

“MESSES GOD BLESSES” **(Genesis 29:31-30:24)**

Some of you, I know, have done quite a bit of work on your family tree. I know that Warren LaVille has traced his ancestry back to the 1400s, and one of his ancestors came to America on the Mayflower – and had the distinction of falling overboard before being rescued. I’ve not done any work on my genealogy, but others in my family have, and I’m told that the McKays go back to Scotland, and we – at one time – were pretty powerful, influential people in Scotland. The dark side of our history is that we attained our power and influence by stealing horses. We McKay’s would rob you blind and think nothing of it. In every family tree there is a mixture of good and bad – things that make you proud and things that make you embarrassed.

Jesus also had a family tree, and the Old Testament – in large part – is the story of where Jesus came from, and the family history that led up to His coming. Like most families, Jesus’ family tree has it’s fair share of messy, dysfunctional people – going all the way back to the beginning of Israel’s birth as a nation.

As we’ve been going through the book of Genesis, it’s good to remember that Genesis was written during the time period following the exodus – some 400-plus years after the time of Jacob, and was written by Moses to give the people of Israel a connection to their past. He wanted them to understand where they came from in order to be the people God called them to be. Moses could have written a dressed-up, sanitized version of Israel’s history, but part of what makes the Bible authentic and trustworthy is that it tells it like it is. Time after time in Genesis we read about people behaving badly, and we wonder why these stories are in the Bible. They’re certainly aren’t there for us to imitate and pattern our lives after. Why are these stories included in the Bible?

I want to let that question linger as we come to a passage in Genesis where no one comes out looking good. There are no heroes or role models – yet there is a great deal to learn about human nature and about God. Our passage today has two themes running simultaneously – first is the mess that sin creates – and the second is how God in His grace brings good from those messes.

We’re in Genesis 29, and the last few weeks we’ve seen how Jacob has fled from the Promised Land to Harran to escape the vengeance of his brother, and there he is reunited with his uncle Laban. He quickly falls in love with his daughter Rachel, and agrees to work seven years for her hand in marriage. But on their wedding night he discovers that Laban has given him his oldest daughter Leah. Jacob, the master deceiver, is himself deceived by Laban, and has to work another seven years for Rachel. The only silver-lining is that he gets Rachel immediately. Suddenly, Jacob has two wives, and as you can imagine, it is not the recipe for a peaceful, happy home.

The story today revolves around the birth of Jacob’s twelve sons – which become known as the twelve tribes of Israel – and the competition between Leah and Rachel to see who could have the most kids. Leah and Rachel each have huge, unmet desires that shapes their identities and drives everything they do. Leah will have no trouble having children, but she could not get the love and affection she craved from her husband. Rachel, on the other hand, had no trouble getting the love and affection of Jacob, but she could not conceive a child for him. How they go about resolving their unmet desires is a case study in what not to do, but will sound very familiar to what we often find ourselves doing. As we read through this passage we see six common, but unhealthy, ways we react to unmet desires.

The first is to **expect others to fulfill my desires**. Verses 31-30... When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, "It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now."

You can't help but feel for Leah. She's not as physically attractive as Rachel, and Rachel immediately catches Jacob's eye. The fact that Leah was not loved by Jacob doesn't mean that Jacob didn't like her or treated her badly, he just didn't love her in the same way he loved Rachel – and Leah knows it – she feels it. She knows that Rachel is more desirable than her, and becoming desirable to her husband becomes part of her identity. She thinks, "If I can have a child with Jacob, I will earn his love and respect."

God graciously enables her to conceive and she has a son. He's fulfilling his promise to Jacob to bless him with many descendants, and Leah has the honor of giving birth to Jacob's firstborn. She names him Rueben, which means "Behold, a son." The names that Leah and Rachel give to their sons has nothing to do with the characteristics of their sons, but reflects the emotions of the mother. Rueben's name reflects Leah's joy that the Lord had seen her misery, and the hope that by giving birth to a son she will gain the love of her husband. Rueben is a bright spot in her pain.

Verse 33... She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Because the LORD heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too." So she named him Simeon. Apparently, having Rueben did not change Jacob's affections for Leah, and she pours out her misery to the Lord, and God gives her a second son named Simeon, meaning "the one who hears." God heard her prayers, and with Simeon her hopes are raised once again that she will be loved by Jacob.

Verse 34... Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." So he was named Levi. Leah still doesn't have the love of her husband, but she hasn't given up hope... "Surely with three sons Jacob will love me and be attached to me. Having Levi will bond us together."

Verse 35... 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. Then she stopped having children. A shift seems to take place in Leah with son #4. Instead of focusing on her unmet desires – and what she doesn't have – she praises the Lord for what she does have. Her circumstances haven't changed – she still doesn't have the love of her husband – but she changes her attitude. Some of you may be struggling with something you can't change – maybe it's your marriage or your health or some other circumstance. Even if there are things in your life that won't change, but it doesn't have to stop you from changing. You can bloom right where you're planted.

Leah was in an unhappy marriage and nothing she tried could change her situation. But God changed her. Instead of looking to Jacob to meet her needs, she looked to God. When you look to others to meet your deepest needs – a husband, a wife, a sibling, a friend – you're looking at flawed, broken people who are not equipped or designed to give you what only God can. You may have the most wonderful husband or wife in the world, but expecting them to meet all your needs sets you up for huge disappointment. God created us first and foremost to have a relationship with Him, and only He can fill the deepest needs of our soul. God created us to be in a relationship with Him, and apart from God we there will always be an empty void. When we seek God to meet our desires it frees us up to receive love from others in a way that does not expect them to give more than they're able to give.

Chapter 29 ends by saying Leah stopped having children. She will have more later on, but in the opening verses of chapter 30 the focus shifts to Rachel, and we see the second human reaction to unmet desires: **Resenting others for having what I don't have**. Verse 1a says... "When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister." Envy is one of the seven deadly sins, and begins early in life when we begin to notice differences between ourselves and others and we compare ourselves to others... "He has more toys than me, he is better at soccer than me, she has a better family situation than me, she's more well-liked and popular than me."

Envy leads to the dual emotions of resentment and discontentment. We can envy just about anything... We can envy someone's possessions – their house, their wealth, or their truck. We can envy someone's position or promotion. We can envy someone's achievement or success. We can envy someone's good fortune. We can envy someone's good health or good looks or good marriage or good kids.

The book of James says that the source of conflict is rooted in resentment and discontentment. James 4:1-2a says, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight." James 3:16 says, "For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice." Envy is the gateway to every evil practice. Envious people lie, envious people steal, envious people gossip and spread rumors, envious people slander the name and reputation of others. Envious people can even end up murdering someone. Cain killed Abel because of envy. The Jewish leaders killed Jesus because of envy.

A big part of Christian maturity is learning to be content with the life and circumstances God has given you, and not compare yourself to others. Instead of being jealous of what others have, Jesus said, "Rejoice with those who rejoice." That kind of attitude can only happen through the supernatural power of Holy Spirit. When you allow the Spirit to weed out jealousy and resentment, it leads to a much more happy and joyful life – and one that is not dependent on how you measure up to others.

Rachel's jealousy leads her to a third unhealthy response, and that is **blaming others for my unhappiness**. Verses 1b-2... So she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!" Jacob became angry with her and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?" When we're unhappy, the natural reaction is to find someone to blame. Rachel says to Jacob, "Give me some children," implying that he's responsible for her barrenness. She even caps it off with a threat... "Give me children or I will curl up in a corner and die." Unhappy people expect others to make them happy – but that's an unfair expectation because happiness and contentment is found only in the Lord.

We haven't talked much about Jacob's role in these baby wars, but he doesn't come out looking good either. Instead of listening and showing compassion, he reacts in anger. Theologically, he's right – he can't control whether Rachel has children or not – that's up to God. But instead of praying for Rachel and showing compassion, he responds in the flesh and gets angry.

The mess that's being made in Jacob's home gets messier in verse 3, where we see the fourth damaging reaction to unmet desires, and that is **using others to get what we want**. Verses 3-8... Then she said, "Here is Bilhah, my servant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and I too can build a family through her." So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife. Jacob slept with her, and she became pregnant and bore him a son. Then Rachel said, "God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son." Because of this she named him Dan. Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, "I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won." So

she named him Naphtali.

Rachel is so desperate for validation and approval that she uses servant to act as a surrogate mother. In their culture if a woman was unable to conceive a child it was customary for her to give one of her servant girls to her husband as a concubine – or second wife – and the children born to the concubine would be considered her children. It's the same thing Sarah did by suggesting to Abraham that he have a child with her servant Hagar.

Both Hagar and Bilhah were used as pawns – they were a means to an end to give Sarah and Rachel what they wanted. They were so consumed with their own needs that they didn't stop to consider the harm they were doing to others.

Rachel not only uses Bilhah, but puts her hopes in her. She thinks, “God isn't coming through, so I have to take matters into my own hands.” All this does is create a bigger mess. Jacob now has, what is in essence, three wives. Polygamy was an accepted practice in the culture of the day, but it was not accepted by God. God designed the marriage relationship to be between one man and one woman, and He put a boundary around marriage for the well-being of society. He knows that anytime we step outside his boundary – whether it's polygamy or adultery – anytime we ignore God's boundaries, there's trouble – and many of the problems we face in our culture are directly tied to breakdown of marriage due to our selfish desires.

Bilhah, Rachel's servant, gives birth to two sons, and Rachel names the first son Dan, meaning “he has vindicated me.” All Rachel is thinking about is herself... “I need vindication... I need recognition... I need validation... and now in my son I have it.” She names her second son Naphtali, which means “struggle.” She says, “I have struggled with my sister, and I've won!” Just as Rachel uses Bilhah to get what she wants, she uses her sons as well. They are a means to get the approval and vindication she so desperately craves.

The mess in Jacob's home gets even worse with the fifth unhealthy reaction in the ongoing baby war: **Competing with others to outdo them.** Verses 9-12... When Leah saw that she had stopped having children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, “What good fortune!” So she named him Gad. Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. Then Leah said, “How happy I am! The women will call me happy.” So she named him Asher.

It looked as though Leah had come to accept her circumstances after having Judah, but when she sees Rachel have two children through Bilhah, Leah says, “Two can play at that game,” and she gives her servant Zilpah to Jacob as a surrogate.

Solomon made an interesting observation in Ecclesiastes 4:4 when he said, “And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another.” Solomon observes that what drives people to work is envy of what the person down the street has. It's the desire to keep up with the Joneses. We want people to think well of us and perceive of us in a certain way. I've always thought it was fascinating that some of the wealthiest men in America – the Rockefellers, the Vanderbilts, and the Carnegies of the world – who accumulated billions and billions of dollars – never stopped trying to make more. It really wasn't about the money, but the competition to outdo each other. It was about the power. Leah is driven by the same desire.

Don't miss what she says when Asher is born... "How happy I am! The women will call me happy." Her happiness is derived by what others think of her. She's overjoyed not so much with the birth of her son, but what her son will mean to people's perception of her. If Leah was on social media, she would post pictures of her and her children and sit anxiously by to see how many like button clicks she got. I've read that getting a ding or like response on your phone actually releases dopamine into your body – it makes you feel valued and validated. But the feeling is short-lived, and like a drug it quickly wears off and you need more and more of it to get the same effect. A few weeks ago a study revealed that 60% of adolescent girls feel persistent sadness, and part of the reason is the pressure they feel from social media to measure up to perceived expectations. The ironic thing is that people really aren't thinking about you, they're thinking, like you, about themselves.

God offers a much better way out of a culture that bases identity on what others think, and that is to base our identity in Him – to see ourselves as He sees us – and to get our value and worth from being saved and adopted into His family. When we find our identity in God, then our need to impress others will decrease, and we will become more and more content with who we are and what we have and begin to enjoy life.

Things get even more bizarre in verse 14 with the sixth response: **Bargaining with others to gain leverage...** During wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." A mandrake is a plant that people superstitiously believed aided in fertility. Since Rachel is desperate to have children of her own, she asks Leah to give her some of the mandrakes that Reuben found.

Verses 15-16... But she said to her, "Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?" "Very well," Rachel said, "he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes." It appears like Jacob was spending most of his time with Rachel, and in order to get Jacob's time and attention, Leah swings a deal: I'll give you the mandrakes, you give me Jacob.

Verse 16... So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him. "You must sleep with me," she said. "I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he slept with her that night. Did you catch what she said? "I have hired you." I want love and acceptance so badly that I've bought time with you.

Verses 17-21... God listened to Leah, and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son. Then Leah said, "God has rewarded me for giving my servant to my husband." So she named him Issachar. Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son. Then Leah 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." So she named him Zebulun. Some time later she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dinah. Your heart kind of goes out to Leah. After giving birth to her sixth son, she says, "Now Jacob will honor me – now he'll love me – what more do I have to do?"

The story ends with Rachel, at long last, having a child of her own. Verses 22-24... Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, "God has taken away my disgrace." She named him Joseph, and said, "May the Lord add to me another son." In Rachel's culture, not having children was a sign of shame, and by having Joseph, her shame is lifted and she hopes and prays that she will have many more.

Earlier I asked why these stories are in the Bible. Wouldn't it be better to have stories of God's people behaving well and making good choices? The New Testament says that all the stories in the Old Testament are written as examples for us to learn from – both to follow good examples and be warned by bad examples. After a lot of pondering on this passage, I believe there are two primary things we can learn.

First, **look to God to meet your deepest desires.** Psalm 37:3-4 says, “Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” God is the one who gives us the desires for love and approval and recognition, and He uses these God-given desires to drive us to Him. When delight in the Lord – when we find our joy and contentment and satisfaction in Him – our desires are met. We may not gain the love and approval of others – and we may not have all the longings of our heart on earth satisfied – but when we delight in the Lord, we see the shallowness of what we thought would bring us satisfaction, and God changes our desires so that we seek what is eternal and real.

And the by-product of that is that we are able to enjoy much better relationships by freeing people from expectations and resentment and blame. We no longer feel compelled to compete with others, to use others, or bargain with others. Instead of looking to them to meet our desires, we seek to serve them and build them up in Christ.

The second great lesson we learn in this story is that **God in His grace can redeem the messes we make.** Make no mistake, Jacob's family would reap the consequences of what Leah and Rachel and Jacob sowed for many centuries to come. As we saw last week, God allows us to reap what we sow to get our attention and not continue in sin. At the same time God is unbelievably gracious. He specializes in working all things together for good – even our failures and mistakes. And this is good news for us, because without God's grace we'd be doomed. As Romans 5:20 says, “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” In other words, as the hymn says, grace is greater than all our sin. There is no mess too big for God's grace to work.

The grace of God is seen by each child He grants to Leah and Rachel. God promised Jacob that He would build from him a great nation with many descendants, and despite the all the sin and dysfunction of this chapter, God fulfills His promise. These twelve sons – who would be imperfect themselves – would be used of God to fulfill His plan to rescue the world from sin – because Jesus would come from Jacob's family. He would come through the line of Judah – the fourth son of Leah. Throughout Jesus' family tree are a number of women like Leah and Tamar and Rahab and Bathsheba – women who were looked down on and rejected. His family tree was full of messy people, but from them came the world's greatest gift. Jesus, the direct descendant of Jacob's family – blessed the world by dying on the cross in place of guilty sinners, and offers salvation by grace through faith to all who will believe.