

“Grace Greater than All My Sin”  
Genesis 29:31-30:24  
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What a good boy you are Johnny. Here, have a piece of candy.  
Heidi, if that happens again, there will be no more evenings out with friends – you’ll be grounded.

Mary, you did so well with that contract that I have decided to give you tomorrow off.  
John, you are on probation as of now, one more mess up like yesterday and you’re fired.

My boss owes me “big time”, especially after I worked all weekend pulling off the biggest sale of the year.  
I know I’m in trouble at work, I couldn’t make quota two months in a row.

All of our lives, in most situations, we learn that **rewards come with good performance** and poor performance means we lose out.  
In fact we learn it so well that we carry that mindset right over into our relationship with God.

If I perform as a good Christian, I can expect God’s blessing but if I mess up, I’m in deep trouble.  
In fact our inclination is to think that if things are going well, it must be because **God is pleased with our performance** and if things are not going well in life, it is because God is not pleased.  
We begin to think and act as if the grace of God is inextricably linked to our performance.

Last week I spoke from the first half of Genesis 29.  
There the lesson was that we reap what we sow.  
Jacob the earlier deceiver was now himself deceived.  
But in that lesson from the life of Jacob there was something else we noted.

For God's children, **the grace** of God mitigates/softens the law of reaping what you sow and it does it in two ways.

God's grace means that he does not punish his children for their sin as they deserve, but he loves them enough to discipline them for their good.

The second thing that God's grace does is bless his children in spite of their sin.

Our sin doesn't keep God from his gracious purposes in the world.

Again I emphasize, we live in a world where we think all of life is quid pro quo – something for something.

But the Bible declares that the grace of God is not bought – it is not earned or deserved.

God grants his grace as he wills – even in the most unexpected places.

Maybe especially in the most unexpected places.

Because it is in the unexpected places that we learn best what grace truly is – unmerited favor!

READ Genesis 29:31-30:24

I struggled all week with this text.

What is it that God wants to teach me through this rather dysfunctional family?

One Bible commentator wrote, "Certainly this text is not well adapted for use in the pulpit..."

That didn't encourage me a lot!

A story well told is carefully told.

The author doesn't throw in a lot of unnecessary material.

He carefully selects the parts of the story to retell.

That would certainly be expected when the Holy Spirit of God is superintending the retelling by inspiring the human author – in this case, Moses.

So I took the story apart every way I could think of.

I tried to determine the major characters.

I looked at what each one said and how they said.

I looked at how the author reconstructed the story for telling.

I looked first, of course, to see if the author made any commentary on the story – helping us know its significance.

Going through all of that, I was still puzzled.

Midweek, I had lunch with my daughter and son-in-law and talked with them about it.

After puzzling with me for a few minutes, they said, “Haven’t we seen through most of the stories of Genesis that the subject is usually God?”

As I pondered that later, it became obvious to me that, yes, here again God is the subject – he’s the major character of the story behind the other characters.

That should have been obvious even as I looked at the opening and closing words of the story.

Look at 29:31 “When **the Lord** saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb...”

Look at 30:23 “Then **God** remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb.”

Who’s the only one doing anything right in the whole story? God

I think what we have here is an almost incredible juxtaposition of God’s grace and humanity’s sinfulness.

Placed side by side with sinfulness, we can’t help but see the grace of God shine brighter.

For several chapters now in Genesis, chapters which cover many years, we have been reading about God’s promise that through Abraham’s children God would raise up a people greater in number than the dust of the earth or the stars in the sky.

And for several chapters we have noted that that promise doesn’t quite seem to come to pass.

Abraham’s wife is barren, unable to have children.

And when she does have children she has one – a son.

That one son marries, but his wife also is unable to have children.

When she finally does have children she has two – hardly an auspicious start in populating the earth.

And one of those sons marries foreign women and goes off the deep end spiritually – no future in him.

And the other son is this Jacob of our story.

Would the family ever get going?

Would there ever be more than one or two?

The story we have just read is the account of the partial fulfillment of God's promise to Jacob to be with him and bless him with children.

Moses' readers and we know that from these twelve sons come the millions that would be known as Israel.

This is the first significant installment of that blessing.

Now that is important in and of itself – here is the telling of how the people of God had their beginning.

**But what is most striking are the circumstances under which that blessing took place.**

And herein is the beautiful truth for us – God's grace is just that – it is grace – pure, undeserved, unearned favor.

Think with me about the situation.

Apart from God, who is the principle character in the story, who are the other main characters?

Certainly they are the sisters Leah and Rachel.

And you can't help but notice the large shadow Jacob throws across the whole story.

Two sisters married to the same man.

Jacob was told to go to his home country and get a wife – not two.

Later, in Moses day, marrying sisters would be expressly forbidden.

Leviticus 18:18 "Do not take your wife's sister as a rival wife..."

Jacob would have done well to have known and heeded that advice.

Genesis 2 certainly indicates God's desire for one husband/one wife.  
The NT makes that explicit.

All polygamous marriages in the OT are somewhat  
disastrous.

This whole marriage starts out headed for trouble.  
And we are quickly told that trouble is exactly what comes.

29:31 "When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved..."

What a pitiful situation!

She knew she wasn't the chosen bride when she joined her  
father in tricking Jacob into marrying her instead of her sister  
Rachel.

She knew what 29:30 already said, "Jacob loved Rachel  
more than Leah."

And she was not the last woman to think that if she bore a child for  
him, her husband would finally love her.

At the birth of her firstborn she said, 29:32 "It is because the  
Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me  
now."

It didn't and doesn't work! She was no more loved than before.

When she gave birth to her second son, she said, 29:33 "Because  
the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too."

And yet a third time she bore a child and said, 29:34 "Now at last my  
husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three  
sons."

She had three more sons and even at the birth of the last one she  
said, 30:20 "This time my husband will treat me with honor because I  
have borne him six sons."

How pathetic. We feel so sorry for Leah.

But Leah is not an innocent victim here.

More of that in a moment.

How about Rachel?

She is an equally pathetic figure.

As much as Leah longed to be loved, so Rachel longed to be a mother.

To be childless was to fail at both motherhood and matriarchy.

Rachel knew the promises made to Jacob.

She knew that through Jacob God would grow a family more numerous than the stars and through whom all the world would be blessed.

She also knew that in their culture, to have children was the fulfillment of what it meant to be a woman.

Betty Friedan argued instead in the 70s that only by escaping the “comfortable concentration camp” atmosphere of the home, family and children could a woman become strong and fulfilled.

Germaine Greer considers the “plight of mothers as more desperate than that of other women.”

The unfortunate mother-wife is a failure: to her husband she is a shrew and a sexual bore, and to her children, far inferior to the commune as parent.

Greer thinks that the problem is being resolved with the disintegration of the family in western culture.

But a growing number of women writers are seeing through the anger and myths of the earlier feminists.

Maggie Gallagher writes that despite all the efforts made in recent years to demean and discourage motherhood, women’s mothering instinct is as strong as ever and that despite the growing possibility that they alone will be responsible for raising and supporting the children. (from Dresner p77ff)

One modern Jewish author observes: “It seems reasonable to conclude, then, that despite the upheavals in women’s roles that the twentieth century has witnessed, it is in the order of their nature not only for women to give birth but to want to give birth... It may be true that for considerable portion of human history it seemed to be the ONLY order of their nature. Nevertheless, it is around the biological fact of motherhood – the wonder of motherhood – that one crucial

meaning of “woman” is to be located: to conceive, to bear, to nurture, to offer a love that is richly returned, and one day after children have matured and had offspring themselves, to claim those children as well, as grandchildren.” Samuel Dresner in Rachel p80

But Rachel was barren!

I think a 1988 poem in the book Judaism captures the plight of these two women rather well:

Rachel

My father came and bid me stay,  
 Enjoined the women bar my way.  
 And dumb to all entreaty, led  
 My sister Leah in my stead,  
 Where Jacob waited for his bride.  
 I heard the revelry subside,  
 The guests depart, I slept alone,  
 Dreamt Leah slept beneath a stone. (was dead)

Leah

My father did it to be kind,  
 And I who knew the dark was blind.  
 Who loved in silence, hoped, believed,  
 But Jacob mocked me, Rachel grieved.  
 And kinsmen turned away in scorn.  
 I grazed the flock, I shucked the corn.  
 Fled Jacob's wrath, Fulfilled, reviled,  
 When autumn came, I bore his child.

S. Singer in Judaism 1988 p252

We cannot help but have great empathy for them both.

But I think the Jewish poet also captured well the Bible's implication of Rachel's and Leah's contribution to the wretched family life they lived.

Unenviable as their situations were, how did Leah and Rachel respond to their unfortunate circumstances?

In Leah's case, no woman should be treated that way.

But instead of a trust in God's provision, Leah plays the game as wickedly as does her sister.

And how did Rachel respond?

30:1 "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!'"

She harbors resentment toward her sister and she blames her husband.

Instead of trusting her future to the wisdom and hands of God, she follows in her grandmother Sarah's footsteps and tries to do her own way.

She compounds the double marriage problem by adding a third woman to the mix, giving her slave-girl to Jacob to have children through her.

It was the ancient version of surrogate motherhood.

As I said earlier, Leah plays the game of anything you can do I can do better and responds by giving her slave-girl to Jacob.

And when that is done, they both enter into a bartering for sex.

The mandrake was apparently believed to be a fertility drug and Leah who didn't need it, had it and Rachel who thought she needed it, wanted it.

Rachel had apparently used her favored status with Jacob to forbid him to sleep with Leah any more and Leah used the fertility drug to buy her way back into Jacob's bed.

But when it was all done, Leah was still unloved and Rachel was still barren.

And what about that "jerk" Jacob!

He's some prize, huh?

All of her life, Jacob treated Leah as a second class wife.

The later evidence of that comes soon in Genesis when Jacob meets Esau, who had been out to kill him.

When Jacob knows that Esau is coming, Jacob divides his family and cattle into groups and holds Rachel and her

son closest to himself – putting the slave-girls and their sons and Leah and her sons out in front.

Even with Rachel, I would not call Jacob's response to her the most tender I've ever heard of – "Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?"

Between the three of them, they made a huge mess of that family. That mess would plague Jacob for the rest of his life as his sons squared off against each other based on Jacob's favoritism of Rachel's sons.

Robert Candlish wrote many years ago, as is obvious from the language, "What mean these wretched bickerings and jarrings in that ill-assorted home? To what purpose is this indecent haste of these women? Why all this miserable game of rivalry, defiling honorable marriage – this pitiable trade and traffic of mandrakes – and all the other incidents which so offend us – enacted beneath the roof of a professed man of God? Does the Lord stand in need of such devices and doings as these for the raising up of children for Abraham?"

(Robert Candlish Studies in Genesis 514)

But what's the point of showing these people acting as we so often act?

What's so valuable in telling about their faithlessness, envy, strife and unloving actions?

**What's worth telling is the grace of God in the midst of it!**

God owed Leah nothing - but her grandson, many times over, would be great deliverer of Israel from Egypt – Moses.

God owed Leah nothing - but he gave her the child, Judah, through whom the Messiah would come.

God owed Rachel nothing - but through her would come the son, Joseph, who would save his people from famine and destruction.

God owed Jacob nothing - but through him God created a people of his own – a people who would one day be greater in number than the stars of the sky.

No, God owed them nothing except judgment for their faithlessness and unfaithfulness BUT God was gracious!

We should not ever excuse their sin or ours but let us never forget that divine grace is not earned.

No matter how wretched our circumstances, no matter how guilty we are, God's gracious work continues in the lives of his children.

God does not bless us because of us, he blesses us in spite of us.

God's grace is not based on our performance.

His grace is based on his love.

He loved Jacob, Rachel and Leah and he loves you and me!