



CAN CHILDREN MAKE YOU HAPPY, AND AT WHAT PRICE?

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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 Genesis 29:31-30:24
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In our last study we examined Jacob's dealings with Laban, Rachel's father, to secure Rachel as his wife. The result of the negotiations was not one but two wives for Jacob, and not seven but fourteen years in the service of his father-in-law. Today the subject of our study is the birth of children. The promise of children was a significant driving force in God's covenant to Abraham, especially when it was made to barren women like Sarah and Rebekah. Following years of anticipation, God was faithful to his promise. Now the question is, How will God continue to fulfill his promise into the third generation? What follows is the surprising birth narrative of Jacob's twelve children. Here we discover how two wounded women learn to connect with God. These two sisters, Rachel and Leah, give voice to the question, Can children make you happy, and at what price? After we have examined this we will address the theme of children, in the context of the New Covenant.

Literary Outline
(Bob London)

Text and Topic	Initiators of the plot
A Rachel barren: Leah Unloved	Yahweh saw
B Leah conceives: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah	
C Rachel confronts Jacob: "give" me or I die!	Rachel saw
D Rachel/Bilhah as a wife: Dan, Naphtali	
D' Leah/Zilpah as a wife: Gad, Asher	Leah saw
C' Leah confronts Rachel: Rachel "gives up"	
B' Leah conceives: Issachar, Zebulun	God heard
A' Rachel fertile, conceives: Joseph	God remembered

I. Leah's First Four Children (Gen 29:31-35)

Now the LORD saw that Leah was unloved [lit.: "hated"], and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. Leah conceived and bore a son and named him Reuben, for she said, "Because the LORD has seen my affliction; surely now my husband will love me." (Gen 29:31-32, NASB)

In the last scene Jacob and Laban were the prime movers behind all the action involving the bridal negotiations. Leah and Rachel did not even have a voice. At one point they became nameless bargaining chips in the hands of their greedy, manipulative father. In this scene, however, God becomes the prime initiator of the plot ("Now the Lord saw..."). God gives both Rachel and Leah a voice; Jacob becomes the responder to the female initiative; and Laban is nowhere to be found in this scene. This is God's grace to women in a male dominated world.

When a grievous injustice occurs, God often consoles the most wounded party first (cf. Gen 21:17). Thus, when God sees that Leah is "unloved" (lit. "hated"), he consoles her by opening her womb and giving her the gift of a son. Leah sees this son as God's gift, but she has a dual purpose behind the name she chooses for him. Reuben (*r'uben*) literally means, "See, a son!" But the name fits well as a shortened version, giving glory to the Lord who "has seen" (*ra'ah*) "my affliction" (*be'oniyi*). So in one sense Leah sees the boy as God's gift, but in speaking his name she secretly hopes to get what she really wants: the love of her

husband ("perhaps now my husband will love me" [*ye'habani*]). Thus the gift of a son becomes Leah's means to attain a love that was painfully lacking in her marriage to Jacob. I had that same secret hope resonating in my heart once. I thought that if my wife Emily and I had a son, my father would love me. We named our first-born David Jonathan ("the beloved gift of God"), but, painfully, like Leah, this gift brought no change in my relationship with my father.

Next, God in grace visits Leah with yet another gift.

Then she conceived again and bore a son and said, "Because the LORD has heard that I am unloved, He has therefore given me this son also." So she named him Simeon. (Gen 29:33)

Sarna notes: "The names of Leah's first two sons replicate a pair of verbs ("to see," "to hear") that express God's providential concern and care for the unfortunate." Yet, as Anderson explains, we "see the depth of Leah's pain in the names she gives her children. When Reuben...was born, her triumph was mingled with bitterness and a forlorn hope...Each time she conceived, she nurtured the same yearning, but always in vain."¹

She conceived again and bore a son and said, "Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." Therefore he was named Levi. (Gen 29:34)

With three sons in her quiver, Leah thinks that now she is at least able to compete with Rachel's beauty. What husband could overlook a wife who brings such gifts to his home? But notice Leah's expectations have been reduced after three years: her choice of verbs changes from "love" to the less affectionate "attached."

But God is still not done. He gives a fourth gift.

And she conceived again and bore a son and said, "This time I will praise the LORD." Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing. (Gen 29:35)

This time Leah offers pure praise to God for the gift of a son. His name, Judah ("praised"), reflects no ulterior motive that the boy might be a vehicle to win her husband's love.

Sometimes when children are born out of the context of rejection or barrenness, the parent makes a deep theological connection with God at the time of birth. This was true for each of our five children. When our first-born died of a rare enzyme deficiency, my faith was not damaged, since I felt that every first-born belonged to God. But I never dreamed that God would require that of us again, especially when the medical odds were 75% in our favor. At the death of our daughter the following year, my theological equations were shattered. Then I learned that God could require anything of us. Following our adoption of Becky two weeks after we lost Jessica, I felt this was the pure gift of God. When Jenny arrived eighteen months later, I thought that God did for me what he had done for Job: He doubled my family, with two in heaven and two on earth. Then God gave us Katie, and I had no theological categories for his generous, undeserved grace. Thus with each birth we connected with God in new ways.

With four sons in her quiver now, Leah thinks she can compete on an equal footing with her beautiful sister. At this stage she stops bearing. We are not told whether the Lord closed her

womb or she lost access to her husband, although her later confrontation with Rachel (30:15) may suggest the latter. This completes the first scene, as God comforts an unloved wife with the priceless gifts of four boys. But, as is typical of life, grace does not occur in a vacuum. The free gifts of God to one individual become the coveted prize of another.

II. Two Sisters "Wage" War (Gen 30:1-13)

A. Rachel confronts Jacob (30:1-2)

Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she became jealous of her sister; and she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or else I die." Then Jacob's anger burned against Rachel, and he said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (Gen 30:1-2)

Jacob lives in a home where neither of his two wives is content. Leah has children but lacks love, while Rachel is loved but lacks children. Each wife desperately wants what the other has. Each feels that what she does have in no way compensates for what she lacks. And, as usual, the husband is clueless. After years of jealousy, Rachel finally expresses her pain: "Give me children, or else I die!" Rather than praying, she demands that Jacob solve her dilemma and soothe her unbearable pain. Her words communicate much, especially because they are her first recorded speech.²

For openers, Rachel blames Jacob, as if everything was his fault. And then she indicates that, because she lacks children, his love for her means nothing. Alter makes the point that her "impetuosity is reminiscent of her brother-in-law Esau, who also announced to Jacob that he was on the point of death if Jacob did not immediately give him what he wanted."³ If Rachel had had a counselor to help her voice her emotions, I imagine that what she would like to have said was that watching her sister bear four children into the arms of the man she herself loved, while she remained barren, was unspeakably painful for her. When emotions are bottled up for too long, however, they seldom get expressed the way we would like.

Lacking sensitivity, like so many men, Jacob responds in kind. His answer, "Blame God, not me!" though theologically correct, is extremely defensive and lacks the empathy needed to soothe Rachel's pain. Generations later, Elkanah seems to do little better when he attempts to address Hannah's pain of barrenness by saying, "Aren't I better to you than ten sons?" (1 Sam 1:8). Hannah responds by turning to the Lord and pouring out her heart in efficacious prayer. She becomes the model of faith for barren women.⁴ Rachel, however, does not yet demonstrate Hannah's faith or maturity.

B. Rachel offers Jacob Bilhah, her maid (30:3-5)

She said, "Here is my maid Bilhah, go in to her that she may bear on my knees, that through her I too may have children." So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her. Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. (Gen 30:3-5)

Rachel handles her pent-up frustration not with prayer, but by impetuously reverting to Sarah's earlier scheme (16:1-6). If she can't bear the children of promise, she thinks it is better to conceive them through her maid, and then adopt them (i.e., "bear on my knees") at birth. So she offers her maid, Bilhah, to Jacob, who quickly complies with the order. The plan is successful, and Bilhah bears a son.

C. Rachel claims the victory in the naming (30:6-8)

Then Rachel said, "God has vindicated me, and has indeed heard my voice and has given me a son." Therefore she named him Dan. Rachel's maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. So Rachel said, "With mighty wrestlings [lit. "with the wrestlings of God"] I have wrestled with my sister, and I have indeed prevailed." And she named him Naphtali. (Gen 30:6-8)

Once Rachel lays hold of the boy she is so overcome with joy that she gives glory to God. But the name she chooses, Dan ("vindicated me"), taints the gift with a competitive sting, as if God had taken her side to restore her dominance over her sister.

But the God who never keeps score acts once again, with gracious abundance. He gives twice what she had hoped for, granting Bilhah another child. Rachel considers that winning this last round has given her the ultimate victory. The boy's name, Naphtali ("with the wrestlings of God I have wrestled my sister"), seals the fact that, at least from her point of view, God himself has permanently taken her side. How sad, that the name Naphtali reflects not praise but dominance in her struggle for the ever coveted "love trophy." Rachel didn't know that when we become competitive to prove our worth, that never produces contentment, even when we win. Leah will respond with a little competition of her own.

D. Leah bears through Zilpah (30:9-13)

When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, "How fortunate!" So she named him Gad. Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. Then Leah said, "Happy am I! For women will call me happy." So she named him Asher. (Gen 30:9-13)

The fact that Leah has stopped bearing doesn't end the struggle, for she too has a maid. If Rachel can be built up through her maid, so can she. And she is just as successful as Rachel, with not one but two more sons. Leah has answered Rachel's challenge once again. But notice now that through these years of competition, Leah has finally given up hope of ever attaining Jacob's affections. The names of the two boys reveal that she is looking for her praise in a different world from that of her husband. She turns to public acclaim ("women will call me blessed") for her approval. When affection in the home runs dry, we look elsewhere for applause.

Now that Leah has evened the score life is at an impasse for Rachel. Here we come to the critical point in the story, as the two sisters actually connect with one another and speak about their pain.

III. Rachel Gives Up (Gen 30:14-24)

A. Rachel and Leah speak (30:14-15)

Now in the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." But she said to her, "Is it a small matter for you to take my husband? And would you take my son's mandrakes also?" So Rachel said, "Therefore he may lie with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes." (Gen 30:14-15)

Reuben, Leah's firstborn son, goes out into the fields during the wheat harvest and happens on some mandrakes. Wenham explains: "The mandrake [*Mandragora autumnalis*] is a perennial Mediterranean plant that bears bluish flowers in winter and yellowish plum-sized fruit in summer. In ancient times, mandrakes were famed for arousing sexual desire (cf. Cant 7:13) and for helping barren women to conceive... Indeed the word translated 'mandrakes' (*dud'im*) here is almost the same as 'love' (*dodim*) (Prov 7:18; Cant 1:2; 4:10; 5:1)."⁵ The mandrake plant would prove to be a coveted prize between the two sisters, as each competed for what the other possessed.

For the first time in the text Rachel breaks the wall of silence and connects with her sister. Her address is much more polite ("please") than her initial words to Jacob—and a vulnerable admission of her own need. Leah's sharp and bitter response reveals years of pent-up anger.⁶ Rather than answering in kind, Rachel compromises and offers Jacob to her for one night in return for "some" of the mandrakes. Wenham suggests: "This one re-

mark is an eye-opener. We are shown just how much Jacob is favoring Rachel over Leah that she is prepared for just one night to give away her mandrakes. But it also shows how desperate Rachel is for children; though Bilhah has borne her children and she has adopted them, giving them names that express her sense of triumph, she still really wants a child of her own.⁷ Though Leah's silence indicates "grudging consent" (Wenham), it brings both sisters into a relationship in which they have to connect to address each other's weakness.

Jacob comes home weary after toiling all day in the hot harvest sun. Leah runs to greet him, unable to contain the joy of anticipating a night of love.

B. Leah waging love with Jacob (30:16-21)

When Jacob came in from the field in the evening, then Leah went out to meet him and said, "You must come in to me, for I have surely hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he lay with her that night. God gave heed to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Then Leah said, "God has given me my wages because I gave my maid to my husband." So she named him Issachar. (Gen 30:16-18)

Gushing with enthusiasm, Leah reveals the transaction to Jacob. Too tired to figure it all out, he merely complies, and the result is yet another pregnancy. But Leah's fertility has nothing to do with the mandrakes. It is merely the gift of God, who listens to the pleas of the oppressed. Leah names the son Issachar ("man of hire"), to seal the one moment when she was able to "buy" love. This has a ring of profound pain, as every mention of the boy's name would be a reminder that his father was a "hired stud." Her next statement reveals that she believes her reward came as a result of placing God in her debt by an earlier act of good will. This is terrible theology! Theological maturity is not a prerequisite to receiving God's grace, however. Once again, God gives more than she asks for, doubling the blessing.

Leah conceived again and bore a sixth son to Jacob. Then Leah said, "God has endowed me with a good gift; now my husband will dwell with me, [or better "exalt me"⁸] because I have borne him six sons." So she named him Zebulun. Afterward she bore a daughter and named her Dinah. (Gen 30:19-21)

Leah names her sixth son Zebulun, a derivative of the term "endowment" or "gift." With this sixth birth, her optimism returns. She wonders if perhaps these gifts will be the means, if not to receive her husband's affection, at least public recognition that she is his legal wife. How could a husband not be moved to some emotional response upon arriving home to six boys! To these, God adds yet another child, this time a daughter, whom she names Dinah ("judgment, vindication"). With a total of seven children (the number of perfection) we marvel at how God makes this unloved woman the perfect mother.

Though Leah may think the game is over, Rachel has one more turn at bat. Following long years of agony, God acts on her behalf, opening her womb.

C. God remembers Rachel (30:22-24)

Then God remembered Rachel, and God gave heed to her and opened her womb. So she conceived and bore a son and said, "God has taken away my reproach." She named him Joseph, saying, "May the LORD add to me another son." (Gen 30:22-24)

Three more years pass and God finally "remembered" Rachel. In Scripture, when God "remembers" someone, it is not referring to a casual coming to mind, as if God had forgotten and the one in question suddenly appears on the radar screen. No, it speaks of the time when God, who always had the individual close to his heart, descends from heaven to earth to intervene on their behalf, and in so doing dramatically alters the course of their history (Gen 8:1; 19:29; 30:22; Exod 2:24). For Rachel, being remem-

bered means she has become fertile. At long last she bears a son. The name she gives him, Joseph, is pure praise, not only for what God has done in removing Rachel's past shame, but also giving her hope for yet another son. This hope was not mere wishful thinking, but a weighty sense of what was real. With Joseph's birth, Jacob now has twelve children.

What an amazing text! Who would come up with a story like this to impress the nations with the origins of their faith? As Brueggemann explains: "two competitive sisters, a husband caught between them, and an exploitative father-in-law are not the most likely data for narratives of faith."⁹ What are we to make of the gifts of children and the roles they play in the kingdom of God?

IV. Reflections On Children and Happiness

A. Children and the grace of God

1. God hears the oppressed, and intervenes with gifts of grace

Our text opens with God "*seeing*" and ends with God "*remembering*." God is the prime mover in this story. He is the one who intervenes to care for these hurting women. He grants priceless gifts of children to them, just because he loves them. The fact that every requested pregnancy is immediately followed by an unsolicited second, is the supreme way of saying that God is generous beyond belief. These indescribable gifts give Rachel and Leah a voice. The two daughters, who never had a voice with their father, become the primary voice in this text. And here we learn how precious it is for the Father to hear a daughter's voice. Though the theological expression of their voices is less than perfect, God keeps on loving them with more gifts. This is truly God's grace at work.

2. Competition blinds us to God's love

But regrettably, from a human viewpoint, competition between the sisters blinds them to the purity of God's good gifts. Rather than being expressions of love in their own right, they become vehicles to possess something that is more precious to them than God's love. How sad, when the "divine" becomes captive to the "human." When this happens, our souls are blocked from experiencing the liberating freedom of the love of God. And, just as in the Jacob story, oftentimes God must resort to extreme measures to root it out. How long must it take us to learn that "wrestling" and "competing" for human love will never make us content, even when we win? Just like Rachel and Leah, we find that our greatest theological discoveries come as a result of crushed expectations.

3. When Rachel gives up, she opens up

The climactic moment in the text comes when Rachel finally connects with and gives up to her sister. At that moment Rachel immediately opens up to God's grace. After she patiently waits through three more pregnancies by her sister, she conceives and bears a son. Joseph dries "the tears of the long-lost mother years, the silent father fears, and lonely road where no one hears."¹⁰ Rachel's faith is to be a mirror to Jacob that grace is a gift, not a grasp,¹¹ and becomes the turning point, not just in this text, but in the entire Jacob story. As Rachel had to connect with her sister to find true joy, so Jacob will have to re-connect with his brother to see "the face of God."

B. Children in the New Covenant

1. Competition gives way to mutual appreciation

Throughout the Old Testament, stories about barren women usually appear in the context of competition (Sarah and Hagar; Rachel and Leah; Hannah and Peninnah). But with the inauguration of the New Covenant, competition gives way to mutual appreciation and unending praise. When the aged Elizabeth, now large with child, meets the youthful Mary, who has just conceived, Elizabeth is overcome with ecstatic praise, and her baby leaps in her womb with joy (Luke 1:44). Later, when the boys are

grown, rather than competing, each knows his proper place. Jesus said of John, that among those born of women, there was none greater (Luke 7:28). And John said of Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). So when the gift of the Spirit comes to us and we are born again, it pours out the love of God without measure (Rom 5:5), and endows us with divine gifts not to compete, but to complement one another in the new family (1 Cor 12:4-7). When you feel that you are a precious son or daughter in God's heart, then you are delivered from the tyranny of searching for human love and you can serve with freedom.

2. Spiritual seed transcends physical seed

Second, with the coming of Christ, spiritual seed transcends physical seed. Christ never married, yet Isaiah says of him, "He shall see his seed" (Isa 53:10). Therefore, in the New Covenant we do not need to marry or be fertile to be an effective "mother." This is why Paul sees the gift of singleness as an honorable office (1 Cor 7:32-34), not a second-class state for the unattractive. The single person can exercise the supreme availability and undivided devotion to Christ that married people cannot. Singles in our church serve at the heart of almost every ministry. Some of the most outstanding spiritual leaders of the last hundred years were single. John Stott is one of the finest expositors in the English language. His single-minded devotion to Christ has allowed him to write and teach prolifically. Mother Teresa is probably the most renowned "mother" of the last century.

3. Giving "birth" in the New Covenant

Thirdly, in the New Testament we discover that, as daughters are willing to be vulnerable and give voice to their pain, they "give birth" to the new family. The New Testament sequel to this story of two pained daughters giving birth to twelve children, is the story about a twelve-year-old girl near death. Her father, Jairus, loves her so much he will do anything to save her (Mark 5:21-43). As he and Jesus are quickly making their way to Jairus' home, another woman, whose flow of blood for twelve years has cut her off from life in Israel, takes hold Jesus' cloak for healing. What will Jesus do with two women competing for the same thing? To Jairus' amazement, Jesus stops and gives the hemorrhaging woman his full attention. After she "told Him the whole truth," he says to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well" (Mark 5:34). But what about Jairus' daughter? Jairus didn't know it, but this woman's vulnerability and faith were gifts to him to mirror the faith he would need to receive his daughter back from the dead. Upon finally seeing Jairus' dead daughter, Jesus says to her, "Talitha koum!" ("Little girl, arise!"). It is the voice of Jesus that the daughter hears, bidding her rise and walk in newness of life. In the end, a father, mother and daughter are made into a new family, not through competition, but through a daughter's courage to voice her pain. These three become a beautiful cameo of the new Israel, symbolized by the number 12, and bonded by love.

This song is dedicated to all the daughters of PBCC

Talitha Koum

Tell me your story, Talitha koum,
I will not turn my face from you.
Sing me your pain, Talitha koum,
I want to hear your tender voice.
Let me touch your tears
for the long lost mother years,
the silent father fears,
and the lonely road where no one hears.

Take up my hand, Talitha koum,
and look deep into a father's eyes.
Here is my hand, Talitha koum,
For you I will not despise.

Let me touch your tears
for the long lost mother years,
the silent father fears,
and the lonely road where no one hears.

I am now leaving, Talitha koum,
I must step down from this holy place.
But I turn and watch you, Talitha koum,
Lost in your Savior's sweet embrace.

He will touch your tears
for the long lost mother years,
the silent father fears,
and the lonely road where no one hears.

He will be there for you, Talitha koum,
Leah koum,
Rachel koum,
Talitha koum.

—James Garcia and Brian Morgan

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1. Both quotes are taken from Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 410.

2. Robert Alter notes that the first recorded speech of a character "has particular defining force as characterization." Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 158.

3. Alter, *Genesis*, 158.

4. Hannah's method of "pouring out" (*shaphak*) her soul completely before God so impressed David, that he commends it as a model way to pray (Ps 62:8).

5. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 246.

6. Wenham notes that "direct questions introduced by *hame'at* ("Is it too little...") usually express great exasperation by the speaker (Num 16:9; Josh 22:17; Isa 7:13; Ezek 34:18)." Wenham, *Genesis*, 247.

7. Wenham, *Genesis*, 247.

8. This is Alter's translation. Waltke suggests translating it, "my husband will acknowledge me as a lawful wife." Waltke, *Genesis*, 414.

9. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 253.

10. Taken from the song *Talitha Koum*, by James Garcia and Brian Morgan.

11. We find women serving in this same role as a foil to the disciples of what pure faith is in the gospels (Mark 5:25; 7:25; 14:3).