

Genesis 29:14-35

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[0 : 00] Well, in our journey through Genesis, meeting different women who figure prominently in the account, we come to Leah and Rachel, the daughters of Laban, the wives of Jacob.

And I want to consider these two women in relation to two very different father figures. I think we can use that expression, father figures. Well, first of all, Laban, who was their father, but we want to contrast Laban with God, who serves as a heavenly father for these two women.

And if we had to summarize the treatment that they received from these two father figures, we could say that these are two women who are victims of a greedy father, but vindicated by a gracious God. Victims of a greedy father, but vindicated by a gracious God. And that thought will hopefully kind of order the manner in which we consider this account.

There's a lot of material, and we're going to have to be necessarily selective in what we make reference to. But hopefully that will give us some compass to guide us.

[1 : 28] Now, the manner in which we've been making our way through the book of Genesis allows us, at least in a measure, to follow the thread of the big picture in God's redemptive purposes.

There is, of course, this thread that we can detect through the Bible. And, of course, that includes in Genesis. And that thread, of course, coming to its fruition in the coming of Messiah Jesus.

And as I say, even as we've been looking at this book in quite a selective way, as we've considered some of the women in Genesis, we've been able to see the thread.

We started with Eve. You remember after the fall, the words that were directed to the serpent concerning his eventual demise or fate when it was indicated that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent.

And so already there's this mention of the seed of the woman that we know speaks of Jesus, the Messiah, who's to come. Then, of course, the years passed. We met Sarah, Abraham's wife.

[2 : 39] And as we met Sarah and, of course, Abraham, her husband, we were reminded of God's continuing promises concerning their seed, the seed of the woman, but now through Abraham and Sarah.

And, of course, we read of the promises that were directed to Abraham by God in chapter 12 of Genesis and chapter 17 as well. But then, of course, as we thought about Sarah, we were reminded of her circumstances, that she was barren, she was unable to have children.

But then we, again, saw how God miraculously intervened and she gave birth to Isaac in her old age. We also met Hagar, part of that same story, the maidservant, a victim, many victims that we meet in Genesis, especially women.

And Hagar, a victim who evidenced greater piety than Sarah in many ways, which is also just a reminder of how God's dealings with His people is all of grace.

It's not a question of merit, determining the manner in which God deals with us. Then last week we met Rebecca, the wife that God provided for Isaac.

[3 : 57] And this is much closer to remember, especially if you were here last Sunday evening. One of the things that we were struck by, I was certainly struck by it, I don't know if you were struck by it as well.

But we noted that the striking correspondence between the blessing that Rebecca received from her family, really, in all probability, unbeknown to them the significance of that blessing.

But we noticed how it bore a striking resemblance to the blessing that Abraham received from the angel of the Lord, following the occasion when he was willing to offer his son Isaac.

But then his son, of course, was spared by God. And there's this blessing that is directed to Abraham. And then we find Rebecca's family pronouncing a very similar blessing, which also focuses on this seed who would be used by God.

Well, Rebecca, who we met last Sunday evening, as with Sarah before her, was also barren, childless. But we read that Isaac prays for her.

[5 : 09] God answers Isaac's prayer. And she gave birth to twins, to Esau and Jacob. And I think we're familiar with, we remember the story of how Esau sold his birthright, how Jacob, by deception and with the connivance and help of his mother, stole Esau's blessing from his father, the father that was due to give the blessing to Esau, that blessing stolen by Jacob.

And this brings us to the episode that we want to consider this evening, the search for a wife for Jacob, the one through whom the promised seed was to come.

And despite him not being the firstborn, and yet another hint of grace and the exercise of God's prerogative in the ordering of this redemptive threat in his dealings with us.

And as I said a moment ago, my particular interest is to contrast Laban and the Lord and their respective treatment of Leah and Rachel. They proved to be very different fathers, Leah and Rachel, victims of a greedy father, but vindicated by a gracious God.

But let's first just get to the point where we meet Leah and Rachel. Jacob, with his mother's help, with Rebecca's help, has just stolen Esau's blessing and he fears for his life.

[6 : 46] But Esau declares that he is intending on seeking revenge for this injustice that has been perpetrated. And his mother, fearing for the life of her favorite son, is intent on protecting him.

And so we read in the account of how she concocts this story of Jacob needing to secure a wife from her brother's family. And that's really picking up the story in chapter 27. There in chapter 27 of Genesis at verse 42, we read, when Rebecca was told that her elder son had said, that is his intention to kill his brother, she sent for her younger son Jacob and said to him.

And then we read what she says. And then what she does is that she goes to her husband and she has this story for her husband in verse 46. I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living. So he must go to my brother Laban and find a wife there. Now that, at face value, seemed a reasonable proposal.

But of course, the reason for it was simply an excuse to secure safety for Jacob. In fact, the language that Rebecca uses is really quite striking.

[8 : 03] That expression translated, I'm disgusted with living, could be translated, I hate my life. That sounds like the kind of thing you hear people saying.

It sounds quite contemporary. I hate my life. And then she builds around this need for her son Jacob to go to Laban and find a wife.

Of course, he did need to find a wife. But that wasn't Rebecca's principal concern at this moment. But God was ordering all of these things. So we then, at the beginning of chapter 28, we find Jacob calling, or rather, Isaac calls Jacob and blesses him.

There in chapter 28, we can just read the beginning of that chapter. So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him. Then he commanded him, do not marry a Canaanite woman. Go at once to Padan Aram, which is, of course, what Rebecca had sown in Isaac's head.

To the house of your mother's father, Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. And then you have this very significant blessing. May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples.

[9 : 21] May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham.

And so they're very clear and explicitly. Isaac identifies Jacob as the son through whom God's promises to Abraham would be fulfilled. So Jacob arrives in Paddan Aram and he meets Laban. And we meet Laban again. We met him last Sunday evening. So let's contrast Laban and the Lord and their respective treatment of Leah and Rachel. And we'll start with Laban and how Leah and Rachel are victims of this greedy father.

We can maybe just backtrack a little. So in the measure that we were able to know or learn something about Laban when we considered him last Sunday evening in the context of a wife being sought for Isaac, Laban came across reasonably well.

We just remind ourselves of his initial response to Abraham's servant seeking this wife, his sister, for Isaac in chapter 24 and in verse 50.

[10:38] Laban and Bethuel. Bethuel was Laban's father. Laban and Bethuel answered, this is from the Lord. We can say nothing to you one way or the other. Here is Rebecca. Take her and go. Let her become the wife of your master's son as the Lord has directed. You know, you read these words and you think, what a pious man. What a God-feeding man. Here is a man who recognizes God's will, submits to God's will, delights in God's will and acts in accordance with God's will. And so it's a very promising picture that is painted of Laban. But then even in this account, there were some alarm bells begin to ring because you can see, though it's not stated maybe very explicitly, but you can detect that greed that characterizes Laban as the servant speaks of Abraham's great wealth and how Isaac is the sole inheritor of this great wealth. And you can almost see Laban lighting up at the prospect of all the riches that may come his way if he participates and cooperates with this request that Rebecca become Isaac's wife. Well, from that occasion to the occasion that we're thinking about this evening, many years have passed. Esau and Jacob are now grown men. And what kind of character do we find Laban to be in this account?

[12:04] Well, maybe there's two or three things that we can notice about Laban. And then we can just think about how they impact on his daughters. I think the first thing that we discover about Laban is that he is a very manipulative man.

Now, we see that in the way he deals with Jacob in particular. The very beginning of the account of Jacob marrying Leah and Rachel, then in verse 14, we read, after Jacob had stayed with him for a whole month, Laban said to him, just because you are a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing?

Tell me what your wages should be. Now, again, you read that and you say, wasn't that reasonable of Laban? He's concerned to not exploit Jacob, and so he wants to pay him for his work.

And it all seems very reasonable. But I think there's a subtext here. Really, Laban's concern is to bring Jacob into a position of dependence. He wants to become his boss.

As his boss, he has greater authority over him. So this isn't some act of spontaneous generosity, but rather it is Laban already beginning to manipulate the situation in his favor.

[13:14] Together with his manipulation, he is, and this is, of course, something he's famous for, he is very deceitful in his dealings with Jacob. And we know, of course, his ultimate act of deceit in the matter of Leah and Rachel.

When Jacob was looking forward to marrying the woman that he loved so dearly, we know what happened. Laban, verse 22, brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her. And, well, the account continues. Of course, there's a rich irony in Jacob suffering in this way.

He was the man who was so known for being deceitful. He was the man who, together with his mother, had concocted all these deceitful plans against his brother Esau.

And now he finds himself the victim of an act of cunning and deceit. You know, what goes around comes around. Certainly that was something that Jacob discovered, or to use more biblical language, as a man sows.

[14:19] So he shall reap. Well, Jacob certainly discovered that to be true. So Laban is a manipulative man. He's deceitful. And he's also evidently a very greedy man. In verse 27, when Jacob discovers what has happened, and he enters into, I guess, further negotiation with his father-in-law, and what is it that Laban says?

Finish this daughter's bridal week. That is Leah. Then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work. And all the wealth that would come with having somebody as prosperous and as hardworking and as gifted as Jacob working for him.

Where has his piety gone? The piety that he appeared to have when we met him on the previous occasion? Well, probably it was never there in the first place.

It's probably the case that Laban was never a genuine worshiper of Yahweh, but he was very able to accommodate himself to what was most convenient. Indeed, in this very account, we meet Laban engaging in divination of different kinds and some kind of syncretistic pagan worship that seemed to be what characterized this man.

Now, when we think of Laban, we think of his manipulation and his deceit and his greed, and even in what we've said thus far, the victim seems to be Jacob. And we focus on Jacob as the victim.

[15 : 52] But of course, Leah and Rachel are also victims. And maybe it's evidence of the unfair treatment that is meted out to women generally, that we ourselves are sometimes guilty of not noticing.

That they are, in many ways, greater victims of their father's actions than even Jacob himself. What can we say about Leah and Rachel?

How can we describe them in relationship with their father? Well, in many ways, their father sees them as pawns in his thirst for wealth. You know, his concern is to get rich.

And he sees his daughters as a means to secure that outcome. You know, he practically sells them to Jacob. You know, he negotiates a good price for his daughters.

I'm not saying that he has no affection for his daughters. I'm sure that at some level and in some measure, he loved his daughters. But he loves wealth more than his daughters.

[16 : 58] And that is what determines the manner in which he behaves and acts towards them. So they're pawns in Laban's thirst for wealth. They're victims of his self-centered deception.

The deception that he imposes on Jacob. The whole story of this family is marked by the hurt and the resentment and even the hatred that results from these two women having to share a husband. That was not God's intention. But because of Jacob's deceit, that is the outcome. And as we say, we don't have time to go through the account. But if we do, we find time and time again the hurt and the pain, the resentment.

Yes, even the hatred that arouses because of or arises because of Laban's actions. And the victims of his actions being his own daughters.

Now, in this sorry tale, I think both women are victims. But Leah, perhaps especially, is a victim and sinned against by her own father. Of course, Jacob is not without fault in this.

[18 : 08] But primary responsibility rests on the shoulders of Laban. We pick up the story there in chapter 29 and in verse 30 where it speaks of Leah.

This is once Jacob has both sisters as his wives. And we're told Jacob made love to Rachel also. And his love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah.

Now, when you read that, it doesn't sound so bad. He loved Rachel a lot. He was madly in love with Rachel. Well, not so much with Leah. Now, that wouldn't be a very happy place to be for Leah.

But I think the manner in which it's described is somewhat gentle. I think the idea of what is being said, and a subsequent verse confirms it, it's not so much that Jacob loved Rachel more than he loved Leah, but rather the idea is that Jacob loved Rachel rather than Leah.

The implication seems to be that he had no love for Leah. His love was directed only to Rachel. And of course, in verse 31, we have that stated more explicitly.

[19 : 20] We read, When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved. Period. Here was a woman who was not loved. Not loved by her father. Not loved by her husband. This was a loveless woman.

This is a woman who was the victim of her own father's sin and greed. I wonder if we can just try and imagine something of Leah's misery and unhappiness.

It's the fault of her father. She is a victim of her own father. And there are, we might just pause for a moment. It's not our principal concern, but there are salutary lessons for those of us who are fathers and mothers.

To be careful with our priorities. Careful that greed and deceit don't become part of our makeup. And the damage that it can cause to our children.

Again, we think of Laban. I'm sure Laban didn't hate his daughters. He had some affection for his daughters. He loved his daughters, but he loved money more. And that is a very dangerous place to be.

[20 : 28] So Leah is a victim. But Rachel is also a victim, if to a lesser extent. But let's move on in the short time that we have left to the Lord.

We're contrasting Laban with the Lord. And see how Leah and Rachel are vindicated by a gracious God. They're victims of a greedy father, but vindicated.

By a gracious God. And we'll start with Leah. And we start with Leah and focus on the beautiful language. And perhaps even more beautiful.

The actions of God on behalf of Leah. As they're described in verse 31. So chapter 29 and verse 31. We read, When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive.

When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive. These two verbs. The Lord sees Leah.

[21 : 28] He sees her pain. He doesn't just see her physical condition. This isn't some cold analysis. Oh, here's a woman who is childless. Well, I'm going to do something to help her have a child.

No, he sees her pain. He sees her loneliness. He sees and feels her suffering. When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive.

This is the God that we have. A God who sees. A God who feels. A God who understands. A God who sympathizes with those who are unloved.

And acts on their behalf. Of course, he's done that most wonderfully and most powerfully in the giving of his own son. For those who suffer.

For those who are unloved. For those who stand in need of his love and care and compassion. But notice that the Lord doesn't just enable Leah to conceive.

[22 : 32] That in itself would be a vindicating act on the part of God. He also determines that her sons, Leah's sons, should occupy the place of prominence in his redemptive purposes.

In the big story of redemption. We have in that section that begins at verse 31 that we've just read. A list of her sons. Now if we notice her third and fourth sons.

The third and fourth sons of Leah. The unloved one. And who are the third and fourth sons of Leah? Well, they're Levi and Judah. Now these are two.

If we had to identify the greatest prominence. These undoubtedly were the two sons of greatest prominence. Levi was the father of the priestly tribe of Israel. And Judah was the father of the kingly tribe.

From out of whom would be born Messiah Jesus. The lion of the tribe of Judah. So here we have Leah. Not only is she granted the privilege and the joy of bearing children.

[23 : 36] Even though to a husband who didn't love her. But she is also granted this great privilege. That it should be her sons who would occupy this particular prominence in God's purposes.

And maybe very especially Judah. Through whom the seed. The messianic seed would continue through to the birth of Jesus.

So God vindicates Leah. And he vindicates Leah big time. But it's also striking to witness Leah's relationship to the Lord as evidence by the names that she gives to her children.

It's already quite a striking thing when you think about it. That clearly it was Leah who determined what the name should be. When you see the meaning of the names. It's clear that she was the one who decided on the names.

Because they all relate to her. Not only to her but to her relationship with God. And it is striking that here is a woman who hardly is given any dialogue in the whole of the account.

[24 : 34] But in the naming of her sons. We have revealed a great deal about her spiritual condition. And how much she was grateful to the God who vindicated her.

The God who loved her when nobody else loved her. And let's just notice the names that she gives to her sons. And draw out what we can from them. Well first of all the first son is Reuben.

It seems that the meaning of this name Reuben is look a son. And as is stated explicitly in the text. This is an echo of the fact that God saw that she was unloved.

You know we've already noticed that verse. When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved. Then in verse 32 what we told. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben. For she said it is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now. And so she names her son. In gratitude to God for having seen her misery.

[25 : 37] So even in the name of her son. She's acknowledging God's goodness and God's grace to her. Then her next son Simeon. And the name Simeon is drawn from the Hebrew verb to hear.

And again we're told in the passage very explicitly. That he is so named because the Lord heard her distress. He heard her cries. Whether these were cries calling out for another son.

Or simply the cries of an unloved woman. That he hears. Maybe her silent cries. Heard by God. And so when her son is born.

She gives him a name that acknowledges her gratitude to God. Then Levi. The third son. It would seem that the name Levi has to do with the idea of being attached.

And here the idea is not quite so related to God. But rather to her aspirations with regard to her husband.

[26 : 40] And her hope. Unfulfilled hope. That Jacob would love her. We see there in verse 34. Again she conceived. And when she gave birth to a son. She said now at last my husband will

become attached to me.

Because I have born in three sons. So he was named Levi. That hope that she had was not one that was realized. But then finally Judah. And maybe it's the most significant of them all.

Or it kind of allows us to see the progression in Leah's faith. Because in the naming of her son Levi. There's still this aspiration that she would find love in her husband.

It wasn't an unworthy aspiration. Though it was an unfulfilled one. But there still seems to be this sense of. I need to be loved by Jacob. I won't be fulfilled until I'm loved by Jacob.

And so she hopes that as son is born after son. That will secure this outcome. But then with Judah things change. And Jacob is no longer in the picture in that unhealthy way I would say.

[27 : 43] Because what do we read about Judah? Verse 35. She conceived again. And when she gave birth to a son she said. This time I will praise the Lord. So she named him Judah.

Then she stopped having children. And there's surely a significance in that. This time I will praise the Lord. Thus far I've been grateful to God. But my gratitude to God has been very much a function of this hope.

That what God has given me will lead to Jacob loving me. Well now I know that he doesn't love me. And he's not going to love me. But now I will praise the Lord. My focus will be on him.

My gratitude and my satisfaction will be found in him. But now I will praise the Lord. Well that's Leah.

Vindicated by God. What about Rachel? Well we need to jump. Time is running out. But we need to jump to verse 22. Where we read of Rachel. We read there.

[28 : 41] Then God remembered Rachel. He listened to her. And enabled her to conceive. In the intervening period. The maidservants have given birth. But Rachel has been unable to give birth.

But then we read those words. Then God remembered Rachel. And we know the significance of that word remembered. In the Bible. How remembering on the part of God. Is always coupled with action.

On behalf of the one remembered. Then God remembered Rachel. He listened to her. And enabled her to conceive. I think we see a growing perhaps maturity in Rachel. You know at the beginning of chapter 30.

We didn't read that. We have Rachel demanding of Jacob. Give me a son. And Jacob says. Well it's not my fault. I can't just produce a son. But now it's different isn't it.

Then God remembered Rachel. He listened to her. And the implication is that she had finally. Not been demanding a son of Jacob. But had prayed to God. That God would hear her. And enable her to conceive.

[29 : 39] And God heard. And enabled her to conceive. He listened to her. And she's able to declare and testify. And by God has taken away my disgrace.

And God is good to Rachel. Rachel wasn't particularly deserving of God's goodness. But she enjoyed God's goodness. She was granted a measure of God's grace in her life also.

Well let's draw the threads together. What can we draw from this contrasting picture of Laban. The father of Leah and Rachel. And the Lord who serves as a heavenly father to these two women.

Two very different father figures. Well as I mentioned a moment ago. There might be merit in us just thinking a little bit. We're not going to do it now. Of the lessons that we can draw for ourselves.

In our own families. In our own parenting. And what priorities we have in our lives. And what implications that then has on our children's lives. Maybe another thing we need to be conscious of.

[30 : 41] As we think of this reality of a very inadequate father. A greedy father. A self-centered father. It maybe should lead us to be careful in how we present God as father.

God is father. And of course we think of God as father as a very positive image. We have to be conscious that for many people. The figure of a father isn't a positive image. And that's not to say that we shouldn't present God as father.

Because he is a father. And he is a loving and a gracious father. But we need to be aware that for many people. That image doesn't immediately lead to those thoughts.

Or connotations. But more significantly as we think of this account. It provides us a striking reminder. Of God's love. And of God's power.

The love that he shows to the unloved. And we think especially of Leah. When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved. He loved her.

[31 : 45] He enabled her to conceive. And the love of God shines out in this account. But also the power of God to order the events for the fulfilling of his purposes.

Even through the sin and the folly and the selfishness of so many of the actors. You know you have Rebecca who acts in a really an appalling way. You have Jacob acting so appallingly also.

You have Laban. We've thought of him in particular. And yet through all of this God's purposes are not frustrated. But God's purposes are fulfilled. Through the folly and the disobedience and the sin of these sinful men and women.

God remains in control. The Messiah will come. And he will come through all these intrigues of those whom we've met this evening.

And we can see God's providential hand in history. We perhaps have the advantage when we look at a book like Genesis. That we look back from the vantage of all of the events having been fulfilled.

[32 : 46] And we can see God's hand of providence looking back to all that he has done. And of course in many ways that's the simplest way for us to read providence in the measure that we can.

It's difficult to do so when we're in the middle of the events. It reminds me of words that were said by John Flavel. John Flavel was a 17th century English Puritan.

And he speaks of providences. He expresses himself in this way. Some providences like Hebrew letters must be read backwards. And that's really what we find when we turn to Genesis.

And we see God's overriding, powerful, gracious hand ordering all things for the fulfilling of his purposes. And he is the same God today. In our complicated, mixed up lives.

Where we mess up, where those around us mess up, we can be assured that God is ordering all things. For the good of his people and the fulfilling of his purposes. Well let's pray. Heavenly Father we do thank you for your word.

[33 : 48] We thank you that you are a God who loves the unloved. We thank you that you are a God who orders all things. And for the good of your people and the fulfilling of your purposes.

And we thank you for this in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.