



Genesis 29:15–30

5th Message

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MARRIAGE AT WHAT PRICE?

SERIES: THE JACOB STORY

One of our most delightful and important tasks we undertake as pastors is to prepare couples for the life-long journey of marriage. We take marriage seriously at PBCC and view the preparation process as much more important than the actual wedding ceremony. When I first meet with a couple I tell them that it is my hope that by the end of the process they will have acquired a Biblical framework for negotiating their way through the open sea of marriage. I feel that my task is not merely to teach about marriage idealistically from the formative teachings from the Garden of Eden (that place where are our dreams and longings originate), but also to shape the couple realistically. In the movie *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, a wise Greek father gives advice to his daughter who has just fallen in love with an Italian soldier:

When you fall in love it is a temporary madness;
it erupts like an earthquake, then it subsides;
and when it subsides, your have to work out whether
your roots have become so entwined
it is inconceivable that you should ever part.
Love is what is left over,
when being in love has burned away.

Anyone who is married knows it doesn't take long to wake up from the dream-like world of the honeymoon and discover you married a sinner. Like you, this person has bad breath when they wake up in the morning, they can be moody, non-communicative, bossy, rude, and very defensive about even the smallest idiosyncrasies of their behavior. It also doesn't take long to discover that your spouse, like you, came into this marriage with dysfunctional baggage from their family of origin, baggage that they appear blind to, but is so obvious to you.

The revelation of these changes can be so dramatic that some may even question the sanctity of the marriage when the person they are now legally married to seems so different than they imagined. This is the critical juncture in marriage when couples must cultivate true covenantal love as opposed to the "easy affection" that drove their courtship. But sadly, when a spouse doesn't meet expectations, disappointment and resentment can take root and yield a harvest of bitterness that severs hearts and turns love cold, creating the temptation to break the covenant. This predicament isn't unique to marriage. Anyone can feel trapped by a previous commitment that loses its shine. So the question I want to examine is, "Can we be truly blessed by God if we are seemingly trapped in an unhappy situation, whether it's a marriage or another commitment?"

No one woke up to the fact that he had in fact married the wrong girl as quickly as Jacob. Can you imagine the initial shock to wake up after your wedding night only to find the bride's sister in your bed? This betrayal will alter the course of his life forever. Our story has five movements, with Jacob's marriage to Leah taking center stage.

A Negotiation of betrothal price for Rachel	29:15–19
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I. Betrothal Negotiations for Rachel (29:15–19)

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

As we saw last week, Laban presents himself as a generous man who is eager to reward his nephew. He invites the energetic Jacob to name his wages, but notice only after his nephew has labored for nothing 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 painfully find his "wages" as hard won through sweat and deception. "Wages" will define every aspect of his life (marriage, children, and dowry) during his twenty-year stay in Haran (29:15; 30:18, 28, 32, 33; 31:7, 8, 41). In the end they 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. Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. Jacob loved Rachel. And 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 that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." (vv. 16–19)

Laban has a problem. He has two daughters not one, and it was the custom to marry the older first, but Jacob loved the younger, more beautiful Rachel, not the older Leah. Jacob knows he is breaking with social convention, so he offers a very handsome price for her hand to alleviate any objections from her materialistic father. Seven years of labor would have been 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 about 84 shekels!). What will Laban do? He covers his enthusiasm with a veil of reluctance, "better you than someone else." But slyly he does not mention the girl's name lest he be accused of breaking his covenant at a later date.

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 the love he had for her. (v. 20)

So Jacob thinks his deal is secure, and he eagerly begins his seven-year term of employment for his uncle. If in Laban's offer we wonder, "Does true love have a price?" Jacob's actions demonstrate "true love

will pay any price!” Reducing his courtship to a service contract does not dampen Jacob’s romantic dreams. The seven years seemed “in his eyes” (note the word play with Leah’s “soft eyes”) like just a few days. 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 We find that one of the sweet mysteries of romantic love is that when you are possessed by it, time seems to fly and service is sweet, robbed of all its toil.

But though the seven years pass like “a few days,” Jacob grows impatient towards the end, as his greedy 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. It is very demeaning when an employee must ask for the “wages” that are his due.

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

Jacob’s speech is much like Esau’s when he caught sight of the stew Jacob was preparing. You’ll remember that Esau was so governed by his earthly senses that he could barely bark out his request, “Please let me gulp down some of this red stuff.”² Now the tables are turned and Jacob is the one overcome by passion. 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.” This would not be the kind of attitude I would appreciate by someone requesting my daughter’s hand in marriage. The sly Laban does not answer Jacob, lest later he be accused of lying, but quickly takes action. Sadly, just like his brother, Jacob’s overriding passions will blind him to deception.

III. Marriage to Leah (29:22–24)

So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a (“drinking”) feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. (Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant.) (vv. 22–24)

Laban gathered all the men of “the place” and prepared what looks more like a bachelor party than a wedding feast. The term “feast” (*mishteh*) comes from the root “to drink” (*shatah*) and usually denotes a drinking feast. The goal is obvious—an abundance of alcohol given to a very “thirsty” young man will aid Laban’s deception. Under the cover of darkness Laban brought Jacob’s veiled bride to him, and the over eager groom immediately consummated the marriage, unaware of the bridal switch. The event happens so quickly, with no obstacles, it makes us wonder what powerful control this father must have been able to exert over his daughters, for in this text they have no voice.

The narrator concludes with Laban’s contribution to the newlyweds, his maid Zilpah. As 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 (Gen 24:61; 29:29) or a city (1 Kgs 9:16).³

As we will see, though Laban is the master of greed and deception and breaks all ethical boundaries, he is always eager to appear as the generous benefactor who does things with “legal” precision. Amid the cruel deception of this “innocent” groom, we are tempted to ask,

“Where is God?” To that question the narrator has skillfully inserted a little clue. The narrator’s use of the term “the place” (Gen 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” (Gen 28:11, 16–17, 19). It serves as a subtle hint to the reader that God can indeed be found even in “this place” of deception, but it takes the eye of faith to see it.

IV. Re-negotiation of Betrothal Price for Rachel (29:25–27)

And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” (vv. 25)

When Jacob awakes from his blissful sleep he is overcome with the realization that the woman he slept with the night before was not Rachel, but her older sister, Leah! The narrator shifts us to Jacob’s vantage point so we feel his shock and horror. Outraged he confronts Laban with his injustice and violation of their agreement. The question, “**What is this you have done?**” resonates throughout Genesis when injustices occurred that had the potential of bringing cities to the brink of disaster. Both Abraham and Isaac placed their wives in situations that risked adultery and were resolutely rebuked by foreign kings for doing an “unthinkable” act (12:18; 26:10). These were also the words of God when he confronted Eve (3:13) with her sin in the garden. Jacob is now so outraged, only these words will do! But Laban is more than prepared with an answer for his nephew.

Laban said, “It is not so done in our country (lit. “place”), to give the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” (vv. 26–27)

Laban immediately justifies himself, that in “this place” such things are not done. What things? Marrying off the younger before the firstborn! Laban plays his cards well. Instead of the term “older” he substitutes “firstborn,” a little barb for Jacob’s past deception of his brother. In effect he says, “You may get away with that where you live, but not in ‘this place!’” Laban paints himself as a righteous man who will not break upstanding traditions.

Then to soften the blow, he appeals to his generosity. He tells Jacob that for just a slight inconvenience he can have all that he wants. Just complete the marriage week of “this one” and you can have the “other one”. Notice Laban not only robs his daughters of a voice, he doesn’t even give them a name. Priceless daughters become nameless bargaining chips for profit. But then he adds, there will be a little additional “price,” just a mere seven years. But for Jacob, what’s seven years, when you are in love? For by Jacob’s own admission, when you are in love, seven years are but a “few days.” So again Laban plays the generous negotiator. He must comply with tradition in “this place,” but for a little inconvenience on Jacob’s part, a mere week, and a little contract extension, which will speed by, all parties can be satisfied. In case there is any doubt of Laban’s public image of generosity, he is the subject of the verb “**to give**” seven times in this passage. He portrays himself as the perfect “giver,” giving a maximum of benefit for very little payment! So if Jacob is 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. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. (Laban gave his female servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her servant.) So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. (vv. 28–30)

What can Jacob do? He has no money, and with no family present and Laban holding all the cards, he is cornered. If he has any hopes of marrying Rachel he must comply. That's exactly what he did. In the end, both men got what they wanted, and more. Jacob got not just one wife, but two, and Laban doubled his profit. But we must ask, "At what price?" We can only imagine what that first week was like. Paul Stevens describes it well.

So for seven more years of service he can have Rachel. But 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 love 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. Then add a dash of bitterness to the whole equation, and we find that no one was happy in this marriage. 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 recover that sweet carefree love. In one night Laban has successfully transformed Jacob's holy pilgrimage of courtship into an oppressive exile.

VI. Reflections on "Marriage at what price?"

A. Moral outrage for those who use love for a price

The first implication is the obvious moral outrage the narrator has made us feel over Laban's character and success. "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 when manipulative in-laws attempted to control the affections of a son and daughter? Thus the first command to a couple considering marriage is to "leave" (*āzab* lit. "abandon") their mother and father, in order to "cleave" to their spouse. By implication, that means that no relationship outside the marriage may exert emotional control over a husband or a wife. 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 should make it a point not to interfere in the marital affairs of their children.

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 and are resolutely condemned in the book of 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 may be governed by the love of money (1 Tim 3:3, 8).

B. Where is God in "this place"?

1. *God judges his elect in "this place"*

The narrator makes it clear 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. Just as he never received his father's affection, so now he is married to an unloved woman, for life! God is the master of mirror making. Therefore before we throw stones of outrage over some injustice done to us, perhaps we should first look into the mirror, as David did before the hateful stones of Shimei (2 Sam 16:11–12). It is not always true, but sometimes the very thing in others that provokes our rage in others may be also deeply rooted in us. Perhaps that what Jesus implies when he encourages us to take the log out of our own eye before attempting to take the "splinter" out of our brother's eye (Matt 7:5). So for Jacob, "this place" is the place where God disciplines the son he loves (Heb 12:5–7).

2. *Marriage is "a place" where we learn to love*

There comes a time in every close relationship, whether marriage or close friendship, when the initial connection or affection fades and a new kind of love must be born, covenantal love. In the Hebrew Scriptures this all-important term for love is *hesed*,⁷ which describes the eager desire to cultivate loyalty, kindness, service, and affection on the basis on a **prior commitment**, not our feelings. This kind of love is the outstanding attribute of God's love—"The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind," says the psalmist (Ps 110:1). Proverbs 15:4 proclaims that the litmus test of the one who fears God is one "who swears to his or her hurt and does not change." It is this 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 life buried next to him in the patriarchs' grave (49:31), not Rachel, who dies a premature death (35:19).

Whenever I find myself stuck in a painful situation based on a previous commitment, I take comfort in the fact that it was Jacob's son who was transformed through two unjust prison terms, and that much of the New Testament was written from a prison cell by a man who learned to love his enemies.

Please note however, nothing in this story instructs us to stay in commitments that are abusive or harmful. Rather, it is a challenge and encouragement to those of us who have grown jaded in relationships or frustrated by circumstance and wonder whether it is worth the effort to endure instead of seeking an escape. In many cases, the first step back toward contentment is being more intentional in the way we treat and love those whom God has connected us to.

3. *God redeems his elect in every "place"*

There is no question in the story how bad Jacob's life is, and how victimized he became to begin a marriage without the freedom of consent. To marry without consent is the quickest way to breed resentment and bitterness. All marriages require work, but two wives

seem out of the question. Polygamy was never presented as the ideal in Scripture, and all examples of it are fraught with pain. But here we find the revolutionary truth that the sovereign God will intervene even in situations he condemns, and will work out his plan of redemption. God can work in and through us despite all our wrong choices if we allow him. It was Jacob's marriage to Leah that was responsible for the births of Judah, David, and Jesus of Nazareth. Leah's obedience and faithfulness, even in a marriage where she was not loved, was redeemed by God's everlasting love.

C. Praise for those who choose "this place"

While Scripture honors those who allow God to transform their character when they find themselves stuck in a difficult "place," consider the praise awarded to those who freely "choose" to live out their purpose in such a "place," because of their unfailing love for their Redeemer. Consider the young, Moabite widow Ruth who, when urged by her mother-in-law to turn back to her "place" and her family, adamantly refuses in spite of any obstacle she may face.

Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. (Ruth 1:16–17)

As Bruce Waltke observes (bold is my emphasis),

Her classic confession of faith in I AM (1:16) and her commitment to Israel exhibit her as a helpless widow who makes decisions by a **deliberate commitment** to his person although she sees no natural way of salvation (1:20–21)...Boaz testifies to her extraordinary *hesed* by **not remarrying for love or money** (3:10), and the Bethlehem women indirectly testify to it by the accolade that she is to Naomi "better . . . than seven sons" (4:15)...At the end of the story, the elders liken the former Moabitess to Rachel and Leah... Under *I AM's* good hand, she will become a heroine in sacred history, memorialized along with Israel's original matriarchs, and a mother of David and Jesus Christ (4:17).⁸

As Frederick Buechner once said, "The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁹

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Col 3:12–14)

*Dedicated to my wife Emily,
forty-eight wonderful years*

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

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

Now I am your Jacob, that dreamer of dreams.
while my mind is in heaven,
and my head lay on the stone,
you build the ladder,
that brings heaven home.

1. R. Paul Stevens, *Down-to-Earth Spirituality* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 14.

2. Robert Alter, *The Five books of Moses, Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 131.

3. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 236.

4. Stevens, *Down-to-Earth Spirituality*, 84-85.

5. Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 404.

6. "To honor" one's parents means to give them social weight in the community. 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. *hesed* ("covenant faithfulness," "unfailing love," "loyalty," "mercy") is one of the most significant words in the Old Testament. Its range of meaning is so broad it is translated by over 14 English entries. It harkens back to an earlier covenant or oath between two parties and is most often invoked when one party is helpless and looks to the stronger party to meet a need out of compassion and kindness.

8. Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 864

9. Dr. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made, The Marvel of Bearing God's Image* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 233.