

JACOB BUILDS HIS FAMILY
[The God of Paddan Aram (I)]

Genesis 29:1-30:24
Key Verse: 29:35a

Lesson 13b

"She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, 'This time I will praise the Lord.' So she named him Judah."

Jacob was a man who struggled with men. There is an element of human greatness in his priorities and in his life of struggle. First, he wanted honor--the honor of being number one. He struggled with Esau and won the birthright, but he made an enemy and had to leave home. Second, he sought love. He went to Paddan Aram with instructions from his father to take a wife from among the daughters of his mother's family. He met Rachel and fell in love with her (29:10,11). He lived with his mother's family in Paddan Aram for 20 years, working as a hired hand in the house of his uncle Laban. His life in Paddan Aram was a life of hard work and struggle with his uncle. But he persisted until he could marry Rachel. His home became place of struggle between two women. But in the course of his struggles, Jacob revealed himself to be a faithful man. And God proved himself to be a faithful God. Third, Jacob sought wealth. Jacob arrived in Paddan Aram empty-handed, and he would have left empty-handed, if God had not helped him (31:42). God is great; he is patient and broad-minded. From the way God helped Jacob we can learn something of the deep mystery of God's ways in his redemptive work. Jacob was a man of his times and his family did not come up to the New Testament standard (nor to the standard of Genesis 2, for that matter). But God made Jacob's family very fruitful: he had 4 wives, twelve sons and a daughter, and later, great wealth. In this lesson, we learn about how God worked to build Jacob's family. God used this family to build a nation. But before they could be used, they had to be changed. This lesson is about God who helped Jacob in his struggle; it is also about Rachel and Leah, two jealous sisters. One became a spiritual woman and grew as a woman of faith. She had real joy in her heart. The other one died in sorrow and bitterness.

1. Jacob marries (29:1-30)

After Jacob met God at Bethel and made his vow, he gained strength. He walked toward the northeast until he came to Paddan Aram. He saw a well in a field with several flocks of sheep lying near. He found that the shepherds were from Haran, so he asked about his uncle Laban. To his surprise, they knew Laban. Not only that, they pointed to a beautiful shepherdess coming with a flock of sheep and told him that she was Rachel, Laban's daughter. It was love at first sight! God had faithfully brought Jacob to the home of his mother's brother, and had led him to meet the girl he would love for the rest of his life. Jacob impressed Rachel by rolling the large stone from the mouth of the well and watering the sheep she was tending. He kissed her and wept aloud, for he was deeply moved --either by God's faithful leading and/or by Rachel's beauty.

Jacob was very different from Esau. Esau, his twin brother, already had two Canaanite wives. He was a man of flesh. He could not wait for anything. When he was hungry, he had to eat; when he wanted to marry, he married--it didn't matter who. Jacob, however, had not married. He had sought honor--the birthright--first. Now, he met the woman he wanted to marry. But he did not rush into the marriage or try to live with her before marriage. He agreed to work for her father as a hired hand for 7 years for her hand in marriage. Verses 17-18 say, "Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form, and beautiful. Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, 'I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel.'" "Jacob served Laban seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her." (20) There are things we like to do and things that we ought to do. The things we like to do come from our emotions; the things we ought to do rest on faith and will. A person who only does what he feels like doing is a man of flesh. He can only make God sorry. (Eph 2:3; Ge 6:6) Esau was such a man. He looked strong, but he was weak because he could not overcome the desires of his flesh. Such men live out their lives as slaves to their feelings, and they die without doing the things they ought to do. They can easily bring great harm to others. But a person who rules the desires of his flesh and his feelings, and does what he ought to do can become a great man. Jacob was such a man. He mastered his emotional feelings and worked hard in Laban's house for 7 years for the woman he loved.

To agree to work as a bond servant for 7 years without wages in order to marry a woman seems foolish. But here we can see Jacob's greatness. Jacob could give his very life to get the one thing he wanted. He wound up investing 14 years of his life to get Rachel (30). Many people today are too careful to calculate about everything. They are afraid to risk anything. They are afraid to make any kind of commitment or work hard, giving their hearts to any task. They are afraid that they will get too involved and lose something. But shallow people like this never have the courage to do anything great. Such men are destined to live on the bottom of society and they are the ones who turn out to be the real losers. The refusal to make lasting relationships or deep commitments is the disease of modern man. These kind of people frequently must be treated for mental illness.

So Jacob finished his contract and said to Laban, "Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to lie with her." (No cheating before marriage!) They had a big wedding. The bride was heavily veiled--according to the custom of the times. The next morning, Jacob woke up and found that the wily Laban had tricked him. He had married Leah (whose name means "cow"). But Jacob did not give up. He finished the bridal week with Leah, then made a new contract with Laban. This time, he got payment in advance--he married Rachel. While working 7 more years, God made him very fruitful. He had 11 sons and a daughter by Leah, Rachel and their maid servants, Zilpah and Bilhah. He got a large return on his investment of 14 years of his life.

Jacob was only doing his own business, but God was working out his sovereign plan. God used Jacob's love for Rachel, to give Jacob twelve sons. These twelve sons were the foundation of the nation of Israel. Sometimes we are so selfish that we only think about our own business, but God is with us to exercise his sovereignty and accomplish his own purpose. Later, we learn that Jacob's sons, with the exception of Joseph, were not good men. But God changed them and raised them up to be the Patriarchs of Israel and the foundation stones of God's redemptive history. Our God has a purpose for each person, and he works in and through each person's life to accomplish that purpose.

2. Rachel and Leah (29:31-30:24)

Jacob was a man of his times. We should not become so entangled in judging him by the standards of another age that we miss the spiritual lessons we should learn. One thing is clear: He suffered a lot because he was married to more than one wife. His children also suffered and his wives suffered. God's standard--one man, one woman, one marriage-- "till death do us part" is still best.

Jacob loved Rachel; he never changed. But God is fair. When he saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb and gave her children. She had 6 sons and a daughter. In the early years of her marriage, her one consuming desire was for her husband's love. Her struggle is seen in the names of her sons. When her first son Reuben (he has seen my misery; see a son) was born, she thought that her husband would love her. But nothing changed. Her second son, Simeon, also brought hope that Jacob would love her. (Simeon means, "he hears") The third son, Levi (attached) again brought hope that her husband would become attached to her. But Jacob's heart was not moved. Leah was sorrowful. She felt unloved. She was jealous of her beautiful sister who had totally captured her husband's heart. She had thought that if she bore sons for her husband he would love her, but it didn't work. It never works. She must have cried many tears and struggled with hatred and jealousy in her heart. Then, her fourth son was born. She named him Judah. She made a decision. She would no longer beg love from her husband. She turned her heart away from her husband and away from her rival, to God. She named her fourth son "Judah" which means Praise-- and she praised God. Leah opened her hard cold wounded heart and let the love of God come in. She solved her deep inner problem--her thirst for her husband's love--by accepting God's love. God's love is far greater than the measure of man's mind. It is the only love that truly satisfies. It is eternal and life giving. Later, Leah named the two sons which her maidservant bore Jacob, "Gad" (good fortune) and "Asher" (happy). She became a happy woman. Later, she bore Jacob two more sons: Issachar (God rewarded me) and Zebulun (honor). She said, "God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons." Her husband and future generations honored her. She was buried in the tomb of the Patriarchs beside Jacob, and her son, Judah, became the covenant son.

Rachel was quite different. She was beautiful and spoiled. She had a monopoly on Jacob's love, but she was not satisfied. Human love cannot fully satisfy a person's heart. Rachel was intensely jealous of her sister. 30:1 says, "When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. She wanted children, but she didn't pray. She complained to Jacob, "Give me children or I'll die." Jacob's angry answer pointed Rachel to God, but she did not accept it. He rebuked her, saying, "Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?"

Rachel did not seek God; she had a bright idea. She gave her maidservant Bilhah to Jacob and asked him to have children by her. She used Bilhah as a surrogate mother for 2 sons. The names she gave these sons reflect the inner bitterness in her heart. One was Dan, which means "vindicate", and the other, Naphtali, "struggle." She only thought about struggling with her sister and winning a victory (30:3-8). Finally, God gave Rachel a beautiful son, Joseph. Jacob loved him most, for he was Rachel's son. He became the cause of great sorrow and the source of great blessing. But when Rachel bore her son, she was not happy or thankful. She named him Joseph, which means "give me another." She was never happy or satisfied. Her heart was full of anger and jealousy. She worshiped idols (31:34). Finally, God gave her another son, Benjamin, and she died in childbirth--still thinking only of herself.

The sovereign God was working out his own purposes in the midst of an imperfect human family. He blessed Jacob and protected him, and he trained him. Many years later Jacob could say, "My life is a pilgrimage", and "God has been my shepherd all my life." (47:9; 48:15) God used Jacob's love for Rachel and through the struggles of his

family, gave Jacob 12 sons, and made him into a great nation, the nation of Israel.

The names of Jacob's sons are:

Leah - Reuben (see, a son), Simeon (he hears), Levi (attached), Judah (praise)

Issachar (reward),

Zebulun (honor)

Rachel - Joseph, (add another), Benjamin (son of my right hand)

Bilhah - Dan (vindicated), Naphtali (struggle)

Zilpah - Gad (good fortune), Asher (happy)