



A COURTSHIP MADE IN HEAVEN

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 29:1-20

25th Message

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Returning to our studies in the life of Jacob, over the next six Sundays we will journey with the patriarch from Bethel (*"house of God"*), to Peniel (where he finds *"the face of God"* in the *"face of"* his brother Esau), a period covering some twenty years.

The Journey from Bethel to Peniel

- A Jacob flees Esau
 - B Angels of God meet Jacob at Bethel (*house of God*)
 - C Deceived by Laban in Marriage
 - X Birth of children
 - C' Deceives Laban with flocks
- B' Angels of God meet Jacob at Mahanaim
- A' Jacob reconciles with Esau at Peniel (*face of God*)

It is critical to understand Jacob's story, for in this account we will discover how to find the blessing of God in the passages of everyday life. Paul Stevens captures the enormous significance of this patriarch from whom the nation of Israel derives its name:

In the book of Genesis we learn more about Jacob than Abraham and Isaac put together. Jacob is the first lover in the Bible, that is, the first to show what it is like to be in love as an all-consuming passion. He is also the first worker in the Bible – not just one whose work is mandated (like Adam and Eve), but whose daily expenditure of energy is actually described in its toilsome agony and breathtaking creativity. He is the first entrepreneur, the first to show us what it is like to exercise faith in the workplace to envision, invent and implement. Jacob is the first dreamer whose nighttime visions are explicitly described. He is the first to give us the intimate details of the deathbed experience; the first to reveal his last will and testament. But there are other reasons why this story engages us personally.

His story is so universal because it is so personal. He grows up with an emotionally distant father, and Jacob bonds deeply with his mother. The family is fragmented and messy. While his parents' marriage began in love, his mother and father grew emotionally distant from each other and each parent sought intimacy and solace in a favorite child. In this marriage there is more speech directed *through* the children than to their spouse. A distant father, an overbearing mother, an overpowering brother, wives he cannot please, a manipulative father-in-law, children alienated from each other – this is the material not only of Jacob's story but all too often our own. It is in this messy complexity of family life that Jacob's own identity, his vocation and his spirituality are formed, forged and hammered in the heat of everyday life. We are privileged to hear every detail, from whispers in the honeymoon tent to panic prayers on the eve of a fateful rendezvous. But most important we get inside Jacob himself to discover what makes him "tick."

What drives Jacob is the desire to know the blessing of God. The pursuit of blessing is the engine of the faith in the story, and is the prize that is contested at every level.¹

In our text, from Genesis 29, Jacob leaves home in search of a bride. Following a divine encounter with God at Bethel, he makes the long trek to Haran, hoping to meet with his mother's family. This is a story about courtship, and the significant role it will play in Jacob's journey. Sadly, the art of courtship has all but faded from the horizon of our Western culture, and we are much the poorer for it. Today I hope to set out a proper vision for what

courtship entails, not just as a preview to marriage but as an integral part of our spiritual development.

Robert Alter refers to this story as a "type-scene," i.e. a fixed sequence of motifs that is repeated in the Bible. In betrothal type-scenes we find several motifs recurring. A man is sent on a journey to a foreign land in search of a bride. Arriving there, he finds a young maiden by a well (a symbol of fertility). Following a brief conversation, and the drawing of water, the girl runs home to her father. Lastly, a betrothal agreement, together with a feast, climax the scene.² The story strikes a resonant chord in every man who wants to be a "prince charming," and every woman who longs to be a beauty worth pursuing. Deeper still, however, it speaks to the fathomless longing of our hearts to be sought by God. The fact that this type-scene is repeated six more times in the Bible³ heightens its significance. Each time the story is repeated the emotion rises as the audience is captured by the mystery of romance coupled with providence.

Our text has four scenes. First, Jacob meets the shepherds of Haran; second, he meets Rachel; third, he meets his uncle Laban; and fourth, he courts Rachel.

I. Jacob Meets the Shepherds in Haran (Gen 29:1-8)

Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the sons of the east. (Gen 29:1, NASB)

Following Jacob's heavenly encounter with God and angels at Bethel, the patriarch treks northeast, to Haran, with a renewed sense of purpose. The Hebrew text reads literally, "Jacob *lifted* his feet." This is the only time the expression is used in the Old Testament. "Rashi suggests that Jacob's elation after the Bethel epiphany imparted a buoyancy to the movement of his feet as he began his long trek to the East."⁴ (The verb also frames the story, for at the end of the journey, Jacob "*lifted* up his voice and wept.") Even though Jacob's father sent him away with no gift for a dowry, the encounter with God has fully energized him. He journeys on, eagerly anticipating what God might have in store for him.

Jacob arrives "in the land of the sons of the east," a general description of the geographical area just east of Palestine. "The people of the East, noted for their large flocks and herds and numerous camels (Job 1:34), lived a nomadic life on the eastern fringes of Canaan in Transjordan."⁵ At this point the narrator freezes the action and draws the reader into the scene from Jacob's vantage point.

He looked, and saw [lit. "behold"] a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for from that well they watered the flocks. Now the stone on the mouth of the well was large. When all the flocks were gathered there, they would then roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well. (Gen 29:2-3)

Jacob happens on a field where three flocks of sheep are resting in a circle around a well. The well, which takes center stage (it is mentioned five times), is a clue that he might be on the verge of a life-changing, romantic encounter. The size of the well is impressive; several herdsmen are needed to remove the "great" stone that covers it. "Cisterns—and sometimes also wells—are...covered in by a broad and thick flat stone with a round hole cut in the middle, which its turn is often covered with a heavy stone, which it requires two or three men to roll away, and

which is removed only at particular times.”⁶ Waltke explains: “The rock functions to keep the well clean and to safeguard against anyone accidentally falling into it, but more importantly, its immensity restricts the use of the well to a select group of shepherds who together move it.”⁷ Thus it was conventional for the herdsmen not to attempt to water their flocks until all the herds had gathered at the well, so that collectively they could easily remove the massive stone. Stones figure prominently in Jacob’s life. Perhaps this stone is symbolic of the heavy obstacle he will face later with a wife who is barren. Unlike this stone, however, barrenness will be an obstacle that only God can remove.

Into this scene of shepherds relaxing under the midday sun bursts the young Jacob. Filled with energy, and eager to find out where providence has brought him, he initiates a conversation with the shepherds, interrogating them with four questions.

Jacob said to them, “My brothers, where are you from?” And they said, “We are from Haran.” He said to them, “Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?” And they said, “We know him.” And he said to them, “Is it well with him?” And they said, “It is well, and here is Rachel his daughter coming with the sheep.” He said, “Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them.” But they said, “We cannot, until all the flocks are gathered, and they roll the stone from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep.” (Gen 29:4-8)

Jacob opens with the polite address “my brothers,” inquiring as to where they come from. From their reply, “Haran,” he realizes that divine providence has placed him at exactly the right place. Probing further, he asks, “Do you know Laban?” Again, with the absolute minimum of information, their terse answer, “We know,” appears anything but polite and inviting, leaving the impression that the locals view this brash young foreigner with suspicion. But Jacob will not be put off. He probes further, “Is it well (lit. “*peace*” - *shalom*) with him?” The surly shepherds respond with but one word, “*Shalom*.” This sounds somewhat ironic to our ears, given the “cold” atmosphere. But, as fate would have it, at precisely that moment Rachel appears on the scene. The shepherds retort, in effect, “You want to know about your uncle? Here is his daughter. You can ask her.”

Now that Rachel has caught Jacob’s eye the stage is set for a romantic encounter by a well. There is only one problem: too many players are onstage. Wanting to be alone with the girl, in his impatience Jacob berates the lazy shepherds for not getting on with their work: “Why are you sitting around when you should be watering your sheep and working?” he demands. Notice that, even as a foreigner in a strange land, Jacob has no thought for social etiquette. Like a bossy employer, he orders them back to work. Feeling annoyed with this pushy young man, at last the shepherds are forced to explain to Jacob the way things are done in Haran: “Excuse us, lad. Take a number and wait.” But Jacob, no child of convention, utterly disregards their command.

II. Jacob Meets Rachel (Gen 29:9-12)

While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father’s sheep, for she was a shepherdess. When Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother’s brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother’s brother, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother. Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted his voice and wept. Jacob told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and that he was Rebekah’s son, and she ran and told her father. (Gen 29:9-12)

In the middle of their lengthy discussion, Rachel arrives at the well with her father’s sheep in tow. As she comes into view, it dawns on Jacob that he is in fact “home.” Overcome by emotion, a number of actions spring forth from him like an exploding geyser, removing every obstacle in sight, whether massive stone or surly shepherds. Like his mother before him, he performs an almost supernatural feat by removing the massive stone. In a little preview of his future destiny, he takes it upon himself to water Laban’s flock. Then he kisses the girl and begins to weep uncon-

trollably—before he even announces who he is. “As Nahum Sarana notes, there is a pun between ‘he watered’ (*wayashq*) and ‘he kissed’ (*wayishaq*). The same pun is played on by the poet of the Song of Songs 8:1,2.”⁸ What a different picture this is of Jacob! The cold, calculating deceiver is now overcome with emotion and reduced to a puddle of tears as he embraces his relatives. Through his tears of joy he finally explains to the surprised maiden that he is her relative, and with that Rachel immediately runs home to tell her father. Carried along by the memory of her aunt, who was visited by a relative from the land of Canaan, she wonders if a betrothal might be imminent.

This scene forms a contrast to the encounter between Jacob’s mother, Rebekah, with Abraham’s servant, however, and sets Jacob’s character in stark relief. In the earlier scene, Abraham’s servant sought divine guidance through dependent prayer, but Jacob offers none. On that occasion Abraham’s servant designed a test to secure just the right girl, with the right character, for Abraham’s son. And Rebekah demonstrated her supreme capacity for hospitality by freely watering all the camels. Here, Jacob impulsively does all the watering and learns nothing of Rachel’s character. In the end, Abraham’s servant gave praise to God, but Jacob merely weeps. God had led them both, but it appears Jacob is oblivious to this, just as he admitted in Bethel, “*Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it*” (28:16). Jacob will one day learn to pray, but only through years of painful lessons from life’s sufferings. An even greater contrast is that Abraham’s servant came with camels and expensive gifts, while Jacob arrives on foot, with nothing in his hand. Was this Isaac’s way of exerting his control and repaying Jacob and Rebekah for their deception? And what impact did this have on Jacob? The result is that it sets up Jacob to be enslaved to a very greedy man, Laban, who is about to appear on the scene.

III. Jacob Meets His Uncle Laban (Gen 29:13-14)

So when Laban heard the news of Jacob his sister’s son, he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Then he related to Laban all these things. Laban said to him, “Surely you are my bone and my flesh.” And he stayed with him a month. (Gen 29:13-14)

Hearing news of another young relative in town, Laban immediately runs to greet and embrace Jacob. His motive is obvious. Like the innkeeper in *Les Misérables*, he is driven by the lust for money:

“Master of the house...doling out the charm ready with a handshake and an open palm... Charge ‘em for the lice, extra for the mice, two percent for looking in the mirror twice.”

Running to meet Jacob, all that Laban can think of is the memory of the ten camels and the gold and silver he received for Rebekah’s hand in marriage. One Jewish commentator even wondered if, when Laban embraced Jacob, he was really feeling for gold!

It certainly didn’t take Laban long to discern that this young man of promise was just a runaway. Laban’s enthusiasm dissipates as Jacob comes into view, with no treasures in sight. Jacob tells his uncle the whole story. Did he include his deceit? The text doesn’t say. In response, Laban’s first word, “*Surely you are my bone and my flesh*,” is somewhat ambiguous. It could be reflecting an openhearted welcome, or perhaps expressing reluctance and ambivalence on his part, since he is obligated to offer hospitality now that Jacob has proved to “*indeed*” be a relative. The phrase also evokes the memory of Adam’s elation when finally he was presented with Eve (Gen 2:23), but then midway through abruptly stops short of full voiced praise and drops off into silence. Does this mirror Laban’s own disappointed expectations when he saw Jacob? Such ambiguity will be the hallmark of all of Laban’s future dealings with Jacob. A month after Jacob’s initial contact with him, the uncle makes his business offer to his nephew.

IV. Courting Rachel (Gen 29:15-20)

Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" (Gen 29:15)

As a blood relative, Laban should have taken it upon himself to help the impoverished Jacob get a new start in life, but now we learn that all this time Jacob has been rendering his services free to his uncle. Laban has reduced his nephew to the status of a slave. But, lest he tarnish his reputation, he presents himself as a generous man, eager to reward his nephew. He invites the energetic Jacob to name his wages. "Wages" is the key term that will define every aspect of Jacob's life in Haran (29:15; 30:18,28,32,33; 31:7,8,41). Placed in the context of family relationships, "wages" has a jarring ring about it, for it reduces familial relationships to money. Obviously, Laban has been observing Jacob's affections for his daughter Rachel. Rather than giving Jacob a blank check, however, he intends to use Jacob's smitten heart for personal gain.

But first the narrator sets the stage by giving some background information.

Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. And Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful of form and face. (Gen 29:16-17)

To help the reader understand what happens next, the narrator gives two pieces of information about Laban's two daughters: first, their names, and second, their appearance. Laban named his girls after animals. The older was named Leah (cow), the younger Rachel (ewe). In this family of shepherds the father treats his precious daughters as commercial commodities to be used for profit. Throughout the entire story there is no affection demonstrated between Laban and his daughters. Second, regarding their appearance, Leah's eyes were "tender." This is a difficult term to translate. It may be, as Waltke suggests, that her *soft* "eyes lack the fire and sparkle that Orientals prize as beauty"⁹ (see Song of Songs, 4:1,9); or as Alter suggests, perhaps "Leah has sweet eyes that are her one asset of appearance, in contrast to her beautiful sister,"¹⁰ who had striking face and beautiful figure. In any case Rachel wins the beauty pageant—and Jacob's affections. He doesn't hesitate to respond to Laban's "generous" offer.

Now Jacob loved Rachel, so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than to give her to another man; stay with me." So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her. (Gen 29:18-20)

Jacob is very specific about which daughter he desires. Let there be no mistake: it is Rachel, the younger. Aware perhaps that he is breaking with social convention, he offers a handsome price for her hand, in an effort to alleviate any objections from her father. Seven years of labor well exceeded the maximum bridal price of 50 shekels in the ancient world, in which the average manual wage was approximately one shekel per month. Jacob offers 84 shekels! The greedy Laban hides his enthusiasm in a veil of reluctance, "better you than someone else." Slyly he does not mention the girl's name lest at a later time he be accused of breaking his covenant. Thinking the deal is secure, Jacob eagerly begins his seven-year term of employment with his uncle. Reducing his courtship to a service contract does nothing to dampen his romantic dreams. To him, seven years seems like just a few days.¹¹ Such should be the characteristic of that wondrous season in life that we call courtship.

I want to leave us with four important reasons for why we need to rediscover the lost art of courtship. Since I am rather passionate on this topic, I will take the liberty of adding a few of my own "uninspired" thoughts on the subject. I find that many young men today act like the shepherds of Haran: they are caught up in work, enslaved by convention, and often blind to the beauty around them. We need a few more Jacobs to shake things up and move the stones.

V. The Necessity to Recover Courtship

A. The Definition of Courtship

First, since courtship is almost a lost art in our culture, we need to begin with a definition of what courtship is. Paul Stevens hits the nail on the head:

Courting is pursuing a relationship that could lead to marriage, with clear intent, with affection appropriate for the level of commitment, with non-manipulative persuasion by word, gifts, deeds, and touch. It includes the determination to reserve sexual intercourse for its rightful context of full covenant marriage, in other words, to wait, and give and receive the tokens of love with integrity rather than duplicity, knowing all along that the relationship may not be consummated in marriage. So restraint and discipline are imposed.¹²

B. The Value of Courtship

1. It benefits the man with the mystery of delight and discipline

This appears to be the only period in the story of Jacob that is dominated by unadulterated joy and happiness. Leaving home and journeying far away puts him in the vulnerable position of experiencing feelings he has never felt before. By a well in Haran he falls in love, a love that takes him outside of himself and becomes an all-consuming passion. This is the kind of passion that feeds the Song of Songs in all its rich, alluring poetry.

But it is important to note that it is only when Jacob leaves home on this journey that he has his first significant encounter with God. God cares for him, protects him and providentially leads him to the one who would become his wife. For Jacob, this romance with God and Rachel occurs simultaneously, with one feeding the other. This might suggest to parents the importance of allowing, or in some cases, like Jacob, forcing our children to leave home to find themselves and gain confidence in a God who can lead them in a strange and hostile world. This was true in my own life. Leaving home for college, and studying overseas later, I carried on a dual romance, one with God, the other with Emily. Like Jacob, I must confess that four years seemed but a few days. It was sheer delight.

Courtship leads Jacob into the mystery of delight, and it also trains him in the area of sexual discipline. It is tragic to see so many couples replace courtship with living together. When couples who are living together want to get married at PBCC, we ask them to separate and remain sexually abstinent until after the wedding. It is not that we are self-righteous prudes bound to an antiquated Puritanical ethic. No, it is because we want them to experience one of the greatest joys in life. During courtship the tension created by sexual abstinence actually enhances a couple's intimacy by forcing them to communicate at deeper levels of the heart. In the movie *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, a wise Greek father gives advice to his daughter who has just fallen in love with an Italian soldier: "When you fall in love it is a temporary madness; it erupts like an earthquake, then it subsides; and when it subsides, you have to work out whether your roots have become so entwined it is inconceivable that you should ever part. Love is what is left over when being in love has burned away."

Thus the goal of courting is to get to know the other person at an intimate level.

2. It gives worth to the woman

When a man has to court a woman, it grants her honor and deepens her sense of value. Being known comes at a price. Any man who is unwilling to pay the ultimate cost is not worthy of her hand. One of Shulamite's final speeches speaks of the value her commitment to purity bestowed on her relationship:

"I was a wall, and my breasts were like towers;
Then I became in his eyes as one who finds peace." (Song of Songs 8:10)

When young girls sell out cheaply, courtship gives way to seduction, possession, and sadly, the potential for abuse. (I would also add that not all references to courting in the Bible are male

initiated. Ruth initiates her courtship with Boaz; and the girl in the Song of Songs is the dominant speaker by far.)

3. It keeps affections alive in the marriage

All too often, not much time elapses after the honeymoon before romance is overrun by the hard work of communication, financial survival and raising a family. But a quality courtship has the benefit of keeping affections alive throughout the life of the marriage and providing the proper context for having children. My memories of courting Emily are still as fresh as when I was in my twenties. Whenever we encounter difficulties, I find they don't weigh much on the scale because of the quality of our affections.

To help foster romance between newlyweds, I ask each couple I marry to take a year-long honeymoon. For the first year of their marriage they should not get involved in any ministry commitments. I ask them to take a romantic weekend away once a month, even if all they can afford is camping or hiking, and when they arrive at their romantic locale they must send me a postcard. Thus my "fee" for counseling and marrying them is twelve postcards. I also suggest that, if possible, before they start their family to try living overseas for an extended period of time, and carry out their romance in a foreign culture, with different values from our own. Over the years about ten couples have done this, and have testified to the lasting benefit it has brought to their marriage.

As the marriage relationship matures couples should never lose the flavor of romance in their marriage. They should never stop holding hands, speaking tender words, laughing, and doing playful things that border on the ridiculous. If you think you're too old and survival has drowned out your affections, I say, why don't you be like Jacob? Break with convention and move the stone! Our youthful passions never really leave us; they continue to reside just below the surface. Even though I'm a grandfather now, I find that I still remember how to act like a silly teenager who is head over heels in love with someone.

4. It prepares us to be wooed by God

Finally, some of you may wonder at the relevance of all this. Perhaps you feel that the possibility of ever being wooed is beyond you. You may be a widower, or a divorcee. You may be locked in a dead marriage. You may be a firmly detached single, hemmed in by walls of protection that keep your heart from feeling much. If that is the case, let me remind you of the climax of this scene. The seventh time this betrothal scene is played out, God himself comes into a foreign land searching for his bride (John 4). And when he arrives at a well (Jacob's well!) a woman is standing there. She is not a Jew, but a half-breed Samaritan, and she is neither young nor a virgin. After several unsuccessful marriages she is merely living with someone for convenience sake. She draws her water alone, for no one in this town associates with her anymore. But, like Jacob, Jesus breaks all the social conventions and speaks tenderly to her. He asks her for a drink, and then offers her living water. However, like the shepherds in the Jacob story, she thinks there are too many obstacles to surmount. Upon hearing that she has been speaking to the Messiah, she runs from the well and announces this new guest, not to her father, but to all the men of the village. In the climactic betrothal scene of the Bible she becomes the new Rachel.

We serve a God who courts, woos and wins back his bride. And God's romance doesn't end in a few months; it is ever more dear the older we become. The whole age is truly an engagement. So our affections deepen, our hearts broaden, and we feel more

and more, all in preparation for the final marriage feast of the Lamb. So if you feel too old or burned out, perhaps God is speaking to you today,

"Assuredly, I will speak coaxingly to her
And lead her through the wilderness
And speak to her tenderly.
I will give her her vineyards from there,
And the Valley of Achor as a plowland of hope.
There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
When she came up from the land of Egypt."
(Hos 2:16-17, JPS)

*This Message is Dedicated to my wife Emily,
And Thirty Wonderful Years*

O Emily, you are my Rachel,
Your beauty and radiance captured my heart,
Five years was nothing to work for you,
It seemed like a few days because of my love for you.

Then a voice was heard in Ramah,
Rachel is weeping for her children because they are no more,
But the Lord said, "Keep your eyes from tears,"
"There is a hope, and your children shall return."
His loyal love was true, and I loved you more.

Now I am your Jacob, that dreamer of dreams.
While my mind is in heaven,
And my head lies on the stone,
You build the ladder,
That brings heaven home.

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1. Paul Stevens, *Jacob* (IVP, forthcoming).
2. Robert Alter calls this a "type scene." He masterfully explains the use of type-scenes and their conventions in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 47-63.
3. Alter notes that this type scene is repeated with Jacob, Moses, Samson, Ruth, Saul. I would add that it finds its climax and most radical changes, shattering the normal conventions, in the New Testament, when Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman by the well (John 4:1-42).
4. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 151.
5. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 229.
6. S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen, 1916), 269, quoted by Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 400.
7. Waltke, *Genesis*, 400.
8. Alter, *Genesis*, 152.
9. Waltke, *Genesis*, 405.
10. Alter, *Genesis*, 153.
11. "Few days": ironically, this was the amount of time Rebekah had told Jacob it would take before he could return home (27:44). Yet what for Jacob seemed like a passing moment was, I imagine, to a waiting mother, interminable.
12. Stevens, *Jacob*.