

Despite Israel’s dysfunctional beginnings, the LORD continues to work through his people’s messiness, foolishness and sin—humbling them to prompt their trust in him, and thus providing for their deepest needs: divine favor for the unloved and removal of reproach for the ashamed.

Introduction & Background – Will I ever be able to rise above the sins of my past? Have I missed the rescue boat? Perhaps scheming to get the love and honor I crave is the answer? This story is about how the sons of Jacob (Israel) were born. It is such a realistic and embarrassing account of Jacob’s family dysfunction that we often ignore it. But it has much to teach us about the Church and our lives.

I. Scheming to Get What You Want Can Make Life a Mess

A. Scheming for love can get you “hated” (vv. 31-35, 15a)

Jacob loves Rachel, his uncle Laban’s younger daughter. When the wedding day finally arrives, Laban tricks him into marrying his older daughter Leah, who cooperates in the ruse. Then Laban agrees to let him marry Rachel. So within a span of perhaps a few days he gains two sisters as wives. He loves Rachel, but Leah is unloved (“hated” in comparison; cf. [Gen 29:30](#)) by Jacob.

B. Scheming for honor can get you shame (vv. 1-3, 14-17)

Rachel schemes to fulfill her deepest desire to have a baby by resorting to surrogate motherhood. She gives her servant Bilhah to Jacob to bear children in Rachel’s stead. We know that this is a bad idea because we’ve seen the results in Jacob’s grandmother Sarah’s life (cf. [Gen 16-18, 21](#)).

II. What the Mess You Made of Life Can Do to You

A. It can make you desperate (vv. 1, 3, 9, 14-16)

Both sister wives covet what the other has, unable to be content with love and children as blessings in themselves. Rachel reveals her desperation: “Give me children or I die!” She convinces Jacob that surrogate children are the best path to motherhood. Leah responded to Rachel’s scheme by giving her own servant Zilpah to Jacob. The mandrake episode highlights Rachel’s and Leah’s desperation.

B. It can make you vindictive (vv. 1, 5-8, 15)

1. Rachel felt entitled. When Rachel’s life became a mess, she threw a tantrum, blaming her husband for her barren womb. Then she schemes to have children by Bilhah. This was a socially acceptable custom, but contrary to God’s ways. But she claims Bilhah’s children for her own and then presumes God understands and approves. Notice the vindictive names she chose for Bilhah’s children: Dan (meaning Judged or Vindicated) and Naphtali (meaning My Struggle).

2. During their tussle over the mandrakes, Leah’s frustration with her status in the home erupts when she accuses Rachel of stealing her husband. Leah’s words are ludicrous and vindictive! Leah justifies her anger by shading the truth to excuse her vindictiveness.

C. It can make you lose hope in God (vv. 1-3, 9-13, 15)

1. Jacob answers Rachel’s complaint in anger. Jacob rightly says that he is not God, and that it is God who has withheld children from Rachel. Contrast Jacob’s response with that of Isaac his father. Isaac and Rebekah prayed ([Gen 25:21-22](#)), but there is no evidence that Jacob prayed for God to remove Rachel’s shame. Correct theology cannot replace faithful piety.

2. Leah was dragged down into competing with Rachel. Leah is not calling on the covenant name of the LORD as before, is now naming some of her children without thinking of God, and has regressed in again pursuing Jacob's love by having babies. But at least she still prays (v. 17).
3. Rachel's eagerness to barter her husband's affection to gain the mandrakes shows she is not free of her pagan background (cf. Gen 31:19). In ancient times mandrakes were considered both an aphrodisiac and a fertility enhancer (cf. Song 7:13). Rachel is still trying to control her mess, still scheming to remove her shame in a desperate effort to get pregnant.

III. How to Begin Cleaning Up Your Mess

A. Humble yourself by giving up control (vv. 14-21)

Rachel gave up control of her lone asset (Jacob's love and affection) to Leah who began bearing children again. Rachel, in a sense, now bore the social shame of barrenness *and* the sense of losing her husband's love. Leah gave her children names that reminded her of the divine blessing they were, not names that taunted her sister. Perhaps learning from Leah's example, for the first time Rachel gave her messy life to the LORD and prayed for help.

B. Trust the LORD for your deepest desires (vv. 35, 22-24)

1. God hears, listens, and takes action for the unloved and ashamed. God demonstrates he is especially concerned to lift up the neglected who are members of the covenant. When Leah named her fourth son Judah, literally, "Praise," she chose to trust the LORD with her desire to be loved. The LORD ultimately gave Leah half of Jacob's sons, including the priestly line of Levi and the messianic line of Judah.
2. Rachel finally turned to God. Then he "remembered" this daughter of the covenant. He transformed Rachel's barrenness to fertility only after she "gave" her husband to Leah. She finally ceased scheming and decided to trust the LORD instead. She made herself vulnerable. God humbled her, she learned to trust him, and so God blessed her with a child.

C. Believe that a changed heart is a cleaned-up mess (vv. 31-35, 22-24)

1. Did Leah's marriage get better? Perhaps a little, but she was never Jacob's beloved wife. However, Leah did find love and favor in the LORD, who was a husband to her. We still remember Leah as a woman with a changed heart and a divinely favored life.
2. Did Rachel ever surpass her sister in the blessing of motherhood? Not really. She gave birth to Joseph, Jacob's favorite son and the father of the great Israelite tribes Ephraim and Manassah. But she died giving birth to her second son Benjamin. However, Rachel did find honor and favor in the LORD, who answered her when she finally became a woman of prayer and trust.
3. Rachel and Leah discovered that a heart yielded to God didn't change their circumstances, but it effectively cleaned up the mess they had made of their lives. When God changes your heart, the love and honor that naturally follow bring an abiding joy that will cause you to flourish, despite how messy life still seems to be. They learned the lesson of James 4:1-10.

Conclusion – The Bible does not offer the misery of a resigned shame, the phoniness of trite platitudes, or the fateful blaming of circumstances. Instead the Bible offers hope in the one who remembers and has come to bring new life (Jn 10:10). In Christ the savior of Israel, those who give up control of their mess and trust in the LORD for his special love and honor will find their mess is truly cleaned up in having a changed heart.