



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Player Played Genesis 29:31-30:24

Fr. William Klock

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Last week we saw Jacob walk from his mountaintop experience of God at Bethel, down into the dark valley of Haran. God called Jacob into his covenant and promised him blessing, but Jacob isn't spiritually ready to do the kingdom work God has prepared for him. He needs to pass through the crucible of God's discipline. He needs to stop being the dishonest schemer who seeks only his own will and instead needs to learn to walk before God, trusting in God's plan and timing and being blameless as he does so. And as Jacob passes through this crucible of discipline we see all of his ways turned back on him. In the last chapter the schemer was schemed himself. Just as he had deceived his father and his brother, his uncle deceived him. Jacob had thought he was working seven years for the hand of Rachel, only to find Leah next to him the morning after his wedding night.

Jacob did marry Rachel too, but he had to work another seven years for Laban. The account of his first lesson ended in Genesis 29:30, which tells us that "Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah." That's the setup for the next lesson. A healthy family isn't built on polygamy or favouritism. We've already seen how the favouritism that Isaac and Rebekah had shown Esau and Jacob had caused the problems that resulted in Jacob's flight to Haran—to this spot in which we now find him. We know things aren't going to go well this time either. Imagine how these two sisters feel. First, Rachel was swindled out of her marriage to Jacob and because of her father's schemes is now part of a polygamous relationship. But think of

poor Leah. She married Jacob only to have him marry her younger sister as soon as her wedding celebration was over and, for the next seven years, she was reminded of the situation every day that her husband went off to work; he was paying the bride price for her sister. This is a situation rife with conflict.

But remember: God is always at work to overcome the obstacles that his creatures put in his path. The bigger picture here is that of God disciplining his people: maturing their faith and making them holy. The second lesson begins in 29:31, where we see a new obstacle in God's plans.

When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.

"Rachel was barren." That's an obstacle on two fronts. First, we remember that God had promised Jacob descendants like the dust of the earth. When he arrived at Haran, Jacob chose Rachel. It was through her that he expected God to bring about that promise and heritage of children. Obviously that's not going to happen if Rachel is barren. But, too, if we think a generation further in the story we know that Jacob's family will survive only because of Joseph, Rachel's son. The Jewish people who heard this story in ancient times would have been even more acutely aware of this obstacle than we are. Rachel *can't* be barren—at least not forever. And, of course, God will overcome these obstacles, but he does so in a way that calls his people—then and now—to a more mature faith.

First, however, we're told that when God saw Leah, miserable and in a loveless marriage, he opened her womb. Remember what we've seen over and over again as the story of Genesis has unfolded: When God sees, he always provides. And not only that, but when God provides, he always provides what is good. God knows our needs and he knows best how to meet them. And so, in his

mercy, he opened Leah's womb. What's interesting is that God's provision for Leah only made the conflict worse in the short term. What Leah *really* wanted was the love of her husband. In that society, bearing children was the natural way for a woman to earn the love and respect of her husband and of gaining standing in the household and the community. But, as we'll see, it didn't work that way for Leah. She does find consolation in her children, but her children don't win her husband's love for her. In contrast, Rachel, wants children, but has none. The storyteller, in telling us that God opened Leah's womb, implies that it is God who has closed Rachel's. She has Jacob's love, but what she *really* wants is children. Each of the sisters is jealous of what the other has. But as the conflict between Rachel and Leah heightens, we realise that God's plans are bigger than their immediate needs. Redemptive history is unfolding here. Jacob expect God to work out his covenant promises through Rachel, but God has already chosen Leah to be the mother of the Messiah's line. That said, Rachel has a place too. Her son, Joseph, will be a saviour of sorts as well. Through the actions of Joseph, God will preserve the line of Judah, making Joseph the saviour of the Saviour.

In verses 32-35 we see the birth of Leah's first four sons. The focus is on their naming. Each time Leah names her sons—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah—we see hope spring up in her again.

And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, "Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me." She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also." And she called his name Simeon. Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, "Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three

sons.” Therefore his name was called Levi. And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, “This time I will praise the LORD.” Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing.

With each son Leah has hopes that Jacob will finally love her, but those hopes never materialise. In Reuben she was sure that she'd found her husband's love, but then with Simeon, her second son, she says, "The Lord has heard that I am hated". Nothing had changed and even with two more sons, *still* nothing changes.

But nothing changes with Rachel either:

When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (Genesis 30:1-2)

Rachel has Jacob's love, but she's barren. She may have the place of priority in the family, but her culture placed enormous pressure on her to bear a son for her husband. In that time and place, everyone *knew* that it was the gods who opened and closed the womb. No doubt Rachel felt the eyes of everyone on her and their unspoken comments: "She's failed her husband" or "What secret sin is she being punished for?" And under that pressure she goes to Jacob and pleads with him: "I can't live without bearing you a child!" (The irony is that Rachel will die in childbirth.) Her desperation and her pleading with Jacob underscore a problem even bigger than barrenness: faithlessness. We see this in Jacob's angry rebuke: "What do you want me to do? I'm not God!" Jacob, who is immature in faith understands that God is the one calling the shots here. Even the pagans around them had some grasp of the fact that this was more than a human

problem. And yet as much as Jacob acknowledges God's hand in the situation, he abdicates his responsibility as the intercessor for his family. Jacob stands in stark contrast to his father. When Rebekah was barren, Isaac interceded for her. Jacob does nothing and in the face of Jacob's inaction, Rachel resorts to the same sort of surrogate mothering that had got Sarah into trouble. As Sarah in her impatience to have a son gave her maid Hagar to Abraham, so Rachel now gives her maid Bilhah to Jacob. And again we see the passivity of Jacob as he takes up his wife on her offer of Bilhah.

Then she said, “Here is my servant Bilhah; go in to her, so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her.” So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her. And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Then Rachel said, “God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son.” Therefore she called his name Dan. Rachel’s servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, “With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed.” So she called his name Naphtali. (Genesis 30:3-6)

Bilhah has two sons whom Rachel claims as her own. And in naming them we can see how she finally feels vindicated: "God has judged me and heard my voice" and "I've wrestled with my sister and prevailed". Dan is proof for her that God isn't punishing her for some secret sin and Naphtali becomes a trophy in the conflict with her sister. And yet the story isn't over. The central obstacle is Rachel's barrenness and that hasn't truly been resolved yet. Resolved by human standards? Yes. But not by God's standards.

And then as we move into verse 9 we see that Leah is not to be outdone. If

this were a Hollywood musical I can imagine Leah waltzing into the room as Naphtali is born and singing to Rachel, "Anything you can do I can do better! I can do anything better than you!"

When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Then Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. And Leah said, “Good fortune has come!” so she called his name Gad. Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. And Leah said, “Happy am I! For women have called me happy.” So she called his name Asher. (Genesis 30:9-13)

Look again at verse 9; it reads, "When Leah *saw*..." Verse 1 begins the same way: "When Rachel *saw*..." The story began: "When the Lord *saw*..." When the Lord *saw*, he gave Leah children as a gift of mercy. God's wisdom is perfect. When he gives, he always gives what is perfectly good. But now, in the midst of their rivalry, these two women take God's role on themselves. Rachel *saw* that she was childless and gave her maid to Jacob. Then Leah *saw* that she had stopped bearing children, and not wanting to be upstaged by Rachel, she gave her maid to Jacob. Both women repeated Eve's mistake. Remember that Eve *saw* that the fruit of the forbidden tree *appeared* good. The problem is that human can't really see. God created with limited knowledge; he intends for us to rely on him for the perfect knowledge of what is good and what is evil. We fall into sin when we try to determine for ourselves, based on our finite and limited knowledge, what is good. Both Rachel and Leah *saw* a problem, but they lacked the wisdom to deal with that problem in accordance with God's will; neither one was willing to wait on God or to trust him to resolve her problems. The end result is a doubling of the level of conflict in the family. It was bad enough that Jacob had taken two

sisters to wife, but now he's fathering sons by their maids too. Rachel and Leah thought they saw a good solution, but because they didn't trust God for what is truly good, their plans only caused more problems.

Of course, it takes time for the new problems to manifest themselves. At the time, Bilhah and Zilpah seem to have provided good solutions. In fact, Rachel and Leah both see the sons born of their maids as gifts from God. Brothers and sisters, this ought to serve as a warning to us. Over and over I've seen Christians with problems take matters into their own hands and attempt to meet their needs by worldly and sinful means. Many times they have temporary success, just as Rachel and Leah did, and so they attribute their success to God and even parade around their success as proof that God approves of what they've done. Rachel and Leah remind us that the end *never* justifies the means and that while God may allow our actions, it doesn't mean he approves of them. God never approves of our sin and he never approves of our acting out of rivalry or jealousy as these two women did. As we'll see, their actions bring short-term success and opportunity to gloat, but in the long-term they bring only family strife.

The story shifts the scene to young Reuben in verse 14:

In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." But she said to her, "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also?" Rachel said, "Then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son's mandrakes." When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, "You

must come in to me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he lay with her that night. And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Leah said, "God has given me my wages because I gave my servant to my husband." So she called his name Issachar. (Genesis 30:14-18)

In the ancient world mandrakes were thought to have magical powers as an aphrodisiac. In the Greek world they were associated with Aphrodite, the goddess of love, sex, and beauty. The Hebrew word literally means "love fruits". Reuben found these plants growing in a field and gave them to his mother. We don't know how old he was. These could have been the innocent gift of a little boy, but it's very possible that he was old enough to be aware of the rivalry between his mother and Rachel and that he gave her the mandrakes knowing full-well their significance. If that's the case, it shows that Rachel and Leah's rivalry has already spilled over to and involved their sons. If these were, in fact, mandrakes they would have been extremely rare in Mesopotamia.¹ Rachel sees the mandrakes as an opportunity to finally bear a child of her own. But Leah won't share, so Rachel trades her one night with Jacob for the mandrakes. This really underscores just how distant Leah was from her husband. As the preferred wife, Rachel probably controlled the other wives' access to Jacob. Leah was desperate for her husband's love. She wanted more children of her own too and no doubt saw the mandrakes as a solution just as Rachel did, but as much as they meant to her, she was willing to part with these rare plants for just *one* night with her husband.

The story also underscores what's happened to Jacob. Remember that

Jacob is a schemer. He's spent his life using other people as pawns to get what he wants. Now Jacob comes in from the field and is met by Leah and told that she's purchased him for the night. Jacob is no longer the master of his own household. In fact, he's not even master of himself; he's a stud to be bought and sold by his wives. The Hebrew word used here describes a commercial exchange. It's the same word that was used to describe Jacob's exchange for Esau's birthright, then for Esau's blessing. The first two times it was Jacob manipulating someone else. In the last chapter, Laban's deceptive swap of Leah and Rachel used this word a third time and now here it's used a fourth. God is giving Jacob a taste of his own medicine. As he played others, now others are playing him.

The irony of the situation is that the mandrakes do Rachel no good, while as a result of that *one* night with Jacob, Leah conceives and bears another son. In fact, the storyteller makes it clear in verse 17 that it was God who opened Leah's womb. The mandrakes were simply another human scheme and one that God does not honour. We can only imagine how this must have angered and frustrated Rachel. Leah, on the other hand, appears to have gained at least some favour in Jacob's eyes, because he begins sleeping with her again:

And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son. Then Leah said, "God has endowed me with a good endowment; now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons." So she called his name Zebulun. Afterward she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah. (Genesis 19-21)

There may well have been and likely were other daughters in the family, but Dinah is singled out because she has an important role to play in the terrible events of Chapter 34.

¹ M. Zohary notes that mandrakes have never grown in Mesopotamia and that this must have been a different plant with similar qualities. *Plants of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 188-189.

Finally, in verses 22-24 we have the resolution of the problem:

Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and said, “God has taken away my reproach.” And she called his name Joseph, saying, “May the LORD add to me another son!”

“God remembered Rachel.” What did he remember? God remembered his covenant promises made to Jacob that he would be the father of offspring like the dust of the earth. Through her husband, Rachel was a daughter of God’s covenant. That’s what God remembers as he comes to Rachel to make good on the promise he had made to her husband. God remembers his covenant promises.² God never breaks his promises and never abandons his people. It underscores the point we’ve seen all along: God is always at work. Rachel had cried out in anguish to Jacob because she thought she had been abandoned by God. In fact, God had been there all along, working through these events to build and mature the faith of his people and their knowledge of him and of his ways.

Notice especially that God comes to Rachel—that he “remembers” her—*after* she gives up her husband to Leah and after she gives up on superstitious schemes involving aphrodisiacs. Joseph isn’t a child born of her own power or cunning or scheming, he’s God’s gift to her. In him God finally takes away her reproach or her disgrace. And in naming Joseph she expresses a faithful hope that God will provide another son too.

Rachel wasn’t the only one God remembered. Long before he “remembered” her, he “saw” the unloved and miserable Leah. The story here is about people who hurt and people who are missing half a life.

Leah had children, but she lacked her husband’s love. Rachel had Jacob’s love, but she was desperate for a son. God’s actions here give hope. Eugene Roop writes, “To those caught in half a life, the Bible offers not reproach or platitudes but God’s remembering. To those longing for love or stagnated by a sterile world, the faith offers not blame or jargon but one who has come that we might have a full life (John 10:10)....Some folks, maybe all, will find themselves living in a situation which blocks them from reaching the fullness of life. They know the anguish of Leah and the hostility of Rachel. Ministry, like the Bible, takes that agony utterly seriously even while offering a word of hope.”³ Brothers and sisters, think on that. In the midst of our misery and our unmet needs, God *will* remember us. And Rachel and Leah teach us that God remembers in his perfect timing. He remembered Rachel at a time when she had finally given up on her own schemes and on superstition so that she would know without question that Joseph was God’s gift.

Friends, God reminds us here that his kingdom will not be built, his covenant will not be established by human schemes, by human power, or by human will. As he called Abraham, he calls us into partnership with himself to build his covenant, but the only work that builds his kingdom is the work we do in accordance with his will. And it’s for that reason that God is in the business of turning sinners into saints. It’s for that reason that God is about the business of mercy and grace. Consider what God had to work with here. Jacob was a dishonest schemer. He was prayerless. He was only interested in God in terms of what God could do for him. As if that weren’t bad enough, he married two sisters, who, in their rivalry with each other, introduced their two maids as additional wives.

There’s material here for more than one soap opera or reality T.V. show. But it is this disaster of a family that God blesses with twelve sons and through them and through their rivalries and dissensions brings his Saviour. God’s grace is truly greater than our sins.

If God chose to work through Jacob and his family, we have every reason to expect that he will work through us. He has graciously called us to new life in his Son. He has given us his Spirit to renew our hearts and minds, to turn us from sin to holiness. And he’s called us to the work of his kingdom. Let us steep ourselves prayerfully in his Word that we might know him better and be attuned to seem him at work in our lives. Let us steep ourselves in his Word that we might know his way and his will. And let us trust him to provide what is good in his perfect timing rather than trusting in worldly and sinful schemes. Let us remember that God’s kingdom is built not by sin and not by human schemes, but on righteousness and according to his perfect will.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we remember today your Son, who has taken his place at your right hand, where he reigns over his kingdom, and as we recall the ascension of Jesus, we anticipate the coming of the Holy Spirit. By grace you have made us your kingdom people, Father; give us grace now, we pray, to live the new life Jesus gives and to live in the power of your Spirit that we might grow in faith and righteousness. We ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

² Brevard S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (London: SCM, 1962), p. 41.

³ *Genesis* (Kitchener, Ont.: Herald, 1987), p. 206 cited in Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 415.