

Foundations: A Family At War With Itself
By Jason Huff
June 12, 2022
Proverbs 17:1; Matthew 5:21-26; Genesis 29:31-30:24

Our final Scripture reading is from Genesis 29:31-30:24. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, "It is because the LORD has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now." She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Because the LORD heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too." So she named him Simeon. Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." So he was named Levi. She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "This time I will praise the LORD." So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children. When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!" Jacob became angry with her and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?" Then she said, "Here is Bilhah, my maidservant. Go in to her so that she can bear children for me and that through her I too can build a family." So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife. Jacob went in to her, and she became pregnant and bore him a son. Then Rachel said, "God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son." Because of this she named him Dan. Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, "I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won." So she named him Naphtali. When Leah saw that she had stopped having children, she took her maidservant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, "What good fortune!" So she named him Gad. Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. Then Leah said, "How happy I am! The women will call me happy." So she named him Asher. During wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." But she said to her, "Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?" "Very well," Rachel said, "he may lie with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes." So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him. "You must come in to me," she said. "I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he lay with her that night. God listened to Leah, and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son. Then Leah said, "God has rewarded me for giving my maidservant to my husband." So she named him Issachar. Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son. Then Leah said, "God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons." So she named him Zebulun. Some time later she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dinah. Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, "God has taken away my disgrace." She named him Joseph, and said, "May the LORD add to me another son."

Every family has disagreements. Show me a family that says they've never argued and I'll show you liars. Doesn't mean you've gotten into knock-down, drag-out fights or that you've raised your voices. But two people are never in such agreement that they always have the same view on everything. Relationships are hard because we see the world through different lenses.

Now some families are good at fighting. What I mean by that is that they know how to handle conflict well. They listen to each other, not just trying to anticipate the other person's argument and preparing a comeback, but genuinely listening to one another. They strive to understand where others are coming from. They are willing to change their point of view when it's logical or necessary. Their judgment doesn't get clouded by their emotions. They show love for one another through the whole process of working out a disagreement. I don't know who does this, but if you do or know someone who does, please come to me and teach me! Seriously, though, we try, but it's hard, because emotion gets in the way.

Now imagine those emotions filtered through a dysfunctional family unit – a family unit that was made dysfunctional by the father of the two brides who married his daughters off to the same man through pulling off a dirty trick. That's what we're dealing with today. The point of this passage isn't to say, "See how much better we have it in our families," even if that's true! Buried within this passage are some deep truths about how God relates to us and we relate to God. Unlike last week's passage, where we heard no mention of God's name during Jacob's negotiations to marry Rachel, God's name is invoked all over this passage. Sometimes God is directly involved. Sometimes God's name is used to support things that I don't think He was supporting at all! But God's presence is all over this passage.

If you weren't with us last week, just a quick recap – Jacob, who had fled the wrath of his brother Esau, came to the land of Haran and his uncle Laban's home. Falling in love with Laban's daughter Rachel, Jacob works seven years for her hand in marriage. But due to Laban's scheming, Jacob was actually married to her elder sister Leah. A week later, after the wedding celebration for Leah was done, Rachel was given to Jacob as his wife for an additional seven years of labor. It was obviously a mess, and now we see the immediate results.

What sets these two women at odds is deep envy. The envy begins with Leah's envy of Jacob's relationship with Rachel. She longs for Jacob to show her the kind of affection he shows Rachel. Unfortunately, that's never going to happen. Rachel is unloved – in Hebrew, the word is literally the opposite of love, so in some places it's translated as "hated." Jacob will fulfill his obligations, but little else. And Leah's story is heartbreaking. She so wants his love and is never going to have it. God responds to Leah's situation by giving her children.

And that's what creates the deep envy in Rachel. Rachel watches her older sister have son after son while she doesn't conceive. Jacob may dote on Rachel, may show her great affection, but now that's not enough. She has to compete with her sister who has given Jacob all these children. She gets into an argument with Jacob that he must give her children or she'll die. Jacob is having none of it – he knows that's in the hands of God. But it's intriguing that Leah stops having children at the same time Rachel makes this demand. It's impossible to tell, but I think Rachel may be demanding Jacob be hers alone and to stop treating Leah like his wife altogether.

The envy between these two leads to this competition where they give Jacob their maidservants to have as wives to bear more children for them. Then there's the issue of the mandrakes, which requires some explanation. Mandrakes grew wild in the region. You couldn't just buy them from a farmer because they were hard to raise. There were superstitions throughout the whole ancient Near East that mandrakes has powerful fertility properties – they're even mentioned in the Song of Songs. Rachel believes that the mandrakes Leah's son Reuben finds could help her conceive. But Leah is having none of it – she already feels like Rachel has stolen Jacob away from her. So Rachel agrees to a relationship between Jacob and Leah again in the hopes that she could have children of her own because of the mandrakes. What sad is that, just as their father viewed Leah and Rachel as property to be bartered off to Jacob, Leah and Rachel barter for Jacob as if he was property too.

By the time everything is said and done, we have a dozen named children – 11 boys and at least 1 girl. Jacob deals with four wives, two of whose children count as Leah's and Rachel's by ancient mindsets. We have at least a decade of heartbreak and infighting. Later Israel will have to deal with oppressors from the outside constantly taking Israel to the brink of war. But in these foundational times, the wars seem to be within the families themselves. While there are plenty of stories in the Bible that make us grimace, this is one of the few that just makes my heart ache for everyone involved.

Polygamy wasn't banned by God's law; it's not condoned, but it's not condemned either. Jesus tells the Pharisees that God allowed many things under the law, like divorce, not because they were good but that Israel's heart was so hard that they wouldn't have accepted the law otherwise. I think polygamy falls into this category. If you hear what grief it causes every single time it's practiced, it's unlikely you'll fall into the trap unless you're absolutely determined. We know how powerful this is in our own lives. We're much less likely to do something harmful if we've had a loved one hurt by it – smoking, drinking, promiscuity, gambling – not because there's a law against it, but because we've seen the damage done.

But what deeper messages are here for us? How is Jesus speaking to us throughout the passage? So let's see some of the things God is doing here. The first thing I see is *the absolute sovereignty of God on display*. If we have a naturalistic worldview, then God doesn't enter the picture. Biology takes its course and either things work or they don't. But the Bible paints a different picture for us, one where God is deeply involved with what happens to us. It is God who allows Leah to have all these children, and it is God who takes away Rachel's barrenness and allows her a son. We must reconsider how in control of everything we are when it's so clear God is the Almighty One who truly allows and disallows things to happen in our world. God still requires our participation in His plans – I only know of one virgin birth – but how those plans turn out is in His hands.

But God is working out His plans through this ragtag bunch deep in their jealousy. By the time this passage is complete, we've seen the births of 11 of the 12 tribes of Israel. (Benjamin, by far the youngest, will come later.) God did not let all of this pain and struggle happen for nothing. This is His chosen people. Almost all of the Israelites reading this book for the first time see themselves represented in this passage. Through the heartache comes the lineage of the entire nation God has called to Himself. That's God's sovereignty at work.

The sovereignty of God is how I get through my days. Not that I'm constantly thinking about it, but I know down deep that God is in control of history and directing it. So many things in our lives don't go according to plan, do they? The car insurance gets paid a day late and suddenly we're filling out tons of paperwork to get it reinstated. Meijer's out of the one ingredient we've got to have for tonight's meal. We plan a trip, and then we have \$5+ gasoline. Nothing seems to go quite like we think it will. And these are the simple things, the little things that bother us. Our bigger plans don't quite turn out the way we hoped either, and with those plans often does come heartache.

And yet God is steering our course. For every believer, God is charting the path towards Himself. Yes, life will get rough and messy. As I've heard it put, "there's a heartbreak in every pew." And yet our Redeemer and Restorer knows His way through the darkness to bring us into His marvelous light. I am confident that God will take the difficulties of our life and redeem them because that's the kind of God He is. It's my prayer that you will believe that too.

Something else I noticed here that I think is worthy to note is that *God has a long-term memory for faithfulness*. Leah is full of anguish because Jacob does not love her. With her first three sons, Leah acknowledges the LORD and does so by His proper name. And yet each time, there's a caveat. "Now my husband will love me." "Now my husband will be attached to me." "Because the LORD heard of my plight, He gave me another son." Each time, Leah is giving the LORD His due, and yet she's still looking to a man for her validation. She does the same with her final child too, always hoping Jacob will come around. She even says that God must have liked her giving her maidservant to Jacob, because she credits that as the reason God gave her another son. Honestly, she's a bit confused.

But let's go back to child #4. When she has her fourth child, Leah doesn't look to future happiness with her husband. She doesn't look to catch up with rival Rachel. She says, "This time, I will worship the LORD." The name of her fourth son, Judah, in Hebrew sounds an awfully lot like the word praise in Hebrew, "yadah." All the names of all the children are plays on words and sounds. But here, it's the LORD alone who receives the glory for this child.

Judah himself is not a noble character, as we'll find out in the future. He's not the first child; he doesn't stand out; there's nothing particularly excellent about him or his immediate descendants. But this child, the one of twelve who was named for the LORD and dedicated to Him – the tribe of Judah will be the only tribe that survives when the rest of Israel is wiped out in 722 BC. King David will come from the tribe of Judah, and so will Jesus. Call it happenstance or even providence; this was just God's plan. But it seems interesting to me that we know what Moses did not know when he was writing down the history of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – that this one, this Judah, his clan would be the one from whom the Messiah would come.

In some aspect of your life right now, it's hard to be faithful. I know all of us have a struggle somewhere where we just want to do what isn't right by the Lord's standards. Maybe something little, maybe something big. But when we show faithfulness, God remembers. You may never see the result of your faithfulness – Leah obviously never did, at least not in this life. But God remembers. And because God is sovereign, like we talked about before, He can reward your faithfulness way on down the line, long after all of us aren't even a memory in this world.

How might your faithfulness pay off down the line? It's hard to say, but small events change the world. A man ran off with a young boy's bicycle. The young man went to the police station to report it, saying he wanted to 'whup' the thief. Sergeant Joe Martin suggested he might need to learn how to box first and took him under his wing. That young man was Cassius Clay, also known as Muhammed Ali. Actress Tippi Hedren met with a group of Vietnamese refugees during the Vietnam War, and the refugees were incredibly impressed with her manicured fingernails. Hedren sent her stylist to the refugees to teach them how to do it – now, the nail salon industry is dominated by Vietnamese salons who owe their start to the actress.

God is faithful. When the author of Hebrews was encouraging his readers to continue on in spite of persecution, he wrote, "God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them." We believe that when we show the love of God to others, somehow down the line, it will matter. What you do that is dedicated to God matters.

Finally, I see this sad truth in here today as well: *it's easy to get distracted from the love of God when we are jealous or envious of others.* As I said last week, I feel for Leah. Despite being a part of Laban's scheme, I don't think she planned it – she certainly didn't think she'd wind up as miserable as she became. She recognizes the LORD's hand in her bearing children, and with Judah, she gives credit to the LORD alone without any caveats. She shows some real faith. But her jealousy gets the better of her. She gives her maidservant to Jacob in this competition with Rachel, and she has additional children where she still broods over Jacob's affections. She might have gotten it right with Judah, but she gets pulled back into the fray.

Jealousy and envy destroy relationships. It's very hard to love someone and yet covet what they have. When someone talks about being "a good person," it's usually because they are thinking about murder and adultery, not jealousy and envy. A lack of contentment drives the American economy – "ooh, that car looks nice, I'd like that." Then someone else sees that car and thinks, "I should have one of those too." Pretty soon there are a lot of cars sold and a lot of envious people trading in a car they loved a year or two before because they aren't keeping up.

This family at war with one another will eventually set their sons at odds with one another too. How much could have been prevented if envy hadn't been one of the first things they encountered in their home life? We follow the command of 1 Peter 2:1 – "Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind." When we keep a careful eye on our envy, we allow the Spirit room to grow in our lives, to breed contentment rather than jealousy, so that we can be joyful whatever the situation.

Friends, God will reward those who follow Him wholeheartedly without a care only for what they might receive from Him. He is sovereign, and He will show His faithfulness to those who love Him long past the time we're gone. So may we put aside those old hurts and harms, may we live not out of jealousy but out of compassion and love, and we will wait with anticipation to see what Jesus can do when we live out a life devoted to Him.