



A COURTSHIP MADE IN HEAVEN

SERIES: THE JACOB STORY

Genesis 29:1–20

4th Message

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Before we continue in our studies in the life of Jacob, I want to emphasize the importance of what we are doing. In his book *God of All Comfort, A Trinitarian Response to the Horrors of This World*, Scott Harrower explains how his heart sank when he “noticed that the USA Today’s lead article was ‘Your Definitive Guide to 2017: A Year of Hope and Horror.’” Three years later, the horrors rage on—senseless armed conflicts, millions of displaced refugees, deadly disease, poverty, domestic violence, sexual abuse, mass shootings, human trafficking, natural disasters, wildfires, oppressive government—so that Your Definitive Guide for 2020 might read: “A Year of Horror with no Hope.” Harrower writes,

Horrors never go away; they are always with us—destroying life and maiming human beings...Horrors raise theological, existential, and pastoral questions. How is God involved in a world pockmarked by horrors. Is it possible to live meaningfully in such a random and death-directed world? Is there any hope for recovery from horrors and the traumas they generate in us?¹

The Bible, unlike any other religious book, doesn’t balk at portraying the darkest depravity of the human heart, but then it reveals how the Creator God is at work redeeming life amid the darkness. So it is with the Jacob story, it gives hope to those who have grown up in dysfunctional homes or been victims of violence or sexual abuse. Harrower explains that, “In order to recover from trauma, persons need to establish a sense of safety, **lament their trauma in the context of a coherent story**, and reconnect with their community.”² In my opinion, this is what church ought to be, and it’s what I’ve found to be the most rewarding aspect of ministry.

But our story today strikes a happier note—it’s about Jacob’s search for a bride and the significant role courtship will play in Jacob’s life. Sadly, the art of courtship has all but faded from Western culture, and we are much poorer for it. But I hope this morning to give a vision of what courtship entails, not just as a prelude to marriage but as an integral part of our spiritual development.

Robert Alter refers to this story as a “type-scene,”³ signifying a fixed sequence of motifs that are repeated in the Bible. Betrothal type-scenes have several reoccurring motifs. 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 announce the news to her father. The scene ends with a betrothal agreement and feast. 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, it speaks to the fathomless longing of our hearts to be sought by

God. The fact that this type-scene repeats seven times in the Bible heightens its significance.⁴

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 negotiates with Laban to marry Rachel..

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

A. Jacob’s arrival at the well (vv. 1–3)

1 Then Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east. 2 As he looked, he saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep lying beside it, for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well’s mouth was large, 3 and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place over the mouth of the well. (Gen 29:1–3 ESV)

Buoyed by his heavenly encounter with God and angels at Bethel, Jacob treks northeast to Haran with a renewed sense of purpose. The Hebrew text reads literally, “Jacob lifted his feet.” This is the only time this 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.”⁵ 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.

As he approaches Haran, the narrator freezes the action and sets the scene from Jacob’s vantage point. Jacob happens on a field where three flocks of sheep are resting in a circle around a well. The well, which takes center stage (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. Bruce 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.”⁶ Thus it was conventional for the herdsmen not to water their flocks until all the herds had gathered at the well, so that collectively they could remove the massive stone with ease. Stones figure prominently in Jacob’s life. Last week, a stone was his pillow. Perhaps this stone symbolizes heavy obstacle he will later face 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 learn where providence has brought him, he initiates a conversation with the shepherds, interrogating them with four questions.

B. Jacob's encounter with the shepherds (vv. 4–8)

4 Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where do you come from?" They said, "We are from Haran." 5 He said to them, "Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?" They said, "We know him." 6 He said to them, "Is it well with him?" They said, "It is well; and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!" 7 He said, "Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered together. Water the sheep and go, pasture them." 8 But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep." (vv. 4–8)

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, the impatient 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. Even as a foreigner in a strange land, Jacob has no thought for social etiquette. He just orders them back to work. But the shepherds tell this pushy young man how things are done in Haran: "Excuse us, lad. Take a number and wait." But Jacob, no child of convention, ignores them.

II. Jacob Meets Rachel (29:9–12)

9 While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess. 10 Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother. 11 Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. 12 And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father. (vv. 9–12)

During their lengthy discussion, Rachel arrives with her father's sheep. As she comes into view, Jacob realizes he is in fact "home." Overcome by emotion, he springs forth like an exploding geyser, removing every obstacle in sight. He performs an almost supernatural feat, removing the massive stone. In a little preview of his future destiny, he even waters Laban's flock. Then he kisses the girl and begins to weep uncontrollably—before he even announces who he is. 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 relative. 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.

This scene is a striking contrast with the story of Abraham's servant coming to Haran to seek a bride for Isaac and finding Rebekah. Then, 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. Rebekah demonstrated her extraordinary hospitality by watering all the camels—a supernatural feat like Jacob's removal of the stone. But Jacob impulsively does all the watering and learns nothing of Rachel's character. Abraham's servant praised God, but Jacob merely weeps. God had led them both, but Jacob appears 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 after years of painful life lessons. Lastly, Abraham's servant came laden with camels and expensive gifts, while Jacob arrives on foot, empty-handed. Was this Isaac's way of exerting his control and repaying Jacob and Rebekah for their deception? However it impacted Jacob, it sets him up to be enslaved to a very greedy man.

III. Jacob Meets Uncle Laban (29:13–14)

13 As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, 14 and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month. (vv. 13–14)

Immediately when Laban hears another young relative in town he runs to greet and embrace him. Knowing Laban's character it doesn't take a genius to discern his motivation. Surely he remembers the ten camels and the gold and silver he received for Rebekah's hand in marriage. But Laban quickly discerned that this young man was just a runaway. With no treasures in sight, his enthusiasm quickly dissipates. When Jacob tells his uncle the his story, did he include his deceit? The text doesn't say. Laban's response, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh," is somewhat ambiguous. It could reflect an openhearted welcome, or perhaps expressing reluctance and resignation, since he is obligated to offer hospitality now that Jacob has proved to be a relative. The phrase also evokes the memory of Adam's elation when finally presented with Eve (Gen 2:23), but halfway through it, abruptly stops. No praise, just silence. Does this betray Laban's disappointment? Such ambiguity will mark all of Laban's dealings with Jacob.

A month after Jacob's initial contact with him, the uncle makes his business offer.

IV. Jacob Negotiates with Laban for Rachel (29:15–20)

15 Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" (v. 15)

As a blood relative, Laban should have helped the impoverished Jacob get a new start, but now we learn Jacob has been working for free. Laban has reduced his nephew to 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 defining every aspect of Jacob's life while he is in Haran (found 9 times: 29:15; 30:18, 28, 32, 33; 31:7–8, 41). Placed in the context of family relationships, "wages" has a jarring ring, for it reduces familial relationships to money. Obviously, Laban has observed 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.

16 Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. 17 Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. (v. 16–17)

To help the reader understand what happens next, the narrator gives two necessary pieces of information about Laban's 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"⁷ (Song 4:1); or as Alter suggests, perhaps "Leah has sweet eyes that are her one asset of appearance, in contrast to her beautiful sister,"⁸ who had striking face and beautiful figure. In any case Rachel wins the beauty pageant and Jacob's affections. He doesn't hesitate to answer Laban's "generous" offer.

18 Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." 19 Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." 20 So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. (vv. 18–20)

Jacob is very specific about which daughter he wants. 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. 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 contract with his uncle. Reducing his courtship to a job contract does nothing to dampen his romantic dreams. To him, seven years seems just a few days.⁹ Such should be the characteristic of that wondrous season in life that we call courtship.

I want to leave us with four important reasons 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 thoughts. 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 stone.

IV. The Necessity to Recover Courtship

A. The Definition of Courtship

First, since courtship is a lost art in our culture, we need to define it. 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.¹⁰

B. The Value of Courtship

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

This is the only period in the story of Jacob that displays unadulterated joy and happiness. Journeying far from home puts him in the vulnerable position of experiencing new feelings. By a well in Haran finds a 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, 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, the romances with God and Rachel occur simultaneously, with one feeding the other. This might suggest to parents the importance of allowing, or as with 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.

Courtship leads Jacob into the mystery of delight, and it trains him in sexual discipline. It is tragic to see so many couples replace courtship with living together. 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.

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 the 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 was in his eyes
as one who finds peace. (Song 8:10)**

When young girls sell out cheaply, courtship gives way to seduction, possession, and sadly, the potential for abuse. Interestingly, not all references to courting in the Bible are male initiated. Ruth initiates her courtship with Boaz; and the young maiden in the Song of Songs is the dominant speaker by far.

3. It keeps affections alive in the marriage

All too often it doesn't take too long after the honeymoon for romance to be 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. Though the relationship matures, marriage should never lose

a flavor of romance. We 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.

4. It prepares us to be wooed by God

Finally, some 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, generally disinterested in romance. If that is the case, let me remind you where the climax of this scene ends.

The seventh time this betrothal scene is played out, God himself comes into a foreign land searching for his bride (John 4). When he arrives at a well (Jacob's well!) a woman is standing there. She is not a Jew, but a half-breed Samaritan. She is neither young nor a virgin. She draws her water alone, for her neighbors shun her. 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. But, 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 leaves her water jar, 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, and in the next scene gives birth to the new Israel.

"Courting is not simply the invention of a romanticized society of a bygone day. It is native to the human heart and even corresponds to the heart of God who courts, woos and win (and wins back) his bride Israel (Hos 2:14-15)."¹¹ God's romance doesn't end in a few months; it is ever more dear the older we become. Our affections deepen, our hearts broaden, and we feel more and more, all in preparation for the final marriage feast of the Lamb.

**"Therefore I am now going to allure her;
I will lead her into the wilderness
and speak tenderly to her."**

**"I will betroth you to me forever;
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice,
in love and compassion.**

**I will betroth you in faithfulness,
and you will acknowledge the LORD."**

(Hos 2:14, 19-20 NIV)

1. Scott Harrower, *God of All Comfort, A Trinitarian Response to the Horrors of This World* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 1.

2. Harrower, *God of All Comfort*, 127.

3. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 47-63.

4. Alter notes that the "betrothal type scene" occurs six times in the Old Testament in the lives of Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samson, Ruth and Saul. I would add that it finds its seventh and climactic occurrence in the New Testament, when Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman by the well and offers her living water (John 4:1-42).

5. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 151.

6. Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 400.

7. Waltke, *Genesis*, 405.

8. Alter, *Genesis*, 153.

9. "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.

10. R. Paul Stevens, *Down-to-Earth Spirituality, Encountering God in the Ordinary, Boring Stuff of Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 75.

11. Stevens, *Down-to-Earth Spirituality*, 77.