

Heart Idols in a Troubled Home

Genesis 29:31-30:24

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In 1 John 5:21, John writes “little children, keep yourselves from idols.” Idolatry. That’s an interesting topic for me to begin a sermon with in 2020. Think about it, not too many of us burn incense before little bronze statues in our living rooms. Idolatry might have been a problem in the past or in some other culture, but it’s not really much of an issue for us now. Or is it?

Most of us think about idolatry in terms of little wooden statues. But idolatry in its many forms actually begins within our own hearts. A form of idolatry that we can relate to happens when we desire or want something so desperately that we are willing to sacrifice our principles of right and wrong to possess it.

This morning we will see the kind of idolatry that we Christians frequently fall into.

Think of things that are good that we all tend to love too much, to want at all costs. Think of the things that you feel like are needs, things you can’t live without.

We have come this morning to a text that is both difficult to really wrestle with and yet so simple in its trouble. How did we get here? Well, Jacob has married two women, one greatly loved and the other, well not so much. What terrible heart trouble and strife this brings. It is all set up for us in verse 30 of Genesis 29. “So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years.”

We will see in this text, where there ought to be great joy what we see are heart idols in a troubled home.

The Unloved Blessed by God (29:31-35)

The first four children are born with heart exposing sentences of pain and longing mixed with trust and praise.

³¹When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. ³²And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, “Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me.” ³³She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also.” And she called his name Simeon. ³⁴Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, “Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.” Therefore his name was called Levi. ³⁵And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, “This time I will praise the LORD.” Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing.

Her Dependence upon God

Through this paragraph we see Leah's dependence upon God. She acknowledges that each son she bears comes from God. Her deep faith in God who loves her and blesses her causes her to walk in obedient worship. She responds to God as the giver of her blessings - He has taken notice of her (v.32) and has heard her (v.33). So she will praise Him (v.35).

We are encouraged then to be intentional in our dependence upon God. There is a kind of dependence that is forced upon us when sometimes God gives us a swift kick in the pants. Too many Christians are quietly and simply self-reliant, depending on themselves. Maybe this is you. It takes a major catastrophe to shake your self-confidence and self-reliance. You can look so spiritual when in the desperate times you cry out in private and public dependence.

But it is so much better for us to choose to recognize what is true all along. Self-reliance is a mirage, a myth, an illusion. God desires and intends for us to be self-consciously dependent on Him at all times. This is a function of praying without ceasing. A heart that is dependent on God will send up sentences of prayer for grace, wisdom, insight, help and even love, praise and adoration.

You and I ought to love like this. It ought to thrill your heart to be utterly dependent upon God *and to say so all the time*. Then we will know that God takes notice, hears and moves on our behalf so that we will praise Him.

Her Progression of Sons

She is blessed as she produces a progression of sons. At the human level, this is a bit astonishing. She is Jacob's wife. She is the first wife. She loves him and presents herself to him. We can wonder from our perspective about the why's and what's of their intimacy. Yet over 4 years, she becomes pregnant each year and gives birth to a son. Israel's familial and tribal lineage is being reviewed here. The family squabbling and strife simply grows up over the centuries into tribal dissent and division. Yet God is pleased to bring into existence the first of His chosen people. From the progression of the first four sons of Leah come the prominent tribes. She brings forth Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah. Later on, Levi will be chosen and set aside as the priests unto God. Judah will become the royal tribe from which Israel's kings will descend and whose great end will be in Jesus Christ, the final King.

Her Expressions of Pain

The names she gives the sons speak of her pain. She is unloved (maybe even hated - see verse 31). She has become a wife through deceit. She was not the one who was loved, longed and labored for. She was the surprise the morning after. It is almost certain that she had little or no choice in the matter. She was eldest. She was to marry first. She was to do what her father said. Now she is in a marriage where her husband does not love her and her sister is the apple of his eye.

Listen to her longing in the boy's names.

- Reuben: She is experiencing affliction and longs for her husband's love.
- Simeon: She is experiencing hatred and rejection yet knows God's care.
- Levi: She is experiencing loneliness and alienation and longs for her husband to be attached to her.
- Judah: Now there is no complaint. Upon the birth of the son from whom future kings will come, there will be nothing but praise.

It would be easy to wonder about whether her desire to be loved by her husband has become an inordinate desire. I do not think anything in the text points us to that at this point. What we see seems to be more a mix of hope and longing. Her husband is intimate with her. Out of that a son is born. Hopefully now he will see her value and treasure her, love her and become attached to her. But it was not to be.

This is often the way it is. You have a real and legitimate desire for what God commands someone else to give you. Maybe, it is the love and affection due a spouse. Maybe it is the rightful recognition due from your boss, or another in authority over you. But then they withhold it or even deny it. How will you respond?

- Will you crave it to the point you will sin to get it or sin when you don't have it?
- Will you be content to continue to long for it, but stay submitted to the sweet and good providence of God?

Now, this is where our Christ-centered trajectory must be wise and Biblical. Leah shows us how God blesses us even when we are despised and rejected by people who ought to love us. Maslow and Dr. Phil are wrong – we do not have a need to be loved. We have a desire to be loved and in many, it is a craving. We have a responsibility to love, to love God and neighbor as we actually do love ourselves. Leah shows us how to be God dependent while rightly longing for the kindness and love of others.

Here is the lesson for the nation of Israel and for all of God's people. We will often be hated and despised. Sometimes by people who ought to care for us. We cannot respond with bitterness and anger on the one hand nor self-pity and depression on the other. We can depend on God, know that He gives attention to our plight, hears our prayers and delights in our praise. And, while it doesn't always work this way, we may even experience unmeasured blessing and the sweetness of His care.

Yes, Jesus came to His own people, and they rejected Him, despised Him and finally crucified Him. But praise God for the progression of sons and daughters that have come out of His holy obedience even when it was painful, sad and hard.

The Rivals Contending for Preeminence (30:1-18)

How often it is hard enough without aggravating circumstances. So here, Leah is not only unloved by her husband, she is envied, taunted and finally humiliated by her sister. The contention and rivalry escalates. And floundering through all of this is weak, inept Jacob whose foolish love for Rachel binds him to her and blinds him to Leah.

When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" ²Jacob'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?" ³Then 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." ⁴So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her. ⁵And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. ⁶Then Rachel said, "God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son." Therefore she called his name Dan. ⁷Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. ⁸Then Rachel said, "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed." So she called his name Naphtali.

⁹When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. ¹⁰Then Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. ¹¹And Leah said, "Good fortune has come!" so she called his name Gad. ¹²Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. ¹³And Leah said, "Happy am I! For women have called me happy." So she called his name Asher.

¹⁴In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." ¹⁵But she 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." ¹⁶When 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. ¹⁷And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. ¹⁸Leah said, "God has given me my wages because I gave my servant to my husband." So she called his name Issachar.

In the Use of their Handmaids

O how envy and jealousy rules Rachel's heart. She has the love and devotion of her husband. Yet her sister does not. She is jealous of her sister's sons and the place they will now have. Without sons, her future is insecure. Jacob will pass on the complete inheritance to Leah's sons. What will she have? Her sister has it all. What folly envy is! Its fierce gaze on what God has given others blinds you to what God has given you.

Rachel stands in stark contrast to her sister. Her desires become demands. You have to love the childish tantrum of Rachel. "Give me children or I die." What!?! She is going to threaten him? What is he supposed to do about it? To any thinking person it is obvious that the problem is Rachel, not Jacob. Leah has had no problem getting pregnant. But Rachel is barren. Leah is blessed by God. Rachel is barren by God.

Jacob well knows all this. He is not God nor is he in God's place. He cannot cause what only God does. In his response is a rebuke, as well. God had withheld the fruit of her womb. So what is he supposed to do about it? Rachel then proposes a family old solution – take my handmaid and we will have children by her. The phrase in verse 3, "on my

behalf" literally reads "on my knees" in the Hebrew. When the surrogate gave birth while actually sitting on the knees of the wife, or sometimes immediately laid the newborn on the knees of the wife, it symbolized the wife providing a child for her husband.

So Jacob fathers two boys, Dan and Naphtali, by Rachel's handmaid. Oh, listen to the triumph in Rachel's voice. She has competed with her sister and now has prevailed. She is so foolish. How can two boys fathered by her handmaid possibly be a triumph over a sister with four natural born sons?

Contrast the naming and statements of her two sons with that of Leah. In Dan she sees the reversal of the judgment of God. In Naphtali she has wrestled and overcome her sister. In neither of these is there real dependence on God nor the sense of presenting a gift to her husband. She has reversed God's disfavor and scored points against her sister. Meanwhile, Leah has stopped bearing children as well. The way this is stated implies that she is not having relations with Jacob and so is now having no children. She is not going to be outdone by her sister. If only she had been as content to wait on God for her rightful place over her sister as she was her rightful place in her husband's heart. So, she offers her handmaid Zilpah to Jacob. Zilpah bears him two more boys, Gad and Asher. In her naming of them and her response to God's giving of them, listen to her happiness. She is joyful and glad in her good fortune and in her public favor. She is happy, for others will call her happy.

How many of you would come to the place that you will be glad in the favor of God even if you do not have the much sought after love in a relationship you prize?

In the Trading of Favors

Moses now writes to show the pettiness and pointlessness of their strife. Because we have monogamous marriages, what we read here is a bit mind-boggling. But listen for a moment to the story.

During the wheat harvest, Leah's son Reuben found some mandrakes, a plant that was thought to be a fertility drug. It is referred to in the Song of Solomon as enhancing intimacy. Many also thought that it would help a barren woman conceive. So began a bizarre negotiation. Rachel wanted some of the mandrakes to help her infertility. Leah refuses. Her bitterness against Rachel is evident. "You took my husband; now I am supposed to help you have children with him?"

Rachel responds by offering to trade several nights with Jacob in return for the mandrakes. This confirms the implication earlier in the text that Leah has stopped bearing children because Jacob has stopped being intimate with her. Leah agrees to the trade. It seems that her heart has now begun to bow to an idol, the idol of her husband's affection and attention.

So, she meets Jacob on the way home from harvest that evening. "You are mine tonight – I have hired you (dig at Jacob), paying by giving my son's man-drakes (dig at Rachel and her barrenness). Jacob lies with her and she conceives a son. God has dealt with her, given

her due wages, for doubting Him and giving Jacob her handmaiden. So, Issachar is born and named.

Well, this is kind of sordid, isn't it? Here is Israel with all their national prejudice and tribal pride hearing the inspired account of the struggle and trouble by which they became a people. They should be humbled. They should be thankful that God designs the sad state of human relations and brings about His good and great purposes. We are not often far from this. We so rely on our ingenuity and strategy to get what we want. But how much better to trust, depend and wait on God. What an encouragement to know that even when we don't, God is still at work to accomplish what He desires and designs.

The Births Concluding the Family (30:19-24)

The final two paragraphs bring the story to its climax.

¹⁹And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son. ²⁰Then 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. ²¹Afterward she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah.

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

In Leah's Great Endowment (v.19-21)

God blesses her with a gift in this last son. Zebulun is born. This sixth son is a great gift from God. This word endowment implies not only a great and unexpected gift from God, but a rich blessing to be eagerly passed on.

Now, she hopes to be honored by her husband. This is now six sons she has borne him. Maybe now he will see her worth. Maybe now he will hold her up in honor. Six sons of her own she has brought him. Will he look to her now with affection and honor? Will he see her as blessed of God? Will he despise her still?

And she bore the first daughter in the family, Dinah, who only appears here as a footnote.

In Rachel's Lifted Reproach (v.22-24)

God lifts Rachel's reproach. He takes notice of her and moves on her behalf. It is God's mercy and grace, not man-drakes and human ingenuity, which will make the barren ones rejoice as the mother of children. God had closed her womb. God opens her womb.

For the first time in this text, Rachel acknowledges with a true heart. God has taken her reproach away by giving her a son. She names him, Joseph. His name means, "May he add" but it sounds like, "Be taken away." The irony of his naming and the history of his life – but that's for another day.

Reflect and Respond

How do you respond when someone's disobedience leaves you without?

- *YOU CANNOT DEMAND WHAT OUGHT TO BE FREELY GIVEN.* Yes, you can ask. You ought to hope. You should pray much. You seek counsel to bear it well. You learn to be

content by seeking your satisfaction in God alone. But your desires should not become demands.

- *YOU OUGHT NOT DENY WHAT HAS BEEN GRACIOUSLY COMMANDED.* Jacob withheld what was commanded him to give – the affection and attention due his wife. It does not matter how the relationship began. It is still his responsibility to respond to God and reflect His love by loving her. You love by grace whom you ought.
- *YOU MUST NOT ALLOW EVEN THE GOOD FROM GOD TO BE CRAVED* so much that you will sin to get or sin when you don't have it. Yes, there are wrong desires. But I find people more often sin in an idolatrous craving for what is good and right.

My challenge to you?

To most of you, this text sounds strange. To all of us, it should ring true. Join with me as we search our hearts and cry out to God, confessing our sin and longing to be holy before our great King. We must be satisfied and submitted, content and conquered by our Lord Jesus Christ.