

Family Chaos

Genesis 30:1-24

We have all been hurt by the selfish words and actions of those near to us. The depth of this sort of pain can often disillusion us. Feelings of anger and revenge seem justified. Evil seems to naturally perpetuate more evil. Before long, the world in which we live becomes chaos. When this occurs, we often conclude that either God does not understand us, or He doesn't care. Either way, we begin to lose hope that there is any true path out of the mire in which we live.

Jesus boldly claims to all who are stuck in the chaos of sin, that He has come that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Jesus' words are not a gimmick. He backed them up with His own death and resurrection. Jesus alone has the power to bring life out of chaos.

The story of Jacob's family occurred some two thousand years before Jesus walked the earth. But Jesus' words of promise are the fulfillment of God's promises to Jacob. We live some two thousand years after Jesus ascended into heaven. Chaos still surrounds us. And we need Jesus' words of promise and hope more than ever.

Last week, we saw that Jacob's family did not get off to a good start. God sees that Leah is unloved. And He is merciful to her, giving her four sons. With the birth of her fourth, Leah is brought to praise the Lord. Rather than craving the love of Jacob, Leah finds joy in the Lord. You might think that after such a wonderful declaration of "contentment and joy in Yahweh" that Leah's sanctification is complete. You would be wrong. Her sanctification is only beginning.

Sometimes, when we are alone with the Lord, we can offer ourselves to Him with great zeal and passion. And we mean what we are proclaiming to Him. But then, after we come down off the mountain of our spiritual high, we enter back into life. And in life, we have to interact with people. And the people around us are themselves dealing with their own sinful attitudes. And rather than maintain our attitude of praise, we are plunged right back into our sinfulness. And often, it is in our family relationships that our ugliness most manifests itself. This is where we pick of the story in Genesis 30:1.

When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children,
she envied her sister.
She said to Jacob,
"Give me children,

or
I shall die!"

Initially, it was Leah who was unloved. We are not explicitly told, but it is a good guess that Rachel was indifferent to her sister's pain. It was not Rachel, but God who was moved by Leah's plight. God has compassion on Leah by giving her children. Leah is happy. And you would think that Rachel would also be happy. Instead, we find that Rachel wants what Leah has. Rachel wanted children. There is nothing wrong with her wanting children. But the right thing would have been to pour out her frustration to God. She ought to have pleaded with God to open her womb as he had the womb of Leah. She ought to have been happy for Leah. And she ought to have been thankful that she had a husband who loved her. Instead, she was filled with jealousy towards Leah.

We must remember that God gives us Scripture as a mirror into our own heart. We should be able to see ourselves in Rachel's attitude. Are we not restless? Do we not struggle to be content with the good that God has given us? Do we not constantly fight against our own forms of jealousy? Rachel's problem is universal. It lives in all of us.

Rachel thinks that her problem is in the situation. If she can change the world around her, then life will be good. She does not recognize that the true problem lies within her own heart, and in her relationship with God. Rachel thinks that just having children will fix the restlessness within her.

I must take a minute and explain how current "woke" culture would see this story. Woke culture would see Rachel as being bound by the patriarchal society around her. She has bought into the lie that having children is the key to happiness. If she wants happiness, she must break free from this bondage of family as the Bible defines it.

If this patriarchal ideal can be deconstructed, then happiness will result. Woke culture is simply wrong. Deconstructing the ideal will not make you happy. Pursuing your conception of love at all costs will not make you fulfilled. Being angry at those who hold to the ideal will not make you content.

The answer is not found in turning away from God's ideal. But neither will having the external ideal fix the problem of the heart. We desperately need God. And we need him to work inside of us. The desire for children is a good desire. But, just because the ideal of bearing children is good, does not mean that God won't intentionally take us through the pain and frustration of not being able to bear children, to expose the deeper issues of our heart. Rachel's frustration could be a means to drive her into the arms of God. Instead, she fights to change her situation.

Listen to her demand to Jacob, "Give me children, or I die."

Something is terribly wrong with Rachel's attitude. But it is not a problem of having a desire for children. Were not children part of God's Covenant Promises?

When God gave the promised blessing, He promised children. To have no offspring is viewed covenantally as a terrible thing. Children are a blessing.

This is why in the Gospel, we are also to yearn for offspring – spiritual offspring. As Christians, we should want God to use us such that through our witness others will come to know Jesus. We should not want to go through this life having no offspring of any kind. But as good as it is to bear children, both physical and spiritual, what is more important is to find our significance and joy in God alone.

Rachel craves significance through children. But the truth that she cannot see, is that she needs to know God.

John 17:3 ³ And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Rachel seeks to control her world, and her husband, to fix the pain within her. Her demand has the opposite effect that she intends.

² 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?"

She was hoping to control her husband and get what she wanted. Instead, her own selfishness begins to drive a wedge in her marriage. Rachel's demand is sinful. But so is Jacob's response. We cannot say that Rachel's sin "caused" Jacob's sin. That would be going too far. But it is most certainly a reaction to Rachel's sin.

What we have brewing is chaos – family chaos. Jacob's response is technically correct. But it is terribly wrong. He is speaking to his wife. She is the one that he loves more than any other in this world. And he does not share in her suffering in the least.

Jacob has been aware of the animosity between his two wives. But so far, those tensions have not affected him all that much. Now Rachel is making demands of him. Instead of having compassion and directing Rachel to God, he becomes angry.

Why is Jacob angry? Because the problems of his wife are now affecting him. And when it gets down to it, most of us really only care that we be treated well.

Jacob is not responding to his wife in an understanding way. He just wants her to be nice to him again.

Remember, God is not finished with Jacob yet either. We have been told that Jacob loved Rachel. But my guess is that Jacob really loved how Rachel made him feel. Now that she is not making him feel so good, the depth of his love for her is being challenged. Husbands, we are not only to love our wives when they make us feel great inside. We are to love them even in their own weakness and sin.

At this point, the family relationships are like a ball of twine that gets all tangled. The knots are so twisted that you begin to think that throwing the whole ball away would be easier than taking the time to unravel the knots. Rachel did not intend this, but her own jealousy is working to destroy her relationship with Jacob. Jacob might have responded with compassion and directed Rachel to the LORD in a gentle way. Instead, they both continue to pursue their own personal ambitions.

3 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."

4 So she gave him her servant Bilhah
 as a wife,
 and
 Jacob went in to her.

5 And
 Bilhah conceived
 and
 bore Jacob a son.

We have already seen in the example of Sarah and Hagar that this solution was culturally acceptable. But just because something is culturally acceptable does not make it right. Rachel has bought into the lie that a surrogate child will remove her jealousy. Rachel is deceiving herself. Yet, how ironic is the mystery of God's providence? God will not allow Rachel to conceive, but Bilhah has no trouble whatsoever. And when Bilhah does bear a son for Rachel, Rachel interprets it all wrong.

6 Then Rachel said,
"God has judged me,
and
has also heard my voice
and
given me a son."

Therefore she called his name **Dan**.

7 Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again
and
bore Jacob a second son.

8 Then Rachel said,
"With mighty wrestlings
I have wrestled with my sister
and
have prevailed."

So she called his name **Naphtali**.

Bilhah is able to bear two sons for Rachel. Rachel interprets this as God being favorable to her. She names Bilhah's first son, Dan, which means "God has judged." She names Bilhah's second son Naphtali, which means "struggles of God."

Rachel is convinced that God is now on her side. Why? Because she got what she wanted. She is so blinded to her own sin she views her "wrestlings with Leah" as "divine wrestlings." The ESV says "mighty wrestlings", but the Hebrew literally reads "wrestlings of God". Rachel is convinced that God has fought for her in her battle against Leah. It is so easy for our sinful hearts to read providence incorrectly. Rachel thinks the battle is to prevail over her sister. What is the true battle? The true battle is always the same. It is to see our own sinfulness and need of God. Now, we are taken back to Leah and her response to Rachel's jealousy.

9 When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children,
she took her servant Zilpah
and
gave her to Jacob as a wife.

10 Then Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son.

11 And Leah said,

"Good fortune has come!"
so she called his name **Gad**.

12 Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son.

13 And Leah said,

"Happy am I!
For women have called me happy."
So she called his name **Asher**.

One sin leads to another. Chaos perpetuates chaos. Leah sees Rachel's behavior and imitates it. Rather than continue in her previous attitude of simply praising Yahweh, Leah responds in kind. She believes the lie that Rachel has succeeded in prevailing over her. The old feelings of not being loved by Jacob return. Her previous words of praise were sincere. But now that she is living life, her praise is forgotten.

We saw Rachel's capacity for jealousy. Now we see Leah's capacity for jealousy. And this jealousy is aroused by a comparison with Rachel. Things were fine while she was bearing children and Rachel was not. But now the tide is turned. Rachel is bearing children and she is not.

O how fickle we are. Have you ever been having a good day, only to see it ruined by hearing the news of someone else having a better day? Now all the insecurities flood in. You come to church and you thought your family was doing pretty well. But then you look around and all the other families look so perfect. Then you start feeling insecure about yourself, and your family.

Rather than counting the blessings of the four children that she does have, Leah sets out to outdo her sister. She is not very creative. She engages her own servant, Zilpah. Leah now, through Zilpah, is bearing children to Jacob. And because Leah's efforts succeed, she too thinks God has blessed her. Gad – Good fortune, Asher – Happy

Leah thinks that God has moved over to her side again. She revels in the thought that she will now be envied by women. Chaos begets chaos.

Can you see God's dilemma? He is intent on giving us blessing. But when He gives blessing, our sinful hearts twist and destroy it. This is the family God has chosen to build into a family for Himself.

Beginning in verse 14, we are shown the extent of our human attempts to get what we want.

14 In the days of wheat harvest

Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field

and
brought them to his mother Leah.

Now the children are brought into the chaos. Reuben is loyal to his mother. Whenever a man has more than one wife, the children often become loyal to their biological mother. Kids often want to fix the problem of their parents' problems. But they do not always have the wisdom to do so.

Reuben knows that his mom is sad because she has ceased bearing children. He has heard stories of how there is this plant that increases sexual desire and fertility. He goes out looking for some of this plant and is able to find some. This is pretty amazing in itself as the plant is not native to that region. But, according to God's providence, he is able to find the mandrakes. And he takes them to his mother. Somehow, Rachel learns that Leah has the mandrakes and wants them for herself.

Then Rachel said to Leah,
"Please give me some of your son's mandrakes."

Leah has no intention of being kind or generous to Rachel.
She has her own ambitions.

15 But
 She(Leah) 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."

At this point Leah and Rachel hate each other. How sad. I can imagine these two in childhood playing. Now, sin has plummeted their relationship into chaos. They are consumed with their own selfish interests: Leah is trying to gain Jacob's foremost affection. Rachel is trying to gain children.

Rachel has manipulated Jacob into no longer having marital relations with Leah. She has Jacob all for herself. But it is not resulting in children. Maybe the mandrakes will be the solution! She is willing to give Leah rights to sex with Jacob in exchange for what she believes to be the fertility drug.

Whether mandrakes have the ability to increase fertility or even produce the desire for lovemaking is open for debate. It seems most likely that the abilities of the plant are vastly over-estimated. It is best to assume that these mandrakes represent our tendency to trust in superstitions rather than the God of the Covenant.

At this point, Jacob is being used and manipulated. He has lost all authority in the home.

The wives are in complete control.

- 16 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.
- 17 And
God listened to Leah,
and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son.
- 18 Leah said,
"God has given me my wages
because I gave my servant to my husband."
So she called his name **Issachar**.
- 19 And Leah conceived again,
and she bore Jacob a sixth son.
- 20 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**.
- 21 Afterward she bore a daughter
and
called her name Dinah.

Once Jacob learns that Rachel has given her permission, he willingly sleeps with Leah.

Whether he does so out of love of Leah, or a desire to have sons, or simply to keep his wives from fighting, we do not know. It seems that the rights that Leah purchased were for more than one night.

Leah names her fifth son, Issachar, which means “hired”. Again, Leah is interpreting providence wrongly. Consider this somewhat silly scenario:

Someone might skip church to go to Wal-Mart. While they are going through the aisles they find a wonderful deal. What do they conclude? God must have wanted me to skip church and go to Wal-Mart.

Dinah is the only daughter mentioned. She is introduced here because she will be a major player in Genesis 34. This seems to close out Leah’s part in the story. At this point, you might think that God would want nothing to do with the family of Jacob. He certainly has seen enough evil to merit his condemnation of each of them.

But then we come to verse 22.

22 Then God remembered Rachel,
and
God listened to her
and
opened her womb.
23 She conceived
and
bore a son
and
said,
"God has taken away my reproach."
24 And
she called his name **Joseph**,
saying, "May the LORD add to me another son!"

At this point Rachel has still not borne Jacob any children herself. Jacob has 10 children to 3 women, but none to Rachel. The text tells us that God remembered Rachel.

This is important because it is not a statement coming from the mouth of Leah or Rachel. These are words of the narrator. That means that they give us the Divine Perspective.

These words are also full of “theological meaning”.

God had not forgotten Rachel like we forget where we put our keys. God is acting towards Rachel in accordance with His covenant promises. In Genesis 8, God remembered Noah when He was drying the land. And in Genesis 19, God remembered Abraham when He was sparing Lot from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Later, in Exodus, God will remember his people when he leads them up out of Egypt. So, the words, “And God remembered” are words indicating that God is interceding according to His covenant love.

God remembered Rachel with His Covenant Love. God is treating Rachel as a child of the covenant. The text also tells us that God listened to her. Rachel was trusting in mandrakes. But there must have been some sincere crying out to God in her frustrations. It is not the mandrakes, but God’s gracious hand that has given her a son.

Rachel feels that her reproach/shame has been taken away. Rachel is not somehow magically fixed at this point. But we do see that God is active in her life.

She names her son Joseph. (God has taken away my reproach.) Joseph will become the major player in the final chapters of Genesis. It is in a family full of chaos, that God continues to work according to His covenant love. In a chapter full of family chaos, we hear these quiet words, “And God remembered Rachel”.

How does this apply to us? It would be nice if all our families were full of harmony and peace. We should use Genesis 30 as an example of what not to do. Rather than jealousy and competition, we should act towards one another in love and understanding and patience. And we should strive to remind ourselves that the true source of our unhappiness lies within.

Genesis 30 works like a mirror exposing our own sinful attitudes. We have recorded these bad examples so that we can better see ourselves in them. And, by the working of the Holy Spirit, we can repent of them, seeking to be more like our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

How important is the cross of Christ? In the cross, we can find full and complete forgiveness. And in the cross, we see our own heart of selfishness crucified with Christ. We can say with Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ...” But the truth is that, even as those who are united to Jesus Christ, we all fall short of the ideal. Either through our own sin, or through the sin of those around us, we find ourselves in chaos. And in the midst of our chaos, the question we must ask is whether or not God can still work to

redeem a people for Himself? The answer is “absolutely, yes”! He has been doing this from the very beginning!

Renew your faith in Jesus Christ. Do not expect a quick fix. Do not expect that God will undo all the chaos. But, even in the midst of family chaos, God will remember you.

While we live in this world full of chaos, the path to happiness always involves a deeper trust in God’s Covenant Love. It is not found in getting what you want. God does give us many good things in this world. We should be thankful for them. But our sin always tells us that it is not enough. Our sin always compares itself to what others have.

We must learn that it is our own sin that is our greatest enemy. The sins of others can hurt us, but they cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Even through the sinfulness of Rachel and Leah and Jacob, God is working to fulfill his promises to Abraham, and to us.

God did not choose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because they were already “eager to do what is good”. Rather, being eager to do what is good only comes as the result of God’s work of grace in them.

“Embedded in this agonizing story of people’s emptiness and self-inflicted pain is God’s gracious gift of hope. These people have half-lives, blocked by sorrow, hostility, and competition... ‘To those longing for love or stagnated by a sterile world, the faith offers not blame or jargon but one who has come that we might have a full life (John 10:10)...’ Waltke 415.