

Text: Genesis 29:1-30:43

Title: Jacob and Laban

Truth: God’s school of life sometimes has very long semesters.

Date/Location: Sunday April 30, 2023 at FBC

Introduction

In chapter 28, Jacob left home to save his life and find a spouse. The following four chapters chronicle his 20 years away from immediate family and how God continued to watch over him and correct him of some of his character flaws—and build the infant nation of Israel.

I. Jacob Serves Laban 14 Years for Two Wives – 29:1-30

- A. Jacob found Laban quite easily—by meeting some people at a well and talking with them. Somehow, Jacob knew that Rachel, who came on the scene, was the one for him—maybe love at first sight or something? The narrative is very short, and it seems strange to us that he would kiss her so soon. She ran to tell her dad. Then Laban came and greeted him, also with a kiss. So, the initial greeting of Rachel may be more cultural and less romantic.
- B. Jacob agreed with Laban to serve seven years in return for his younger daughter Rachel, because he found her very attractive. Seven years later, on the night of the wedding celebration, the sin of mankind is once again on display because Laban cheats Jacob by giving him his older daughter Leah, who was not desirable to Jacob. It must have been dark, and he must have been drunk or something on the night of the wedding, for he did not notice his “wife” was the wrong girl. Anyway, he found out and complained to Laban, who explained that according to custom, the older daughter had to be married first. So, the next week, Jacob was allowed to marry Rachel also, so he had two wives. He had to serve another seven years for her. Probably the real reason that Laban did this was not cultural, but financial!
- C. What a bait and switch operation! Jacob was very gracious to roll with this deception even in such a critical matter as marriage. He said in 31:7 and 31:41 that Laban had changed his wages ten times.

It may have been ten times, or that may be some hyperbole. In any case, Laban was not an honest man. This event did serve to remind Jacob of his own deceptiveness regarding another critical matter—that of the blessing and inheritance from his father Isaac. Sometimes God permits such a turn of events because it is an effective teaching tool.

II. Jacob’s Children – 29:31-30:24

A. The Lord saw the favoritism of Jacob (sound familiar?) toward Rachel. How this can be regarding such a polygamous relationship I cannot fully or satisfactorily explain. I suppose that once the arrangement was established, the husband was required to love both of his wives equally, whether he had a preference or not. God counterbalanced his favoritism for Rachel by giving Leah a high level of fertility. Leah bore 7 children for Jacob. Here is the whole list, in order of their birth, with the mothers of each indicated and the numbers of the 12 tribes:

<p>Leah</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reuben (29:32) 2. Simeon (29:33) 3. Levi (29:34) 4. Judah (29:35) <p>Bilhah</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. <u>Dan</u> (30:6) 6. Naphtali (30:8) <p>Zilpah</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Gad (30:11) 8. Asher (30:13) 	<p>Leah</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Issachar (30:18) 10. Zebulun (30:20) Dinah (30:21, see Gen. 34) <p>Rachel</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Joseph (30:24) 12. Benjamin (35:18) <p>Daughters are mentioned in Genesis 37:35 and 46:15 but not numbered or named; maybe Dinah is the only one.</p>
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B. An interesting study is to compare the lists of the 12 tribes as they reappear throughout Scripture. Later in Scripture the list has morphed somewhat due to some losing status and others gaining. From Revelation 7:5-8, we read of:

Judah	Asher	Simeon	Zebulun
Reuben	Naphtali	Levi	Joseph
Gad	<u>Manasseh</u>	Issachar	Benjamin

In this list, Manasseh replaces Dan who may simply not have returned after his idolatry and Assyrian captivity. Ephraim apparently drops off due to apostasy as well, and Joseph takes his place. Other lists in the Scripture downplay Reuben, for example by including him with Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh (1 Chronicles 12:37).

- C. When in 30:1 Rachel expressed anger at her husband for not giving her children, Jacob was correct to reply that he was not in the place of God. Quite obviously, the problem of infertility was not with Jacob...and indeed the earlier text said that God made a special arrangement for Leah to “open her womb.” But they agreed to a plan where maid Bilhah would be a concubine and provide surrogate children. This is a repeated mistake from the family’s history: Grandfather Abraham and Sarah hatched a similar plot and Ishmael was born via Hagar. The present case was different because it was not God’s will that a single son be the sole heir of the promises, but instead that the promise “spread out” to a broader base of Israelites as the seed began to multiply.
- D. Then Leah and Jacob made a similar arrangement with maid Zilpah. Now Jacob has a second concubine, which is effectively the same thing as a fourth wife. What a mess. It is after this point that young Reuben, a child of about 5 years of age, found some mandrakes. These were supposedly aphrodisiacs and Leah used them to seduce Jacob to be with her that evening over her rival Rachel. She subsequently had two more sons and a daughter.
- E. The family drama was real; the hurt for Leah was real; the competition was real. But it was all unnecessary, for had Jacob been committed to a one-man plus one-woman marriage arrangement, there would have been no occasion for the drama. He could have had 12 boys and 1 girl with one wife (it has happened before in world history). This is a reminder for us: just do things God’s way! It is the best way. Today’s drama in western cultures might not involve polygamy (or it might), but it most certainly involves unfaithfulness, adultery, lack of self-control, anger, lack of forgiveness, bitterness, lack of commitment, and pride. It results in a next generation who learn the bad habits of their parent(s) and repeat those kinds of errors.

III. Jacob Tries to Leave Laban for Home, 30:25-43

A. It has been long enough for Jacob, and he is ready to return home to his family, with his wives and children. But Laban does not want him to go—using as the reason (excuse?) that God has blessed him on account of Jacob. Indeed, that is true—there was an overflow of blessings from God to Jacob, and those spilled into the life of Laban and his family. Sometimes in life there is collateral *damage*; but other times in life there is collateral *blessing*.

If you are a dedicated follower of Jesus Christ, your life can overflow with blessings to those around you. Think about how that might be the case. If you are a child in your family, you can bless your family by following God's word; if you are a parent or a friend or a fellow church member, can it be said of you that *our lives* are blessed for your sake?

- B. Jacob also knew that Laban was far better off now than he was before. It was plain for anyone to see.
- C. Jacob suggested a plan whereby Laban could compensate him: just give him the spotted/speckled sheep that were born in future years (30:31-36)—not even the existing ones of that color pattern. Those and the solid-colored ones would remain Laban's. This seemed to be a good deal to Laban probably because of relative birth-rates, and it put Jacob in God's hands as far as what his wages would be.
- D. Then, Jacob did what he could to manage the flocks and the fertility of the flocks as wisely as he knew how. He did work harder with his flocks than he did with Laban's. And he probably knew quite a bit from decades of experience back home and then 14 more years with Laban. The process involved knowing when the animals were in heat ("whenever the stronger livestock *conceived*," where that word refers to *breeding*, that is, when they were ready to conceive).

He used what we might consider a strange method to encourage the breeding—the peeled tender branches of almond and chestnut trees. We might think this is superstitious, but I would encourage you to be a bit more humble. Just *what* do you know about

breeding sheep and goats? What do you know about chemicals or smells that might encourage frisky behavior on their part? I would venture a guess: *nothing*. We will leave the large-scale animal husbandry to Jacob and read about the results that God gave. And those results were tremendous. Jacob continued to be blessed by God and to grow in wealth. Note, by the way, that his wealth was not measured in dollars or precious metals. It was measured in *animals and servants*. His investment of work was added to the amazing way that God designed animals to reproduce and be fruitful. The return on investment was noteworthy.

E. Notice that the blessing of God did not permit laziness on Jacob's part. God wrought His blessing in *connection* with Jacob's hard work. The Abrahamic covenant was not an entitlement program. And neither are God's promises to you some kind of cheap entitlement. Of course, we know that salvation is a gift. But living as a saved person is not a walk in the park, it is not a life of hand-outs, it is not a life of zero accountability.

Conclusion

This situation persisted for six more years, bringing the total up to 20 years until Jacob returned home. It was only in the last six years that Jacob truly "got ahead" and that happened despite how Laban seemed to continuously change the terms and conditions of his work. Next time we will see how Jacob escaped the tentacles of Laban and returned to the promised land.

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