

JANUARY 13

Genesis 29, 30

Today, in Genesis 29 and 30, we are adding to our cast of characters: Leah and Rachel, their maidservants, Zilpah and Bilhah, and twelve of Jacob's children - Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Dinah, and Joseph. Each child's name is a reflection of the volatility of that strange household, in which competition for the attention and affection of Jacob produced so much strife and anguish, that the story of Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery (to which we will presently come) seems somehow to be an almost predictable outcome. In fact, Jacob's marriages to Rachel and Leah were such a domestic disaster that later in the law of Moses (Lev.18) people were prohibited from ever again marrying two sisters in each other's lifetime.

God's great wisdom in ordaining monogamous relationships to be the revealed pattern for human families is very obvious in this account. In North American culture, of course, polygamous marriages are not tolerated by law, but something of the same confusion and hurt is reflected in a great many of the broken and "blended" families that are so prevalent in our own society. God's forgiveness and God's grace is available to anyone, no matter how confused their family relationships are, but mark it well - God's moral laws are not arbitrary things. If you ignore them - you always do so to your own great peril.

How ironic it is that Jacob the schemer - Jacob the deceiver - is forced to leave his home and family because of the harsh results of his deceptions, and is led by God directly to the household of Laban, the schemer, Laban the deceiver. In his Uncle Laban, Jacob the swindler has met his match.

Jacob falls madly in love with Rachel, Laban's younger daughter - the first really great love story of the Bible. He strikes a bargain that he is certain his uncle will not refuse. He offers terms that are unrefusable. He will work for seven years for free for the hand of Rachel in marriage. So much in love is he that the seven years fly by and "*seem like only a few days.*" *Sigh*

The wedding is held, only to discover, when all the bridal veils have been removed, that Jacob is married to weak-eyed Leah - not Rachel. (Don't ask me how Jacob spent the night with her and couldn't tell the difference!) Whether Leah squinted all the time because of bad eyesight, or was cross eyed or disfigured, as some have suggested, we do not know, but in the Miss Paddan-Aram beauty pageant, she wouldn't have made the final cut. Jacob the con man had been out-conned by Laban, and seven more years of labor is the price of the bride for whom he had already labored seven years. Laban's 'generous' concession of allowing Jacob to buy now and pay later, is the only consolation he gets.

Laban's ability to maneuver and manipulate seems almost endless as he and Jacob negotiate and posture over wages and flocks. Since most sheep and goats are solid

colored and only a relatively low percentage are spotted, Jacob asks for the privilege of having the spotted ones as his wages. Laban immediately agrees and promptly removes all of the potential breeding stock from the herd.

Jacob counters with a strategy of his own - the poplar almond and plane tree branches in the watering troughs. Some commentators say that this is in fact an effective breeding strategy. I am personally more inclined to think that God is blessing Jacob in spite of himself. I do know that the reason Laban gave for wanting Jacob to stay after he has paid back the price of his two brides is the better explanation for what was really going on here. He said to stay because "*the Lord has blessed me because of you.*" Jacob's flocks grew not so much because he was a shrewd breeder, but because God was blessing him. But Jacob hasn't really understood even yet that God's blessing, as opposed to his scheming, was the real key to getting ahead. So Laban and Jacob scheme and plot, adjust and maneuver, and if we were to use the words of the Psalmist, we might well say the "*Lord laughs and has them in derision.*" "Jacob - you just don't get it. And for as long as it takes for you to learn that scheming and manipulating are not the way to the promise, I'm going to leave you with the likes of Laban in the land of Paddan Aram."

Now think about this my friends. You and I are a lot more like Jacob than we would like to admit. We want all the blessings that God has promised (and if the truth be told, we'd like to order a few more that He hasn't promised us). Like Jacob we'd like those blessings right now if possible, and we normally can think of four or five ways in which it might be appropriate for us to help God along by arranging this or maneuvering that. Abraham had to learn that God didn't need his help in fulfilling the promise. He also had to learn that God didn't work on Abraham's time table, and Jacob needs to learn that God never endorses unrighteous methodologies to achieve His good goals. Be forewarned, my friends, God has a habit of teaching us hard lessons by using other people who are much like ourselves as His instruments of discipline. And if we run away from that - from the lessons God wants us to learn - we generally run right smack into the arms of the very same kind of people, in another place and another situation - and it will keep on happening until we learn whatever it is that God is trying to teach us.

One well-known Bible teacher has put it this way - he says that all of us are, like jewels, diamonds in the rough. Jacob certainly was rough. God is the gem master who alone has the skill to cut the rough diamond and make of it a polished gem. People are the tools, the hammers, and the chisels that He uses to produce the necessary cuts. But if we resist His work in our lives - if we break the hammers and the chisels that He first begins to use upon us, God doesn't give up on us - He just goes out and gets a bigger hammer and a sharper chisel. He keeps on doing that until we finally learn what He is trying to teach us. Laban was one of God's chisels in Jacob's life.

Who is God using in your life to chisel you? Lean into the refinement, don't run from it.

That brings me to the last point I'd like to leave with you. Over and over again in the Scripture, God is referred to as the "God of Jacob" - in fact, that's one of the Old Testament's favorite names of God. Sometimes He is called "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob". Sometimes just the "God of Jacob". (Mark it down in your list for "Names of God" if you want, even though we haven't actually seen that name yet). Now I understand Scripture calling Him the God of Abraham - Abraham was the friend of God and for all of his lapses, Abraham was a pretty stellar character. I understand God being called the God of David - the man whose heart was after God. David, too, had his faults. He made some big mistakes but his heart was truly after God. I understand God being called the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ - that seems appropriate to me...but "the God of Jacob"? Why would God want to call Himself that? Think about it....

This is Mark Ashton reminding you that God's word is useful for all kinds of things – teaching, reproof, correcting and training in righteousness. Keep up your reading! God will bless it.