

BABY BLUES

GENESIS 29:31-30:24 AUGUST 3, 2022

Some contests aren't worth winning. Have you heard of the "Rolling in the Grits" competition in St. George, South Carolina? How about the Shin Kicking World Championship? There's a World Bog Snorkeling Championship, and many 'wife-carrying' contests can be found all over the world, from Kazakhstan to our own state of Maine.¹ Wife-carrying contestants compete to win the wife's weight in beer and five times her weight in cash.

Tonight, we sit ring-side at one of the saddest wife-carrying contests ever. Leah and Rachel spend years battling for position and their husband's affection by seeing who could bear the most sons. We watch in astonishment, but we shouldn't forget this was a real family and these were long years of gloom, unhappiness, and strife. When we left off we were told that Jacob did not love both of his wives. His heart belonged to Rachel. His marriage to Leah was an unwelcome technicality. Now, the ugly drama plays out.

Genesis 29:31 - ³¹When the Lord saw that Leah was neglected, he opened her womb; but Rachel was unable to conceive.

This passage covers between 7 and 13 years of time. During that time, Leah was neglected by Jacob. Your version may say "hated" or "despised" or "unloved." This is a heart-breaking reality for Leah. She loves her husband and yearns for him to love her back, but he doesn't.

We aren't the only ones watching. The Lord was, too. And with tender kindness *He* shows the love and affection that her husband refused to give. God would not neglect or despise her.

In this culture a woman's social standing was tied to whether she bore sons. But there were other layers that would've made this particular situation even sharper. First, Rachel had been cheated by her sister just as much as Jacob. Second, Jacob would've told them about his meeting with God at Bethel and how the Lord had made promises of their offspring being like "the dust of the earth."

Genesis 29:32 - ³²Leah 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."

The race was on. As we watch it play out, notice how absent, how silent, how impotent Jacob is. Even though he is the leader of the family, he *refuses* to take up his calling as a follower of God or as a faithful husband. He does not lead, he does not comfort, he does not pray, he does not correct, he doesn't make peace, he doesn't instruct. He becomes a prop in this rivalry. Even in the record of each conception, we do not have the usual inclusion of the husband. Earlier in Genesis we read things like, "Adam was intimate with his wife, Eve and she conceived," or, "Abram slept with

¹ <https://stacker.com/stories/3529/25-weird-competitions-around-world>

Hagar and she became pregnant." *But where is Jacob?* Obviously he is the father, but it's as if he's completely lifeless.

Husbands and fathers have an essential and unique responsibility. Of course, wives and mothers do, too, but the Bible explains that the family must work together, each member fulfilling their calling, with *particular* regard to fathers so that the family can grow and thrive and become strong.

Unfortunately, the United States has the highest rate of single-parent households in all the world.² That's not a judgment on anyone here, it's simply a reminder to us all of the fact that we do not live in a Christian culture. We don't live in a society that loves the Lord and loves His Word. The voters of Kansas proved that last night.³ But we don't want to settle for the world's standard. We don't have to be like Jacob in Haran. We can walk by faith and trust that God will do His good work. And if you find yourself in a family situation full of strife, like we're reading about here, be encouraged that *you*, you can walk with God. You can go His way even if your family does not.

Genesis 29:33 - ³³She conceived again, gave birth to a son, and said, "The Lord heard that I am neglected and has given me this son also." So she named him Simeon.

Both times, Leah acknowledges the Lord's part in gifting her these sons. Of all the characters in our story tonight, she's the most spiritual of the bunch - at least in *this* phase. So, Jacob had been telling her things things he had learned from Abraham and Isaac, and yet he fails to *live* by those truths. He never prays. He never worships. He never serves. The result is the collapse of his family.

Despite Jacob's shortcomings, Leah knows the Lord. She calls Him Yahweh and is confident that He not only sees, but that He hears her - meaning she had a prayer life with Him - and she knew Him to be kind, compassionate, and generous.

Genesis 29:34 - ³⁴She 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.

Leah's story becomes more and more heart breaking. Look at her "*at last*" there. She's trying to keep hope alive - hope that her husband would start to have *any* kind of warmth toward her. But it never happens. In the entire passage, he never speaks to Leah. He only visits her out of *obligation*.

Genesis 29:35 - ³⁵And 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.

Finally, after years of misery, Leah has stopped hoping in *Jacob*. Instead, she hopes in the Lord. "*This time* I will praise Yahweh." But, notice: At the same time that she's growing spiritually, her personal life becomes more painful. She doesn't win over Jacob and she stops having children.

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/12/u-s-children-more-likely-than-children-in-other-countries-to-live-with-just-one-parent/>

³ <https://apnews.com/article/2022-primary-elections-kansas-abortion-b6d62a852c2ce4617f2c03589fbb523e>

Wait - I thought I have struggles so that I can become more spiritual and once I become more spiritual then God can deliver me from suffering? That's not what the Bible teaches. What it teaches is that, because of God's grace and power, we can learn to be content in any situation and that we can be strengthened in suffering - His strength being made perfect in our weakness.

Why did Leah stop having children? Did God close her womb? It's more likely that Rachel demanded that Jacob stop sleeping with her sister. Rachel was a sore loser.

Genesis 30:1 - When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she envied her sister. "Give me sons, or I will die!" she said to Jacob.

Jealousy is a terrible thing. It feels natural to us, because it's part of our sin nature. But in these sisters we see how it is never satisfied, how it will always find a reason to gnaw at your heart if you let it. Leah had spent so much of her life being jealous of her pretty little sister, Rachel. She was jealous that Jacob loved Rachel. But now, we're brought into *Rachel's* room and we see she's *just* as jealous of her big sister - jealous that she has babies. It's eating her up inside.

Proverbs 14:30 - A tranquil heart is life to the body, but jealousy is rottenness to the bones.

Rachel's exclamation reminds us of when Esau said, "Give me that red stuff or I'll die!" *That* time, Jacob was happy, because he was able to take something from his brother. But now he's powerless to help the woman he loves.

But Rachel's outburst reveals more than a desire for a child. Is it possible that she's worried Jacob will stop loving her once that beauty begins to fade? What was his love for her based on? We can also sense Rachel's hatred of her sister. As one commentator notes, she *can't bear* to accept Leah as an equal,⁴ so she becomes obsessed with bearing sons, plural.

Genesis 30:2 - ²Jacob became angry with Rachel and said, "Am I in the place of God? He has withheld offspring from you!"

This was a *big* fight. Scholars say that Jacob raged at Rachel with a hot anger.⁵ Their family relationships continue to break down. Jacob becomes alienated from *both* of his wives.

He spews out that God Himself was withholding children from Rachel. Even if that were true, we have to ask why Jacob didn't do the thing his own father had done and intercede for his wife? Isaac had prayed and the Lord was receptive and the result was Jacob, himself! But Jacob essentially says, "Not my problem." So, not only is he refusing to pray, it's clear he also doesn't really care about the promise God had given him at Bethel. If God was withholding offspring, that's a big deal when it comes to *this* family. It seems like you'd want to find out *why* that was happening.

⁴ John Calvin *Genesis*

⁵ Goldingay, *NET Study Bible Notes*

Genesis 30:3-4 - ³Then she said, "Here is my maid Bilhah. Go sleep with her, and she'll bear children for me so that through her I too can build a family." ⁴So Rachel gave her slave Bilhah to Jacob as a wife, and he slept with her.

Rachel should've gone to the Lord with her problem. Instead, she went to her slave. Undoubtedly she knew the saga of Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael, but decided to try then scheme again.

Bilhah and Zilpah are called "wives" in this passage, but they were not treated equally. In reality, they were concubines.⁶ Family life is *not* improving.

Genesis 30:5-6 - ⁵Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. ⁶Rachel said, "God has vindicated me; yes, he has heard me and given me a son," so she named him Dan.

Rachel was not vindicated. She was completely wrong in her pronouncement here. Leah called out to God with a broken heart, wishing for love. Rachel was angry that her sister would *dare* have a child. God is gracious to this family, but this is not an action He is pleased by. The story of Hagar shows God does not sign off on this kind of human scheming. Other sons would be born of Bilhah and Zilpah, but isn't it interesting that the first, Dan, is left out when Israel's descendants are listed in 1 Chronicles 1 through 9? Dan is not included in the 144,000 of Revelation 7. Dan's tribal land was where Jeroboam would set up one of his golden calves that led Israel into idolatry. Herbert Lockyer writes, "*The history of the tribe of Dan is darker than the history of any other of the twelve tribes of Israel...Persistent idolatry clung to the Danites from first to last.*"⁷

When we place ourselves on the throne of our hearts, the result is idolatry. God cannot be pleased by this kind of selfish, human scheming. We need to cast out the mentality that leads to Dan.

Genesis 30:7-8 - ⁷Rachel's slave Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. ⁸Rachel said, "In my wrestlings with God, I have wrestled with my sister and won," and she named him Naphtali.

Tammi Schneider writes, "*Although Rachel is prettier than Leah, she doesn't seem to be nicer.*"⁸ This was about dominating her sister - it was about *crushing* her. We see how envy has poisoned Rachel. She was blamed Jacob for her infertility (even though he could, obviously, produce sons with any other woman). She's in an all-out brawl with her sister. And here she admits she even is wrestling with God Himself. She's blinded by envy and has made everyone her adversary. She's not realistic at all about the situation. "I've *won*" she said. Excuse me? Check the scoreboard, lady. It is 4 to 2. And your 2 has an asterisk on it.

⁶ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

⁷ Herbert Lockyer *All The Men Of The Bible*

⁸ Tammi Schneider *Mothers Of Promise: Women In The Book Of Genesis*

She's flailing spiritually. As one commentator notes, she's simultaneously raging at God, but also boasts in having His favor. She doesn't acknowledge God's generous grace, as Leah had, but congratulates herself for "winning" these boys.⁹

We see how this kind of selfishness breeds worse selfishness in the next generation. Bruce Waltke points out that Laban had treated his daughters as pawns and now they're treating their many sons even worse. The sons would grow to have the kind of jealousy that led them to violence, murder, and trafficking their own flesh and blood.

Genesis 30:9 - ⁹When Leah saw that she had stopped having children, she took her slave Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife.

Years into this fight, Leah seems to have drifted away from the Lord. No longer is she a woman of prayer and spiritual hope. She decides to take the low road. She had taken her sister's identity on their wedding night, now she'll take her idea to score a few more points.

Genesis 30:10-11 - ¹⁰Leah's slave Zilpah bore Jacob a son. ¹¹Then Leah said, "What good fortune!" and she named him Gad.

This is one of the sadder moments in the text. Leah, who had been the one person who was praising God, is now much more pagan in her behavior. "Gad" was the name of a Middle Eastern deity who brings good luck.¹⁰

Genesis 30:12-13 - ¹²When Leah's slave Zilpah bore Jacob a second son, ¹³Leah said, "I am happy that the women call me happy," so she named him Asher.

Their family strife has spilled out into the wider community. We get an image of the ladies of the land talking together, picking sides. What was the family of faith *supposed* to be doing? Rather than blessing the world, more and more people are being objectified and exploited and dragged downward to serve the jealousy and selfishness of Leah and Rachel. Just when it seems like this contest can't go any lower, sin finds a way.

Genesis 30:14 - ¹⁴Reuben went out during the wheat harvest and found some mandrakes in the field. When he brought them to his mother Leah, Rachel asked, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes."

Little Reuben finds a fruit that were known as "love apples."¹¹ At the time they were thought to be an aphrodisiac and to aid in fertility. Rachel must have been desperate to come to her sister with a "please," asking for this favor. It was a humiliating moment and Leah wasn't about to let it pass.

⁹ Calvin

¹⁰ Goldingay. See also Isaiah 65:11.

¹¹ R. Kent Hughes *Genesis: Beginning And Blessing*

Genesis 30:15 - ¹⁵ But Leah replied to her, "Isn't it enough that you have taken my husband? Now you also want to take my son's mandrakes?" "Well then," Rachel said, "he can sleep with you tonight in exchange for your son's mandrakes."

So, it seems that Rachel "set the schedule" for Jacob. Which makes sense of Leah's words, "you have taken my husband." But surely, the man of the house, the man who has seen a vision from God, will draw a line in the sand and bring his family back from the brink of this madness...

Genesis 30:16 - ¹⁶ When Jacob came in from the field that evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, "You must come with me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So Jacob slept with her that night.

Jacob again is silent, powerless, enslaved, all because he simply *wouldn't* do what was right. He could've put a stop to all of this, but he didn't because he *wouldn't*. He was still a spiritual coward, always running, never facing his own responsibilities, letting others direct him instead of the Lord.

Genesis 30:17-18 - ¹⁷ God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. ¹⁸ Leah said, "God has rewarded me for giving my slave to my husband," and she named him Issachar.

Leah no longer calls God Yahweh. She uses the less personal term Elohim here. But, after her backslide of verses 10 and 11 we see she is praying again and there is God, ready to hear, ready to embrace her and show her mercy.

Jacob, the blessed son who had been given everything by God, was reduced to being a hired hand for his uncle Laban. Now, he's just a hired hand to his wives. This story is no longer an adventure or a comedy, it's a tragedy. What will it take for Jacob to turn to the Lord?

Genesis 30:19-21 - ¹⁹ Then Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son. ²⁰ "God has given me a good gift," Leah said. "This time my husband will honor me because I have borne six sons for him," and she named him Zebulun. ²¹ Later, Leah bore a daughter and named her Dinah.

Leah is an interesting character to study in this text. She started miserable, watching her hope die. She learned to trust the Lord and accept *His* love as enough. But then she gives in to jealousy and it causes her to drift from the Lord. She no longer prays, she no longer resembles the faithful woman she once was. Finally she starts coming to her spiritual senses and drawing nearer to God, but the progress she had made was lost. She's back to her focus on *Jacob's* affection. "Maybe he'll honor me." He wouldn't. We'll see him do something pretty ugly in chapter 33 showing exactly how he rated Leah.

Jacob had other daughters not listed here.¹² Dinah is singled out because of what's going to happen in a few chapters.

Genesis 30:22-24 - ²²**Then God remembered Rachel. He listened to her and opened her womb.** ²³**She conceived and bore a son, and she said, "God has taken away my disgrace."** ²⁴**She named him Joseph and said, "May the Lord add another son to me."**

So, it seems Rachel has finally turned to prayer, rather than just jealous complaining. But she still needs a heart correction. Even when she delivers a son, her reaction is to name him, "Now give me another son!" She's not ready to surrender. Little does she know, that next child will cost her her life. Contentment is a lot more important than we think it is.

We love to watch dysfunctional families on TV. We laugh at the Simpsons and the Bunkers and the Bluths, but living in dysfunction isn't something we enjoy. If you're in a family where some members won't follow the Lord, take comfort from this story. The Lord sees, the Lord knows. He hears your prayer. He still has a future for you. The Psalmist wrote:

Psalm 27:10 - ¹⁰**Even if my father and mother abandon me, the Lord cares for me.**

For your part, follow the Lord. Take the high, heavenly road. Walk with Jesus toward contentment and strength.

As we close, I'd like to say a few words about the implications of this text when it comes to pregnancy and infertility. Many people in this room have been touched by that unique hardship. What are we to make of this passage? Is God playing games with who gets kids and who doesn't? If these characters were so carnally motivated, why did God allow the contest to continue?

While the Bible is clear that God is the Author of Life and the One who knits us together in our mother's womb, that does *not* mean He always, specifically closes wombs. For example, our text does *not* say God closed Rachel's womb¹³ like He did to the women of Abimelech's house. We've seen other characters in Genesis struggle with infertility. It's been happening since the fall of man when sin started mangling the goodness of Creation. That ruin continues today. Why does God grant children to some and not others? We can't answer that. What we know is that God is more gracious than *any* of us deserve. Rachel didn't "deserve" any kids. Neither did Leah. Neither do we. But, we know God is gracious and generous. Every good and perfect gift comes from Him. If the Lord is allowing infertility in your life, know it is *not* because you are not good enough or important enough or spiritual enough. The Lord's love for you is everlasting, unqualified, and unyielding. The Word of God brings this encouragement: That we should not give up on praying and petitioning our Father. We can continue to rejoice in hope because the Lord He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. This is His promise. He sees you and hears you and will never reject you.

¹² Genesis 37:35, 46:7

¹³ John Goldingay *Genesis*