

Thursday Morning Bible Study: Jacob: Exile and Return (Genesis 25-35)

3. Jacob Lives In Exile: Genesis 29:21-31:16

As we noticed as we introduced these studies last time, the action of God's electing grace in our lives is the start of a long road of events—joys and difficulties, triumphs and tragedies—that are all with a purpose. Paul says about God's eternal choosing of us in Jesus Christ to receive the whole spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, that it is His intention "...that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love He predestined us for adoption as sons [and daughters] through Jesus Christ..." (Eph. 1:3-6.) That is the purpose of all that happens in our lives then, that God will work in us to bring us into the holiness and blamelessness filiality of His own Beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

We saw also that the driving force in this narrative is the promise and will of God. Genesis 25:23—the word of the LORD concerning the two sons in Rebekah's womb—sets the course of the story; and then the promise of the LORD to Jacob at Bethel on his flight out to Paddan-Aram reinforced and extended that word. He was the inheritor of the Abrahamic promises, and more. The LORD promised to be with him, to keep him wherever he went, and to bring him back to this promised land. We finished our study last week with Jacob having arrived at Paddan-Aram, to stay with Laban his uncle. He had been promised Rachel, Laban's younger and more attractive daughter, in marriage, and in lieu of a dowry payment, he had been asked to work seven years as shepherd for Laban. Those seven years flew by, and the marriage day arrived. Everything was coming up roses!!—perfectly arranged by the LORD (and it was!) It must have seemed to Jacob that the divine blessing was a pretty neat deal!

But then it all turned sour – not at all the way Jacob may have hoped things would work out – not so perfectly arranged by the LORD (but it was!) – not such a great deal after all. The next 13 years or so of Jacob's life were about to be marked by frustration, disappointment, difficulty, injustice and trouble. And it was in these hard and troublesome years that the real work of the LORD was taking place in Jacob's life, to save him from his besetting sin of pride, to bring him into the humility which is the real place of blessedness. (God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Blessed are the poor in spirit—for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.)

29:21-30 The disappointment started right on the night when it seemed like everything had worked out peachy. In the darkness of the evening of the wedding feast, perhaps under the cover of veils, perhaps with Jacob a little tipsy from the celebrations, Laban smuggled Leah—Rachel's less desired older sister—into the wedding tent instead of Rachel. And, all this unbeknownst to him, Jacob slept with her believing her to be Rachel. A simple statement captures the shock of the moment of realisation the next morning — “And in the morning, behold, it was Leah!” (ESV)

Jacob had been duped, and was angry at the deception. Laban's argument to him was that this better suited the customs there in Paddan-Aram; older siblings had rights to be married first. (Perhaps he could have mentioned this to Jacob before the marriage!) Jacob was angry about the deception, about a sibling being presented as though she were the other sibling. If he had stopped and thought for a micro-second, this may have had some resonance for him. That is exactly what he and his mother had done with Isaac, presenting him as though he were Esau. It does seem that the LORD,

whose story all these events are, was giving Jacob something of a taste of his own medicine.

The agreement was struck that Jacob could also marry Rachel. He first had to complete the marriage week with Leah, then he could marry Rachel and then he would “simply” have to work another seven years as the bride-price for her. I have my doubts that these years would have “...seemed to him but a few days...” (By the way, while there is bigamy in the Old Testament, it is recorded as fact rather than as a model to be approved or copied; it is certainly never portrayed in an unequivocally positive light. The clear teaching about marriage in the Old Testament—and the New—is that it is the union of one man and one woman exclusively for life.)

29:31-30:24 This section is actually the heart of the Jacob narrative. The birth of the eleven sons, and one daughter, is a central event in the history of Israel—where we see the ongoing fulfilment of the covenant promises of God to Abraham and Isaac now start to blossom out more fully in Jacob’s life. But it is also a story full of rivalry, disappointment, striving and failing, as a family comes into being and the covenant dealings of God with this particular man, Jacob, face him up with some uncomfortable truths about himself. It is a story that tells us again and again that what really matters in the course of our lives is the will of God and the mercy of God. All of our striving and envy and bitterness and rivalry does not bring to us what we hope for—but then there is the will and mercy of God.

The truth is, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17). Did you hear that? Every good thing that has ever come your way has come as the gift of God the Father who is always good. Or as St Paul asks us rhetorically, “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1Cor. 4:7). In all our having and in all our yearning to have, the deepest matter is actually the will and the mercy of God. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Leah (Jacob’s unloved and unwanted wife) and Rachel (his favourite) engage in a bitter rivalry through this section, each trying through one way or the other seeking to gain pre-eminence in the marriage bed of Jacob. Laban, the father of the two women, really set them up for a lot of unhappiness in his thoughtless wedding night trick. In the years that followed, Leah yearned for love, and Rachel yearned for children—each envying what the other had, lamenting their inability to get it, and trying whatever means they can to get it.

Leah the unloved wife (“hated” really means slighted or disregarded) was fortunate in having many children—seven by the end of the chapter!—and she used her reproductive prowess as power. But it seems that Jacob stopped sleeping with Leah when she stopped bearing children for a time after the birth of her fourth son, Judah, leaving her emotionally deprived of the love or respect that she had hoped her child-bearing would win her from her husband. Listen to the names she gave her sons: Reuben—“for now my husband will love me”...Simeon—“for the LORD has heard that I am hated”...Levi—“Now this time my husband will be attached to me”...Zebulun—“now my husband will honour me, because I have borne him six sons.” Interestingly the fourth son she called Judah, saying, “Now I will praise the LORD.” Perhaps at this stage she is expressing some trust in the LORD and turning away from her craving for her husband’s affection. She also is the only one in this section who has the LORD’s name on her lips.

Rachel on the other hand was childless for most of the section, but she used Jacob's favouritism of her to try to get one up on her sister. When she saw Leah bearing child after child, she got angry with Jacob: "Give me children or I shall die!" (Maybe she was complaining he has ignored her?) But Jacob answered bitingly, but also with a degree of truth, "Am I in the place of God who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" She schemed then and offered her servant girl as a surrogate, who bore a son, Dan – and then another!, Naphtali. (Note that this name has to do with her prevailing in a wrestle with her sister... that will be a theme the comes back again in the future.)

Seeing this, Leah offered *her* servant girl, who also bore two sons, Gad and Asher, to Jacob. And then, when her eldest son Reuben found some mandrakes—a kind of berry which were thought to have aphrodisiacal and fertility powers—she agreed to sell them to Rachel for the princely sum of having Jacob sleep with her again. (I wonder how Jacob felt, being treated like a sperm donor or gigolo by his wives.) And Leah conceived again—two sons Issachar and Zebulun, and then a daughter, Dinah. As for Rachel—the trade seemed to have been a poor one. She had no success conceiving; the mandrakes were a failure.

Now having traced all this back and forth, this striving for and striving against, we need to see what is actually driving the whole thing. The passage begins and ends with the action of God. "When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb (29:31) ... Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb (30:22)" And that's the thing here—in this messy and complex family with all its rivalries and struggles and deals, God himself was working out his will and his mercy and that is what drives things forward. Every gift comes down from the heavenly Father. Children are a heritage *from the LORD*.

30:25-31:16 The future is a strange and foreign land to us. It is something that we both anticipate and desire, and something we dread and seek to avoid. It is full of promise and full of threat. This is because the future is by and large out of our hands. We try all kinds of ways to guarantee and secure our future and to set a course to a future that we would like...but the future remains an untameable beast. We find that our lives are a succession of events in which we are taken where we "would not choose to go" (John 21:18.)

The reason for this is really quite obvious. The future is God's future. Our lives and our times are in His hands: "People's steps are from the Lord; how then can they understand their way?" (Prov. 20:24). "The heart of people plan their ways, but the Lord establishes their steps" (Prov. 16:9). "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Prov. 16:33). But what is the decision of the LORD? What is His will, His purpose, His intention, His thought and regard for us? Unless we are settled and sure about that—]well, we cannot live well with this unpredictable future.

In Genesis 30:25, immediately after the birth of his son Joseph to his favoured wife, Rachel, Jacob planned to return back to the land promised to his forefathers and to him in the dream at Bethel. When he set out it was to only be for a while until his brother Esau's temper had cooled off (27:43). But disappointment and delay had dogged his departure. But now, he had completed his fourteen years of indentured service to Laban in place of dowry for his two wives, and he wished to take up the future that the LORD has promised him. He sought Laban's permission to leave—but finds Laban, his crafty uncle, unwilling to let him leave (30:25ff.).

Laban thought of Jacob and the family as a part of his clan, and he recognised too that somehow Jacob lay behind his own increasing prosperity—the LORD had blessed him because of Jacob. So he was unwilling to let go of his “lucky charm”. He was right of course: the blessing of the nations through the presence of the chosen people of God (Abraham, Isaac and now Jacob) has been a constant theme through Genesis. But what Laban didn’t understand was that the blessing doesn’t come through *possession* of those people, but rather *honouring* them. “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed: (12:3).

Laban wanted a blessed future—and tried to keep it by holding on (unjustly) to Jacob. He wouldn’t pass on to Jacob any of the family wealth (even though it has increased by his being with the family) but negotiated a deal in which Jacob would work for him longer still—Jacob simply taking what would normally be a small part of a shepherd’s wage for tending Laban’s flocks of sheep and goats. Sheep are normally white, goats are normally dark—speckled or striped kids and lambs are born more rarely, and black lambs are rare too—these rarer young would be his wages. Normally a shepherd would be entitled to 1 in 5 of all the lambs or kids born—and Jacob was suggesting a scheme that would probably see him get far less than that kind of return. It seemed to Laban extremely favourable—an offer too good to refuse! And to stack the odds even more in his favour, Laban sent off any sheep or goats that were already speckled or spotted to his sons’ flocks to try to reduce the chances of the flocks in Jacob’s care bearing in his favour.

Jacob however had a cunning plan—using careful breeding and local superstition he saw a vast increase in the number and strength of the speckled, spotted and black lambs and kids. The superstition involved the belief that animals mating in front of striped or speckled things would bear striped or speckled offspring. This explains Jacob’s gathering of branches and peeling strips off them to expose the white wood in contrast to the darker bark, and placing them in front of the water troughs where the animals were likely to mate. Later, when he speaks with his wives about all this, Jacob owns that the real factor though was the action of God: “God did not permit [Laban] to harm me... Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me...” (31:7-9). Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.

Over the next six years of labour he steadily eroded the wealth of Laban and acquired it himself. This led to envy among Laban’s sons, and Jacob fell out of favour with his uncle. By trying to keep the blessed future, Laban had in fact put it in jeopardy. And commanded by the angel of God in a dream, Jacob decided to leave with his wives, children and wealth. Twenty years on from his arrival, finally the promise of God to bring him back home was coming to be. He couldn’t settle for a future of complacent compliance with the prosperity he had in Paddam-Aram (he could have grown wealthier still there, perhaps...). *There’s the promise of God to him and the world!*

The essence of being a responsible human being is to be a person of gratitude to God. Thankfulness is what makes us human beings. Thankfulness is what we refuse in our stubborn sinfulness (Rom. 1:21)—and so thankfulness is the unmistakable hallmark of the saving work of God in a human heart. Every other facet of Christian life flows out of this, and no other facet of Christian life has its true being without thankfulness.