

Twelve Sons

Genesis 29:31 - 30:24

One of my favorite commentaries is at it again, noting that “important as the revelation of this chapter may be from several points of view, again, it does not happen to be suited for use in the pulpit. For without a doubt, no man would care to lay bare the rivalries between Rachel and Leah as recorded in [these verses].”

Well....I would. I'll be glad to lay bare for you the rivalry between Rachel and Leah, and I'll use that man's otherwise useful commentary to help me do it. That sinful rivalry is a worthy and edifying thing to study in a sermon because that sinfulness it will work to magnify God's mercy and grace. We will see a lot of God's mercy and grace this morning.

This is the history of God's people, the nation of Israel. We have reached the great climax of God's choosing his people, for the sequence of choosing just one descendant to be in the line of his covenant people has ended. Now, in this generation, God chooses them all. All twelve sons of Jacob are included as the twelve tribes of Israel. As a group, they define the nation of God's people. And those twelve sons carry over to the NT as the symbolic representation of the whole church of Jesus Christ--the universal, worldwide, catholic church consisting of all true believers from all the nations. Indeed, that church is also founded upon another group of twelve, the twelve apostles.

And so it is, that Jacob, whose name will soon be changed to Israel, will have twelve sons. But in the birth of those sons, one thing is immediately obvious.

I. GOD WORKS THROUGH FALLIBLE AND OFTEN FOOLISH HUMAN BEINGS.

Fallible and foolish. That means subject to making mistakes, and prone to disregard God and his laws. Rachel and Leah are prime examples. So is Jacob, for although my focus today is upon Rachel and Leah, Jacob's faults lie at the root of this whole struggle. For though he is a changed man, as we saw last week, still he is a willing participant in this rather tangled web of immorality. Indeed, the very presence of more than one wife renders him guilty, and don't let anything else I say today make you think that such an arrangement is OK. It isn't, and these problems, particularly the jealous conflict between his wives, is an obvious natural consequence of having two wives in the first place. From a human perspective, its amazing that they don't kill each other, even if they are sisters!

So let's look at it closely. Keep in mind what's happening. God is creating the nation of Israel. He is accomplishing that which is at the heart of his covenant promise to Adam, Noah, and Abraham. The promise of a great nation. And that great nation has humble origins, doesn't it? Two women doing everything they can to compete for the affections of one man. That's the origin of this great nation. This could be a new television drama program, couldn't it? It could be a new daytime soap-opera.

This sort of thing goes on in many a place, from high schools and church youth groups, to factories and business offices, to the highest levels of government. A jealous conflict between two women over the affection of one man. But in this case,

A. The jealous conflict between Rachel and Leah is the context in which God created the nation of his people.

These twelve sons will be identified over and over again in Scripture. They will be identified in Genesis 49, when Jacob finally blesses his family just prior to his death. They are identified as the nation of Israel enters and conquers the

promised land. They are identified in the writings of the prophets, and even into the symbolic writings of John in the book of Revelation.

The twelve tribes of Israel came about as a consequence of jealousy. Obvious, and easy to understand jealousy.

29:31 “Leah was unloved.”

That is a proper translation, though the original is literally that “Leah was hated.” She was spurned and rejected, her affections no doubt often dismissed. And with good reason, for she married Jacob only by means of deception. It was Rachel whom Jacob loved, right from the start. It was Rachel whose beauty and form so captivated his heart and captured his attention. So Leah was unloved.

But she did bear children, a great blessing even now, and much more so then. Her ability to bear children brought to the surface Rachel’s jealousy.

30:1

This foolish, petty jealousy is exposed for all its shamelessness in,

30:14-16

As one commentator writes, “the frank narrative of the Scriptures on this point makes us blush with shame at the indelicate bargaining of the sisters--one of the fruits of a bigamous connection.”

Utterly shameless bargaining. In effect, Rachel sold her rights to sleep with Jacob that night for a few mandrakes that Leah’s son Reuben had found. To explain that, the mandrake was a plant with yellow berries about the size of a nutmeg, which the

Hebrews thought would actually help fertility. It was seen as an aphrodisiac. Mandrakes were sometimes called “love apples.” Infertility medication.

Rachel is resorting to this horrible bargain in order to get some of the desired fruit, hoping that although Leah would get to sleep with Jacob that night, some night soon she would be able to be with him and actually conceive herself.

It didn’t work out exactly as Rachel planned. Leah did sleep with Jacob that night, and evidently several more nights. And Leah was the one who had more children.

30:17-21

I should note that Dinah will become the subject of chapter 34, and Jacob did have other daughters. The recorded genealogies, however, usually included only the sons who would carry on the family name. The daughters would be included with their husbands, after they married.

You’ll note that the name of each son carries great meaning. If you have footnotes in your Bible, you might read that Issachar sounds like the Hebrew for reward, or wages, for she says,

30:18

The other son was named Zebulun, which means honor. Specifically, it is the honor of someone’s presence, and verse 20 could be translated, “Now my husband will dwell with me.”

30:19-20

Now, Leah thinks, Jacob will actually live with her and honor her with his affections and his attention. For she has given him six sons and at least one daughter.

Again, the big picture. God is using this adolescent jealousy to produce the twelve tribes of Israel. Amazing, isn't it. God works through fallible and often foolish human beings. There is a NT passage that immediately comes to my mind,

2Cor. 4:7 "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. 8 We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 11 For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So then death is working in us, but life in you."

God entrusts the treasure of the gospel in the earthen vessels of human hands. I like the translation jars of clay, or pots, emphasizing just how fragile they are. We are the fallible and often foolish human beings through whom the kingdom is being built today. And God uses these jars of clay for a very obvious reason. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us."

Israel didn't become a great nation because Jacob was a great and godly man with a faithful and godly wife. No, Israel became a great nation because God made it a great nation. So it is with the church. The church is a great institution, which shall never die, not because we are great people. But because God is a great God. That is so clearly obvious in these verses. God works through fallible and often foolish human beings.

Let's look briefly at the worst aspect of this rivalry between Rachel and Leah, and that is their use of handmaidens. Now, we can try to justify this somewhat by realizing that it was a common

and acceptable custom in those days. Indeed, Laban likely gave each of his daughters a handmaid in just such a case, in which they were unable to have children. Their handmaid could bear children for them. Sort of the first instance of surrogate mothers, which are quite noteworthy today. But make no mistake about it,

B. The use of their maidservants for bearing children was an immoral act.

Rachel goes first.

30:3-6

Now, it seems that the end does justify the means, at least from Rachel's perspective. But she is at fault even in thinking such a thing. The first son from this union was named Dan, a name meaning "vindicated" or judged. Rachel considered herself vindicated, because Jacob now had a son with her maidservant. She was vindicated because now she could build her family, using her maidservant Bilhah to experience the actual pregnancy and delivery.

Then she acts almost triumphantly upon the birth of the second son.

30:7-8

Naphtali means "my struggle." Reflecting on her struggle with Leah, she declares triumphantly, "I won." I have a son. The boy's name reflected that declaration. But, still, it wasn't true, and such an immoral act didn't satisfy any of her needs, nor did it win back the affections of her husband. It certainly didn't end the rivalry with Leah, for Leah proceeds to do the same thing.

30:9-13

Again, the almost ironic use of meaningful names. Gad means good fortune, and what good fortune Leah considered for

herself. Another son, perhaps she will now attain the good fortune of the fullness of Jacob's love, which had been denied her.

Then another son, Asher, a name which means "happy." Leah declares, "How happy I am. The women will call me happy."

But she wasn't happy, for this jealous conflict was far from over. This whole thing is so foolish, isn't it?

But this is how God creates his holy nation, the nation of his chosen people. Amazing, isn't it. God works through fallible and often foolish human beings.

Let's look a bit more deeply into the experiences of these two women, Leah and Rachel. Let's learn more about the abiding spiritual truths that God would have for us in these pages of Scripture. This is much more than a soap-opera. This is the inspired word of God, therefore "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Leah and Rachel are both useful for such training in righteousness because both of their experiences reveal how God works in our own lives, today. Both of their experiences reveal a great deal about God.

First,

II. LEAH

Leah's experiences teach us a great deal about God. Again, 29:31

A. Leah's experiences reveal how God blesses the unfortunate with a rich legacy.

It is true to say that as a general rule, God blesses the underdog. God is rooting for the underdog, not the favorite. And Leah is the woman unloved, she is the woman not blessed with the beauty of Rachel. For whatever reason, she lived more years unmarried, seemingly to create the impression that she might never be able to be married. She was married only because of her father's trickery, and married to a man who really loved her sister.

But, when the Lord saw that she was not loved, he opened her womb and gave her children. She had the legacy of giving birth to the firstborn, Reuben.

v.32

Reuben's name was a name representing that great blessing, for the name means, "Behold, a son." "See here, I have a son."

It was a name which was itself a testimony crying out to Jacob, a name which was Leah's own claim upon the affections of her husband Jacob, a claim that would surely capture his attention. "Look, a son. The firstborn." Then she had a second son, Simeon, whose name means "one who hears." She implies, therefore, that she had asked for this child in prayer. And she ascribes the son to the graciousness of the Lord. She must have been a woman of faith.

v.33

Then two more sons, who would play such a vital role in the life of the nation of Israel. Levi and Judah.

v.34

Levi means attachment, a name expressing her confident wish that her sons would ensure Jacob's attachment to her. How she must have thirsted for the love that was denied her.

But, of course, Levi and his descendants would come to represent a far greater attachment, for they would be the tribe set apart as priests, the tribe attached to God.

The priestly tribe descended from the son of this woman who was unloved, the woman who was seen by her husband as second-best. The woman forced to occupy a lowly and humble place in the affections of her husband.

But God blessed the unfortunate one with a rich legacy. That legacy included the son Judah, a name which simply means “praise.”

v.35

There is surely a sense of true godliness, for she accepts the blessings of these children for what they are. She is blessed, and she knows it. So she sings praise to God.

God has given this lowly and most unfortunate woman a rich legacy, perhaps the richest of all legacies, for the legacy of Judah is carried on to a very godly woman of a much later generation, a common, ordinary, simple woman named Mary. And Mary’s son was the Lord Jesus Christ, and her blessing was therefore the greatest blessing any mother could possibly receive, the blessing of bearing the son of God in her own womb, a son conceived by the power of Holy Spirit, without a man. For Mary was a virgin until after Jesus was born.

The legacy of Leah is that through her line, through the line of her son, would come into the world the Messiah. We’ll see that in more detailed in weeks to come, but let me read the prophecy Jacob gives to his son Judah as Jacob prepares for his own death.

Gen. 49:8 “Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise; Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; Your father’s children shall bow down before you. 9 Judah is a lion’s whelp; From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; And as a lion, who shall rouse him? 10 The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people”

The scepter, of course, is the symbol of the king. The King shall reign over the nations, the King in the line of Judah. The Lion of Judah. The spiritual principle is that God blesses the lowly. Not the high and mighty.

The world in which we live blesses the high and mighty, the rich and famous. The strong and beautiful. God’s methods are quite different. And there is a very clear reason for that. Consider,

1Cor. 1:26 “For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. 27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; 28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence. 30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption — 31 that, as it is written, “He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.”

God chooses the unfortunate so that when they are blessed, they will give him the praise. God chooses the foolish, the weak, and the lowly so that when they boast, they will be compelled to boast in the Lord. To the contrary, our world exalts those who are

wise and intelligent, those with superior intellects and high IQ's. Our world exalts the strong, those able to excel in athletics or other demonstrations of power. Our world exalts the ones in positions of authority and influence.

God rebukes all of them by blessing the unfortunate.

Think about it. Our world makes heroes out of men who can dunk a basketball. Our world makes heroes out of men who can drive a car around a big circular track faster than anyone else. We worship them. We make heroes out those who have the intelligence to become a lawyer or the knowledge to become a professor. We make heroes out of company executives and even government leaders.

But God makes heroes out of the meek and lowly. He makes heroes out of common, ordinary people, like you and me. "See your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence."

Leah shows us something else about God, also.

B. Leah's experiences reveal how God honors the faithful cries of his children.

Again, Leah, in her lowliness, does appear to be a woman who cried out to God and who was heard!

29:32

"The LORD has surely looked on my affliction," implying that she has cried out to him in the midst of that misery.

v.33

"The Lord has heard." The clearest indication that Leah was a woman of much prayer. Then,

v.34-35

She is moved to praise God. The name of her fourth son would simply be "praise." She praises God for hearing her faithful cries. She acknowledges that her sons were given to her by the Lord in response to her prayers and her difficult position in the home. Her experiences teach us a great deal about the nature of God.

So do Rachel's experiences.

III. RACHEL.

But what, what do Rachel's experiences teach us about God? First,

A. Rachel's experiences reveal how God brings humbling chastisement to those who trust in their own ability.

Chastisement. God blesses the lowly and unfortunate. And he humbles the proud.

2Sam. 22:28 "You save the humble, but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them low."

1Pet. 5:5 "Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' 6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."

God opposes the proud. He gives grace to the humble. We see that in Rachel and Leah. Outwardly, Rachel had all the advantages, including her beauty and Jacob's love. And there is a sense in which does experience God's humbling chastisement. And humbling it was. It was the most humbling experience she could have faced.

29:31

She shows the need for such chastisement, for we find that the jealousy seems to begin with her.

30:1

The inappropriateness of that outburst is reflected in Jacob's answer, which I think is a quite appropriate answer.

v.2

This could be simply the angry exchange between a husband and wife whose marriage is so strained by the presence of a second wife, but it also seems that Jacob is correct in ascribing Rachel's condition to God. Jacob is saying, "It's not my fault." "I am not in the place of God." "God is the one who has kept you from having children."

It seems at this point that Rachel is not yet ready to rely upon God, but upon her own wisdom and ability, expressed in this passionate plea to Jacob. Her response to Jacob's rebuke is faulty, as well. For if she believed that God was the one who had kept her from having children, then she should have sought out God's presence and pleaded with him in prayer.

Instead, she comes up with that horrible idea of giving her handmaid to Jacob to bear children on her behalf. Yet outwardly, humanly speaking, from a worldly perspective, this plan of hers worked. She got children.

30:3-8

But, of course, that plan didn't work. All of that was immoral, a violation of God's laws and rejection of his righteousness. And remember Rachel's other plan, to sell her rights to sleep with Jacob one particular night in exchange for some mandrakes, in an attempt to make herself more fertile.

All those human attempts failed miserably. But that's not the end of the story. Rachel did finally have children.

30:22-24

B. Rachel's experiences reveal how God brings rich blessings upon those who come to understand his mercy.

Rachel did seem to learn that lesson of God's humbling chastisement. We don't read any details, other than the fact that God listened to her. God heard her, which means that she had learned to cry out to him in humble reliance upon him. God listened to her, and God opened her womb! God took away her disgrace.

And the name of that son reflected her experiences so well. For the name Joseph sounds very much like the Hebrew word "take away." All his life, he would represent the removal of God's discipline, the removal of that curse of being unable to bear children. And as we'll see in chapters to come, Joseph would be greatly loved. And he would be a great and godly man, whose life would always be an example of God's blessing to Rachel.

And so we read in,

Gen. 49:22 "Joseph is a fruitful bough, A fruitful bough by a well; His branches run over the wall. 23 The archers have bitterly grieved him, Shot at him and hated him. 24 But his bow remained in strength, And the arms of his hands were made

strong By the hands of the Mighty God of Jacob (From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel), 25 By the God of your father who will help you, And by the Almighty who will bless you With blessings of heaven above, Blessings of the deep that lies beneath, Blessings of the breasts and of the womb.”

But the name Joseph actually means something else. The Hebrew word means to add. And so we read,
v.24

God would add to her another son, the youngest son, Benjamin, whom we will study in chapter 35. Tragically, Rachel would die giving birth to that last son, but surely she died as a woman who understood God’s mercy. And her life stands as a testimony of how God brings rich blessings upon those who come to understand his mercy, and who do not rely upon their own strength.

Sometimes, and really I think quite often, God’s richest blessings come to us only after learning some of these lessons. Some of God’s richest blessings come only after experiences of humbling chastisement. My encouragement to you this morning is that in the experiences of your own life, learn to understand his mercy. And in your struggles, cry out to him for help. And he will answer. As he promised. For as he spoke to Jacob as he would build the nation of Israel, he also says to us,

Gen.28:15 “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you.”