

SERIES: Unwavering Faith (Genesis Vol. 3)
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Message Title: A Very Dysfunctional Family Pt. 2
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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, Gen. 29)

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.*

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." 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.1-2)

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)

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."

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)

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.

The story continues:

Now in the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field [*a mandrake was a root that was believed to be an aphrodisiac, a fertility drug, a love potion*], **and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." But she said to her, "Is it a small matter for you to take my husband? And would you take my son's mandrakes also?"** (Vs. 14-15a)

Now that's an interesting thing for Leah to say, isn't it? Let's go back and remind ourselves of something: Who stole whose husband? It was Leah that stole Rachel's husband. This was the big deception. This was the big switchover in the middle of the night. If anybody stole anybody's husband, it was Leah stealing Rachel's husband. But now she's losing the competition and she's painting herself as the victim. And the story goes on:

So Rachel said, "Therefore he may lie with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes." When Jacob came in from the field in the evening, then Leah went out to meet him and said, "You must come in to me [*that phrase is typically used to describe relations between two people who have never been together—which may be the writer's hint of saying it had been a long time since Jacob was with*

Leah], for I have surely hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he lay with her that night. God gave heed to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Then Leah said, "God has given me my wages because I gave my maid to my husband." So she named him Issachar. Leah conceived again and bore a sixth son to Jacob. Then Leah said, "God has endowed me with a good gift; now my husband will dwell with me, because I have borne him six sons." So she named him Zebulun [*which means "to dwell"*]. Afterward she bore a daughter and named her Dinah. (Vs. 15b-21)

Dinah will play into the story later; we'll just make a mental note of that. But this is an absolute disaster! Here Leah is having to *buy* a night with her husband from her sister Rachel. And this whole thing has just turned into an unimaginable nightmare.

Then God remembered Rachel, and God gave heed to her and opened her womb. So she conceived and bore a son and said, "God has taken away my reproach." She named him Joseph, saying, "May the LORD give me another son." (Vs. 22-24)

We read through this story and it really is almost unimaginable that Jacob could make such a disastrous mess of his life and his family. The reality is, none of this was necessary. These people have made choices and will live with the consequences the rest of their lives. This nightmare now of a family will create problems that will follow them for the rest of their lives. 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.

Now we read through this episode and we look at Leah and we look at Rachel. We think, *We would never do that. These people were wacky. We would never do that.* Are we so sure of that? Rachel was wanting to win; she was wanting to succeed. Leah was wanting to be loved; she was wanting to be happy. They both were wanting to be happy. But they did not understand what it means to trust God, to wait on God, to let *God* solve God-sized problems.

We keep chasing these things in the world, hoping they'll someday make us happy—whether they are relationships or some sort of success or some material thing. We keep chasing these things as if eventually they're going to make us happy. Let's just name them: "*Now I'll be happy.*" Let's name that new car Reuben... "*now I'll be happy.*" And that doesn't do it, so we buy a new house... "*now I'll be happy.*" And we get into these new relationships... "*now I'll be happy.*" And this amount of money... and this success... and this title. We just keep chasing all this stuff, and at some point we have to realize, *These are God-sized issues in our lives, and no man-made solution is going to ultimately satisfy.* We're just making a mess of our lives. And many are sitting in the pile that you have created, because you've tried to solve God-sized problems with man-made solutions, and it will never work.

This is why this walk of faith thing is so important. It's important we understand that even the most ordinary daily decisions need to be made practicing the presence of God in our lives, so that we don't make these foolish decisions and create such disastrous environments, but that we understand what it means to trust God and to wait on Him for *His* solutions to these problems.

What about Jacob in this whole story? What's wrong with this guy? He was supposed to be the great patriarch. The whole reason he wanted the blessing is because he thought he could do it right. He wanted to lead his people and his family down the path of righteousness, to walk in God's way. But he comes out of this story as a spineless, passive, angry, frustrated man, who has made a disaster. He can't even lead his family. What chance does he have to lead this nation?

You would think God would say, "You know, Jacob, this is such a mess. You're all out of here! I'm going to start over. I'm going to find a new patriarch that isn't so messed up." But that's not the case. There is the reminder that this is Yahweh, Jehovah, the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God. He promised. And before this story is over, Jacob *will* become a great man of faith—a "Hall of Famer." He will have a remarkable story when it's all over.

Out of this disastrous environment, one of these sons will emerge as the son through whom the Promised Seed will flow in the line of Christ. And out of this disastrous, dysfunctional environment, one of the greatest Old Testament figures of faith will emerge. Why? Because God is a God who keeps His promise. It's about God's power; it's not about Jacob's performance. And where we look at this and it all seems hopeless (*What a disaster!*) God just sees His promise, and it will be accomplished.

Many of you struggle with your past. Many of you struggle with your present and all these consequences of the choices you've made. Our choices may be with us for a lifetime. But in the midst of all of that, God wants to reach into that dysfunctionality. God wants to reach into that environment and He wants to pull you out and make you a hero of faith. He wants to accomplish things through you that you today could never begin to imagine.

One of the problems when we start seeing ourselves as losers is that we start living that way. We just kind of give up, thinking, *I'm a loser; that's all I'll ever be*. That is bad theology, and it is a lack of faith—because God says, "No, this story isn't over yet." By your choices you may have created a disaster, but God in His faithfulness is going to reach into that mess and wants to make you into a hero of faith. And God wants to do something through you that today seems absolutely unimaginable. If you just believe that—*just believe*—it will be accomplished by God's power and promise, not the greatness of your performance.

Yes, we live with the consequences. But God wants to do through you, like He will do through Jacob, and make you a hero of faith—if you *just believe*.

Our Father, we're thankful that You're a God of grace and a God of mercy. Lord, we look at this disastrous story and we wonder why You didn't just choose to start over with a different family that hadn't made such a mess of their lives. But Lord, You are faithful to keep Your promise. You don't just use nice people that come from nice families that have always made good choices. Lord, You use real people that are living with the consequences of past choices. Lord, sometimes we feel like we're in the midst of such dysfunction that we're useless. But Lord, You don't think that. You will reach into the middle of that confusion and You will pull us out. You will make us heroes of faith—not because of who we are... but because of who You are. Lord, just help us to believe that. Lord, help us to believe that in Jesus' name. Amen.

Nat: Bryan, I would guess that we all need that reminder. God can reach into our messes and do something special, if we are willing to trust Him.

Bryan: Yeah. So we all need to be reminded of that. It is a mess. Every time we read through this story, it's like, I can't believe what a mess this is. And you'd think God would just get rid of Jacob and start over. But what's so amazing is His patience and His kindness and His faithfulness, that God's still going to do something special through Jacob. And it's a good reminder that God has that same patience and faithfulness for us.

Nat: Yeah. And I'm thankful for it. You know, the dynamics in this family are almost unbelievable. I mean, my heart hurts thinking about the pain caused by so many bad choices.

Bryan: Yeah. I've read this story so many times, and every time I'm just struck by how incredibly dysfunctional this whole family is, and there will be consequences to these choices that will impact Jacob for the rest of his life, and Jacob's sons in the Joseph story. So there's a lot to it, bad choices that they do have consequences. And it does hurt a lot of people.

Nat: And I think the reality is, just because we live with the consequences of bad choices, doesn't mean that God can't still use us. I mean, sometimes He even uses the fruit of poor choices to accomplish something really good. I mean, for example, out of this mess comes Joseph, who we know will emerge as one of the greatest heroes of faith in the Old Testament.

Bryan: Yeah, it is interesting. So the consequences are real and they're painful, but God can still do great things. So like you said, out of this comes Joseph. But even think about maybe there's a listener out there, that maybe had a child outside of marriage, and okay, that's not what God wanted, but that child still matters, and God can do wonderful things to that relationship. You can't go backwards. So you trust God to be faithful and God often brings good out of messes we make.

Nat: Yeah. I have no doubt that our listeners today are sitting there and they're looking at their lives, and probably even it's possible that they're sitting in a big mess right now. What words of encouragement would you offer them?

Bryan: Yeah, so Jacob's mess is a really big mess, but God is faithful to keep His promise. And one of the ways you see that is there will be times when He will introduce Himself as, *I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*. So it's good to remember that, that in the midst of the mess, God is still faithful and His grace is enough. You know, we can't go backwards. We can't undo what's happened. So what's it look like to be faithful today and tomorrow? And to me, Jacob's always a reminder that God is faithful and God can reach into my mess and still use me for things that matter.

Nat: I'm thankful for it because I know it's been true in my life and true in yours. I hope this has brought you some encouragement. Thanks, Bryan.