

“Only the Weak-Eyed Will See” | Genesis 29 (He Who Wrestles with God: A Study of the Life of Jacob)

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(Small Group Discussion Questions on Page 7)

As a father of a young daughter, this the topic of today’s text literally haunted me this week.

I don’t typically have nightmares, but I did this week. And it clearly emerged from the contents of Genesis 29–30. In my dream I was **protecting my daughter from a band of violent thugs** who were chasing us through a forest. Most of the dream was spent working hard to evade the evil gang and to hide my daughter from their attacks.

It was the sort of dream that was in **slow motion**. I felt incapable of fully protecting her. There was the sense she could be **struck or stolen from me at any moment**.

At one point I was screaming ‘This is my daughter’ ‘stay away from her’. I woke up in something of a panic at 4am, and couldn’t get back to sleep. For most of the following day, I couldn’t kick the dream.

There was a silver lining though. A few days later I recalled a bizarre aspect of the dream, that I had been forgotten in my prior panic. In the dream while the bad guys fired projectiles at us, I was deflecting them, not with a shield, or weapon, but with my 1968 reissue Fender Stratocaster guitar. Saved by the power of rock and roll! Remembering that aspect made the dream a lot less terrifying; but not this passage!

Yet, underneath the heartache, deception, and depravity, we find the very roots of redemption. Roots that powerfully point to the fulfillment of our soul’s deepest longings through Jesus Christ.

We’ll approach the text in three movements this morning.

First, we’ll look at verse 15 and see how the **“wages” of Jacob fulfill the “reward” promised to Abraham** earlier in Genesis.

Next, in verses 17 and following, we’ll discover that **weakness tells us about more than Leah’s eyes**; it reveals to us the power of the Gospel.

Finally, we’ll learn that **only the weak-eyes can clearly see the Lord blessing** through Leah in verses 30-35.

I. Jacob’s Wages/Abraham’s Reward (v. 15)

In verse 15, we read,

“Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your **wages** be?”

On the surface, this verse is really easy to understand. Jacob will be working for Laban, and so “wages” is commercial terminology. “How shall I pay you?” is the sense.

But the original hearers would hear “wages” and immediately think back to an earlier passage – Genesis 15:1. There the word translated here as “wages” is rendered as “reward.”

“Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your **reward** shall be very great.”

The “wage” here in Genesis 29 and the “reward” in Genesis 15 is the same promise that God has been making to Abraham since Genesis:

that Abraham would become **a father of many nations** and **through him all the families of the world would be blessed**.

[Application: Descriptive vs Prescriptive]

This helps us out straightaway, because Jacob ends up married to four women by the end of this passage, and he has children with them all. Today’s passage won’t likely make it into any future editions of the children’s Story Book Bibles anytime soon. I don’t even know how I’d explain it to my daughter if I were to read it to her. There’s no way to sugarcoat it. At least the story of the Flood has some cute animals and a boat to work with, before God destroys all creation.

But never mind explaining it to an eight-year old: how do you justify this stuff to an adult? Do we need to defend God here? Has God’s shifted his views on marriage through the ages, as some more liberal interpreters try to claim?

The key principle is this: The Old Testament often *describes* cultural customs of the day without *prescribing* them. This entire passage: wages, ancient bride prices, having multiple wives at once—these are all descriptive aspects of the culture not prescriptive precepts of God.

You might say: “Jacob should have known that this behavior is contrary to the teaching on a single husband and wife marriage in Genesis 1, the same teaching found later in Ephesians 5, and Jesus himself.” Only, remember, Jacob himself is in the book of Genesis . . . which hadn’t even been written yet; never mind the New Testament. Unless Marty McFly took him Back to the Future, and got him a study Bible, he’d only be know the customs of the day.

II. The Power of the Gospel through the Weakness of Leah (vv. 16-17)

As the story continues to unfold we learn in verses 16-17 that Laban had two daughters. The older daughter Leah is said to have “weak” eyes while the younger daughter Rachel is described as being “beautiful in form and appearance.”

On the surface, the meaning is obvious: **Jacob happens to find Rachel more attractive** than Leah. There’s no indication that Jacob is pronouncing this aloud. Moses tells us this as the narrator. The fact that Jacob was more physically attracted to Rachel is therefore not a moral problem at all. It’s human nature.

Underneath the surface, though, is where things get really interesting. The word used to describe Leah’s eyes in **Hebrew** can mean either “**weak**” or “**soft**.” It’s quite vague.

Commonly scholars will offer guesses like ‘Jacob didn’t think her eyes had enough sparkle.’

But when the Hebrew is unclear, the Greek translation usually sheds quite a bit of light on the situation. The greek translates it with the word ἀσθενής [*asthenes*] which means:

- **ineffectual,**
- **limited in capacity,** or
- **“suffering from a debilitating illness.”**

This indicates that whatever the physical appearance of her eyes was, she might have suffered from a visual impairment. But when we consider Leah’s ‘weakness’ in light of the rest of Holy Scripture, we can glean a profound insight:

God works powerfully through the things that appear to be weak.

Consider what the apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:2

⁴ For [Christ] was crucified in **weakness** [same word as in Genesis], but lives by the power of God. For we also are **weak** in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

Later Paul concludes:

“I will boast all the more gladly of my **weaknesses**, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. **For when I am weak, then I am strong.**”

[Transition] It’s not just that Leah was deemed ‘less attractive’ than Rachel; it’s that our God works through weakness to shame the strong and to lift up the lowly.

III. Only the Weak-Eyed Will See (vv. 16-35)

So much happens in verses 16-30. You heard it read. A despicable act occurs in which **Laban deceives Jacob the deceiver** by tricking him into consummating a marriage to his daughter Leah rather than Rachel.

The verses that follow are loaded with irony and poetic justice. When Laban defends his trickery by saying:

“It is not so done in our country to give the younger before the firstborn”

The hearer automatically harkens back to Jacob’s own earlier deceitful acts in which he stole his older brother Esau’s birthright and blessing.

But one of the key themes here is God’s providential reversal of Jacob’s “love.” We can see this in **the sequence on love and hate in verses 18-31.**

We continually hear

+ “Rachel was loved” (vv. 18, 20, 30)

- but “Leah was hated” (vv. 31, 33)

In contemporary English, we hear “love” and “hate” and think Jacob is “smitten” with Rachel, but he “really, really, really dislikes” Leah. But that’s not what these words indicate in the ancient context. “To love” in Genesis is to be “inclined toward, or to prefer” and “to hate” means “to not be inclined to.”

Jacob preferred Rachel, largely for reasons of physical attraction, but God was inclined to lift up Leah. The Lord reversed Jacob’s prerogative. As Jesus himself teaches that “the one who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

As Leah begins to bear children under God’s blessing, she is initially almost entirely focused on the impact child-bearing may have on **winning her husband’s affections.**

- In verses 32, after she bears Reuben she says “**now my husband will love me.**”
- And in verse 34, after she gives birth to Levi, she says “**now this time my husband will be attached to me.**”
- And yet, in verse 35 something profound happens. Something of the presence and providence of God breaks in for Leah.

Only the “weak eyes” can clearly see

Verse 35 says:

And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, “**This time I will praise the LORD.**” Therefore, she called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing.

[Illustration: Hide and Seek/Side Line Coach]

Of course, God was there with her all along correcting every cultural obstacle, accommodating himself to our fallenness to bring blessing through Israel to all the families of the world.

But as in our experience, so often the legitimate cares and longings of everyday life crowd out our ability to recognize the guiding and guarding presence of God in our midst.

It reminds me a bit of Hide and Seek. Now, when you play Hide and Seek with really little kids, you have to basically let them win. If the kid is four years old, they will be clumsily hanging out of a slide, visible immediately. You've got to play the whole game. 'Oh, I wonder where she is?' You start looking around and announcing 'Ok, not in there. Not over here.' Then you go to the realm of the absurd, 'Maybe they're in the mailbox.' Nope not in there. [One kid was saying 'I'm not over here' and the parent says 'Ok.']

Once kids get older, game on. Last year I was playing hide and seek in a large park play area with a big field and lots of trees with lots of good hiding spots. But I decided to try something unconventional. I went and stood on top of a picnic table right in the middle of the field. Somehow, because of how obviously out in the open I was I became undetectable to the kids. It was like I was invisible [demonstrate my ridiculous pose]. I just sort of blended in, somehow. I was there the whole time, but they only spotted me when I gave myself away.

Into the narrow frame of human longing cuts the wide-angle view of God's providential work in and through Leah. What Jacob called weak; God has made strong. The one Jacob rejected; God elected. The hated one; becomes the beloved one.

And if only for a moment, Leah saw it. It didn't take away her pain. It didn't instantly solve the hurt. But she marveled; in much the same way that Mary would marvel so many years later.

My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ **and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,**

⁴⁸ **for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.**

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ **for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.**

⁵⁰ **And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.**

⁵¹ **He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;**

⁵² **he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;**

⁵³ **he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.**

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

Conclusion

I can see myself in Jacob sometimes. Not in his particular sins. But in a certain familiarity with his fallenness. Impassioned, impetuous, inebriated by the seductions and distractions of daily life—that’s Jacob, and sometimes, that’s me too. Might it be you as well?

And yet, even more familiar to me than Jacob’s fallenness is Leah’s longing. Leah the weak. Leah the hated. Leah the unloved, the rejected. Leah, the one who gets left out, passed over, left behind.

Maybe these titles resonate with you now, in this season. Maybe they’ve always resonated with you. For whatever reason you feel right at home—**lost in the unmet longings of Leah.**

Someone you deeply care for has turned their back on you. Betrayal is a fresh wound.

For years you sought to hear from a parent, a partner, from your peers: “you are loved”, “you are worth everything to me”, “I won’t abandon you.” “You belong.” “I will fight for you.” “I will give it all for you.”

And so often these longings were met, not even with the cold charity of Jacob, but with a piercing sting of silence, neglect, or indifference.

The church is not the place where the strong gather to give the weak something stronger to aspire to. ‘Come, join us, we’ll teach how not to be so weak, so that you can be strong like us.’

No: the church is a place where the weak gather to invite more of the same to the table. So that in our weakness we can together be strengthened with the strength of another, the strength of Almighty God in the person of Jesus Christ. For the Bible says that “while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”

If feel that you are strong apart from Christ, O what a great need you have to realize your weakness apart from him.

You cannot stand in the strong blessing of Jacob unless you first enter in through the weakness of Leah.

The apostle Paul understood this. He pleaded with the Lord three times to remove a terrible obstacle from his life, **a thorn in his side** as he called it. But God said to Paul:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

The weakness of Leah comes to its ultimate fruition not by being erased, ignored, or replaced by our own self-willed strength but in solidarity with the weakness of the cross—in the legacy of the weakness of Jesus Christ.

Jesus the weak. Jesus the rejected. Jesus the cast off, the forsaken, the abandoned. Broken for us so that we might be made whole in him. Accepted. Loved. Forgiven. Justified. Sanctified. Glorified.

And if you didn't hear it from a parent, you should have! And if you ache from abandonment and unrequited love from spouses, family, or friends. Hear this: The false pronouncement of Jacob the deceiver is not true. The voice of Jacob says 'you are weak, you are unloved, you are rejected.' But the voice of Jesus says: "you are loved", "you are worth everything to me", "I will never abandon you." "I will fight for you." "I'll give it all for you." "I have paid it all for you."

You may well find yourself flying the banner of Leah—patron saint of the lonely, the forgotten, the afflicted, the forsaken. Commiserate there when you must but then cling to the greater banner of Jesus Christ, of the lineage of Leah, of the tribe of Judah. In Leah we find common cause in our afflictions, and we see glimpses of grace in the midst of our present weakness. But in Jesus Christ the unmet longings of every broken human heart are eternally fulfilled.

Discussion Questions

(1) Often the Old Testament is descriptive but not prescriptive. God works redemption through very imperfect (and by contemporary standards abhorrent) cultural situations to bring blessing. But how can we tell what is only cultural and what is meant to abide? How does the principle of interpreting Scripture through Scripture help the unclear parts of the Bible to become clear? How might understanding the whole Bible teaching on a matter, such as marriage, shed light on troubling verses by seeing a biblical teaching in its full canonical context? By seeing it in the teaching of Jesus Christ?

(2) How might the disciplines of prayer, Scripture reading, and/or fasting assist us in standing down from our supposed strength and recognizing our absolute dependence upon God?

(3) How can we gain the wide-angle view that made Leah's 'weak eyes' capable of seeing and praising God? How does knowing God's revealed will in Scripture allow us to see and persevere even in our unmet longings and personal thorns (obstacles) in our side?

(4) If the "wages" of Jacob and the "reward" of Abraham is really, at its core, about the promise that God would bless all the families of the world through Israel, and eventually through Israel-in-person, Jesus, what role do we play in that mission as individuals and as the church?

(5) How does thinking missionally assist us in seeing the world clearly through weak eyes while thinking merely religiously, and individually causes us to confine the gospel to ourselves, thereby causing us to lack in mission and vision? How does the promise that the Gospel is not

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just for me but for all the families of the world, change how I view my job, my neighbors, and my purpose in life?

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