



Genesis 29:31–30:24

6th Message

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CAN CHILDREN MAKE YOU HAPPY? ASK LEAH AND RACHEL

SERIES: THE JACOB STORY

Last week we examined Jacob’s dealings with Laban to secure Rachel as his wife. The result was not one but two wives, and not seven but fourteen years of service. Today the subject is the birth of children. The promise of children was a significant piece of God’s covenant to Abraham, especially with the barrenness of Sarah and Rebekah. Through years of anticipation God was faithful to both. Now we wonder how God will continue fulfilling his promise into the third generation. What follows is a very surprising birth narrative of Jacob’s twelve children, and in it we discover how two wounded women learn to connect with God.

These two sisters give voice to the question, Can children make you feel “good enough”? The word “enough” has become a religion in our society. In his book *Seculosity*, David Zahl writes,

Listen carefully and you’ll hear the word enough everywhere, especially when it comes to anxiety, loneliness, exhaustion, and division that plague our moment to such tragic proportions. You’ll hear about people scrambling to be successful enough, happy enough, thin enough, wealthy enough, influential enough, desired enough, charitable enough, woke enough, *good* enough.¹

In the competition of being “good enough” in this marriage, we find that Rachel starts with a commanding lead, for she was loved by Jacob, while Leah was not. Bruce Waltke observes, “Her husband’s emotional rejection also entails her inferior social position within the household.”² In Leah’s mind, not until she gives birth to four sons for Jacob, does she think she can compete with her beautiful sister. When we explore the theme of children in the context of the New Covenant, we discover the antidote.

Literary Outline ³

Text & Topic	The 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. The Lord Enables Leah Alone (Gen 29:31–35)

When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, “Because the Lord has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me.” (Gen 29:31–32 ESV)

In the last scene Jacob and Laban were the prime movers of all the action and bridal negotiations. Laban’s daughters, Leah and

Rachel, had no voice, and were bargaining chips for their greedy, manipulative father. In this scene however, God initiates the plot (“*Now the Lord saw...*”) and gives Rachel and Leah a voice, while Jacob responds to the female initiative, and Laban leaves stage. This is God’s grace to women in a extremely male dominated world.

When a grievous injustice occurs, God often consoles the most wounded party first (cf. Hagar in Gen 21:17). So when God saw that Leah was “*hated*,” he consoles her by opening her womb and giving her a son. Leah recognizes the gift, but her chosen name betrays a dual purpose. The name Reuben (*r’uben*) literally means, “*See a son!*” But it fits well as a shortened version giving glory to the Lord who “*has seen*” (*ra’ah*) “*my affliction*” (*b’onyi*). So, in one sense the emotionally neglected Leah sees the boy as the gift of God, but in the speaking the name she secretly hopes to get what she really wants, her husband’s love (“perhaps **now** my husband **will love me**” [*ye’habani*]). So the gift of a son becomes Leah’s means to attain a love that was painfully lacking. God in his grace visits Leah with yet another gift.

She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because the Lord has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also.” And she called his name Simeon. (v. 33)

As Sarna notes, “The names of Leah’s first two sons replicate a pair of verbs (“*to see*,” “*to hear*”) that expresses 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 give 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.”⁴

Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, “Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.” Therefore his name was called Levi. (v. 34)

Now with three sons, Leah thinks that perhaps she can at last compete with Rachel’s beauty. What husband could possibly overlook one who brings all these gifts? But notice, her expectations have seemingly dropped, as her choice of verbs changes from “*love*” to the less affectionate “*attached*.” But God was 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 called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing. (v. 35)

With the fourth child Leah gives pure praise to God for the gift of a son, and his name, Judah (“*praised*”), reflects no ulterior motive to win her husband’s love. Whenever children are born amid rejection or barrenness, the parent often makes deep theological connection with God. I know this was true for each of our five children. For Leah, with four sons, she thinks she can now compete on equal footing with her beautiful sister. This completes the first scene; God comforts an unloved wife with the priceless gifts of four boys,

and she stops bearing. Whether because the Lord closed her womb or she lost access to her husband, we aren't told, though her later confrontation with Rachel (30:15) suggests the latter. For typical of life, grace never happens in a vacuum, and God's gifts to one individual become another's coveted prize.

II. Fierce Competition Between Sisters (Gen 30:1–13)

A. Rachel Confronts Jacob (vv. 1–2)

When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (vv. 1–2)

Jacob lives in a marriage where neither wife is content. Leah has children but lacks love, while Rachel is loved, but lacks children. Each wife desperately wants what the other has. What they do have in no way compensates for what they lack, and they suffer. After years of jealousy, Rachel finally expresses her pain, “Give me children, or else I die!” Rachel should have prayed, but she demands Jacob solve the dilemma to soothe her unbearable pain. Her words communicate a lot, especially being her first recorded speech.⁵

First, she blames Jacob. Second, she implies his love means nothing without children. Alter observes that her “impetuousness 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.”⁶ If she could articulate her emotions, I'm sure she would have said watching her sister bear four children for the one she loved, while she remained barren, was unspeakable anguish. But when emotions are bottled up for too long, we seldom express them the way we would like.

Jacob lacks sensitivity and 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 does little better when he attempts to address Hannah's pain of barrenness with, “Aren't I better to you than ten sons?” (2 Sam 1:8) Hannah responds by turning to the Lord and pouring out her heart in efficacious prayer. Hannah becomes the model of faith for barren women.⁷ Rachel does not yet demonstrate that faith or maturity.

B. Rachel offers Jacob Bilhah, her maid (vv. 3–5)

Then she said, “Here is my servant Bilhah; go in to her, so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her.” So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her. And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. (vv. 3–5)

Rachel handles her pent up frustration not by prayer, but by impetuously reverting to Sarah's earlier scheme (Gen 16:1–6). If she can't personally bear the children of promise, she will 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. The plan is an instant success, and Bilhah bears a son.

C. Rachel claims the victory in the naming (vv. 6–8)

Then Rachel said, “God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son.” Therefore she called his name Dan. Rachel’s servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, “With mighty wrestlings I have

wrestled with my sister and have prevailed.” So she called his name Naphtali. (vv. 6–8)

Once Rachel receives the boy she is overcome with joy and glorifies God. But sadly 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, doubling the gift and granting Bilhah another child. To Rachel, winning this last round is the ultimate victory. The boy's name, *Naphtali* (“*with the wrestlings of God I have wrestled my sister*”), cements her belief that God has permanently taken her side, giving her final victory over her sister. Sadly, it reflects not praise but dominance in her struggle for the coveted “love trophy.” But little does Rachel know that when we compete to prove our worth, it never produces contentment, and Leah will answer with a little competition of her own.

B. Leah bears through Zilpah (vv. 9–13)

When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Then Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. And Leah said, “Good fortune has come!” so she called his name Gad. Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. And Leah said, “Happy am I! For women have called me happy.” So she called his name Asher. (vv. 9–13)

If Rachel can compete through her maid, so can Leah. She is just as successful, with not one but two more sons. The playing field is level again. But after years of competition Leah has finally given up on attaining Jacob's affections. The boys' names reveal that she seeks praise outside of her husband, from the realm of public acclaim (“*women will call me blessed*”). When affection in the home runs dry, we often look elsewhere for affirmation.

Now that Leah has evened the score, Rachel is at an impasse. Here we come to the critical point in the story, when the sisters connect and speak about their pain.

III. Rachel Connects with Leah and Gives Up (Gen 30:14–24)

A. Rachel connects with Leah (vv. 14–15)

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 that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son’s mandrakes also?” Rachel said, “Then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son’s mandrakes.” (vv. 14–15)

Leah's firstborn son, Reuben, went out into the fields during the wheat harvest and discovered some mandrakes. As 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. Song 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; Song 1:2; 4:10; 5:1).⁸

This plant would prove to be a coveted prize between the two competing sisters. For the first time in the text, Rachel breaks the 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 response is sharp and bitter, revealing years

of pent up anger.⁹ Rather than responding in kind, Rachel offers a compromise: one night with Jacob in return for “some” of the mandrakes. As Wenham suggests,

This one remark 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.¹⁰

Though Leah’s silence indicates “grudging consent” (Wenham) these sisters have had to connect with each other to address their weakness. When Jacob comes home weary after toiling on the harvest, Leah runs to greet him, joyfully anticipating a night of love.

B. Leah waging love with Jacob (vv. 16–21)

When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, “You must come in to me, for I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes.” So he lay with her that night. And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Leah said, “God has given me my wages because I gave my servant to my husband.” So she called his name Issachar. (vv. 16–18)

Beaming with enthusiasm, Leah reveals her transaction. Jacob, who is probably too tired to figure it all out, merely complies. Though exhausted he still was potent, and the result is another pregnancy. But her fertility had nothing to do with the mandrakes, it was another gift of God, who listens to the oppressed. Leah names the son, Issachar, “man of hire,” to seal the moment she was able “to buy” love. Painfully, every mention of the boy’s name was a reminder his father was a “man hired” for love. Her following statement reveals she believes an earlier act of goodwill placed God in her debt, and this son was her reward. Terrible theology! But theological maturity is not a prerequisite for God’s grace, and again, God gives more than she asks and doubles the blessing.

And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son. Then Leah said, “God has endowed me with a good endowment; now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons.” So she called his name Zebulun. Afterward she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah. (vv. 19–21)

Leah names her sixth son, Zebulun, a derivative of the term “*endowment*” or “*gift*.” Optimism returns, and Leah hopes these gifts will secure public recognition that she is a legal wife, if not her husband’s affection. How could any husband not be moved to some emotional display when coming home to six boys! Then God adds another birth; this time a daughter whom she names Dinah (“*judgment, vindication*”). With seven (the number of perfection) children we can marvel at how God made this unloved woman the perfect mother! Though Leah may think the game is through, Rachel has one more turn at-bat. After years of prolonged agony, God acts on Rachel’s behalf and opens her womb.

C. God remembers Rachel (vv. 22–24)

Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and said, “God has taken away my reproach.” And she called his name Joseph, saying, “May the Lord add to me another son!” (vv. 22–24)

After three more years, God finally “*remembered*” Rachel. In Scripture, when God remembers someone it is not a casual “coming into the mind,” as if God had forgotten them and now they have

suddenly returned to his radar. It is the time when God, who always had the individual close to his heart, descends from heaven to intervene on their behalf and dramatically alters the course of their history (Gen 8:1; 19:29; 30:22; Exod 2:24). For Rachel, being remembered means she has become fertile and at long last bears a son. His name, Joseph, is pure praise not only for what God’s removing her past shame, but also giving her a future hope for yet another son. This 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 invent a story like this if they wanted to impress the nations with the origins of their faith? As Brueggemann explains, “two competitive sisters, a husband caught between them, and an exploitive father-in-law are not the most likely data for narratives of faith.”¹¹ What are we to make of the gift of children and the role they play in the kingdom of God?

IV. Reflections on Children and Happiness

A. God’s gifts of grace

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

Our text opens with God “seeing” and ends with God “remembering.” He drives all the action and intervenes to care for these hurting women. He grants these daughters priceless gifts of children just because he loves them. The fact that every requested pregnancy is immediately followed by an unsolicited second, is the supreme way of showing God is unfathomably generous. These indescribable gifts also 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 we learn how precious it is for the Father to hear a daughter’s voice. Though their theological expression is imperfect, he keeps loving them with more gifts. This is truly God’s grace at work.

2. *Competition blinds us to God’s love*

But sadly, competition blinds these sisters blinds to the purity of God’s good gifts. They twist his gifts from expressions of love in their own right, to vehicles to possess something more precious to them than God’s love. How sad that the “*divine*” becomes captive to the “*human*.” This blocks our souls from experiencing the liberating freedom of God’s love. God must often 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, it is never *enough*. Like Rachel and Leah, our greatest theological discoveries will come from crushed expectations.

3. *When Rachel gives up, she opens up*

The turning point occurs when Rachel is forced to connect and give a gift to her sister. When she gives up, she opens up to God’s grace. After she patiently waits through three more pregnancies by her sister, Rachel 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.”¹² Experiencing God’s love in her womb, Rachel no longer keeps score. It is enough. Rachel’s radical faith becomes a mirror to Jacob showing grace is a gift, not a thing to grasp,¹³ and it becomes the dramatic pivot point in the entire Jacob story. As Rachel had to connect with her sister to find true joy, so will Jacob have to re-connect with his brother to see “the face of God.”

B. The glory of the New Covenant

1. Competition gives way to mutual appreciation

Whenever barren women appear in the Old Testament their stories usually contain painful competition (Sarah and Hagar; Rachel and Leah; Hannah and Peninnah). But with the New Covenant, competition yields to mutual appreciation and unending praise. When the aged Elizabeth, now large with child, meets the youthful Mary, who has just conceived, she 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 says of John, among those born of woman, there was none greater (Luke 7:28), and John says of Jesus, “*He must increase, but I must decrease*” (John 3:30). When we receive the gift of the Spirit, we are born again, God’s love pours into our hearts without measure (Rom 5:5), endowing us with divine gifts, which work together to build up the body in love (1 Cor 12:4–7). In God’s new family there is no competition or comparison. When you feel that you are a precious and unique son or daughter in God’s heart, you are delivered from the tyranny of being “good enough,” so that you can serve with freedom and joy.

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) and “*The children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married*” (Isa 54:1). 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. For the single person can exercise a supreme availability and undivided devotion to Christ that married people cannot. Some of the most outstanding spiritual leaders of our time were single. John Stott was one of the finest expositors in the English language, and his singular devotion to Christ allowed him to write prolifically; and Mother Theresa is most likely the most renowned “mother” of the last century.

3. Brokenness becomes the bond of the new family

Lastly, in the New Testament, as daughters are willing to be vulnerable and voice their pain they “*give birth*” to the new family. The New Testament sequel to this story of two pained daughters giving birth is the story of a little twelve year old near death, and her father, Jairus, who loves her so much he will do anything to save her (Mark 5:21–43). As he and Jesus quickly make their way to

the home, another woman, whose flow of blood for twelve years cut her off from life in Israel, grabs Jesus’ cloak for healing. What will Jesus do with two women competing for the same thing? To Jairus’s 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’s daughter! He 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. When Jesus finally sees Jairus’s dead daughter he says to her, “*Talitha Koum,*” (“Little girl, arise.”). The daughter hears Jesus’ voice bid her to rise and walk in newness of life. In the end a father, mother and daughter become a new family, not through competition, but by a daughter’s courage to voice her pain. These three become a beautiful cameo of the new Israel (symbolized by the number 12) bonded by love.

1. David Zahl, *Seculosity, How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became Our New Religion And What To Do About It* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), xiv.

2. Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 409.

3. Special thanks to my friend Bob London for this outline.

4. Both quotes are taken from Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 410.

5. Robert Alter notes that the first recorded speech of a character “has particular defining force as characterization.” Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 158.

6. Alter, *Genesis*, 158.

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

8. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 246.

9. 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.

10. Wenham, *Genesis*, 247.

11. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Int (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 253.

12. Taken from the song “*Talitha Koum,*” by James Garcia.

13. We find women in the gospels similarly functioning as a foil to the disciples, modeling authentic faith (Mark 5:25; 7:25; 14:3).

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