

Genesis 29:31-30:24, No. 50**“Unpromising Beginnings”****March 19, 2017****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We left the narrative last time with Jacob having married two sisters, one of whom he had longed to marry and one whom he had never wanted to marry. Knowing human nature, we expect this to bring trouble and we will not be disappointed.

Text Comments

Now, as we read this account, so strange to us in some ways, let us appreciate the very human story that it is. It is the narrative of the sinful rivalry of two proud and very unhappy women. Each sister had what the other ached for. Leah longed for her husband’s love; Rachel longed to be a mother. Each went about seeking her own happiness the wrong way – as human beings so often do – but, though both remained consumed by the rivalry between them and by their unfulfilled longings, God worked in all of this foolishness and unhappiness to accomplish his will.

- v.31 “The Lord saw...” often introduces God's action in defense of the weak and the needy. When God “saw” Israel's plight in bondage in Egypt (Exodus 2:25), he intervened to deliver her. I'll let you check the footnotes in your Bibles for the meaning of the names given to the sons as they were born in turn.
- v.32 Leah named three of her first four sons with reference to the Lord – it is the divine name “Yahweh” that appears here. Leah was confessing her faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- v.33 Leah hoped that the birth of a son to Jacob would win her husband's love, but it did not. Her bitter disappointment was expressed in the name of her second son.
- v.34 She still hoped that her children would earn her husband's love.
- v.35 “Judah,” like the first two names, acknowledged God's mercy to her, but no longer did Leah express any hope of Jacob’s love. Was she coming to terms with her situation? She had four sons; she would have to be content with that. She stopped having children either because she became infertile – very temporarily as it turned out – or because, far from bringing Jacob closer to her, her children drove him still further away and marital relations ceased.
- v.1 What God *saw* had led him to act mercifully toward Leah. What Rachel *saw* produced more envy and bitterness. She had her husband’s love but a rival wife, her own sister, had children when she had none. Like Sarah before her, she adopted the desperate expedient of having children through her servant. She said to Jacob that she must have children or she would die. The irony is that she would eventually die in childbirth!
- v.2 Jacob’s angry retort compares very unfavorably with Abraham's and with Isaac's prayers for their barren wives. In any case, one commentator (Westermann in Wenham, 244) writes:

“To think that after the beautiful and gentle love story of 29:1-20 this angry exchange is our first and only experience of their marriage.” How quickly affection can turn into resentment!

- v.3 Rachel used the same argument, even the same words, Sarah had used years before (16:2). The words “bear children on my behalf” suggest an arrangement we would now refer to as surrogate parenthood, though long before technology made it possible to do such a thing without sexual relations. *There is truly nothing new under the sun.*
- v.4 Bilhah is called a wife, though in reality she was a concubine (as she is called in 35:22), a subordinate wife.
- v.6 “God has judged me” meant that God vindicated her. A tragic name, really. A name that was more expressive of Rachel’s ego and her bitter struggle with Leah, than of her faith in God. The child existed for her! We also have a good deal of this in our culture nowadays; that is, children existing for their parents rather than the other way round.
- v.8 More of the same sad view of her life and her children. Rachel saw everything in terms of her rivalry with her sister. The score was 4 to 2!
- v.11 Rachel’s triumph was short-lived. Whatever Rachel could do, Leah can do better. Leah was preening too! Her children likewise were pawns in this chess match with her sister. The score, if you are keeping score, was now 6-2.
- v.14 Reuben picked some mandrakes – a Mediterranean plant that bears bluish flowers in the winter and a yellowish plum-sized fruit in the summer – which in those days were thought to heighten sexual desire and to help women conceive, in other words an aphrodisiac. There is a reference to mandrakes in an erotic context in Song of Songs 7:13. Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, was called the “Lady of the Mandrake.” [Sarna, 209] Both women viewed the mandrakes as a kind of fertility drug.
- v.15 The bitterness was undisguised. Leah said, in effect, “Jacob sleeps with you, not with me, and now you have the gall to ask me for a fertility drug!” So Rachel proposed a trade: Jacob for the mandrakes. Rachel’s offer is proof both of how completely Jacob had favored Rachel over Leah -- and how desperate Rachel was for another child. The warring sisters struck a bargain, with each getting what she wanted most: Leah some semblance of love from her husband and Rachel the chance to conceive another child.
- v.16 As his relationship with Laban, now even his relationship with his wives had been reduced to a contract.
- v.18 Even Leah seemed to realize that it wasn't the mandrakes, it was God who gave children. At this point Leah seemed to have had second thoughts about having had children by Zilpah. But she took the birth of Issachar as proof that God approved her doing so. Rachel, who had traded what turned out to be Leah’s seventh son for the mandrakes, remained barren for several more years. With this deft touch the narrator explodes the superstition about the mandrakes.

- v.20 She still hoped against hope that one more son might make some difference, even though the five sons she already bore and the two by Zilpah had not. The longings of the heart don't simply disappear because they have been so long disappointed. Interestingly, she still thought of herself as the mother of six, not of eight. She knew the difference between her children and Zilpah's! What is obvious in this entire narrative is that Jacob had been no help in reconciling the two women or softening the bitter rivalry in his home. We hear nothing of his having prayed for his wives as Abraham and Isaac had done. As a spiritual leader of his home, Jacob seems to have been almost entirely absent.
- v.21 Dinah is mentioned primarily because of the role she will play in the family's later history (chapter 34). She was born after the seven year period had been completed. But with Dinah Leah had more children than all the other women combined and the perfect number of children, *seven!* [Waltke, 409]
- v.24 The timing remains a mystery; why Rachel had to wait so long to conceive a child. But God was merciful to her. She prayed for another and she would get Benjamin. But she would die giving birth to him. Such are the mysteries and the ambiguities of our life in this world. God's ways are far above us and past our finding out.

One final point is worth mentioning. As we will read in v. 25, Jacob had completed the seven years he owed Laban for Rachel when all the children had been born. The birth of eleven sons and a daughter in seven years obviously requires that at least two, if not more of the four mothers were pregnant at the same time. Leah bore six sons in seven years. [Waltke, 407]

All the polygamous marriages of Genesis turn out to be disasters, a reminder that God gave but one wife to Adam, and that he never intended for marriage to be anything but the union of mind, heart, and body between one man and one woman. In other cases we are not given much detail. Here we get the full, dismal picture. Jacob never loved Leah in the first place and, perhaps, he also never forgave her for her part in the deceit that had been perpetrated against him by her father. But, then, Jacob had no one to blame but himself. The rivalry in his own home obviously mirrored his own rivalry with his brother Esau. Jacob had fallen into the pit he dug himself.

And even here we don't hear everything. What did Zilpah and Bilhah think about their own mistresses and the other mistress in the home? Hagar and Sarah certainly were the furthest thing from bosom buddies! And then what of the boys. Just a few years into their lives each would know which boys belonged to which woman, which boys were the natural sons of Leah and Rachel and which had been born to surrogate mothers. The dismal beginnings of this family were a recipe for future catastrophe.

But, now this is the point: when this account of the birth of the sons of Jacob was published in its final form by Moses, the nation of Israel already existed in its twelve tribes. She had already been delivered from bondage in Egypt on eagles' wings. She was the people of God. Nations trembled before her. For Israel *this history we just read* was the story of her origin as a people and a nation. These sons were her founding fathers! But what a story! It is simply remarkable and unprecedented

that *this story* should have been told; that it shouldn't have been cleaned up for future generations to read. No legend here, as Romulus and Remus as the founders of Rome! No George Washington telling his father that he could not tell a lie. How did Israel come to be? The twelve tribes were fathered by "a lying trickster and mothered by sharp-tongued shrews." [Wenham, 250] Even worse, some of the twelve were born not to the matriarchs of the covenant family, but by their slave girls. And, remember, that Jacob should have been married to sisters was a blatant violation of the law that God revealed to Moses, the law that became Israel's national constitution. This is the sort of story one ordinarily would not tell who wanted to describe the origins of a great nation.

You have here children born more to satisfy the jealousies of their mothers, as weapons with which to best another woman, than as gifts of God and a sacred stewardship to be raised to love and serve the Lord. Jacob, himself, whose other name, Israel, would become the name of the nation itself, appears in this history not as a hero but as a buffoon. He was reduced to a stud, servicing four different women. He exercised no moral leadership over his wives, he helped them not at all to deal with their grief or their jealousy. In his indifference to their hearts he became the prototypical man and husband! How many wives have found their husbands to be a Jacob in just these ways: unable or unwilling to enter into her suffering, uninterested in cultivating her heart, squandering his role as the leader in his marriage and home to leave his wife to fend for herself.

Rachel, aching for children, abandoned any real trust in God or submission to him and resorted to surrogacy. Jacob knew better. He should have told her that such was not done in his family; that his grandfather had tried that only when his faith in the Lord had failed and it had turned out very badly. He wasn't about to make the same mistake. But, alas, like Abraham, but with less excuse, he went along with it. Later Rachel, still lacking any confidence in the Lord, resorted to "magic" and attempted to conceive a child with the use of mandrakes. Like all magic, mandrakes were a crock and didn't do a thing for her. But the effort was a dismal display of pagan superstition. To acquire the mandrakes she had to sell her husband to her enemy. So much for these heroes of the covenant!

But disappointing as this history is in so many ways, it is out of this mess of a family that was to come the twelve tribes, the nation of Israel, the twelve disciples, and the people of God. *This* is the family history of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world and of his church. It is in this mess of a family, if you can believe it, that God's promises to Abraham and through Abraham to the world would take "a great step toward their fulfillment." [Wenham, 250]

And what is the lesson of all this but that where sin abounded, grace much more abounded; that God's mercy, joined to God's power, can take even our worst and make something beautiful and wonderful from it. *And this will prove to be the story of the Christian church in the world.* To one degree or another, the gospel has overcome the sin and undeserving of vast multitudes of people to bring salvation to the world. In a way and to a degree we never fully appreciate, the story of the church, the people of God in this world is the story of God making a silk purse out of a sow's ear. I want you to think of this history as your history and of your own family history as so like this in a variety of ways.

Those of you who have listened to me for any length of time know the admiration that I have for Alexander Whyte, the Scottish pastor who died in 1921. I discovered Whyte's books of sermons in the early 1980s and have, over the years since, collected and read virtually everything he ever

published and read much of it more than once. Indeed, I even have a volume of his sermons that were never published. I'm not sure anyone else living today has read these sermons! It is a bound copy of some sermons he preached from the pulpit of Free St. George's, Edinburgh in the autumn of 1881 written in the hand of one of his parishioners. They were apparently taken down in shorthand as they were being preached and then written out in long hand later. The evidence for that is that one of the sermons in the volume remains in shorthand. I have stood in his Edinburgh church and wondered what his magnificent sermons sounded like in his own Scottish brogue.

Whyte's books are all simply series of sermons first preached to his congregation and only later published in book form. No one preached like Alexander Whyte! He was no expositor of Holy Scripture. He never preached through books of the Bible and rarely expounded a text. His were subject sermons. But no one preached sin and grace in as arresting, interesting, and searching way as Whyte. He regarded himself as a specialist in sin and if I ever begin to feel that I am thinking too well of myself, I have only to pull a volume of Whyte sermons from the shelf and before I have read even a few pages he will have me facing up to the moral catastrophe of my life. He was such an expert because he was such an honest observer of his own sins. Whyte once told an astonished audience in Edinburgh that he had discovered the name of the wickedest man in Edinburgh. "His name," he said in a whisper, "is Alexander Whyte." [*A Consuming Fire*, 14] To whom much is given, much is required. That single fact makes great sinners of often much-admired people! Whyte's sermons on prayer, his four volumes of sermons on the characters in John Bunyan's great books, and his marvelously suggestive sermons on *The Walk, Character, and Conversation of our Lord Jesus Christ*, are and will remain forever classics of Christian devotion. I owe a great debt to that man, as did a great many in his own day and a great many since. I am anxious to meet him and to express my appreciation when I get to heaven.

Alexander Whyte was born out of wedlock in a day when that was a much heavier burden to bear than it is today. Prof. Bruce Waltke, whose lectures on Genesis, later edited and published as a commentary, have taught me much, tells of learning that his grandmother had come to the United States as an immigrant because she had conceived a child out of wedlock and, in those days, they felt such shame over such a thing that she left her homeland to live out her life in another part of the world. Well so it was in the days of Alexander Whyte's birth and upbringing.

As his biographer observed, "Many Scottish boys have risen from the poorest surroundings to high distinction in the most various fields; but in few cases were their early years overcast not only by straitening poverty, but by this other shadow." [Barbour, 15] Whyte's father, John Whyte was willing to marry his mother, Janet Thomson, but she refused. She believed, and apparently correctly, that marrying John would simply compound the error of which she was already guilty. John Whyte's life, alas, showed little evidence of true Christian devotion. So the boy would grow up with a different last name than that of the mother who raised him, the two of them alone in a house and together in a community in a day when children born out of wedlock were regarded in a very different way than they are regarded nowadays. John Whyte left Scotland for America before his son was born where years later he would fight in the Civil War and spend time as a prisoner in a Confederate prison. He would eventually return to Scotland for a visit and meet his son for the first and only time. John Whyte, for reasons unknown, would eventually die by suicide, a fact either unknown or unmentioned by his biographers. [M. Haykin, *A Consuming Fire: The Piety of Alexander Whyte*, 4]

Alexander's mother was a peasant and had to work hard – weaving in the winter, field work in the summer – to support herself and her young son. And it was only when she had earned a few extra shillings that she could afford to send Alec to school from time to time. At one point she was obliged to sell some of her few blankets in order to provide food and clothing for her son and herself. She would never marry, investing her life instead in the education and spiritual culture of her son. She was a principled Christian and Whyte would later say that he was raised “to love the Covenanters.” And they would say of him after his death that to know Alexander Whyte was to know what the Covenanters were like in their finest hours. [James Barrie] Another described him after his death as “a Puritan risen from the dead.” [John Kelman]

Dr. Whyte would later write in one of his books,

“Our Lord's first humiliation on earth was his being born, and that in a low condition.” [You may recognize that wording from the *Shorter Catechism*] Now, all his followers do not have that forerunning humiliation of his ordained to them. It is only some specially chosen men who have that eminent opportunity...offered to them.” [*The Spiritual Life*, 214-215]

He was one of those few men who was born in an especially low condition, having been conceived in sin, and raised by an unwed mother in a world in which that was just not done by respectable people. To me that is another beautiful picture of how the grace of God overcomes the sins of men. A bad beginning became the foundation of everything good and wonderful. Is this not what we mean by the grace of God? Here, in the case of the sons of Jacob, a highly inauspicious beginning was not simply overcome, it became the salvation of the world! The Lord Jesus, remember, was the descendant of Leah's fourth son!

Florence and I have illegitimacy in our ancestral heritage and other sins as well. My grandfather was raised by his farmer father who was very foolish with money. My grandfather, who became an influential Presbyterian preacher, spent much of his adult life paying off his father's debts. And, of course, every family has such stories to tell; and, perhaps more to the point, each of us hands on such a story to our children and grandchildren; a story of our own folly, our own bad beginnings, our own sins that fouled the family history in this way or in that.

And, of course, what is true of individuals and families is also true of the church. Indeed, in this particular case, in the family history of Israel, the nuclear family and the church were a unity. Our church, Faith Presbyterian Church, has a history and it too is marked by sins that should make us hang our head in shame. Many of you will not be aware that years ago there was a congregational meeting in this very sanctuary where we are gathered today, in which members of this congregation, angry with one another, actually cursed each other, in this very house of worship, in these very pews in which they had worshipped God the previous Lord's Day. *That* is our history and it was out of that congregational meeting, dispiriting as it was, that the church was reborn. *Every person, every family, and every church has skeletons in his, her, their, or its closet!*

But here is the promise of the gospel, of God's forgiveness, of his compassion coupled with his sovereign power by which he overcomes our sins and the tawdry circumstances of our past and our

family's past and our church's past to make something pure and good and important and pleasing to him out of it.

Here is Moses narrating for his contemporaries as well as for us the origin of the twelve tribes of Israel and from beginning to end it is a disgusting story. But out of it, by the grace of God, came the people of God, the "Israel of God" as Paul calls the Christian church in Galatians 6. In other words, this is your history and mine; this is where we came from: an absent and irresponsible father, shrewish, jealous, and stupid mothers, childish jealousies, disgusting bargains, bizarre forays into superstition, and all of it in apparent indifference to the will and the honor of God.

There was pain here, to be sure, a great deal of pain and heartbreak, but out of that pain came the eventual happiness of vast multitudes of human beings. The rest of the Bible will ring the changes on this theme. In the world of God's grace no one is bound by the past, by the sins of the past, even by the worst and most ugly and destructive sins of the past. They may bring pain in the moment, to be sure, but they are no hindrance to God. Levi, whose name "Attached" stemmed from his mother's vain hope of her husband's love, did finally become attached; but his attachment was to the sanctuary of God. He became the father of every faithful priest and minister who through the ages has served the church of God. God sanctified his name and made something beautiful out of something tawdry and pathetic. And so with the rest, Judah especially, as we will see. The names of these sons of Jacob adorn the gate of the heavenly city! Who would believe it, were we not assured that it is so in the Word of God?

Our task, yours and mine, brothers and sisters, is to live in the reality of this divine grace that transcends and transforms a sinful past. Our reputation in the world should be, must be that we are the one community of human beings in which one's past is never held against him or her and, even more, in which we fully expect the errors and sins of one's past to become the stuff out of which the Lord will make a splendid future, in which an embarrassing past only increases the possibilities for a still more glorious future.

So, brothers and sisters, search your mind and heart to be sure that you are not living in bondage to your past – for whatever reason – but in openness to and the expectation of the new thing, the happy future that God will bring out of the ashes of your past. His mercies are new every morning, he does not remember our sins, and he delights to show mercy. To walk *with that God*, to trust him for our future, is the immeasurable privilege of our Christian faith.