

# *Wading River Congregational Church*

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## **SERMONS IN PRINT**

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### **Genesis 29-35 Sisters – Loved And Unloved**

At his mother Rebekah's instigation, Jacob fled from the wrath of his brother Esau whom he had defrauded of the inheritance. He was sent north to find a wife from his mother's family in what is now northern Syria, and by the grace of God came to a well where his cousin Rachel, a shepherdess, appeared at the right moment.

On his journey, Jacob has had the first of three major encounters with God in his lifetime: in a dream he has seen a staircase from earth to heaven ("Jacob's ladder"), and the LORD has appeared and promised him the land of Isaac and Abraham, the heritage of a great nation, and that he will be with Jacob on this journey and bring him safe back to Canaan. But even this is not enough yet to turn Jacob from a deceitful fool into "the father of the nation" – God will deal with him again later to make him what he ought to be.

#### *1) Two Weddings*

When Jacob sees Rachel at the well, he falls for her in an instant. It's not just that she is "family;" it's that she is beautiful – even more than Jacob's mother Rebekah. Rachel has an older sister named Leah, of whom the text says that she had "weak eyes." Now as the great preacher Tim Keller has remarked on this text, the next verse does not say "but Rachel could see really well"! What it says is

that "Rachel was lovely in form, and beautiful." The contrast the narrative impresses on us is very clear: there is a plainer older sister, and a younger one who is just gorgeous – as some men would say today, she is "a real babe." On meeting this woman – like too many men – Jacob simply loses part of his mind, and from that moment on he can only think of one thing – that he wants her!

So Jacob makes an extravagant play for her, offering to work seven years for her father, his uncle Laban, in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage – labor worth far more than a typical "bride price." Laban, who is even more deceitful and cunning than Jacob, quickly agrees. The seven years fly by, and the day comes when Jacob demands of Laban, "Give me Rachel as my wife; I want to lie with her." His desire is frankly sexual; it's not "I love her dearly" but "I want to have sex with her"!

I think you know how things turn out. The wedding is arranged, but Laban quietly substitutes his plainer older daughter Leah under the wedding veil. Next morning when Jacob awakes, as the text says, "Behold, there was Leah!" Jacob, who has been infatuated with Rachel for seven years, apparently doesn't notice it is Leah in his bed that night! Jacob is indignant at being tricked by Laban – who blithely says it is not local custom to allow younger sisters to marry before older ones! Jacob demands the Rachel he worked for, and Laban agrees – at the price of

another seven years labor. So a week after marrying Leah, Jacob marries Rachel as well, and settles in for seven more years labor. Hard work will prove to be the least of his troubles!

## 2) *Loved and Unloved*

Now if you want a perfect illustration of how bad these male-determined arrangements of the patriarchal period were, consider Jacob's marriages. He loves one wife - his dear Rachel - but he leaves Leah unloved. Nobody wants Leah - not her father, not her husband, not her sister. Only God takes notice.

"When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb." Leah quickly bears Jacob four sons - each of them a testimony to Leah's perceptions of being humanly rejected, but growing increasingly close to God. She names the first Reuben - meaning "the LORD has seen my *misery*;" and she says "surely my husband will love me now." But no, he does not. Next is Simeon - "the LORD *heard* I was not loved;" third Levi - "at last my husband will become *attached* to me." All three names are puns or plays on words that describe her misery and rejection and longing for her husband's love and affection, not just his sexual attentions. Leah begins to turn a corner with her fourth son: she names him Judah - saying "this time I will *praise* the LORD." Her salvation is appearing - she knows now that she will be loved by God, if not ever by her husband.

Now Leah's pregnancies cease, but not before the lovely Rachel has become intensely jealous. Rachel, of course, like all beautiful women in the patriarchal narratives, is "barren" - that terrible term again, as though God can't make the point often enough that his ways are not our ways, that sexual attractiveness doesn't mean children, that older brothers serve younger

ones, that the way we value people is not how he values them. Rachel is angry as well as jealous; she screams at Jacob "Give me children or I will die!" Jacob simply responds with anger: "Am I God?" A great help! So Rachel hatches a typical plot that you will have guessed already: she hands over her maidservant Bilhah to Jacob: "Sleep with her; see if you can raise me a family through her!" (Not again! we find ourselves saying).

So Jacob, like all the men of these stories, does just as he is told, and soon we have the two sons of Bilhah. Rachel names them: Dan - meaning "God has *vindicated* me and given me a son;" and Naphtali - meaning "I have *struggled* with my sister and won!" What a tragic family! Unloved Leah, vengeful Rachel, foolish Jacob, and sons who are nicknamed "Misery, Neglect, Unattached, Vindication, Struggle." But we are not done yet. Leah, as she is no longer getting pregnant, hands *her* maid Zilpah over to Jacob too, and soon we have two more sons: Gad - of whom Leah says "what good *fortune*;" and Asher - of whom Leah says "women will call me *happy*."

But Leah still wants more children of her own, and when her son Reuben brings her an herb from the fields called in Hebrew "the love plant" (a *mandrake*), Rachel (who has never yet been pregnant) "buys" it from Leah in exchange for giving Leah a night with Jacob (who evidently mainly sleeps with the lovely but childless Rachel). Jacob does as Rachel tells him, sleeps with Leah, and Leah becomes pregnant again! Two more sons and a daughter quickly follow: Issachar - "God has *rewarded* me;" Zebulun - "this time Jacob will treat me with *honor*;" and the only daughter in the family, Dinah. Finally we are told, "God remembered Rachel," and *she* becomes pregnant, producing a son she names Joseph - "*may the LORD add* to me another son, now that he has taken away my disgrace."

Loved and unloved, barren and pregnant; what a family! 12 children so far, and nobody much happier for it. Jealous wives, an indifferent fool of a husband, nicknamed children. What is God up to in this patriarchal family who are supposed to carry his line of blessing to succeeding generations, and then to the whole world? Where's the blessing in all this mess? Well, you can, if you know God's ways, already glimpse a part of it: the 12 Tribes of Israel are prefigured in the children of Jacob and his four wives.

### 3) *Two Paths*

The narrative is almost but not quite over for the sisters. Jacob becomes rich, and finally, 20 years after Jacob left Canaan, he and his wives and all their children flee from Laban's grasp and head back there. Of course Jacob must still confront his brother Esau, who comes out to meet him with 400 armed men. Jacob goes ahead to plead for their lives, but only after putting Bilhah and Zilpah and their four children in front of his caravan, Leah and her seven next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear! Thank God, Esau has changed, and Jacob and family are not destroyed but welcomed back. In the midst of this encounter, Jacob has met God face-to-face and been forced to wrestle with him all night, rising next morning with a dislocated hip and a new name: no longer Jacob, the deceiver, but *Israel*, the one who wrestled with God.

But as they move on to Bethel, the beloved Rachel dies in childbirth; naming her second son Ben-Oni - "child of my *sorrow*;" only for Jacob-now-Israel to rename him after her death Benjamin - "son of my *right hand*." Rachel is buried near Bethlehem, and from that tomb begins a path that will lead far into the future. Rachel will over time become honored and revered as "mother of the nation" of Israel, and is still so called by Jews

today. That is not least because she was mother of Joseph, the savior of his family when famine drove them into Egypt. But the location of Rachel's tomb on a main travel route made it, and her, even more famous. A thousand years later, as the leaders of "Israelite" society are carried away into exile in Babylon along a road to the east that leads past Rachel's tomb, the prophet Jeremiah speaks of "*Rachel weeping* for her children, because they are no more."

The word of the LORD through Jeremiah is that his people will *return* from exile, and Rachel can cease weeping. But in fact, Jewish culture has adopted the image of Rachel weeping - just as they have the "binding of Isaac" - to describe the Jewish experience of suffering in all subsequent generations. Even Matthew in his NT Gospel will invoke it to describe the impact of Herod the Great's "slaughter of the innocents" - when all boys under two year of age in Jerusalem and Bethlehem are killed as Herod tries to stamp out "the one born King of the Jews." "Rachel weeps" over her lost sons.

Modern Jews feel the same way about *their* suffering. At Brandeis University, where I worked for over 20 years, there is a quiet fish-and lily-filled heart-shaped pool at the center of three chapels - one Jewish, one Catholic, one Protestant. It is a quiet corner of a busy campus, where I loved to walk at lunchtime. Outside the Jewish chapel is a carved marble statue of a woman writhing in agony and tears. On a slab is inscribed "Rachel weeping for her children, because they are no more." It is a Holocaust Memorial. Rachel, mother of the nation, in Jewish eyes still weeps, and will weep until all her children return safely to their homeland.

Rachel's tomb outside Bethlehem remains a place of pilgrimage today; it is reckoned third only to the Temple Mount and the

Cave of the Patriarchs as a Jewish holy site. Rachel's tomb is an especially favored place of prayer among women who are childless, and all those who sorrow.

But there was another sister, and Christians hold her – or should hold her – in even higher regard than Rachel. Leah was unloved, rejected, despised by her father, her sister, her husband. But among her sons were two that made all the difference to God's people: *Levi*, whose line would be chosen by God as the source of generations of priests, and *Judah*, whose line God chose to produce kings. The greatest of them were the house of David, from which came – in God's good time – a king named Jesus, “the lion of the tribe of Judah.” Leah was part of the line of promise that would lead to the Messiah. This is how the LORD would fulfill his promise to bless all the world through Abraham, Isaac, and the deceiver Jacob whom God renamed Israel.

Why Leah? Because she stands for what God stands for – salvation through those who are despised, rejected, unloved, unlovely – “with no beauty that we should desire them.” When all the beautiful and sexually desirable Rachels are history, the plain weak-eyed Leahs will still show us what the Gospel of Jesus makes abundantly plain: that *he suffered* as she did, that he bore the pain and insults of many so that he could produce “children of God,” that salvation comes through the weak and to the weak; not from and not to the strong, or the beautiful, or the sexy.

And even if you are not Leah, or Rachel, but perhaps are Jacob (tho' not yet Israel because God has not finished with you yet); remember to love your wife, to show her attention; remember there are more important things than sex; remember to take your proper role and responsibility in your family- so that you will not finish up raising children who are nicknamed “Misery,

Neglect, Unattached, Vindication, Struggle, Son of Trouble...” May the LORD remember us all, as we cry to him for our families! Let us pray...