews”. They were meant to be the people who praised the Lord.

We all want to become thankful people. Nobody wants to be considered an ingrate. But it’s not that easy. It’s not about minimizing or ignoring our sufferings. As Leah’s example shows, becoming genuinely thankful takes a lot of struggle until there is a change in our inner selves. The words “This time” indicate that even though her situation had not changed, Leah had decided to change the way she responded to her situation. Jacob did not change, but finally Leah herself changed. She decided to look at how she was blessed and loved by God, instead of looking at what she didn’t have. She solved her deep inner problem—her thirst for her husband’s love—by accepting God’s love.

Later, Leah named the two sons which her maidservant bore Jacob “Gad” (good fortune) and “Asher” (happy). She became a happy woman. Later, she bore Jacob two more sons: Issachar (God rewarded me) and Zebulun (honor). She 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.” She was finally able to see herself in God’s history. Her husband and future generations honored her. She was buried in the tomb of the Patriarchs beside Jacob, and her son, Judah, became the ancestor of King David and ultimately of Jesus.

Finally, as a contrast, we look at Rachel. Rachel was beautiful and she had a monopoly on her husband’s love. And yet she also was not happy. She also was jealous of her sister. Each sister wanted what the other had. 30:1 says, “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!’” Rachel totally failed to see her situation before God, only demanding her husband to fix things for her. Jacob even reminded her that it was God, not him, that was stopping her from having children, but it seems to have had no effect. In general, Jacob seems to have been powerless to solve the great struggle between his wives.

Do you think God loved Rachel? Yes, God also loved Rachel. Her delay in having children was also God’s love to make her come to him. That’s why we can’t compare ourselves to others. God’s love is very specific. We can’t compare the way God deals with us to someone else, because it’s just for us. Rachel also could have made a decision before God like Leah did.

But instead of coming to God, she made a move like Abraham and Sarah did when they couldn’t have kids; she gave Jacob her maidservant, to have sons in her name. This would further complicate the family dynamic, effectively adding a third wife to the mix. The strategy worked, as far as that goes, and Jacob had two sons from Bilhah. What did Rachel name them? The first son was named “Dan”, which means “he has vindicated.” Rachel said, “God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son.” With the second son, Rachel said, “I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won.” So she named him Naphtali, which means “My struggle.” It sounds like she did not take any joy in the children themselves. She sounds like someone whose only joy in life is to outdo someone else.

Once Rachel made a foolish trade. Leah’s son Reuben had found some mandrakes, which were believed to increase fertility. To get the mandrakes, she agreed to let Leah sleep with Jacob. But it only resulted in Leah having more sons. Finally, God had mercy on Rachel and opened her womb. When she had a son, she named him Joseph, or “may he add”, because even then, she was not satisfied with what she received and wanted another. This is really the sinful nature. Rachel would have one more son several years later, dying in childbirth. Her life story is one of the tragedies on the pages of the Bible, not because of what happened to her, but because of how she failed to change.

Through Jacob’s years of working for Laban in Paddan Aram, he was blessed to build up an impressive family, becoming the father of 11 sons. God used human struggles to make Jacob the father of 12 nations. But as for us, we have to somehow learn to give thanks, or otherwise end up like Rachel.

I think most of us have some feeling of recurring frustrated desires in our life. Most of the time, the way we react to our situations is pure instinct or habit. But sometimes we realize that we have been given the power to step back and decide to change the way we respond to life. Those times are times of great spiritual breakthrough. Even though the situation doesn’t change, we can say “This time I will react differently to not getting what I want.” May God bless us to gain a new attitude through our struggles: “This time I will praise the Lord.”