

SERIES: Unwavering Faith (Genesis Vol. 3)

By Pastor Bryan Clark

Message Title: A Very Dysfunctional Family Pt. 1

Release Date: Monday 4/13/20

Nobody really knows what her background was like: what life was like at home for her. One could guess that it was probably pretty rough, dysfunctional, unloving. It's likely she longed for affection from her daddy that she never got. So she started looking for love and affection in all the wrong places. One thing led to another—you can fill in the blanks—and she ended up prostituting herself on a daily basis simply to survive. She had resorted to a disgusting form of life because that's all she knew, and she was in a survival mode.

Probably most people would say it's unlikely that she could be acceptable before God; or more than that, it's unlikely she could ever be used by God to do anything of any significance. Her life had become simply too much of a mess. But do you know something? Most people would be wrong. Her name was Rahab. She was a prostitute, a harlot, in the ancient city of Jericho.

But when you look in Hebrews Chapter 11, the "Faith Hall of Fame," lo and behold, there is the name of Rahab the Harlot. God reached down into those circumstances and He made her into a hero of faith. As a matter of fact, it's interesting in Hebrews 11 that the writer even calls her Rahab the Harlot—so that we would not forget what she once was, and what God had made her into.

Maybe even more remarkable than that, is what we see in Matthew Chapter 1, which records the family tree of Jesus, the genealogical line of the Promised Seed, ultimately to Jesus Christ, the Messiah of the world. And there in that family line is Rahab! She was used by God to carry the seed that would eventually be the Seed of Promise, leading to Jesus Christ Himself.

We ask ourselves, *How did this prostitute get in the line of Jesus?* It's just God's grace; it's God's goodness.

I would imagine there are many who struggle with failures from the past, maybe environments that we would call dysfunctional, maybe even your present circumstances—they're just a mess. You look at what has become of your life and you think, *I don't know how God could ever do anything with me.* More days than not, you feel like you're a loser, and that's the label you've attached to yourself. If that's the case, you really need to pay attention to this story from Genesis Chapter 29.

The last we saw of Jacob, through Jacob's manipulation and scheming and then being deceived by Laban, he finds himself married to two sisters—Rachel whom he loves and Leah whom he doesn't love. We ended that story with the feeling that there was trouble ahead. But we had no idea how much trouble was ahead.

We pick up the story in Verse 31:

Now the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. (*NASB)

Before we go on, there are several things we want to notice here. One, it is significant that the name God is used in this verse. It's not just the name God; it's LORD with all capital letters, which is Yahweh or Jehovah, the covenant-keeping God: the God who made the promise, the God who said He would be faithful. Now, one of the reasons that is significant is the last time we saw that was all the way back, when Jacob had this magnificent vision of a ladder coming from the Heavens. God promised Jacob, "I will make you the father of a great nation. You'll have all these descendants. And I will be with you. My presence will be with you always." And Jacob said, "I believe that. The LORD, Yahweh, He will be my God."

But what's interesting is from that statement on, there's no reappearance of the name of God until Verse 31. I don't think it's because Jacob didn't believe. I don't think it's because he didn't want to do the right thing. He hasn't yet learned what it means to claim the promise of God and to practice God's presence in his life. He's trying to accomplish all this on his own—with man-made solutions. So you go through that whole next chapter without any mention of God's name at all. But now in Verse 31, the name God comes back into the story.

Also, this idea of barrenness is not something new. Abraham was the first patriarch and he was married to Sarah, and Sarah was barren for 24 years, before she had the Promised Seed. Abraham's son Isaac was married to Rebekah, and Rebekah was barren for 20 years before she had the Promised Seed. And now here's Rachel, the wife that Jacob loves, and she's barren. All of this is just a reminder that this is a *God-sized problem*.

This is a God-sized problem. Only God can ultimately give life. So Jacob has to learn to just wait—like Abraham and Sarah, and like Isaac and Rebekah—that God would keep His promise.

But God has opened up Leah's womb, and the story continues:

Leah conceived and bore a son and named him Reuben, for she said, "Because the LORD has seen my affliction; surely now my husband will love me." (Vs. 32)

We need to pay attention to these names, because they give us insight into the emotion and the pain of these ladies. Leah is Jacob's wife, but Jacob doesn't love her. Now she has a child and she names him Reuben, which means "Behold, or look: a son!"—hoping that maybe that would cause her husband to love her. *But it doesn't.*

Then she conceived again and bore a son and said, "Because the LORD has heard that I am unloved, He has therefore given me this son also." So she named him Simeon. (Vs. 33)

Simeon means "hear" or "hearing." She says, "The Lord seems to have heard my cry and my sorrow. Now He has given me this son and maybe *now* my husband will love me. *But he doesn't.*"

She conceived again and bore a son and said, "Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." Therefore he was named Levi. [which means "attached"] (Vs. 34)

But he still doesn't love her.

And she conceived again and bore a son and said, “This time I will praise the LORD.” Therefore she named him Judah [which means “praise”]. (Vs. 35)

You have to imagine her pain and her anguish. She's married to a man who doesn't love her. Now, we don't know whether she was a willing participant in this deception or whether it was all Laban's idea. In that culture a daughter would have had little say. If her father said, “Do it,” she would have done it. So certainly she's living with the consequences of her father's choice, and maybe her own. But the reality is, now the consequences are she's married to a man that doesn't love her and she's desperate to have him love her. So she has a child. Maybe now...maybe now...maybe now! *But he doesn't love her.*

One of the things that's so interesting about this opening scene is the fact that Leah keeps using the name Jehovah, Yahweh. In other words, the writer is saying that she has some concept that this God is a God who is personal: He hears your cries and He responds and He cares. This is the personal, promise-making, promise-keeping God. And the question arises, “Where did she learn that?” She was raised in the home of a pagan. Laban was an idolater. He had no concept of this Jehovah God. So where was she learning this? She had to have been learning it from Jacob; that's the only place it could have come from.

It's interesting that Jacob seems to be teaching about this God who made a promise and who keeps His covenant—to the extent that she believes that and she's crying out to Him. But Jacob doesn't seem to get it himself. I find that to be somewhat common. Have you ever found yourself talking to someone else about God's promises and trusting Him, and all of a sudden it dawns on you, *Maybe I should listen to that?* You're struggling with your own fears and your own anxieties. And in the process of the conversation, you're thinking, *I'm not even listening to my own advice.* Why is it so easy to see other people's problems and to see how this great theology applies to them, and so often we can't see it in our own lives?

That's where Jacob was at, and Leah does seem to be understanding it. As a matter of fact, the fourth son was not named anything having to do with Jacob loving her. He was just named “Praise”—as if she had resigned herself to the fact, *He may never love me. But God loves me and He has given me these sons—and for that I will praise Him.* There seems to be some significant movement toward God in this opening scene.

The story continues ... Chapter 30, Verse 1:

Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she became jealous of her sister; and she said to Jacob, “Give me children, or else I die.”

Ouch! It's very important in a Hebrew narrative to pay attention to the first time dialogue ever comes out of the mouth of a main character. This is the first time anything has ever come out of Rachel's mouth that's recorded in the text. She has been in the story, but this is the first time she speaks. And you can hear the frustration—actually the irrationality—in her words. You get the impression that Rachel has always pretty much gotten what she wanted. But now she can't get this. There's just no human way to make it happen, and she's angry and she's hurt and she's frustrated.

And Jacob responds. Now, you remember when Sarah was struggling with her barrenness, Abraham was pretty compassionate with her. When Isaac was dealing with Rebekah and her barrenness, he was very compassionate. They prayed together. But now when Jacob responds to Rachel's barrenness, he's mad.

Then Jacob's anger burned against Rachel, and he said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (Vs. 2)

Jacob says in anger, "Who do you think I am? God? Like I can do this!" I mean, it's fairly obvious it's Rachel's problem, because it's working with Leah. So he says, "Am I God, that I can fix this?" Now I think he's angry at her, but I think he's more angry at God. I think he's angry at God because God promised. God promised this seed—these descendants—and God is not delivering. Because of that, it's making Rachel angry with him; and Rachel is the one he loves. He's angry at God for doing this. So he explodes on Rachel.

In this entire story that we're looking at, there's only one time where any words come out of Jacob's mouth—and that's right here. Jacob is the main character. He's the main character in the chapter before, the chapter after, and the chapter after that. He's the man! He's the patriarch. But only one statement in this story comes out of his mouth—and that makes it very important. That statement is Jacob saying, "Who do you think I am...God?"—which is the lesson he's learning here. This is a God-sized problem; and he's not God. He cannot do it himself! He's having trouble learning that.

Well, Rachel has a solution to this God-sized problem:

She said, "Here is my maid Bilhah, go in to her, that she may bear on my knees, that through her I too may have children." (Vs. 3) 14:22

"Bear on my knees" basically is a procedure of adoption, saying, "My maid will have this child, but this child will be mine." This sounds familiar, doesn't it? When Abraham and Sarah were struggling with her barrenness, that was their solution: "Let's have Hagar the maid come, and we'll have a child through her." This is a man-made solution to a God-sized problem. And it just created disaster.

Now here we are, and Jacob and Rachel are coming up with the same solution. I do understand that in the ancient culture this was common. This was a common, man-made solution to a God-sized problem. What else are you going to do? That's how these pagans operated, because they had no presence of God in their lives. But Jacob isn't like that. The whole point is, God has called Jacob out to be a people of God, to practice the very power and presence of God in his life. They don't need man-made solutions to God-sized problems. God is with them. This was supposed to be their distinctive, but they don't understand that. So they're going with the methodology of the world.

The story continues:

She gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her. Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Then Rachel said, "God has vindicated me, and has indeed heard my voice and has given me a son." Therefore she named him Dan. (Vs. 4-6)

The name Dan means “justice” or “vindication.” But notice when she makes the statement “God has done this,” it’s not Jehovah. It’s not capital L-O-R-D. It’s God. It’s as if the writer is saying, “Yes, this is God’s gift; this is God’s mercy; He is the author of life. But this isn’t what God wanted for the covenant. This isn’t what God intended—this solution to the problem.”

Rachel’s maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. So Rachel said, “With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and I have indeed prevailed.” And she named him Naphtali.” (Vs. 7-8)

Naphtali means “wrestlings.” This is really getting ugly. No longer is it just about Rachel having a child; it’s about Rachel competing with her sister. And now they’re in this competition and she has to win. So she has these two children through the maid, and she says, “I’ve prevailed.” Now, I’m having trouble with the math here. It still seems like it’s 4:2 to me—4 through Leah and 2 through the maid. I don’t understand how Rachel comes out on top, but she thinks she’s winning and she has prevailed. This whole thing is just becoming an ugly mess.

Last time we saw Leah, she seemed like she was on a track of pursuing God and understanding this covenant-keeping God. But she’s in this dysfunctional environment and she’s getting drawn in. So we’re disappointed with Leah’s response.

When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing [*and there’s some question as to whether that’s because God closed her womb or whether it’s because Jacob stopped having relations with her. I think it’s most likely the latter. I think Rachel was putting the heat on Jacob, and Jacob was pressured to completely ignore Leah*], **so she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, “How fortunate!” So she named him Gad.** (Vs. 9-11)

The name Gad means “fortunate.” We would say “lucky.” Now look at the change from before when Leah was realizing, *These are gifts of God*. But now she has gotten drawn into this mess and now when she has this child, she says, “My, how lucky! How lucky we are.”

Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. Then Leah said, “Happy am I! For women will call me happy.” So she named him Asher. (Vs. 12-13) 18:56

I’ve got to tell you, I don’t know one woman who has ever called her happy. She’s not happy; she’s miserable. The ongoing story will tell you she’s still lonely and hurting and miserable. Who are we kidding that she thinks she’s happy? They’re in this competition where they’re trying to beat each other, and the whole thing is just a disastrous mess. Every time she calls these kids to the table it’s a reminder of what she had hoped for that will never come to pass. She calls Reuben “Behold, this son...I thought my husband would love me.” She calls Simeon “God hears me...but my husband doesn’t love me.” Then she calls “Happy” to the table and she knows, *I’m not happy; I’m miserable*. [Laughter] These names are going to mock her the rest of her life.

Can you imagine this home environment with all this competition and anger? And none of it was necessary. God promised, “I’ll give you descendants. I’ll take care of you. I’ll do it all.” But when they started coming up with man-made solutions to these God-sized problems, it just led to disaster. And it wasn’t necessary.

Nat: So Bryan, man-made solutions to God-sized problems spells trouble most of the time, doesn't it?

Bryan: Yeah, I think we see that pretty consistently. So even think about Abraham's story and Sarah not being able to have a child. So they come up with a plan of having a child through Hagar. It's the same thing. It just creates trouble. So now you've got Jacob with four wives and all this competition at home. And maybe it's well-intended, you know, kind of trying to help God out, but it's going to be a mess.

Nat: Absolutely. You know, it's easy to read these ancient stories and actually lose sight of the pain and the heartache these women were going through. It seems like our bad decisions hurt a lot more people than just ourselves.

Bryan: Yeah, of course. That's true. So, you know, I deal with a lot of these heartaches in pastoral ministries, so my heart hurts when I read this story. I feel for these ladies; you just feel the pain. Leah so wants a husband that will love her. Rachel can't have a child. Then you throw the two maids in it. It's like, wow, this story is just filled with so much pain. And you think about the key players, choices that Jacob made and Laban made, and the pain it caused a lot of people.

Nat: Bryan, you mentioned it in your message, but who is Jacob really angry at?

Bryan: I think that's a really interesting part of the story. So Rachel's frustrated and that comes out on Jacob and Jacob is angry at God, but he takes it out on Rachel. So clearly he's saying, I'm not God. I can't do this. I can't control this. But you can kind of read between the lines, where it's like, God, this was your idea. This was your promise. He's feeling the pain of a wife that he loves and God's not coming through. I think he's angry at God. He's just venting it on Rachel.