

# THE OLD MAN AND THE SHEEP

GENESIS 29:1-13    JULY 13, 2022

At first glance, our passage tonight reads like a classic “boy meets girl” story. Against steep odds and with the help of chivalry and the serendipitous crossing of paths, our characters find each other and live happily ever after. Except, we know they *don't* exactly live happily ever after. There are many long years of resentment and manipulation and disappointment ahead.

The story also reads like a classic Biblical archetype: The life-changing meeting at a well. Abraham's servant and Rebekah. Moses and Zipporah. Jesus and the Samaritan woman. And here, Jacob and Rachel. But again, we notice that *this* story lacks something. There's no *personal* interaction with the Lord. No prayer. No praise. No acknowledgment of God's grace, no thanks given to Him.

Upon examination and comparison, we can't help but be disappointed with Jacob in this scene, as we are in so many others during this portion of his life. That's because these are not stories of a man walking by faith. We're still reading the saga of a man contending with God and those around him. He's not driven by a desire to glorify God. He isn't concerned about his own responsibilities. He's a very self-oriented man, blown about by his circumstances and whatever he needs to do to avoid the consequences of his selfishness.

We have no idea how the story might have gone if Jacob had responded to God in faith and humility and surrender. What we do know is that he is making decisions that lead to a lot of hardship. At the same time, we see that man's failure cannot overthrow the faithfulness of God. What a great hope that is.

## **Genesis 29:1 - Jacob resumed his journey and went to the eastern country.**

The Hebrew indicates that he had a “spring in his step.”<sup>1</sup> He's feeling great. But why is he heading east? It's because he's on the run. He's fleeing a scandal. He's left behind the land of promise even though the Lord has made it *very* clear that He wants this family *in* the land of Canaan.

Some commentators say he's joyful because he knows God is with him and that knowledge has lifted away all his cares. But we haven't seen him transformed. He hasn't worshiped. He set up a *marker*, not an altar. When God professed His lovingkindness to Jacob, Jacob responded by saying, “We'll see. If You do this, that, and the other thing, then You'll be my God.”

But there he is, heading east, with a spring in his step. In Genesis, movements to the east are generally not a good thing. Adam and Eve were exiled east out of Eden. Cain went out from the Lord's presence, living to the east. Those God-rejecting peoples who built the tower of Babel settled in the east. Lot separated from Abram and went to the east.

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<sup>1</sup> John Goldingay *Genesis (Baker Commentary On The Old Testament Pentateuch)*, Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

Jacob may have been cheery, but he's fooling himself if he thinks he's making good progress in life. He's going to a pagan land, to a pagan people, to become one of them for 20 years.

God had checked in with Jacob, but it made little difference in his direction. We see those tender moments in the Old Testament where the Lord would come to someone on the run and say, "Hagar, where have you come from and where are you going?" He came to Elijah and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Those are moments when people are invited to surrender to God.

What if the Lord asked you those questions in your life right now? Can we answer, "Lord, I'm going where You've led. I'm doing Your business." Or are we making decisions in a way more like Jacob?

**Genesis 29:2-3 - <sup>2</sup>He looked and saw a well in a field. Three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it because the sheep were watered from this well. But a large stone covered the opening of the well. <sup>3</sup>The shepherds would roll the stone from the opening of the well and water the sheep when all the flocks were gathered there. Then they would return the stone to its place over the well's opening.**

This stone covering the mouth of a well becomes a major plot point. Rocks are a big part of Jacob's life story. He used a stone as a pillow. This stone features prominently. Later there will be a significant use of stones in his feud with Laban.

The association of stones with Jacob is interesting when we think about the *other* patriarchs. Abraham was known for building altars and for planting a terebinth tree. Isaac was known for wells. Altars and trees and wells are useful things that bless and benefit. But rocks? We see Jacob sort of moving stones around, monuments to his misunderstandings and contentions. He reminds me of Charlie Brown in *The Great Pumpkin*, opening up his pillow case to see what sort of candy he's got from trick-or-treating only to find rocks.

**Genesis 29:4 - <sup>4</sup>Jacob asked the men at the well, "My brothers! Where are you from?" "We're from Haran," they answered.**

Jacob greets them with a warm friendliness...that is until we remember how he *treats* his brothers.

The locals are very curt in their replies.<sup>2</sup> But try to imagine the scene. They all know each other. Then, out of the desert, walks a lone guy. No camel, no wagon. He asks, "Where am I?" It's also likely that the shepherds were youths.<sup>3</sup> So I get why they were curt.

**Genesis 29:5-6 - <sup>5</sup>"Do you know Laban, Nahor's grandson?" Jacob asked them. They answered, "We know him." <sup>6</sup>"Is he well?" Jacob asked. "Yes," they said, "and here is his daughter Rachel, coming with his sheep."**

<sup>2</sup> NET Study Bible Notes, R. Kent Hughes *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing*

<sup>3</sup> Henry Morris *The Genesis Record*

Again the shepherds say very little. Maybe they were suspicious of this strange wanderer. Or maybe they didn't say much about Laban because they *knew* him too well. What did Thumper's mom say? "If you can't say something nice, don't say nothin' at all."

When people are generous and kind, we like to tell the story, right? Shaquille O'Neal was in the news recently because he went to a restaurant for dinner and paid \$25,000 to cover every meal at every table.<sup>4</sup> People like to spread that story. It refreshes us to hear about generosity.

"Do you know Laban?" "Yeah, we know him."

It's a reminder to us that our lives are a fragrance. It's not that we live to please people, but we want to be like our Lord. Gracious like our Lord. Generous like our Lord. Forgiving like Him. Welcoming like Him. The fragrance of Christ in a needy world. Not everyone will appreciate the smell, but we don't want to stink like Laban must have to the community around him.

Back to our scene: Here's Rachel! Boy meets girl. Although, it's not exactly *boy* meets girl. It's *old man* meets girl. Jacob is at least 70 years old<sup>5</sup> and Rachel is *maybe* in her twenties.<sup>6</sup> I'm sorry if that ruins anything for you.

This is *probably* not how Rachel would want to meet a potential suitor. It's hard for either of them to make a good first impression while sweaty, grimy, and smelling like livestock.

But before Jacob introduces himself to Rachel, he takes the time to wrestle with these strangers he's just met.

**Genesis 25:7-8 - <sup>7</sup>Then Jacob said, "Look, it is still broad daylight. It's not time for the animals to be gathered. Water the flock, then go out and let them graze." <sup>8</sup>But they replied, "We can't until all the flocks have been gathered and the stone is rolled from the well's opening. Then we will water the sheep."**

Many commentators brand these shepherds as lazy.<sup>7</sup> They say they were "shiftless,"<sup>8</sup> "unreasonable shirkers."<sup>9</sup> Maybe. Or maybe this was the custom of that locale. Yes, Jacob made the case that it would be better for the sheep to water and graze differently. But the shepherds say here, "We can't." To suggest it was only laziness seems unfair. Sheep were their livelihood. I doubt any of them *wanted* to starve or be beaten by unhappy masters.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.si.com/extra-mustard/2022/06/15/shaq-bought-dinner-for-entire-nyc-restaurant-jue-lan-club-while-on-date>

<sup>5</sup> <http://britishbibleschool.com/biblos/abraham-isaac-and-jacob-a-chronology>

<sup>6</sup> *Though we have no Biblical record, the Midrash tradition is that Rachel was 22 years old. She was young enough to not be married, to tend sheep, and to still be of child-bearing age for quite a few years.*

<sup>7</sup> See CSB Study Bible Notes, Morris, Bible Knowledge Commentary, Waltke

<sup>8</sup> Hughes

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

I've done a little bit of traveling to South America. They do some things very differently there than we do in the United States. There have been times when we thought, "The way we do things is better and that's how it should be done." But we hold our tongues because it's *rude* to act that way!

Think of it this way: If you were out doing yard work or gardening and some stranger walks up to you and said, "You're doing it wrong. You should do it the opposite of how you're doing it." Are you encouraged by that? Do you say, "Wow, *thanks* desert hobo who I've never seen before and who doesn't even know where he is! What else should I do differently?" That's what Jacob is doing because that's who Jacob is! He's a heel-catcher - someone who trips up in his dealings.<sup>10</sup> A wrestler, convinced his way is the only way. But how is that working out for him?

Bruce Waltke points out that this is a beautiful demonstration of God's perfect providence. Jacob didn't even know where he was, but he has met the right people at the right place at the *wrong* time. According to *his* wisdom, they shouldn't even be at the well during this hour, yet here they are, as the Lord goes before him to provide him with help and shelter, being faithful to the faithless.

**Genesis 29:9 - <sup>9</sup>While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess.**

Rachel is the first shepherdess mentioned in the Bible. She would've been young but tough and experienced. She would've been a very hard worker and a great problem solver. She would've had to know how to find pasture and lead her lambs to it.<sup>11</sup> But looking ahead we learn that she was not paid for these long days of dangerous work. She will tell Jacob she had *no* portion or inheritance from her father. In fact, she'll say that Laban considers her as an outsider to be sold away.<sup>12</sup>

We'll find that, in many ways, she is very like Jacob. They both deal deceptively. They both manipulate. They both have strained family relationships. They'll both cheat to get a victory over others. But they were both loved by God, redeemed by Him, and ultimately transformed into vessels of honor. God can do incredible things with inadequate people. That's very good news!

**Genesis 29:10 - <sup>10</sup>As soon as Jacob saw his uncle Laban's daughter Rachel with his sheep, he went up and rolled the stone from the opening and watered his uncle Laban's sheep.**

Some say this was a Herculean feat - that it would've taken immense strength to move the stone. Maybe, though no one in the text marvels at it. Certainly, Jacob had a lot of vigor and strength, even at 70 years old.

We immediately remember how *Rebekah* worked so tirelessly to water the 10 camels back in chapter 24, but there's a significant difference. Jacob *ignored* the other flocks. Rather than being an act of servant-hearted grace, this was presumptuous, maybe even unlawful. The shepherds had just

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<sup>10</sup> See *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Kidner

<sup>11</sup> Funlola Olojede *Rachel: The Shepherdess Among Shepherds*

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 31:14-15

said, "Here's how we have to do things." Jacob just takes what he wants. Rebekah had made sure *all* the animals had their fill. Jacob cuts in line with no regard for the other thirsty sheep.

The watering of Abraham's camels had been the sign that God had brought the servant to the woman the Lord intended for Isaac. Jacob's watering here seems to be done as a way to ingratiate himself to Laban, not Rachel. Look at verse 10 again and notice the perspective: "*Laban's daughter....Laban's sheep.*" Jacob's mind is not on marriage, he needs a place to stay and food to eat. And, remember, he has *nothing* to offer. No gift. No camels. No money. He's there to mooch off of his mom's family and so he elbows his way to the front of the water line. He could've waited - Rachel wasn't going anywhere - but he is always looking out for number 1. When Shaq bought all those dinners, he was there on a date. That probably made a pretty good impression. Now imagine if, instead, he had gone to the cook and said, "I'm important. Stop cooking anyone else's food and serve me first." Not quite as romantic.

### **Genesis 29:11 - <sup>11</sup>Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept loudly.**

Commentators want to say it was love at first sight, but then are quick to say, "But this wasn't a kiss of love, just a familial kiss of greeting." Either way, it would've been a shock for Rachel. It is, by the way, the very first kiss between a man and a woman mentioned in the Bible.<sup>13</sup>

Again we contrast this moment with Rebekah and the servant of Abraham. Waltke writes, "Unlike Abraham's servant, [Jacob] offers no praise, for he has made no petition. On the surface all seems well, but underneath lurks dark trouble."<sup>14</sup> Jacob's emotional outburst signals, perhaps, this is a man who is not peacefully established in his personal life.

### **Genesis 29:12-13 - <sup>12</sup>He told Rachel that he was her father's relative, Rebekah's son. She ran and told her father. <sup>13</sup>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.**

It had been almost *100 years* since Abraham's servant had come and fetched Rebekah.<sup>15</sup> Last time someone from the house of Abraham showed up there were many camels, laden with wealthy gifts.

Now? One guy with nothing. "Oh I have a big inheritance back home...but I can't go there because my brother will kill me. You've got food and shelter and clothing for me, right?"

Compared to the original find-a-lady-at-the-well story, this feels like when Disney makes a direct-to-video sequel to a beloved classic. We expect better given how much potential the characters have.

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<sup>13</sup> *CSB Study Bible Notes*

<sup>14</sup> Waltke

<sup>15</sup> *Rebekah was unable to have children for 20 years after marrying Isaac and now Jacob is somewhere in his 70's.*

As we watch Jacob we see that he has great strength and vigor, he has boldness and knowhow and determination and decisiveness and endurance and depth of emotion. He had so many wonderful components that could've been used for great spiritual benefit. But he wasn't living for the Lord. He's still trying to go his own way.

And, you know, after 70 years of life, what does he have to show for it? A family he can't see. An inheritance he can't enjoy. A promise he's left behind. A God he's ignoring. A few rocks in his pillowcase.

All those great aspects of who he was were being spoiled because he was living an un-faith-filled life. His strength was going to be spent for 20 years in service to a man who constantly cheated him. His boldness kept getting him into trouble, causing him to have to run for his life - *twice!* His brash decisiveness leads to strain and misunderstandings. His depth of emotion is unchecked and unbridled, making him act somewhat strange and erratic. He was knowledgeable, but in his selfishness he just became a know-it-all, as we see him speaking to these shepherds here.

Jacob didn't need a change of scene. He needed a change of heart. He needed to believe God and stop trying to helm his own life. He needed to pause and listen and recognize that God had spoken to him and then say, "Let's go along with God instead of doing our own thing." Sadly, Jacob spends 20 years somewhere the Lord didn't really want him to be. Jacob had a lot of ideas about how sheep should be shepherded, but *he* wasn't willing to listen to *his* Shepherd. The result was not exactly green pastures and still waters.

But God wasn't going to abandon His little lamb. He wouldn't cut His losses. No, as He promised, He stayed with Jacob and ultimately brought him back to that good pasture, the one Jacob had wandered away from.

Let's be sheep who trust our Shepherd and go where He leads us.