

Brides, Babies & Bickering: A Home in Chaos

Text: Gen. 29:30-30:24

Introduction:

1. Genesis 29-31 contains the record of Jacob's twenty long years away from the land of Canaan dwelling in Haran with his uncle Laban.
2. This section traces the development of Jacob's family, particularly the birth of his children. While there are some commendable things we can discern in Jacob's home at this time, on the whole, we are presented with a home that is filled with heartache, strife and division. These things are written for our "learning" (Rom. 15:4) so that we might be warned against making the same mistakes and also be encouraged with what God's grace can do with a very imperfect family.
3. We will study this account of Jacob's home and the lessons we can learn under two simple headings:
 - The Picture of Jacob's Home
 - The Practical Lessons from Jacob's Home

I. THE PICTURE OF JACOB'S HOME (29:30-30:24)

Let's survey the text and seek to set the scene of what was going on in Jacob's home at this time. It won't take us long to discern that something is very wrong with much of what we see going on in Jacob's home.

Jacob's home was beset with:

A. Favouritism (29:30-35)

1. The record of Jacob's favouritism (Vs. 30)
 - a. This is the sad reality in a polygamous marriage. Inevitably the husband ends up showing greater affection to one woman more than the other. Jacob loved Rachel "more than Leah". This helps us make sense of the word 'hated' in verse 31. In this context the word 'hated' simply means that he loved Leah less than he loved Rachel. It is a term of comparison. It does not refer to hatred in the sense of a murderous, malicious hatred.
 - b. The same was true in Elkanah's home where he loved Hannah more than Peninnah (See 1 Sam. 1:1-5).
2. The response to Jacob's favouritism (Vs. 31-35)

God took pity on Leah's plight and opened her womb so that the blessing of children would ease her pain as the least loved wife in the marriage. Leah had four sons in quick succession and named them according to her sentiments at the time of their birth. They reveal both Leah's faith in God as well as her heartache and suffering over her relationship to her husband Jacob.

 - a. Reuben ("see a son") (Vs. 32)
 - i. Her expression of faith (Godward) – "Surely the LORD hath looked upon my affliction". Leah recognized the goodness of God in giving her Reuben to give her joy in

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- the midst of affliction. Children can be a real comfort in the midst of pain and difficulty.
- ii. Her expression of hope (Jacobward) – “now therefore my husband will love me”. Like any wife, Leah’s heart craved the love of her husband and she was hopeful that the fact she had born him a son would give her favour in his eyes.
- b. Simeon (“hearing”) (Vs. 33)
- i. Her expression of faith (Godward) – “Because the LORD hath heard that I was hated, he hath therefore given me this son also”. Leah again recognizes the compassion of God in her difficult situation. She knows that God has taken note of her trial and blessed her. She also views her children as gifts from God.
 - ii. Her expression of hope (Jacobward) – none noted for Simeon.
- c. Levi (“joined”) (Vs. 34)
- i. Her expression of faith (Godward) – none noted for Levi.
 - ii. Her expression of hope (Jacobward) – she is hopeful that Jacob will be joined to her now that she has born him three sons.
- d. Judah (“praise”) (Vs. 35)
- i. Her expression of faith (Godward) – “Now will I praise the LORD”. Leah praises God for His goodness to her in giving her a fourth son.
 - ii. Her expression of hope (Jacobward) – none noted for Judah.
 - iii. Note: It is fitting that Judah be called “praise” as it would be through the line of Judah that the promised Messiah would come. Christ is called “the lion of the tribe of Judah” (Rev. 5:5). Interestingly, the Messianic line was continued through one of Leah’s sons, not Rachel’s.
 - iv. It is noted that at this time there was a pause in Leah’s childbearing

B. Jealousy (30:1-2)

1. The stimulation of her envy (Vs. 1a). Leah’s fruitfulness in contrast to her own barrenness stirred up a spirit of envy in Rachel. Matthew Henry defines envy as, “grieving at the good of another”. While very human, this was not a spiritual response to the trial she was going through. Envy is a terrible heart attitude to entertain! Proverbs 27:4 “Wrath *is* cruel, and anger *is* outrageous; but who *is* able to stand before envy?”
2. The expression of her envy (Vs. 1b). Rachel unloads on Jacob in an emotional outburst – “Give me children, or else I die”. Sadly, Rachel would die giving birth to her second child Benjamin. It appears that at least initially, Rachel did not handle her infertility prayerfully but apparently that eventually changes as “God remembered Rachel, and God **hearkened** to her, and opened her womb” (Vs. 22).
3. The admonition of her envy (Vs. 2)

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- a. Jacob was provoked by Rachel's words and responded in anger. What Jacob said in response was right but his angry spirit was wrong.
- b. Jacob clearly recognised that it was God who had withheld children from Rachel at this time.

C. Rivalry (Vs. 3-13)

These verses record the carnal tug of war between Rachel and her sister Leah as they vied to be first place in Jacob's affections. Sadly, the two handmaids would get tangled as pawns in this nasty game of chess between the two sister wives.

1. Jacob marries Bilhah (Vs. 3-8). This was an accepted practice in the culture of that time that a woman who was barren could have a child by proxy through her servant girl. We have already studied how Sarah followed the same course of action with her servant girl Hagar and the disastrous results (See Genesis 16). Rachel's emotional angst over not being able to have a child clouded her judgment and drove her to pressurize Jacob to follow a similar course. Jacob yields to the demand and Bilhah joins an already overcrowded marriage as his third wife. Bilhah bore Jacob two sons:
 - a. Dan ("judgement") (Vs. 3-6). Rachel wrongly attributes the birth of Dan as vindication for her sinful behaviour in giving Bilhah to Jacob. From the outward appearance of things, Rachel had succeeded. She got a baby by proxy through her handmaid Bilhah! How often Christians can be guilty of the same mistake of interpreting the apparent "success" of a sinful endeavour from a pragmatic point of view as evidence of God's blessing. All too often we try and put God's name on things He has nothing to do with!
 - b. Naphtali ("wrestlings") (Vs. 7-8). This gives us a window into the bitter envy that was consuming Rachel in this whole affair. She saw herself in virtual wrestling match with her sister Leah over how many children she was able to produce for Jacob. What a sad picture!
2. Jacob marries Zilpah (Vs. 9-13). Leah notes the success of Rachel's scheme with Bilhah so decides she would do the same with her handmaid Zilpah. Zilpah bears two children to Jacob.
 - a. Gad ("troop").
 - b. Asher ("happy"). By this stage Leah is motivated on a more carnal plain – one of competitiveness with her sister and how more children will enhance her reputation in the eyes of others.

D. Scheming (Vs. 14-24)

1. The mandrake incident (Vs. 14-16)
 - a. Reuben, who was evidently a young lad by this time (probably 5-7 years old), finds mandrakes in the field during wheat harvest and brings them to his mother Leah.
 - b. The only other mention we have of this plant outside this chapter is in the Song of Solomon where reference is made to its pleasant odour – "The mandrakes give a smell, and at our gates

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are all manner of pleasant *fruits*, new and old, *which* I have laid up for thee, O my beloved.” (Song 7:13)

- c. Henry Morris explains that “The mandrake is a small, orange-coloured, berrylike fruit, much esteemed in ancient times as an aphrodisiac and inducer of fertility. It has been called the “love-apple” and, in Western countries, the “May-apple”. It has also been used as a narcotic and emetic, especially its large roots. It was no doubt because of its supposed value in promoting fertility that both Leah and Rachel desired it.”
 - d. Rachel, believing that the mandrakes Reuben had found might help her fertility, requests them of Leah. Leah, superstitiously hoping to use them herself, responds negatively. Her response again highlights the tension that existed between her and Rachel.
 - e. Rachel offers her Jacob for the night in exchange for the mandrakes. Clearly this indicates that Jacob spent the majority of his nights in Rachel’s tent. Leah agrees and make sure Jacob is made aware of it when he gets home from the field in the evening.
2. Leah bears three more children (Vs. 17-21)
 - a. Issachar (“reward”) (Vs. 17-18)
 - i. Issachar was an answer to Leah’s prayer – “And God hearkened unto Leah”. Leah recognised this – “God hath given me my hire”. We are amazed at the kindness and graciousness of God working in this tragic scene.
 - ii. Like Rachel, Leah wrongly interprets this as God’s blessing on her for giving her maiden to her husband.
 - b. Zebulun (“dwelling”) (Vs. 19-20). Again, Leah acknowledges this son as a gift from God and expresses the hope that Jacob would now dwell with her because she had given him six sons.
 - c. Dina (“judgment”) (Vs. 21). Leah finally gives birth to a daughter and calls her Dina. She will feature in a significant way in the drama that unfolds in chapter 34.

E. Grace (Vs. 22-24)

We are amazed at how God could us a family like this but that’s the grace of God. While this account is a testament to human sin and error, it is also laced with the grace and goodness of God to undeserving people.

1. God takes pity on Rachel (Vs. 22)
 - a. God “remembered” her.
 - b. God “hearkened to her” (He answered her prayers).
 - c. God “opened her womb”.
 - d. In the end it was God’s might, not Reuben’s mandrakes that gave Rachel a son.
2. Rachel conceives and gives birth to Joseph (Vs. 23-24)
 - a. The name Joseph means “adding”. It appears that Rachel had faith that now that God had granted her request for one son, He would be faithful and give her a second.
 - b. Joseph was destined by God to be a very special and godly son. Thirteen chapters of Genesis are dedicated to the record of

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Joseph's life which is a similar number of chapters to the life of Abraham and exceeds the record of Isaac and Jacob.

II. THE PRACTICAL LESSONS FROM JACOB'S HOME (29:30-30:24)

These things are written for our "learning" (Rom. 15:4) and our "admonition" (1 Cor. 10:11). We can learn from both the positives and the problems (negatives) of Jacob's home at this time.

A. The Positives of Jacob's Home

1. There was faith in this home

The faith of the patriarchs and matriarchs is highlighted in this passage, especially as it related to their perspectives on conception and child bearing. The saints of old had a God-centred rather than a man-centred view of conception and childbearing.

a. They viewed children as a blessing from God. We do not get the slightest hint in this passage, or in the Word of God as a whole, of the prevailing attitude in our society today towards children. The saints of old believed a fruitful womb were amongst God's chiefest blessings one could receive. This is a biblical and godly perspective on children.

i. Psalm 127:3-5 "Lo, children *are* an heritage of the LORD: *and* the fruit of the womb *is his* reward. As arrows *are* in the hand of a mighty man; so *are* children of the youth.

Happy *is* the man that hath his quiver full of them:

they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate."

ii. 1 Chronicles 26:4-5 "Moreover the sons of **Obededom** were, Shemaiah the firstborn, Jehozabad the second, Joah the third, and Sacar the fourth, and Nethaneel the fifth, Ammiel the sixth, Issachar the seventh, Peulthai the eighth: **for God blessed him.**"

b. They believed conception and childbearing were gifts from God. This theme is laced throughout the whole account. It was this perspective that drove both Leah and Rachel to seek God in prayer for children (30:17, 22).

i. 29:32 "Surely **the LORD** hath looked upon my affliction"

ii. Vs. 33 "Because **the LORD** hath heard that I was hated, he hath therefore **given** me this son also"

iii. Vs. 35 "Now will I praise **the LORD**"

iv. 30:6 "**God** hath judged me, and hath also heard my voice, and hath **given me a son**"

v. Vs. 18 "**God** hath **given** me my hire"

vi. Vs. 20 "**God** hath **endowed** me with a good dowry"

vii. Vs. 23 "**God** hath taken away my reproach"

viii. Vs. 24 "**The LORD shall** add to me another son"

c. They believed in the sovereignty of God over the womb. All through this account the opening of the womb and the giving of conception are attributed to the work of God. We need to remember this in an age when most have been brainwashed by a humanistic society to think they can just turn babies on and off

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as they please. Those who struggle with the pain of infertility in marriage know all too well that conception is not something that can be taken for granted.

- i. 29:31 “And when **the LORD** saw that Leah was hated, **he opened her womb**”
- ii. 30:2 “And Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, **Am I in God’s stead**, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?”
- iii. Vs. 17 “And **God hearkened unto Leah**, and **she conceived**”
- iv. Vs. 22 “And **God remembered Rachel**, and **God hearkened to her**, and **opened her womb.**”
- v. Note: The same God who opened and closed the womb back then can do the same in marriages today if couples will trust God with this area of their lives. Remember, God desires godly offspring – “And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? **That he might seek a godly seed.**” (Mal. 2:15) Before you blindly follow the wisdom and philosophy of the world in relation to childbearing, pause and seek the Lord and His will for your union!

2. There was grace at work in this home. Beautiful touches of God’s grace and mercy are seen throughout this account (29:31; 30:17, 22). In fact, we wonder at the mercy and grace of God that he would go on to refer to Himself as the God of “Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” and use Jacob’s 12 sons as the founders of the 12 tribes of Israel. Those 12 names will one day be on the 12 gates in the New Jerusalem! (See Revelation 21:12) We are amazed that God’s grace could make something out of a family like this but we should also be amazed that God would save sinful, broken people like us and use us with our many faults and failings.

B. The Problems in Jacob’s Home

We can also learn much from the failures in Jacob’s home. They serve as a warning to us of the chaos that can come into a home that is not built and structured according to God’s wisdom. On the balance of things, I think we can say that there is more wrong than there is right with the picture this passage presents of Jacob’s home. This home was filled with strife, contention, disunity, envy, anger, tension and disorder. What were some of the root causes that produced these bitter fruits in Jacob’s home? We can identify several clear problems in this home. These work in order from the fruit to the root; from above the surface to below the surface.

1. The problem of carnal rather than spiritual responses to provocations. This is highlighted in:

- a. Rachel’s envy of Leah and emotional outburst at Jacob (30:1). We understand the humanness of Rachel’s response but she could have responded with trust in God and prayer instead of jealousy and emotional outbursts of discontent to her husband. Proverbs warns, 19:13 “A foolish son *is* the calamity of his father: and the contentions of a wife *are* a continual dropping.”

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(19:13) “A continual dropping in a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike.” (27:15)

- b. Jacob’s angry response to Rachel (Vs. 2). It wasn’t right for Rachel to explode at Jacob but neither was it right for him to react in anger. His council was right but his spirit was wrong!
- c. Rachel and Leah’s nasty striving (Vs. 3-13). Instead of loving each other as sisters and yielding their rights to the Lord in the situation, they descended into a nasty tit for tat power struggle between each other.

2. The problem of a marriage that deviated from God’s design.

Most of the problems we see in this passage are a direct fruit of a polygamous marriage. Polygamy may have been accepted in the culture of that day but it was a serious deviation from God’s original design and intent for marriage. Jacob knew better and yet he not only adds Rachel to his marriage with Leah but eventually the two handmaids as well making him the husband of four wives. There is something very wrong with that picture! Jacob had at least three solid reasons to reject polygamy. He had:

- a. The knowledge of the creation order. We are in no doubt that Jacob was familiar with the account of Creation where God established the home. The correct model for marriage was plainly evident in God’s created order – **one** man and **one** woman for life.
 - i. Genesis 2:23-24 “And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a **man** (singular!) leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his **wife** (singular!): and they shall be one flesh.”
 - ii. Matthew 19:5 Jesus said, “For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?” Note: ‘twain’ means ‘two’!
 - iii. **Key Biblical principle: Any deviation from God’s design for marriage and the home will bear bitter fruit.** Satan has been working overtime since the fall to corrupt, damage and destroy the marriage union. We see all sorts of perversions of marriage in our day. Our society does not condone polygamy but it endorses perversions that are equal to or even worse than the sin of polygamy. For example:
 - Widespread acceptance of the multiple partners. One modern form of polygamy in our society is the abominable concept of “open marriage” where the husband and the wife have an agreement that extra marital affairs are fine.
 - Widespread acceptance of de facto relationships.
 - Widespread acceptance of fornication and adultery.
 - Widespread acceptance of digital concubinage with the pornography industry.

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- Widespread acceptance and promotion of divorce and remarriage.
 - Widespread acceptance and promotion of the abomination of sodomy and its associated perversions.
 - We have gone so low as a society morally we ask “where do we go from here?!” Apart from the grace of God we will sink lower into the degraded, depraved pit and end up with things like legalized paedophilia and bestiality.
 - Like it was in Jacob’s home, the biggest losers are often the children who grow up in a confused and chaotic home environment and apart from God’s grace in salvation, often go on to live dysfunctional and dishonourable lives. We can’t but see that the chaos in Jacob’s home bore fruit later in some of his sons (e.g., Reuben, Judah, Simeon & Levi).
- b. The bad example of Abraham (Genesis 16). Jacob should have known from the story of his grandfather’s polygamy that it wasn’t a good idea!
- c. The good example of Isaac. Isaac, to his credit, was a monogamous man who was only ever married to Rebekah.
- d. Jacob sinned against all that light and knowledge when he chose to go down the path of polygamy.
- 3. The problem of a husband who was passive in his leadership.**
- While each member of this family was accountable to God, in God’s order of things Jacob as husband and head of the home (see 1 Cor. 11:3) was central to the problems in this home. The profile we get of Jacob’s leadership in this section is not good. Instead of exercising godly leadership, Jacob was inclined to be passive and make his decisions in the interests of short-term convenience rather than in the interests of what was right and would have God’s hand of blessing upon it. This passivity and carnality is highlighted in:
- a. Jacob’s decision to marry Rachel after marrying Leah (Genesis 29). Again, we can feel Jacob and Rachel’s emotions in the situation. They loved each other deeply and had such high hopes for marriage after a long, 7 year wait but a spiritual response on the part of Jacob would have been to recognise that he had reaped what he sowed and accept the Providential ruling of God in his marriage with Leah and surrender Rachel to the Lord.
 - b. Jacob’s decision to yield to Rachel’s emotional pressure and marry Bilhah (30:1-4). Jacob should have said “no” to this unrighteous plan but Rachel throws an emotional tantrum and Jacob caves in to the pressure.
 - c. Jacob’s decision to yield to Leah’s demand that he marry Zilpah (Vs. 9). Instead of providing spiritual direction for the home, Jacob was taking a back seat, letting things take their course.

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His mindset was to go with the flow, que sera, sera (what will be will be).

- d. That Leah and Rachel were willing to follow Jacob's lead is clear from Genesis 31:16 – "...**whatsoever God hath said unto thee, do...**"
- e. Men of God need to learn to make decisions in the home that are not based upon emotion but upon what is true and right in the sight of God. That does not mean that as husbands we ignore our wives' emotional needs. We are to dwell with our wives "according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered." (1 Peter 3:7). We should strive to make our wives' lives as happy as possible (1 Cor. 7:33) but not if it means short term happiness at the expense of what's right. There is a need to lead the family along spiritual, biblical lines and that means saying a firm "no" at times to a suggestion that is contrary to God's Word. It means sometimes forgoing your own personal peace and comfort in the present to guide the wife and family through a difficult time with an eye to come out of it the other side on the right side of things with God's hand of blessing upon the family.

Conclusion:

1. What is your perspective on children? Is it biblical or have you been brainwashed by a humanistic, hedonistic society?
2. Are you seeking to build a biblical home in line with God's established order?
3. How are you responding to the provocations and trials in your life? Do you respond prayerfully and spiritually or carnally?
4. Have you made mistakes in some of these areas? Be encouraged with what the grace of God can do to bring healing and repair to your life.