



MARRIAGE, AT WHAT PRICE?

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 29:15-30

26th Message

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One of my most delightful and important tasks as a pastor is preparing couples for marriage. Because we take marriage seriously at PBCC, we regard the preparation process as much more important than the actual wedding ceremony. In my first meeting with a couple planning to be married, I tell them that by the end of the process they will have acquired a Biblical framework with which they can negotiate their way through the seas of matrimony. My task is not merely to teach them about marriage idealistically, using the formative teachings from the Garden of Eden, where our dreams originate, but also to shape them realistically. It doesn't take long to wake up from the dream-like world of the honeymoon to discover that you have married a sinner. Just like everyone else, the person lying next to you has bad breath in the morning! Husbands and wives can be moody, non-communicative, bossy, and rude. They can be very defensive when even their smallest idiosyncrasy of behavior is pointed out.

It doesn't take long, either, to discover that, just like yourself, your spouse brings dysfunctional baggage from their family of origin, things they appear blind to but are very obvious to you. These revelations can be so dramatic that when they come up, some spouses even question the sanctity of their marriage. This is the critical juncture in marriage, when couples are forced to cultivate true covenantal love as opposed to the "easy affection" that drove their courtship. Sadly, however, when a spouse doesn't measure up to expectations, disappointment and resentment often take root, to yield a harvest of bitterness that severs hearts and turns love cold. This pattern is so prevalent today that the divorce rate in the church has kept up with that of the world. The question before us this morning therefore, is: Can we be truly blessed by God if we are seemingly trapped in an unhappy marriage?

Jacob, the subject of our study, quickly awakens to the fact that he has married the wrong woman. Imagine the shock of waking up after your wedding night only to find the bride's sister in your bed! Jacob is the object of a betrayal that will forever alter the course of his life. What happens when you discover that you have married the wrong person? For some, this is but a matter of proportion, but for Jacob, it was literal fact. Can we be truly blessed by God if we are locked in an unhappy marriage?

Our story has five movements, with Jacob's marriage to Leah taking center-stage. First, let's review Jacob's negotiations for Rachel (which we covered in our last message).

I. Betrothal Negotiations for Rachel (29:15-19)

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, NASB)

Laban, presenting himself as a generous man, eager to reward his nephew, invites the energetic Jacob to name his

wages, but only after his nephew has been laboring without wages for the entire month. In contrast to his grandfather Abraham, who found his true "wages" as the gift of God (Gen 15:1), Jacob will find his "wages" hard won through sweat and deception. "Wages" will define every aspect of his life (marriage, children, dowry) during his twenty-year stay in Haran (29:15; 30:18,28,32,33; 31:7,8,41). In the end, "wages" will leave a bitter taste in his mouth.

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. 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." (Gen 29:16-19)

As we saw in our last study, Laban has a problem. He has two daughters, and it was customary to marry the older first. But Jacob's affections are set on the younger, more beautiful Rachel, not the older Leah. Jacob is keenly aware that he is breaking with social convention, so he offers a handsome price for Rachel's hand to forestall any objections from her materialistic father. Seven years of labor was well over the maximum bridal price (50 shekels) in the ancient world. The average manual wage was approximately one shekel per month, which makes Jacob's offer of about 84 shekels generous indeed.

What will Laban do? Greedily he covers his enthusiasm in a veil of reluctance: "better you than someone else." But, cunningly, he does not mention the girl's name lest he be accused of breaking his covenant later.

II. Courtship and Service for Rachel (29:20)

So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him (lit., "in his eyes") but a few days because of his love for her. (Gen 29:20)

Thinking his deal is secure, Jacob eagerly begins his seven-year term of employment for his uncle. If, with reference to Laban's offer we wonder whether true love has a price, Jacob's actions demonstrate that love will pay any price. Reducing his courtship to a service contract does not dampen Jacob's romantic dreams; the seven years seem, "in his eyes" (note the word play with Leah's "soft eyes") seem like just a few days. Again, as Paul Stevens notes, "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."¹ One of the sweetest mysteries of romantic love is that when you are possessed by it, time seems to stand still, and service becomes sweet, robbed of all its toil.

But though the seven years pass like "a few days," Jacob grows impatient towards the end of the term, as his grasping uncle makes no mention of fulfilling his part of the

contract. The frustrated Jacob is forced to initiate the conversation with his future father-in-law. How demeaning, when an employee is forced to ask for the “wages” that are his due from his employer.

III. Marriage to Leah (29:21-24)

Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife, for my time is completed, that I may go in to her.” (Gen 29:21)

Jacob’s speech is much like that of Esau’s, his brother, on the occasion when he caught a whiff of Jacob’s stew. Then, Esau was so overcome by his earthly senses that he could barely bark out his request, “Please let me gulp down some of this red red stuff.”² Now the tables are turned, and Jacob’s passions have overcome him. His rather crude speech (at least his brother said “Please”) reveals his sexual impatience: “Give me my wife...that I may go in to her.” Not the kind of attitude a father would appreciate in a suitor. The sly Laban does not answer Jacob, lest at a later time he be accused of lying, but he quickly goes into action. Just like his brother, Jacob’s overriding passions will blind him to deception.

Laban gathered all the men of the place and made a [“drinking”] feast. Now in the evening he took his daughter Leah, and brought her to him; and Jacob went in to her. Laban also gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah as a maid. (Gen 29:22-24)

Laban gathers all the men of “the place” and prepares what looks more like a bachelor party than a wedding feast. “Feast” (*mishteh*), which derives from the root “to drink” (*shatah*), usually denotes a drinking feast. His goal is obvious: an abundance of alcohol given to a “thirsty” young man will aid Laban’s deception. Under the cover of darkness he brings Jacob’s veiled bride to him. The overeager groom immediately consummates the marriage, unaware of the bridal “switch.” Fully satisfied, the drunken groom falls fast asleep. Everything happens so quickly, we are left to wonder at the powerful control of this father over his daughters, who have no say in the matter.

The narrator concludes with Laban’s contribution to the newlyweds—his maid Zilpah. Wenham writes: “Upon marriage, it was customary for the bride’s father to give her a large wedding present, a dowry. Ancient marriage contracts show that dowries typically consisted of clothing, furniture and money. The dowry served as a nest egg for the wife in case she was widowed or divorced. It is not usually mentioned in the OT unless it included something exceptionally valuable, such as slave-girls (24:61; 29:29) or a city” (1 Kgs 9:16).³

As we will see, although Laban is the master of greed and deception, and pushes ethical boundaries to the limit, he is always eager to appear as the generous benefactor who does things with “legal” precision.

Observing the cruel deception of this “innocent” groom, we are tempted to ask, Where is God in all this? The narrator has skillfully inserted a clue to help us. His use of the term “the place” (28:22, 26), instead of the more appropriate Haran, evokes the memory of Bethel, where Jacob was unaware that the Lord was in “this place” (28:11,16,17,19). It serves as a subtle hint to the reader that God can indeed be found behind the scenes even in “this place” of deception.

IV. Renegotiation of Betrothal Price for Rachel (29:25-27)

So it came about in the morning that, behold, it was Leah! And he said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you deceived me?” (Gen 29:25)

Awakening from his blissful sleep, Jacob is overcome with the realization that the woman he has slept with is not Rachel, but Leah, her older sister. The narrator draws us in from Jacob’s vantage point so that we can feel his shock and horror. Outraged, he confronts Laban with the injustice of how he has violated their agreement. This question, “What is this you have done?” resonates throughout Genesis concerning injustices that could potentially bring cities to the brink of disaster. When both Abraham and Isaac placed their wives in potentially adulterous situations, they were resolutely rebuked by foreign kings (12:18; 26:10) for doing an “unthinkable” act. These were the words of God too when he confronted Eve (3:13) with her sin in the garden. Jacob is so outraged that these are the only words that will suffice.

But Laban is ready with an answer for his nephew.

But Laban said, “It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also for the service which you shall serve with me for another seven years.” (Gen 29:26-27)

Laban immediately justifies himself, saying that in “this place” such things are not done. What is he referring to? Marrying off the younger before the firstborn! He plays his cards well. Instead of the term “older” he substitutes “first-born.” This is a little barb aimed at Jacob’s past deception of his brother. Laban is saying, in effect, you may get away with that where you live, but not in “this place.” He paints himself as a righteous man who will not break with upstanding traditions.

Then, to soften the blow, Laban appeals to Jacob’s generosity. Basically, he tells him that for just a slight inconvenience he can have everything he wants: just complete the marriage week of “this one” and he can have the other “one.” Not only are Laban’s daughters robbed of a voice in his presence, now he doesn’t even give them a name (cf Gen 2:23). Priceless daughters now become nameless bargaining chips for profit. But then, he adds, there will be a little additional “price”: only seven years—a mere trifle, a “few days” for the love-struck Jacob. So again Laban paints himself as the generous negotiator. He is bound to comply with tradition in “this place,” but for a little inconvenience on Jacob’s part, a mere week, and a little extra service added to the contract, which will soon speed by, all parties can be satisfied. In case there is any questioning of Laban’s public image of generosity, seven times he is the subject of the verb “to give” in this passage. He portrays himself as the perfect “giver,” bestowing a maximum of benefit for very little payment.

If Jacob is portrayed as one who loves at any price, Laban is one who uses “love” for a price: for the price of deception, he has doubled his investment.

V. Jacob’s Marriage to Rachel and Additional Service (29:28-30)

Jacob did so and completed her week, and he gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife. Laban also gave

his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maid. So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and indeed he loved Rachel more than Leah, and he served with Laban for another seven years. (Gen 29:28-30)

What can Jacob do? Penniless, with no family support, and Laban holding all the cards, he is cornered. If he has any hope of marrying Rachel he must comply—and he does. In the end, both men get what they want—and more. Jacob gets not just one but two wives, and Laban doubles his profit. But at what price does Jacob realize his dreams in “this place”? What was that first week like? Paul Stevens suggests,

First he must finish the wedding week with Leah, according to the custom of a week-long feast with the bridal couple enjoying their nuptials nightly in the wedding tent. But how hard this must have been for Leah, nightly sensing Jacob’s pain, anger and even rejection! And how confusing for Jacob, required to be passionate with a woman for whom he felt nothing, while he anticipated the completion of this nightly duty would lead in short course to consummation with his true love. No man or woman can love with eye on the clock or calendar...For Leah the second week must have been as hard as the first, as she saw her lovely sister take up the marriage bed with Jacob now cherishing his true love.⁴

The narrator reveals that love that once was pure and unadulterated is now tainted by competition (“loved...more than”). Love’s joy is silenced when it must operate in the shadow of a third party. When the free and spontaneous expressions of love come under the cruel eye of measured calculation, they are no longer free. Add a dash of bitterness and no one ends up happy in this union, except Laban. Leah is used by her father and shunned by her husband. Rachel is thwarted by her father, despised by her sister, and joined to a wounded man who will never be able to recover that sweet state of carefree love. In one night Laban has successfully transformed Jacob’s holy pilgrimage of courtship into an oppressive exile.

What lessons do we learn from Jacob’s marriage in Haran?

VI. Reflections On “Marriage, At What Price?”

A. The moral outrage over those who use love for a price

The first implication is the obvious moral outrage the narrator makes us feel over Laban’s character and success. As Waltke writes, “Laban is cunning, deceptive, heartless, greedy, and ambitious.”⁵ Cursed be the man or woman who uses the devotion of others for personal gain! How many marriages have gone wrong because of manipulative in-laws attempting to control the affections of a son and daughter for their private agendas! Thus the first command to a couple considering marriage is to *leave* (better translated, *abandon*) their mother and father, in order to *cleave* to their spouse. By implication, that means that no relationship outside their marriage should exert emotional control over them. We may “honor”⁶ our parents until death, but we are not bound to obey or please them. Parents should rigorously work throughout the teenage years to prepare their children for leaving home—and make it a point to not interfere in their children’s marital business.

But beyond marriage, the text speaks loudly to condemn *spiritual* Labans who prey on those whose devotion

to God makes them vulnerable to material deception and manipulation. Labans abound in every age. They are resolutely condemned both in Acts (8:20-22), and the epistles (2 Pet 2:3; Jude 16). Love of God in others is something we should never profit from. This is why no leader in the church is to be governed by the love of money (1 Tim 3:3,8).

That is the obvious lesson of the text. But the more subtle and indeed more powerful lesson is the answer to the question, Where is God in “this place”? Imagine the tension Jacob felt after God had just appeared to him in Bethel. Now he is wondering how can God allow his elect son to be deceived by a ruthless business man and be trapped for life in an unhappy marriage(s)? How can this be God’s blessing?

B. Where is God in “this place”?

1. God judges his elect in “this place”

The narrator makes it clear, however, by the repetition of the term “this place” (28:11,16,17,19; 29:3,22,26), that God is as present here in Haran as he was in Bethel. In this case God has allowed “the unthinkable” to discipline Jacob. God’s elect are not exempt from his judgment and discipline. Jacob reaps what he sows (Gal 6:7-8). Just as Jacob deceived his father, who was robbed of his sight, so now he is deceived in the dark. Just as Esau’s sensual passions blinded him to Jacob’s deception, so too Jacob’s obsessive love blinds him to Laban’s deception. And just as he had never received his father’s affection, so now he is married to an unloved woman—for life! God is the master of mirror-making. Before we throw stones of outrage over some injustice done to ourselves, perhaps we should first look into the mirror. While it is not always true, sometimes the very thing that provokes our rage in others may be deeply rooted in ourselves. So for Jacob, “this place” is the place where God disciplines the son he loves (Heb 12:5-7).

2. Marriage is not designed to make us happy

Secondly, marriage is not designed to make us happy, but to be “a place” where we learn to grow to maturity. Paul Stevens comments: “Maturity is not something that can be obtained through self-help books, high-powered seminars and consumer-oriented religion. It comes only in the long thick experiences of life, seasoned by some of the hardest and disappointing experiences, which, if directed Godward become the crucible for faith formation and true holiness.”⁷

There comes a time in every marriage when the flame of easy affection dies and a new kind of love, covenantal love, must be born. In the Hebrew Scriptures, this all-important term for love is *hesed*,⁸ a word that describes the eager desire to cultivate loyalty, kindness, service and affection on the basis of a prior commitment. This is the outstanding attribute of God’s love, and one that is worth paying any price to acquire. It is the quality of love that God wants to inculcate in Jacob, so that by God’s resources he can indeed love someone he was never truly “in love” with. This is the ultimate “blessing” of God’s life. To Jacob’s credit, it is Leah who ends her days buried next to him in the patriarch’s grave (49:31), not Rachel (who dies a premature death, 35:19). If you complain that your marriage is a prison, remember that it was Jacob’s son who discovered this kind of love through two very unjust prison terms, and that much of the New Testament was writ-

ten from a prison cell by a man who learned to love his enemies. So if in the New Covenant we are given Christ's life to love our enemy, is it too much to ask that we love our spouse?

3. God redeems his elect in every "place"

Thirdly, in our text we see that God redeems his elect in every "place." There is no question about how bad Jacob's life is, and how victimized he is in beginning a marriage without the freedom of consent. Marrying without consent is the quickest way to breed resentment and bitterness. And then consider: all marriages require work, but marriage with two wives? Out of the question! Polygamy is never presented as the ideal in Scripture. Whenever we find examples of it they are fraught with pain. But here we discover the revolutionary truth that the sovereign God will intervene even in situations he condemns, and will work out his plan of redemption. So when I counsel couples planning marriage, I tell them that it is my job to make them, first, idealists (Gen 2), then realists (Gen 3), and finally, optimists. If we allow him, God can work in and through us, despite all our wrong choices. If we are shortsighted, remember that it was Jacob's marriage to Leah that was responsible for the births of Judah, David, and Jesus of Nazareth. Aren't you glad they stayed married?

So if you are wondering, "Is God in this place?" the text responds with a resounding Yes! God is as present in Haran as he was in Bethel. Let us therefore give him the glory, no matter what situation we may find ourselves in, and choose to love.⁹

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. (Col 3:12-14)

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A Negotiation of betrothal price for Rachel	29:15-19
B Courtship and service for Rachel	29:20
X Marriage to Leah!	29:21-24
A' Renegotiation of betrothal price for Rachel	29:25-27
B' Marriage and additional service for Rachel	29:28-30

1. Paul Stevens, *Jacob* (IVP, forthcoming).
2. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 129.
3. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 236.
4. Stevens, *Jacob*.
5. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 404.
6. "To honor" one's parents means to give them social weight in the community (Bruce Waltke). We do this by caring for them emotionally and financially in their old age, and by obeying the Lord. Such godly character brings them honor.
7. Stevens, *Jacob*.
8. *Hesed*: In the opinion of some theologians, this is the most important word in the Old Testament. Its range of meaning is so broad it is translated by more than 14 English entries. It is best translated loyal-love, and usually harkens back to an earlier covenant or oath between two parties.
9. This sermon is not intended to be a complete "theology" on marriage. Nor does it apply to women caught in marriages where there is emotional or physical abuse. In such situations our leaders recommend separation, for the safety of the wife and children, and in some cases divorce, when the offender has already severed the covenant bond and refused to repent.