

## **JACOB, LEAH, AND RACHEL: A STORY OF GOD'S GRACE VS. OUR PERFORMANCE**

In Genesis chapter 29 through 32, we come across a strange Bible story. In all truthfulness, it reads a little more like a modern day reality television series. Jealous wives, a controlling boss who just happens to be a father-in-law, a man running for his life, and competitive siblings...the list could go on. Nevertheless, this is not just a purposeless story. Rather, God has a specific purpose in telling us this story. In 1 Corinthians 10:11, we get an insight into why. When God wrote the Bible, He not only recorded the "Joseph stories" of those who stood in the day of temptation, but He also included the "Jacob stories" – those stories that recount tales of deception, love, anger, emotional instability, and yes, mixed in with it all, the blessings of God. Simply put, God desires for us as broken people to learn from broken examples. Today we will learn the truths from this story by assessing the three main characters that find themselves caught in the middle of this historical tale, each trying to gain that which they crave so desperately. Each one has weaknesses, and each has strengths. First let us look at...

### **I. Leah's Performance – "What I can do, not who I am"**

As we read this story, one song seems to be on repeat in Leah's life, and it's a song of heartbreak. Every verse we read, it seems as if Leah is getting looked past, outshined, or taking a backseat to someone, and more often than not that someone is her sister. Leah never even received an actual wedding, for as is the custom with the Jews, weddings were a weeklong ceremony. Most scholarship believes that Laban did not even give Jacob his bride (which was supposed to be Rachel, but who was actually Leah), until the last day of the celebration (for the purpose of consummation). That would be like going through the whole wedding celebration, with someone else being the bride, taking the pictures, wearing the dress, etc., only for you to be the one to get into the car at the end of the day and drive away for the honeymoon. To top it all off, when Jacob realizes it's Leah and not Rachel, his response is not exactly chivalrous. He immediately demands justice, only to realize that Laban, his own kin, has legally

outsmarted him, which he didn't expect. Now Laban asks to him to "fulfill Rachel's week" as well. So, one week after she gets married, guess who she has to share her husband with? That's right, her life-long competitor and little sister Rachel. I can only imagine the anger, frustration, and resentment, all understandable emotions that Leah must feel. Until one day she realizes, for the first time ever, that she can "do" something that her sister, Rachel, cannot: give birth. In Genesis 29:31, we see that God blesses Leah with a boy, which was held in high recognition at that time as a symbol of being blessed. But she sees the blessing as simply a means to continue her performance-based lifestyle. Yes, she gives credit to God, but in the blessing of motherhood her heart desperately searches for the acceptance that she has wanted her whole life. This emptiness continues through the birth of Levi, until we Genesis 29:35, where God records that Leah finally realizes the acceptance she has sought her whole life for cannot be received from another human being, whether it be a father, a husband, or even a child. C.S. Lewis so eloquently captured this thought when he said, "If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world." Leah finally realizes that her life has become about what she can do as she desperately tried to hide who she had become. I am thankful for the fact that the Psalmist plainly gives us this truth in Psalm 62:5: "My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him."

As we continue in our story we see not only Leah's performance, but...

## **II. Rachel's Performance – "Who I am, not what I can do"**

Most people would look at Rachel's life all the way through her marriage to Jacob and simply assume that she had everything together. We find her description from the very Word of God to be "beautiful", "well-favoured", and even better loved by her husband. For all practical purposes, Rachel had the perfect life, and seems content with it. Until the day that she discovers something in her heart that she may not have even known was there. Genesis 30:1 tells us, "*Rachel envied her sister.*" When it comes to emotions and performance-based living, we need to understand that any time envy enters the room, it's about to get dirty. Proverbs 14:30 calls envy "*the rottenness of the bones.*" In the next several verses of Genesis 30, we see Rachel resorting to pagan practices in order to try and satisfy the green monster of envy that had begun to rule her heart. Immediately her life is transformed into a battlefield of competition with her sister, and while they try to soothe their emotional needs, neither of them ever stops to realize that with every action of envy, the roots of

resentment simply plunge deeper into their hearts. Finally, Rachel's one lacking wish comes true for her, and she conceives a son. In Genesis 30:23, we see that Rachel states that God (Elohim – the invisible, eternal One) has taken away her reproach, but then she addresses Him as LORD, or Jehovah (the manifest, Self-existent One) in verse 24. What she realized was that her relationship with God was not to be a distant relationship. Rachel has learned the truth that fulfillment cannot come from a human source, but must come from the One who created us and desires a deep, personal relationship with us.

Which brings us to our last and final character. Let us look at...

### **III. Jacob's Performance – "Who I have become, and what I have done since then"**

Jacob is a little bit of a different story. The Bible records a lot of...

#### A. His Outward Routine.

Jacob seemed to have only three groups of people in his life: those who had wronged him (Laban), those whom he had wronged (Esau), and those who were close to him (Rachel and Leah). His relationship with Laban that started out as a promising business venture has now turned into a game of getting even. His constant interactions with Laban were docile at best, and were laced with undertones of competitiveness, probably sparked by Jacob's inward drive and desire to be at the top. Jacob also seemed to be unsure of how to deal with his two wives and their obsessive competition. At times we see him showing love (Gen. 29:30), preferential treatment (Gen. 29:30), anger (Gen. 30:2), blind obedience probably accompanied by situational ethics (Gen. 30:3-4), and even loyalty. The crux of Jacob's story comes the night before he is to reunite with his brother, Esau, for the first time since Esau declared he would kill him. It is at this point that we see Jacob's most crippling characteristic...

#### B. His Inward Reliance.

James G. Murphy says about Jacob that *"He relied indeed on God, as was demonstrated in many of his words and deeds; but the prominent feature of his character was a strong and firm reliance on himself."* There was a familiarity for Jacob in dealing with his own issues in his own ways that provided him comfort and confidence. But in Genesis 32:24-31, we see Jacob is about to receive a visit that will give him...

#### C. His Upward Revelation.

Up until this point, Jacob had gone through life by using God as a genie in a bottle. As far as he was concerned, God had helped out here and there, but Jacob's planning and hard work were to thank for where he was today. Now, he is to learn the lesson of unreserved reliance on God. Interestingly enough, God decides to teach him this lesson in an unorthodox manner: a wrestling match. James G. Murphy says of this event that *"When God has a new thing of a spiritual nature to bring into the experience of man, he begins with the senses. He takes man on the ground on which he finds him, and leads him through the senses to the higher things of reason, conscience, and communion with God."* And here it is that we see Jacob's upward revelation is that he finally realizes that he is stronger when he is holding to the arm of the One who sustains the universe than when he is standing on his own two feet.

Oh that we would learn this lesson of how much better the grace of God is than our own performance! Cary Schmidt, an author and pastor, writes, *"Since the gospel produces true natural change, I am free from forcing change."* Let us allow the gospel that saves us for eternity to also be the gospel that saves us from our own performance-based lifestyle.

- Pastor Caleb