

God's Gift of Love

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God grants His creatures the gift of love, but His love is greater still, including even love for the unloved.

MAIN PASSAGE: Genesis 29:13-35



What are some love stories you can think of that include intense struggle?

We all suffer from the faults, twisted desires, and selfishness of others as well as of ourselves. Yet even in the midst of all the distortions of love in this life and the countless times our hearts have been broken, there is something driving us on to love and to be loved; that something is God Himself, who is love (1 John 4:8). The true power of stories about love and our own experiences of love, then, is that they point us to the fact that there is a real love, a pure love, that is grounded in the very real God who created all things.

Group Time

Point 1: God gave Jacob a gift of love (Gen. 29:13-20).

¹³ When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then he took him to his house, and Jacob told him all that had happened.

¹⁴ Laban said to him, "Yes, you are my own flesh and blood."

After Jacob had stayed with him a month, ¹⁵ Laban said to him, "Just because you're my relative, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be."

¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters: the older was named Leah, and the younger was named Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah had tender eyes, but Rachel was shapely and beautiful. ¹⁸ Jacob loved Rachel, so he answered Laban, "I'll work for you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."

¹⁹ Laban replied, "Better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay with me." ²⁰ So Jacob worked seven years for Rachel, and they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

God providentially brought about the "chance encounter" between Jacob and Rachel. The world might view it as luck, but the people of God know better. Jacob did not just find love; it was provided to him by His loving Father. And his love for Rachel sustained him through seven years of work to marry her.



Why do people so often resort to "luck" as the "reason" certain circumstances happen at just the right time?

In a greater way than with Jacob, love motivated the Son of God to take on flesh, endure suffering and shame, and lay down His life at Calvary (John 15:13; 1 John 3:16). And it is love that carries us as we seek to follow Him (John 14:15). Yes, our love of Christ is imperfect, but we know that we are loved by God with a perfect love because that is who He is (1 John 4:7-11).



How have you seen God develop, deepen, and purify your love for Him and others?



Voices from Church History

"The only ground of God's love is his grace. The ground of God's love is only and wholly in himself. There is neither portion nor proportion in us to draw his love. There is no love nor loveliness in us that should cause a beam of his love to shine upon us."¹

—Thomas Brooks (1608-1680)

Point 2: God's love is persistent through trials (Gen. 29:21-30).

²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, "Since my time is complete, give me my wife, so I can sleep with her." ²² So Laban invited all the men of the place and sponsored a feast.

²³ That evening, Laban took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob, and he slept with her. ²⁴ And Laban gave his slave Zilpah to his daughter Leah as her slave.

²⁵ When morning came, there was Leah! So he said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Wasn't it for Rachel that I worked for you? Why have you deceived me?"

²⁶ Laban answered, "It is not the custom in this place to give the younger daughter in marriage before the firstborn. ²⁷ Complete this week of wedding celebration, and we will also give you this younger one in return for working yet another seven years for me."

²⁸ And Jacob did just that. He finished the week of celebration, and Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife. ²⁹ And Laban gave his slave Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her slave. ³⁰ Jacob slept with Rachel also, and indeed, he loved Rachel more than Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years.

God used Laban's trickery to teach Jacob a lesson he needed to learn, to discipline him. *Not because* He was fed up with Jacob but *because* He loved him. God disciplines the ones He loves, which produces the fruit of peace and righteousness in those trained by it (Heb. 12:6,11). As sinners ourselves, we are also in need of God's loving discipline. In spite of our evil, our Father does not turn away from us or leave us to our demise. Rather, God loves and disciplines us so that we might become a blessing to others.

How do you respond to the loving discipline from God the Father?



Hardened Rejection

Repentance and Blessing

Through a new arrangement with Laban, Jacob received his beloved Rachel as his wife, though he would work for Laban for another seven years—fourteen years in total. Such was the persistent love of Jacob for Rachel, but the same could not be said for his wife Leah. This situation helps us see the even greater, more persistent love of God, who used Jacob, Rachel, and Leah as part of His salvation history, even through their sins and wrong choices. It was through this family line that Jesus would be born.

Point 3: God shows love to the unloved (Gen. 29:31-35).

³¹ When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was unable to conceive. ³² Leah conceived, gave birth to a son, and named him Reuben, for she said, “The LORD has seen my affliction; surely my husband will love me now.”

³³ She conceived again, gave birth to a son, and said, “The LORD heard that I am unloved and has given me this son also.” So she named him Simeon.

³⁴ She conceived again, gave birth to a son, and said, “At last, my husband will become attached to me because I have borne three sons for him.” Therefore he was named Levi.

³⁵ And she conceived again, gave birth to a son, and said, “This time I will praise the LORD.” Therefore she named him Judah. Then Leah stopped having children.

God showed love to unloved Leah and blessed her in her time of distress. To say Leah was merely unloved doesn't communicate enough. The Hebrew word used here can also connote hatred. Jacob wasn't just apathetic toward Leah—*he despised her*, perhaps because she reminded him of how he had been beaten at his own game of deception. But the Lord had compassion for her and opened her womb to have four sons.



How has God demonstrated His love for you while in the midst of difficult circumstances?

God Is Love: The greatest act of love by God toward humans isn't the giving of _____ but the giving of Himself in _____ so that we might become _____ to Him.

Leah was not the last person to be unloved and despised. There are people all over the world hungering for the love of a human being, and even deeper, hungering for the love of God. Those in Christ have been given the opportunity to reflect God's love to others: to family, to friends, to outcasts, to enemies, and to the unknowns in the world.



What can we do to show the great love of God in Christ to those who feel unloved?

Daily Study

Day 1: Read Genesis 29:1-12

As Genesis 28 winds down, Jacob wakes up from his dream of seeing the stairway reaching into the sky and encountering the Lord. The patriarch recognizes the specialness of this encounter, so he takes the stone near his head, sets it up as a marker, pours oil on top of it, and declares that he will give God a tenth of all He will give him.

As Genesis 29 opens, Jacob reaches his destination of Paddan-aram, and he sees shepherds with their sheep around a well with a large stone covering its opening. In short time, Jacob removes the stone from the well and waters the sheep of the shepherdess Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban. Later he would love and marry her.

Consider the mention of these two stones so close together. The first stone marked Jacob's encounter with God when the Lord promised to provide Jacob with offspring and always be with him. The second stone marked Jacob's encounter with the woman who would, in part, fulfill that very promise.

Throughout Scripture and time, God is working out His grand plan of redemption, but He is also working in the details. We can only wonder if Jacob realized how God used these stones to connect the dots of his promises. God continues to do this today for us. He uses markers in our lives as He guides us, directs us, and reminds us of His promises to provide for us and always be with us.



How have you seen God guide and direct and confirm your steps as you followed Him?



Voices from Church History

“Christ wanted at the very beginning of the journey to strengthen Jacob’s resolve. And so he appeared to him with the words ‘I am the God of Abraham and the God of your father Isaac.’ I have caused the patriarch and your father to experience a great increase in prosperity; so, far from being afraid, believe that I am he who fulfilled my promises and will shower on you my care.”²

—John Chrysostom (c. 347–407)

Day 2: Read Genesis 29:13-30

What exactly was Laban thinking when he agreed to Jacob's request to work seven years for the right to marry Rachel? Did he expect that his older daughter, Leah, would be married before the seven years were up? Did he suspect Jacob's infatuation with his younger daughter would wane? He had only known her for a month.

We don't know, of course. Scripture doesn't tell us, but this account, along with the ongoing motif of deception in Jacob's life, reminds us of our need to live with integrity. As the people of God, we are called to speak the truth at all times and put off even the appearance of falsehood (see Prov. 12:22; 2 Cor. 8:21; Col. 3:9; Heb. 13:18). We should live with integrity because we want to reflect the nature of God to the world and because we find rest, joy, and salvation in the truth—Jesus Christ (John 14:6). Because we have been saved by God's truth and have confidence in our salvation through God's truth, we are to live in truth in every facet of our lives.



In what ways can you live with increased integrity at home, at work, and in your community?

Day 3: Read Genesis 29:31-35

Leah was in such a difficult position. She was married to a man who did not love her, a man who likely despised her because of the deception she had been a part of. And to make matters even worse, her husband was also married to her sister, the one he truly and openly loved. And the two sisters would become bitter rivals (see Gen. 30:1,6,8,15).

As we read this account, we should not gloss over Leah's deep pain, a deep pain produced by sin, notably Laban's and Jacob's. We need to be reminded that sin always has consequences, both in our lives and the lives of others. But neither should we miss what God birthed through Leah's adversity, the beauty He brought from the ashes. Leah's sons were part of the nation God was building. From Levi would come the priests who would act as intermediaries between God and His sinful people. And through Judah would come the line of kings that would give rise to the Savior of the world. Trials and pain often push us away from God, if we let them, and the tragedy is that when they do, we can miss the beauty of God's work in their midst. Instead, let us learn as Leah did—through the pain and the hurt, let us praise the Lord.



How has God used trials, adversity, and pain in your life for good?

Day 4: Read Genesis 30:1-43

For the third generation in a row, we encounter the theme of barrenness as God forms the nation He had promised Abraham. Would Rachel pray like Isaac and Rebekah or take matters into her own hands like Abraham and Sarah? She chose the latter and demanded that Jacob have children for her through her maid, Bilhah, and she had two sons. Then Leah made the same sinful choice and gave Jacob her maid, Zilpah, who also had two sons.

God used these sinful choices for good, but they were not without consequences. Rivalry and favoritism would not be confined to Jacob and his now four wives. These sins would spill over onto their children. Learning from our sins is important. It is one way we grow in holiness. But it is also important that we learn from the sins of others. Surely Jacob knew the stories of his fathers, but tragically, he and his wives chose to repeat their follies.



What lessons have you learned from your failures, and how can you encourage others by sharing them?

Day 5: Read Genesis 31:1-55

It was time for Jacob, the wayward son, to return home. God had told him so (v. 3). And so, as only seemed fitting, Jacob snuck away with his family and possessions, fleeing from Laban without telling him. This, of course, didn't go over well with Laban, who chased down Jacob and his daughters and caught up to them over a week later.

The uncle and nephew aired their grievances with one another before finally making a covenant to settle their differences. But unlike the covenants we have seen to this point—covenants initiated by God that focused on provisions and blessings for His people—this one was different. This was a covenant of warning and division. The two relatives would stay away from each other or face judgment. And with that, Laban exits the story.

The account of Jacob and Laban is marked by deceit, rivalry, favoritism, threats, heartache, and tension—all the fruit of sin. How different it could have been had these two men trusted God and lived with love and honor. Their parting would surely have been different.



Are there any relationships in your life that need healing? What steps toward reconciliation can you take this week?

