

God's Faithfulness in the Midst of Our Unfaithfulness

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[0 : 00] Jacob's children. When the Lord saw that Lee was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. Lee 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. She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son, she said, because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave this one too. So she named him Simeon. 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 born him three sons. So he was named Levi. 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. When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, give me children or I'll die. Jacob became angry with her and said, I am in the place of God who has kept you from having children. 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 Nabthali. When Lee saw that she had stopped having children, she took her servant Zilpha and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Lee's servant Zilpha bore Jacob a son. Then Lee said, what good fortune. So she named him Gad. Lee's servant Zilpha bore Jacob a second son. Then Lee said, how happy am I. The woman will call me happy. So she named him Asher. During wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which she brought to his mother, Lee. Rachel said to Lee, please give me some of your son's mandrakes. 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 and return for your son's mandrakes.

So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Lee went out to meet him. You must sleep with me, she said. I've hired you with my son's mandrakes. So he slept with her that night. God listened to Lee and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son. Then Lee said, God has rewarded me for giving my servant to my husband. So she named him Issachar. Lee conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son.

Then Lee 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 Zibulin. Some time later, she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dina. 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. And what a joy to see you guys tonight. Well done for making it out. My name's James. I'm on staff team here and I need some help with this passage. So I'm going to pray to God to help us. So Father, we pray that you'd speak to us through your word now. We pray that your spirit will work in our hearts and change us from the people that we are, who are away from you, who are sinful, and that we're drawn near to you as we listen now. In Jesus' name. Amen. And I wonder what you made of that passage. That sounds like the kind of cheery, optimistic passage that makes you want to rush out of here and go get married, perhaps. Maybe not. I don't know if you've ever read Chesterton. G.K. Chesterton. He's got this great classic quote on marriage. I'll just read it for you. He says, to put it in one

metaphor, the sexes are two stubborn pieces of iron and marriage is like trying to weld them together. And if you're Afrikaans, if you're South African, you know that cast iron doesn't weld. Unless, of course, there's a miracle from God. But you don't need just to go to Chesterton to get a bolt of reality about marriage here. You can go to this passage tonight. And it is, on the one hand, a very sad passage, isn't it? We see some really bad things happening, some really terrible behavior. We see a miserable marriage, begun miserable. And we see it with people who are deeply sinful and who need the Lord to work in their lives. But in the same time in this chapter, it is also very optimistic. It's very encouraging, isn't it? Because it's a chapter in which we see God's promises, promises to Jacob to make his descendants like the dust of the beach, like the stars in the universe, to give them many Jacob, many offspring, those promises to Abrake, to Isaac, to Jacob. And they're starting to come true here. And it's the center of the point of the life of Jacob. And you might wonder, how can this be? How can such a miserable situation turn out for good?

[6:12] And the answer comes in the very first verse of our reading this evening. Verse 31. Now, if you've got your Bibles open, just keep them open there. When the Lord saw, and it's a chapter that's filled with God working, God working to get things done, where we see God take people who are deeply broken and make them into his radiant people whom he loves deeply. And the question for us tonight is, do we see ourselves here? Do we see that this is a story of God building his people then? And because we are God's people now, by faith, it is our story. We're no different to the people in this passage.

We have the same faults. We have the same petty jealousies. And we suffer from the same sins. And so the only way that we can ever become the people of God, that God wants us to be, here at St. Silas, is because God has done it. God has made us into that people out of the terrible, raw materials. And so let's dive into the story. And the setting is seven years of Jacob's life that becomes the football world cup. And it sounds good on the one hand, except Jacob is the football. And you see here, we see two sisters, Rachel and Leah, competing for Jacob. And they treat having kids as a competition. It is the fertility wars, the fertility football world cup. And at the start of the match, Rachel looks like the firm favorite. We remember how the week before last reading ended, that Jacob's love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah. And it's understandable. Rachel is the stunner. Rachel's the one that Jacob wanted to marry. Jacob only got tricked into marrying Leah by Laban, his father-in-law. And Leah played along with that trick. And so our match, we see two halves, and then we see a half-time talk. And then we see some surprises in the extra time. And in the first half, verses 31 to 35 of chapter 29, it's all about Team Leah. It's a total upset. In quick succession,

Leah has four sons. And by half-time, it's 4-0 to Leah. And that's a great score line to go into the changing room, isn't it? Maybe you don't believe me that it's a football competition. Maybe you don't believe that it is competitive. Well, then just look at the names that Leah gives to the children. Just look at the name of Reuben. And you might look down at your footnotes there, and you see right at the end of those footnotes, you see Reuben means, see, look, a son. And it's a name that looks like a football celebration. Look, a son. And you can imagine the birth, the birthday when they're naming the child. And Leah looks over to Rachel, and she goes, look, a son. That's what I'm going to name him. And Rachel gets the point. The game is afoot. And it's the kind of gift that keeps on going. You can imagine Leah popping out to the shops one day. And she might say to Rachel, Rachel, could you look after my boy, please? Look, a son. While I pop down to the shops.

[10:06] And so at the half-time chat, Rachel goes into the locker room, and she lets it all go at Jacob. And so we read there in verse 1 of chapter 30, when Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children. She became jealous of her sister. And she said to Jacob, give me children or I die.

And it's slightly over the top, isn't it? It's very dramatic. And then Rachel becomes the first football manager in history to make a substitution in verse 3. And so we see then she said, here is Bilhah, my servant, sleep with her so that I can bear children for me, and I too can build a family through her. And at the start, it works very well. Two children and Rachel's back in the game, back in contention. And it puts the scoreline at 4-2. But then look at the name that Rachel gives the children that Bilhah bears. The second son in verse 8, I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won. And it's slightly presumptuous, isn't it? And it makes you wonder, what match has Rachel actually been watching? And there's a strategic flaw to Rachel's plan here, is that anything Rachel does, Leah can do too. And so in verse 9, when Leah had seen that she'd stopped having children,

she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. And Leah has two more sons, and she calls them, how very lucky am I, and women everywhere will call me blessed. And she's really rubbing it in, isn't it? And so Leah pulls away in the Fertility World Cup, and Rachel, the score goes to 6-2 to Leah at full time. And the things should be done here, but then there's some extra time. And in verse 14, there's a strong suggestion of a doping scandal with the mandrakes going on. So we read there in verse 14, during the wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah. And Rachel said to Leah, please give me some of your son's mandrakes. But she said to her, wasn't it enough that you took my husband away? Will you take my son's mandrakes too? And it's really cutting. It's incredibly cutting, thin, isn't it? And they're sisters. And so each woman here accuses the other of stealing her husband. And the sadness in the situation, really, is poor Reuben gets dragged into the mix as well. And then Leah goes on to have another son, in verse 20, and a daughter, Dina. And so the score ends up 9-2. And then in the final seconds of injury time in this match, after seven years of competitive breeding, Rachel finally has a child. And it really is an absolutely heartbreaking story, isn't it? We see confused people, people who are sinners, people who have been sinned against and who sin against others. We see every relationship in the story broken and shattered. Every character in the story sinks more and more into sin and brokenness. And we see this in Leah, don't we? So let's look at Leah. Leah wants to be loved by Jacob. Those are the two themes that are driving this story. Leah wants to be loved. Rachel wants to have children. They're incredibly stronger feelings, stronger emotions that are perhaps true for us tonight. So it's a very real story.

[14:12] And those are the passions that are driving the story. Leah wants to be loved by Jacob, her husband, more than anything. But instead, what we see is the exact opposite. So we see how Leah started off as the ugly sister in our last reading in verse 17 of 29. And then we see how she becomes the sister who is less loved. And then in the very first verse of our reading tonight, it's literally translated, she is the sister who is hated. And Moses, who writes the story, he wants us to see Leah with sympathy.

He wants us to empathize with Leah because this is our story. We want to be truly loved and cherished and cared for, for who we are, warts and all. And despite all Leah's plans, it's not a great plan, isn't it, having six kids in six years to try and win an unwilling husband over. And you can hear Leah's desperation and sadness in the names that she gives her children. So Reuben, Reuben's got another meaning, and that is, it sounds like the Hebrew word to love. And so Leah says, verse 32, surely my husband will love me now. And then Simeon's name expresses disappointment that Reuben's birth has not brought her the love she desired. And verse 33, because the Lord heard that I am not loved. And again, we see this in Levi, verse 34, now at last my husband will become attached to me. And then even right at the end, Leah still never gives up hope. Just look at verse 20, in chapter 30. This time, my husband will treat me on her. And so she names her final son, Zebulun.

And although the Lord sees her and blesses her with sons, she wants what she cannot have. She wants to be loved by Jacob. She wants what the other sister has. And instead of all, instead of getting it, all her yearning does is push Jacob away. And she's so desperate that she asks Jacob why. And we see that she alienates Jacob by the fact that she has to buy intimacy with Jacob from her sister with mandrakes. And then we see the same slide there, the same brokenness in Rachel, and the sister Rachel. So Rachel, rather than rejoicing in her sister's children, all it does is drive her jealousy. And so she moves, in verse 1 of chapter 30, she moves from beauty queen to drama queen. And all she ends up doing is making Jacob angry with her. So verse 2, we read, Jacob became angry with her, and said, am I in the place of God? Who has kept you from having children? And her response to that is to pimp Jacob out. And first she does that to her maid. And it's not a great plan, isn't it? It's never going to make her happy. And then to leer on some hope and some random superstition that mandrakes would give her the thing that she wants. And so she jeopardizes her love with Jacob. She jeopardizes those affections that she might get children. And so in the process, she gets into this fight with Jacob and with Leah, and she ruins those relationships.

[18:20] And I wonder if she is actually any better off for all of it. And it's a truly heartbreaking, rending story. See, each sister here wants to be loved. Each sister wants a happy marriage. Each sister wants children, a happy family. Both are envious of the other, and they imagine if only they had that, then they would be happy. And Jacob, he doesn't escape either. See, Jacob, for the most

part, he's completely absent in the story. But he does manage to sink to a new low here. And so we remember how he was hired out as a slave to Laban, his father-in-law, in our last reading. But here tonight, he's hired out as a sex slave for hire for the price of mandrakes. And then we see in verse 2 of chapter 30 that Jacob is learning that he isn't God. Proud Jacob's learning that he isn't God, and that only God can fix this situation. Only God can fix the sin problem that we see here. And where Jacob's parents, Isaac, his father, and Abraham, his grandfather, had prayed for their infertile wives, Jacob doesn't. He lives entirely for himself. And as broken as these people are, and they are still God's people. They are still conflicted people. We still see them seeking out a relationship with God. We still see them relating to God. And so they're very much like us tonight. And so we should see ourselves in this passage. But as sad as this passage is, it's also a triumphant and a happy passage to the hearers back then. So how do I know this? Well, over the summer, we're looking forward to some weddings at St. Silas. And if you were going to a wedding 500 years after this passage, you might have written something like Boaz wrote to Ruth on his wedding. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together build up the family of Israel. See, the people in Israel after this time, they looked up at Rachel and Leah. They looked up to them as people who built up

God's family. And tonight, as we read this passage, we think, what a mess. But to them then, this passage is a source of national pride.

And the Israelites, we remember the context is they've come out part of Egypt. And they're looking ahead to Canaan, a land filled with enemies that they still had to conquer, a land that God had promised them. And as he promised to build them up into a great nation. And this passage is a battle cry. You can perhaps imagine the Israelites all gathered together, and they're hearing this passage read to them by Moses. And they might hear the different tribes being read, all those sons being read. And they might hear, that's me, that's me. And so it's perhaps like us here tonight. And I might say, is anyone from Aberdeen here? And someone might say something? No, maybe not. I might say, are there any Northern Irish people here? And so, of course. And I might say, are there any South Africans here? And it'd just be me. And what it was, it reminded the people then of what Jacob had been promised. That he'd have a great family, that he'd possess the land, and that his family would bless the world through them.

But this passage also reminded them that don't think they did anything to deserve it. Just look back at your family tree. And the message for them from this passage was, you're a proud nation, but you're not to be proud. I wonder how you might feel about letting other people know about your family. Generally, my habit is to try and emphasize those relations that I think might impress others, and try and not speak about those who are a bit dodgier. So I don't say much about my family. But when Jesus reveals his family in Matthew 1, his family line is a sinful mess. His family line is this. And so what do we see is that God works through this mess to make a people who are his people, and to teach them.

Not to be proud. And there are a number of reasons from this passage that they are not to be proud, but are rather to flee to God. And the first there is that God sees the mess that they're in, and he still clearly acts. And I wonder if you noticed all the references to seeing in this passage. So what do we see? Verse 31, 29.

[24 : 03] When the Lord saw, and then verse of 1, chapter 30. When Rachel saw, and then verse 9, when Leah saw. And unlike Rachel and Leah, who see and their sight leads them into sin, God sees, and he generously cares for all our brokenness and weakness. And so 31. When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive. See, God cares for and remembers the weak and the pitiful, because he wants us to turn and trust him in all we do in life. And the Lord sees even the bad things that goes on. So I wonder if you notice at verse 3, and it says there, then she said, here is Bilhar. And it literally says, look, Bilhar.

And what Moses is doing there is he's highlighting the wickedness there of the situation. And it reminds us of Laban, when he said, when he tricked Leah into sleeping with Jacob, what was the thing there?

Look, in the morning, there was Leah. And so Moses is commenting here that this passage is something not to be emulated. Moses looks down on what's going here. And when God made marriage, he made marriage between one man and one wife. And the point here is that God sees the mess that we have made, and how deeply sinful we are. But he still acts. And the things in this passage that might offend us are nowhere near as heartbroken as God is over these things. He

sees all the suffering, all the injustice.

He sees all the Bilhar's, all the Zulpas. And he cares for them. And he still works to get things done. And the second reason that we are not to be proud and flee to God is that God remembers the weak and lays low the proud. And we think of Leah. And she's the ugly sister, the one that everyone thought would never get married, the no-hoper. And what happens? She ends up becoming the mother of all the priests in Israel and of all the kings of Israel. Jesus came from Leah. And she was not bad.

And that wasn't not bad for the girl whom nobody wanted to marry. But then we also see it in Rachel. You see, this whole story, the whole story of Jacob turns on verse 22. It all builds up to that verse.

[27 : 10] And it's a verse where Jacob is completely absent. Then God remembered Rachel. He listened to her and enabled her to conceive. And the point there is that God is acting despite our sinfulness.

And he remembers the weak and the lowly. He remembers the heartbroken. And Jacob's entirely absent. And the passage is entirely dependent on God's work.

And this leads to the third reason we're not to be proud, but entirely dependent on who God is. And that is, God is a God who shows outrageous grace. In this passage, there's so much that goes wrong in this passage. And I wonder if you might scan back and look at everything that happens. And I wonder if you had friends who behave like the people in this passage. You might be tempted to give up on them. But what does God do?

He sees all the outrageous sinfulness that his people display. And his grace surpasses them all. He blesses Leah after she went in with her father's plan to steal her sister's fiance.

He remembers Rachel despite all her outrageous behavior. Despite all her outrages. He still honors Jacob, even though Jacob forgets to pray and never prays and almost seems to not know God in this passage. Although he does know God and is apathetic. And we see this outrageous grace at work in the life of Jesus. So the Lord Jesus, he saw, the Lord saw Jesus' sufferings and still he sent them. He saw the mess of earth and he still sent Jesus. And then Jesus became weak that we might be lifted up and be exalted. And then finally Jesus died that we might live. He took all our sinfulness and he laid them and buried it at the cross. And he brought us to God that we could know life to the full, life everlasting in him. Let me pray for us as we close.

[29 : 45] So Father, we thank you that you act despite our sinfulness. We thank you that you act despite the mess that we get ourselves into. And we pray that you'd work within us and through us to your great praise and glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.