

**The Battle of the Brides
(Sister Wives)
Genesis 28:10-30:24**

Introduction

What Would You Do for Love?: What is the craziest thing you've seen someone do for love?

- Change style, aesthetic, likes and dislikes, friend group, for a boyfriend or girlfriend.
- I remember when my best friend tried to impress a girl by jumping over a trash can (middle schoolers are really confused as to what impresses girls). He caught his foot going over, fell on the asphalt, and walked away bleeding. I think it backfired.
- Girl (woman?) convinced boyfriend to donate kidney to her sick brother. After the procedure, he learned her "brother" was *actually* her ex-boyfriend (she was still in love with). Later the girlfriend broke up with the donor boyfriend and got back with the recipient ex-boyfriend. It's the worst catfish of all time.

Messy: As the song says, sometimes "love hurts" and "love scars."¹ In the middle of our drama, we see Jacob's love story, the crazy things he'll do for love, and the mess that's left in the wake of it. This story has all the intrigue of a Netflix or HBO max drama.

- In fact, sometimes it helps to think in **cinematic terms**. (1) The **wide-angle** lens of the story shows how God is accomplishing his plan and purpose to call a people, build a nation, give a land, and eventually send a Savior to bless all people. (2) The **close-up** angle shows the people God uses, how he reveals his character to them (and us), and how we can learn to trust him through their successes and failures.

In fact, **in the mess** of these people's lives, we often see the grace and faithfulness of God **more clearly**. Human weakness actually magnifies God's strength.

Bethel: (Read 28:10-22)

- (Previously on "The Patriarchs"), Jacob tricked his brother and Father to obtain their birthright and blessing (respectively). But the situation ended without him receiving much of a blessing at all. Despite the *promise* of God's blessing, he is running for his life so his angry brother doesn't kill him. His mother sends him to her brother, his uncle (who he's never met), to preserve his life and to find a wife. He must travel almost 500 miles with little more than the clothes on his back (*Proclaimers*).
- How bad is it? He's using a rock for a pillow! As he's sleeping on his rock pillow, God appears to him in a dramatic dream. A staircase is descending from heaven to earth, with angels moving up and down it.
 - This is a big deal in the wide-angle lens of Genesis. Remember, in Gen 11 when people built the Tower of Babel so they could reach heaven and get to God? God thwarted their foolish plan. **But now he has built a tower to come to them.**
 - Jacob is known for scheming, for coming up with a plan, for hustling to get what he wants. But here, he has no scheme or plan. **He can't find God, God has to find him.** God shows up when Jacob isn't even looking for him!

¹ Nazareth

- And what he says is profound: He is the God of Jacob's father and grandfather (**the same God and the same promise**). We're seeing the covenant promises of God continue through the family of God. The land on which he is sleeping as a refugee will one day belong to him. His offspring will be multiplied to cover the earth. And God will be **with** and provide for Jacob every step of the way.²
- The promise and presence of God sustains and propels Jacob forward.

1. The Love Story (29:1-20)

Family Reunion: Makes it to a well near his uncle Laban. He starts asking if anyone of the shepherds there know his uncle when, low and behold, Laban's younger daughter, Rachel, (**a shepherdess**) happens to be coming to water the sheep. *There are a lot of parallels between Jacob meeting Rachel at a well and the story of Isaac's servant meeting Rebekah at a well (recurring patterns in Genesis).

Love at First Sight: A kaleidoscope of emotions bubbles up in Jacob. His perilous, difficult, and long journey is over: he found his family! On top of that, he meets Rachel and, as we'll soon find out, *he's found his wife*.

- You might be confused because **Rachel is his cousin**. Nowadays that would end the romantic talk right away. In West Virginia and the OT, that just turns the temperature up.
- This lights his fire and he rolls the **large** stone away from the well that normally would take **multiple shepherds** to move. His adrenaline is going. His engine is revved up.

Rachel: And we soon find out why, Jacob loved Rachel. If not *the only* reason he loved her³ the focus of the text is on one thing, **her physical appearance**. Rachel was beautiful.

- Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. She had, literally, a beautiful shape. This is basically the Hebrew way of saying she is super hot.

Leah: Poor, older sister, Leah. The best the text can say is that her eyes were weak. What does "weak eyes" even mean? The translators are trying to show it is negative (based on the comparison with Rachel). Maybe her eyes are crossed or something? But "soft" or "tender" eyes is a better translation. Everywhere else in the OT this term is never "negative" (i.e., weak). I think what is happening is it is complementing Leah. Her eyes *are* beautiful. "She (at least) has pretty eyes" (this is the "she has a great personality" of the ANE).

- How do I look in this outfit? Your eyes are nice! Do these jeans make me look fat? I love the color of your eyes. Sometimes a compliment is an evasion (evasive maneuvers).⁴

Crazy Little Thing Called Love: Rachel has *captivated* Jacob's affection. He **has** to marry her. He **has** to be with her. He can't be happy without her. This is his Jerry McGuire moment ("you complete me"). But, there's a problem. He has no money. He can't pay a dowry. He has no land,

² This promise is no less crazy for Jacob as it was for Abraham and Isaac. He's gonna have a multitude children? He's not even married yet! Just like Abraham waited for a son, Isaac will have to wait for the promise to be fulfilled. God often calls us to live in the waiting. But as we wait for his promises, he is with us! The certainty of the promise is guaranteed by the power and presence of God.

³ Maybe he was impressed by her shepherding skills.

⁴ The name "Leah" likely derives from "cow" (I'm going to go out on a limb and say that is an insult in any culture).

no household, no nothing. He has nothing to offer her father to convince him to give Jacob her hand in marriage.

- So he offers to work *seven years* for Laban. The average dowry was 30-40 shekels. A months salary was 1.5 shekels. That means he's offering 126 shekels of labor to marry her: 4x the reasonable amount. This could border on **obsession**, *must have*. She is quickly becoming all that he can think about, all that he wants.

So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. We'll put up with a lot when we love something or want something. Our lack of perseverance is usually not a deficit of ability to endure but a deficit of love of the thing we want.

- How many of us will put up with a lot for a significant other but the simplest inconvenience and we give up on Christ? We'll put up with a lot if we love something. What you'll endure, you'll miss out on, what you'll put up with tells me a lot about what you love.
- "I've seen a lot of people leave their church because it doesn't match their political party. I've rarely seen anyone leave their political party because it doesn't match their church" (Norsworthy).
- I've seen a lot of people skip gathered worship or bible study for a football game, concert, or work deadline but rarely vice versa.
- I've seen godliness thrown aside to please or woo a boyfriend or girlfriend, but how many of you will break up with someone or leave that unhealthy relationship for Christ?

How many of us love God enough to overcome our fear and share our faith, to endure ridicule and pursue holiness, and to sacrifice our time even when we're tired?

2. The Trickster is Tricked (29:21-30)

His Patience Has Run Out: He has waited 7 years, he can't wait any longer. ²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, "**Give me** my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." The language here is demanding and brusque. I did my time, now *give me* what is owed. Rachel is less like a gift to be treasured and more like a prize he feels entitled to.

Switcheroo: Laban throws a feast. I don't know what Jacob had to drink, but rather than Rachel, he slept with Leah. Just a hint, take at least one peek behind the veil.

- I've heard some bad honeymoon stories, but nothing like this. If this has happened to you, we can pray for you at the end and arrange some counseling.
- One commentator says that "behold, it was Leah" sums up all the disappointments of human longings. We want one thing, we work for one thing, we sacrifice for one thing *and* we think when we get that one thing we'll be happy. But it turns out to be a trick!
 - The length of his wait and the intensity of his desire only makes the loss more crushing (this, again is a reminder that misplaced love will only crush you).

Laban's Deception: Laban's weak excuse: Oldest has to marry first (could have said something before the wedding night or maybe seven years ago!).

- Jacob has gotten everything he has so far by schemes and tricks. He tricked his brother out of his birthright and his father out of his blessing. But now he has “met his match.”
- He has no recourse to fix this situation (no army, no household; stranger, guest). **He’s been deceived by the person he has placed his trust in, his very family.** Must depend only on God, because he has no schemes left.
- Jacob has been “jacobed.” He gets a taste of his own medicine. Now he feels what it’s like to be sinned *against*. The cunning and calculating Jacob will be weathered by twenty years of servitude to his uncle. “Jacob is not the only person to have needed a Laban in his life” (Kidner).
 - How many times has God used a difficult person to smooth your rough edges and teach you to depend on him? How many times has God used a difficult situation to humble you and teach you gratitude?
- Jacob finishes the week of wedding celebration with Leah and gets to marry Rachel on credit (so he owes Laban another seven years).
 - All the relationships of this story end up being strained. Jacob and Laban have a contentious relationship. Leah and Rachel have a contentious relationship. **The sibling rivalry Jacob escaped by fleeing from his brother has now moved into his house in the form of his wives.**

Poor Leah: The text has already implied how beautiful Rachel is, and how unattractive Leah is. Her father can’t even find someone to marry her, so he has to trick Jacob! The Bible goes ahead and tells us: [Jacob] loved Rachel more than Leah. It makes your heart break for Leah. **All she wants is to be loved but to her husband,** Jacob, but she’s a disappointment, a letdown.

- How is she going to find love and significance? How many Leah’s are in our world, unloved and unseen? The gospel tells us that God loves you and sees you and the church should be the place where these realities can be felt and experienced.

3. The Search for Significance (29:31-30:24)

Competition: We now see a biological arms race between these two sisters as they vie for their husbands love and their own significance by having children. Each sister is trying to gain the upper hand: they use prayer, substitute wives, badgering, bartering, bribing, superstition (and more) just to be the loved and favored wife!

- Twelve children are born in 7 years to these four women.
- Whether this is the way Jacob had drawn it up, God is accomplishing his plan to multiply his offspring (from two kids for Abraham/Isaac to 12!). God is making the 12 tribes of Israel before our eyes (and he’s making them out of a broken and dysfunctional family).

Leah	Bilhah <i>(Rachel's Servant)</i>	Zilpah <i>(Leah's Servant)</i>	Rachel
Reuben (1) Simeon (2) Levi (3) Judah (4) Issachar (9) Zebulun (10) Dinah*	Dan (5) Naphtali (6)	Gad (7) Asher (8)	Joseph (11) Benjamin (12)

Leah: God is kind to Leah. He sees that she was unloved by her husband and he blesses her with children! 7 of Jacobs 13 children are born to her! **But rather than receive that blessing with joy, she looks to her children and husband to give her what can only be found in God.**

- Notice their names. E.g., **Reuben** basically means “he has seen my affliction.” But notice what *Leah adds*. For now my husband will love me. “I have given Jacob a son, now maybe he’ll finally love me. Doesn’t this make me love-able?” Or **Levi**: “Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.” Notice the phrase, “now this time.” “Maybe this will be enough! Maybe now I’ll be seen and loved, I’ll be important.” But each time she’s left empty and unloved.
 - Have you ever felt this way? Maybe this degree will mean I am valuable? Or this new job or promotion? Or this new relationship? Or this money? And on, and on.
 - **It will never be enough.**
- Like so many of us, Leah **wants what she doesn’t have and idolizes what she does have**. She took the *blessing* of God and turned it into an *idol*.
 - Being a wife can be good. Being a mother can be good. Being single can be good. Being a pastor can be good. **But when you take good things and put them in the place of God they become idols that crush us rather than blessings that encourage us.**
- For Leah, she needs to stop trying to earn Jacob’s love and start receiving God’s love.

Rachel: Does Rachel fare better? She beauty he her husband affection. *But* she can’t have children (like Leah), so she feels *less than*, she feels incomplete. When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” This is how incomplete she feels without kids.

- Rachel had the blessing of beauty but couldn’t find contentment. She wanted something she didn’t have.

It’s amazing how both of these women want what the other had, and neither could find **contentment** in what they did have because both of them were looking for love that can only be found in Christ. This is likely what’s going on with the mandrake situation. Mandrakes were often seen as a plant that aided in fertility. Leah has mandrakes but not her husband. Rachel has her

husband but not fertility. So Leah gives Rachel mandrakes if Rachel will give Leah time with her husband. Leah is trying to buy affection and Rachel is trying to buy a child.

- Then Rachel said, “With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed.” She’s fighting to get what she thinks will make her important (kids). But despite proclaiming she “won” by having children with Jacob through her servant (Bilhah), *she knows* she still *feels* inferior. Trying to convince herself that she has beaten her sister, we know she doesn’t believe or feel it because it isn’t until she has a child herself that she says, “God has taken away my [disappointment].”
- She thought she figured out a way to “win.” She thought she could beat her shame through an alternate route. **But no human scheme can remove her shame. It takes God’s gracious gift:** God remembers, God hears, God gives her the gift of a child.

Contentment: The gospel announces our acceptance in Christ. The gospel tells us of his love for us. So the gospel frees us from seeking it elsewhere. The gospel empowers us to follow Christ with hope and joy and contentment in the midst of discouragement and suffering.

- It is God’s love that makes Leah beautiful and Rachel significant, not the love of their husband or the number of children they can give him.
- Beauty fades. Children grow up. So even if you have them, they can’t last.

God doesn’t love us because we are beautiful, useful, well-behaved or accomplished.

- It is his choice to love us that makes us lovely. It is his love for us that makes us beautiful. **And that is something that can’t be lost and doesn’t fade.**
- In a world where boys and girls grow up longing for the love and affection of a parent, and when they can’t find it they often seek it in unhealthy relationships, I want my kids to know that I love no matter what. Do I love my daughter because she is pretty, smart, well-behaved, or athletic? No, I love her because she is my daughter. And guess what, God’s love infinitely surpasses mine. God doesn’t love us because we’re beautiful, we become something beautiful because he loves us. “The love of God doesn’t find, but rather creates, that which is pleasing to it” (Luther)

“The secret to happiness is to want what you already have” (Anonymous). In Christ we have *all we need*, so we don’t have to look elsewhere. You don’t have to go somewhere else, or buy something else, or accomplish something else. You can be where God has you now because he is there with you. **There is a powerful contentment that comes from trusting in Christ.**⁵

Idolatry: What Leah wanted from a man, could only be found in God. What Rachel wanted from a family, could only be found in God. What Leah, and Rachel, and Jacob sought in love, family, children, spouse, significance, and importance will never be enough. These are idols that promise something they can’t deliver. **They are searching for what can only be found in Jesus.** For Leah, Jesus is the true bridegroom who will love her perfectly. For Rachel, he is the legacy that will bring fulfillment. For Jacob, he is the true inheritance that brings eternal blessing.

⁵ Jacob: 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?” Jacob’s schemes were to marry and build a family with Rachel, but Leah is the one whom God blesses. He’s helpless to accomplish what he wants. Now his wives are angry at him. His schemes (which had brought him fortune so far are not sufficient to accomplish God’s plans). When your idols don’t deliver on their promises you will be tempted to (1) blame yourself or (2) blame the world. What you can do, however, is realize you were created for a different world.

- What in your life can you not live without? What do you daydream about having *and then* you'll be happy? Is it a child? Is it a spouse? Is it a job, title, payday, boyfriend, acclaim, fame, and on and on?

None of these things will fix it. In fact, you might find when you get "that thing" you long for it doesn't bring joy but despair.

- Why do I have three Super Bowl rings, and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, "Hey man, this is what is." I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think:... It's gotta be more than this. I mean this can't be what it's all cracked up to be. I mean I've done it. I'm 27. And what else is there for me? (Tom Brady).
- I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer (Jim Carrey).
- "A gold medal is a wonderful thing, but if you're not enough without it, you'll never be enough with it" (Cool Runnings).

"Why do we lie, or fail to love, or break our promises, or live selfishly? Of course, the general answer is 'Because we are weak and sinful,' but the specific answer is that there is something besides Jesus Christ that we feel we must have to be happy, something that is more important to our heart than God" (Keller). "Our lives become vain and empty when we commit them to the *pointless* idols of this world" (Beale). These idols will only destroy you. They will demand more and more of your time and affection, yet leave you empty.

- Remember earlier how God promised to be with Jacob wherever he went. God will never leave you or forsake you.⁶ Idols let you down, but God never does. **Every idol will eventually leave or forsake you. Your idols will always fail you.**

Hints of the Gospel: So, as we zoom back out we see hints of the gospel, we see that God hasn't failed them. He continues to work and accomplish his plans.

- Despite being unloved, "Leah was exalted to become the mother of, among others, the priestly and kingly tribes of Levi and Judah" (Kidner). We see the importance of Judah continually hinted as his name is the only one not dripping with bitterness but simply a word of praise to God. Through Judah, the promised son, the Messiah, Christ Jesus, will one day come to save.
- Rachel *is* given a son, Joseph, who will rescue her family from famine in the coming years.
- "The blessing of God doesn't come over the horizon of human expectation but the scope of God's eternal plan" (me).

God's blessing is not to those who earn or deserve it but to those who receive it in faith.

- God saw Leah, he saw Rachel, he saw Jacob. All of their fighting, and scheming, and longing don't go unnoticed. But until they rest in him, their hearts remain restless.

What does your heart long for? It can only be found in Christ. Turn from your idols and trust him.

⁶ Josh 1:5, Heb 13:5