

Isaac's Descendants

Jacob Marries Leah and Rachel

Genesis 29:1-30

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Scripture

We are currently in a series of sermons on “Isaac’s Descendants.” After twenty years of barrenness, God gave Isaac and Rebekah twin sons, whom they named Esau and Jacob. As a young man, Esau despised his birthright and sold it to his twin brother, Jacob. Much later, Jacob deceived his father, Isaac, and received the blessing that Isaac had intended to give his older son, Esau. As a result of that double deception, Esau wanted to kill Jacob. And so, Jacob was sent away to his mother’s family in Northwest Mesopotamia to find there a wife for himself. Along the way, Jacob had an astonishing dream in which God reiterated his covenant promises that he had made to Abraham and to Isaac that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. In addition, God promised to be with Jacob, wherever he went. After a month-long journey, Jacob arrived at his mother’s family home in Haran.

Let’s read about Jacob marrying Leah and Rachel in Genesis 29:1-30:

¹Then Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east. ²As he looked, he saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep lying beside it, for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well’s mouth was large, ³and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place over the mouth of the well.

⁴Jacob said to them, “My brothers, where do you come from?” They said, “We are from Haran.” ⁵He said to them, “Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?” They said, “We know him.” ⁶He said to them, “Is it well with him?” They said, “It is well; and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!” ⁷He said, “Behold, it is still high day; it is not

time for the livestock to be gathered together. Water the sheep and go, pasture them.”⁸ But they said, “We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep.”

⁹ While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father’s sheep, for she was a shepherdess. ¹⁰ Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother’s brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother’s brother, Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth and watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother. ¹¹ Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. ¹² And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father’s kinsman, and that he was Rebekah’s son, and she ran and told her father.

¹³ As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister’s son, he ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, ¹⁴ and Laban said to him, “Surely you are my bone and my flesh!” And he stayed with him a month.

¹⁵ Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” ¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah’s eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. ¹⁸ Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” ¹⁹ Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” ²⁰ So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” ²² So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. ²³ But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. ²⁴ (Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant.) ²⁵ And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did

I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” ²⁶ Laban said, **“It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.** ²⁷ **Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.”** ²⁸ **Jacob did so, and completed her week. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife.** ²⁹ **(Laban gave his female servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her servant.)** ³⁰ **So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years.** (Genesis 29:1-30)

Introduction

When I first met Eileen, it was love at first sight! It was on a Sunday afternoon, between my second and third year at seminary. Eileen arrived at the house where I was boarding and I had just woken up from a nap. My landlady invited Eileen to stay for dinner, and we were to eat outside because it was a glorious summer's day. While we were waiting for dinner, Eileen and I chatted. I remember thinking to myself, “This is the most wonderful woman I have ever met!”

After that first meeting, we spent a lot of time together that week. Since I was from South Africa, I was rather reserved and formal, and addressed Eileen by her last name, “Miss McCloy.” By the end of the week, I knew that I wanted to take this relationship to the next level, and so one evening I asked her, “Miss McCloy, would you mind if I called you by your first name?” To which she replied, “Why, no. In fact, I wouldn't even mind if you called me by your last name!” We were married four months later.

We do not know everything that was said between Jacob and Rebekah when they first met. But we do know they hit it off right away. However, this beautiful love story also includes a story of deception. And yet, God used even that deception to advance his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Lesson

Jacob marrying Leah and Rachel in Genesis 29:1-30 teaches us that God uses even human deception to fulfill his promise that Jacob's descendants shall be as numerous as the dust of the earth.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Jacob's Love (29:1-12)
2. Laban's Deception (29:13-30)

I. Jacob's Love (29:1-12)

First, let's look at Jacob's love.

Jacob's journey from Beersheba to Haran, via Bethel (where he dreamed about the angels ascending and descending on a ladder from earth to heaven), took about a month.

After his dream at Bethel, **Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east** (29:1). Jacob's journey, most likely on foot, from Beersheba to Haran took almost a month. When he got to Haran, **he looked, and he saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep lying beside it, for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large, and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place over the mouth of the well** (29:2-3).

Community wells were very important. They were literally the life-giving water of the community. Large stones covered the well so that non-community members could not help themselves to the water, and also to keep dirt from falling into the well and causing the water to become mud. Furthermore, one way to ensure that members of the community acted fairly toward each other was to wait until all the parties to the well were there so that they could water their animals together. That is why they said to Jacob in verse

8, after he had asked them why they did not water the sheep and go and pasture them, **“We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep.”**

While Jacob was still speaking with the shepherds at the well, **Rachel came with her father’s sheep, for she was a shepherdess. Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother’s brother, making Rachel his cousin, and the sheep of Laban his mother’s brother, Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth and watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother, making Laban his uncle.** Jacob was clearly strong and vigorous, as it would seem that he rolled the stone from the well’s mouth by himself. **Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud.** This was not a romantic kiss, but rather a familial kiss, that is, a kiss of greeting between cousins. **And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father’s kinsman, and that he was Rebekah’s son, and she ran and told her father (29:9-12).**

In verse 18 we are told that “Jacob loved Rebekah.” At that point, Jacob had been living with his uncle Laban and his family for a month. It seems clear that Jacob’s love for Rachel was a great. In fact, it is the first real love story in the Bible. There are other love stories in the Bible, such as Boaz and Ruth, and Solomon and his Shulammitte bride in The Song of Songs. But none of the earlier couples in Genesis have really been presented as love stories. We know very little about Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, or Isaac and Rebekah. However, Jacob loved Rebekah from the first time he saw her. He did menial labor for seven years in order to receive her as his bride, and he continued to love her throughout his long life. James Montgomery Boice writes:

Is it an accident that the author of Genesis says that Jacob took separate notice, first of Rachel, and then of Laban’s sheep, which she was leading? Jacob was himself a shepherd, so it would have been natural for him to have noticed the sheep. But he was

first struck by Rachel. He was like young men today. First they notice the girl. Then they notice the car she is driving.¹

But Jacob's love for Rachel was not simply that he loved her from the first time he saw her. His love for Rachel was a patient love, as all true love is. When Laban asked Jacob what his wages should be if he were to stay and work for him, Jacob said that he would work seven years for Rachel's hand in marriage. Seven years! That is a long time to wait for someone when you are in love, isn't it? I could barely wait four months! Yet, we read that **“Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her”** (29:20).

Pastor Donald Grey Barnhouse says this about Jacob's love:

Here is the difference between love that has been to Bethel and love that has not been anywhere. Jacob looked upon Rachel, and he never had eyes for anyone else. She was probably very young, and the seven years allowed for her growth to maturity. But Jacob was willing to wait because his heart was fixed upon her. Marriage in the Lord is one of the most wonderful things upon earth, and Jacob's marriage had been planned by God. True marriages are made in heaven, and the reason the world says that many of them are waylaid before reaching earth is that too few people are willing to wait seven years and know those years to be but a few days because of the depth and power of true love.²

Boice makes this comment, “In many ways Jacob is a poor example for Christian people today, but in his marriage he is exemplary. A marriage like his—God-ordained and lasting—is surely among the greatest blessings of this life.”³

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 781.

² Quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, 782.

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, 783.

II. Laban's Deception (29:13-30)

And second, let's see Laban's deception.

Rebekah ran home, and **as soon as her father Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son**, that is, his nephew, **he ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house** (29:13a). Now, you may remember that the last time Laban ran to the well was when Abraham's servant came looking for a wife for Isaac. He had with him a number of camels laden with costly gifts. So, when Laban heard that another family member was at the well, he may have thought that there would be plenty more gifts for him. Imagine his surprise when Jacob was there—with nothing, empty-handed! Then **Jacob told Laban all these things**, that is, the things that had happened to him (although he probably did not tell him all the details) **and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month** (29:13b-14).

Benjamin Franklin once wrote in his *Poor Richard's Almanac* that "fish and visitors stink after three days," meaning that just as fish stink after a few days, so do visitors who keep prolonging their visit get to be really annoying. So, after Jacob had been living in his home for a month, **Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?"** (29:15). It became clear to Laban that Jacob did not plan to leave. So, he decided to put him to work.

Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance (29:16-17). Commentators are divided over the exact meaning of Leah's "weak eyes." So, rather than say anything derogatory about her, let's just stick with the text and say that her eyesight was poor. In contrast, Rachel is described as **"beautiful**

in form and appearance.” And Jacob was smitten by Rachel. In fact, **Jacob loved Rachel. And he said** to Rachel’s father, Laban, **“I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel”** (29:18). Now, you may wonder, “Why seven years?” Apparently, the dowry for a bride in those days was about 35 shekels. A laborer would earn about 10 shekels a year. So, Jacob proposed that he work for 10 shekels a year for seven years, and that be his dowry for Rebekah. He was willing to pay double the dowry in order to marry Rebekah.

Apparently, Laban liked the proposal so much that he did not even bargain with Jacob. He said to Jacob, **“It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.”** So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her (29:19-20). Jacob had never worked for anyone in his life. Moreover, God had promised Rebekah that “the older will serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23). That is, Esau would serve Jacob. But here is Jacob serving his uncle Laban.

When the seven years ended, **Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.”** So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast (29:21-22). Wedding ceremonies in those days actually lasted a week. Family and friends gathered together and celebrated for an entire week. There was lots of food and drink and celebration. At the end of the first day, in the evening, the bride and groom consummated their marriage.

However, in Laban’s case, **in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her** (29:23). Now, one wonders why Jacob did not notice that Leah and not Rachel was brought to him. Well, the bride wore a veil and so she would have been covered, and it is also likely that Jacob had a good amount of wine too. Moreover, I cannot help but wonder if Leah did not wear some of Rachel’s clothing too!

Imagine Jacob's surprise when, **in the morning, behold, it was Leah!** We don't know what Jacob said to Leah, but **Jacob** raced to find Laban and **said to him, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?"** (29:25). The deceiver has been deceived! **Laban said, "It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years"** (29:26-27). Jacob had no choice. So, **Jacob did so, and completed her week. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife.... So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years** (29:28-30). Jacob ended up paying four times the dowry in order to marry the bride of his choice. James Boice has this interesting comment:

The irony of the marriages could only have been achieved by God. A moment ago I pointed out that Jacob had been told how Esau would serve him ("the elder shall serve the younger") but that he had first to learn to serve Laban. That is a first irony. But there are two more ironies. The second is that in being given first Leah and then Rachel, Jacob was forced to learn that the right of the firstborn must be respected, something he had been unwilling to do in the case of his own brother Esau. The third and greatest irony was in Jacob's being deceived by Rachel's father, just as he had been instrumental in deceiving his father. Here the deceiver was deceived. He reaped as he had sown and even became part of that pattern of deceit that was to mar his long life and family relations.⁴

Conclusion

Jacob was learning a hard lesson that God is always in sovereign control of all events. Jacob was learning that the end does not

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, 784.

justify the means. Jacob was learning that God will fulfill his purposes even through human deceit.

It is interesting to note that Jacob never berates Leah for her part in the deception. It is also interesting to note that Jesus was a direct descendant from Leah. It is possible that Leah, the less-favored of the two sisters, had been in love with Jacob all along, even though he had been unaware of it. He came to understand this and probably even learned to care for Leah in a genuine way, in spite of her deception. Even though Jacob still loved and wanted Rachel, he could not bear to hurt Leah. And so, years later, when he finally expressed his anger against his uncle Laban—berating him for (1) his severe hard service, (2) changing his wages ten times, and (3) trying by every means to keep his wealth and turn Jacob away empty-handed—Jacob never once mentioned his doubling of his service from seven to fourteen years for a wife he did not want in the first place, most likely out of his genuine concern for Leah and her feelings (Genesis 31:36-42).

Let me close with the following application from Boice:

We should all grow in difficult circumstances, whether or not they are as filled with duplicity as these. Above all, we should learn that “God cannot be mocked” (Gal. 6:7). He cannot be mocked in this life, nor in eternity. Let us turn from sin and strive to live a life honest in the sight of all men and pleasing to the Lord. The apostle who gives us this text does so in order to make the application: “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (v. 9).⁵

Amen.

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, 785.

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and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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