

GENESIS

29:1-35

Genesis 29:1-35

Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday morning, 10th March 2024 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: Hebrews 6:9-12

Introduction

Last week in chapter 28 we saw Isaac command Jacob to go to his Uncle Laban's home, and choose a wife from his daughters (and very specifically not marry a wife from the people living in the Land of Canaan). And as Jacob obeyed, and began his travels, we read how he encountered God at a place called Bethel, and that God re-confirmed the Abrahamic covenant to Jacob, as He had previously done to Isaac. What was Jacob's response? It was to worship; making a monument that would be a reminder of what God had promised. And then, making a vow, he spoke how God would be His God, and how he would give him a tenth of all that He would give him.

Overview of chapter twenty nine

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- **v1-14** — Jacob arrives in Haran, spends a month with Laban
- **v15-30** — Jacob stays and marries *both* of Laban's daughters
- **v31-35** — Jacob's first 4 children are born

As we begin *this* chapter we will see Jacob continues on from Bethel and reaches Haran, and not only meets one of Laban's daughters as he arrives, but instantly falls in love with her. In verses 15-30, just a month in, their marriage is arranged – at least that's what *Jacob* thinks – but he'll soon find out he is on the wrong end of being deceived this time. Ultimately, he'll marry the girl he wanted to, but *also* the one he didn't. Yet as we get to the final 5 verses of this chapter, we'll see it was through his *lesser* loved wife that he has his first 4 children.

Chapter twenty nine

But, since the beginning is a very good place to start, let's read verse 1:

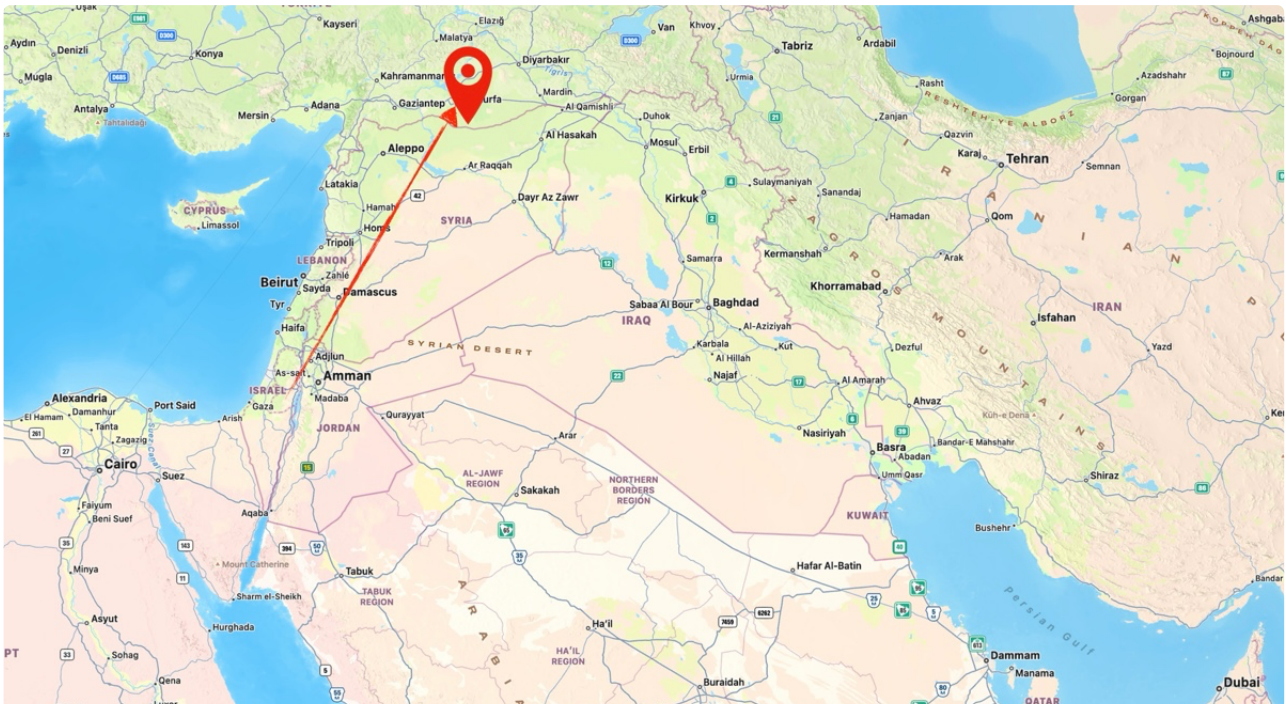
Genesis 29:1

So Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the East.

So he reached his destination, coming to the people among whom Laban and his family lived. Where was that? Well, when I previously looked at the *prior* chapter I had presumed that since Laban was the grandson of Nahor, and Abraham and their father had left him in Ur, that his descendants still lived there. But we actually read in chapter 28 that they are now living in Padan Aram — effectively the same area as Haran, that Abraham had moved to from Ur, en route to the land of Canaan.

And I apologise, for while this isn't a doctrinal error, it means that the destination on the map I showed last Sunday was incorrect, *and* the distance Jacob had to travel was around 200 miles, not 1200. Still long enough on foot to give pause for thought, however. As such I edited my study notes before posting them on our web site last Sunday evening.

For absolute clarity, this is the journey that Jacob had undertaken:



And he is now here in Haran, where his grandfather had lived for a while, many years before. But this is his first time there, and so he wants to find his uncle.

Genesis 29:2

And he looked, and saw a well in the field; and behold, there were three flocks of sheep lying by it; for out of that well they watered the flocks. A large stone was on the well's mouth.

Well accustomed to his father having many flocks of sheep, and numerous wells in the land back home, Jacob recognises this as a good hub of activity to start asking around where he might find his family (which of course he had travelled to see, that he might marry one of Laban's daughters). And indeed, might I suggest that if you are looking for a wife, you'd do well start in the place where the sheep are watered, i.e. the church!

Now, we read that there was a large stone on the mouth of the well — and in part this would have been to prevent drifting sands clogging up the well. As such, it would have only been removed a small number of times each day, and then placed back, as we read in verse 3:

Genesis 29:3

Now all the flocks would be gathered there; and they would roll the stone from the well's mouth, water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the well's mouth.

Having walked over to this gathering around the well, Jacob begins talking:

Genesis 29:4

And Jacob said to them, "My brethren, where are you from?" And they said, "We are from Haran."

So, they are local folks.

Genesis 29:5

Then he said to them, "Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?" And they said, "We know him."

In our terminology, we'd say "do you know Laban the *grandson* of Nahor" — but no such distinction is made here... all Nahor's male descendants were called his sons, just as your contemporary male relatives would be called your brother. And the answers continue to be brief:

Genesis 29:6

So he said to them, "Is he well?" And they said, "He is well. And look, his daughter Rachel is coming with the sheep."

And so this proves to be perfect timing. Even coincidental. Though with God there are not co-incidences, for He is fully able to engineer our circumstances for our good and His glory. And here, one of Laban's daughter's is walking into Jacob's view, his life, and we'll soon see, his heart.

Responding immediately, we read of Jacob:

Genesis 29:7-8

Then he said, "Look, it is still high day; it is not time for the cattle to be gathered together. Water the sheep, and go and feed them." But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together, and they have rolled the stone from the well's mouth; then we water the sheep."

Whether for protocol, or for fairness to all who needed water from the well, these men say they must wait until everyone that needs water arrives. Cynically, we might wonder if it was convenient excuse for them, for we'll read that Rachel was quite the pretty girl, and so perhaps these men were happy to have her stay there as long as possible. But Jacob, it seems, is very keen for them to water their sheep and move on to feeding them elsewhere, perhaps so he himself would have opportunity to talk to this attractive young lady on her own — especially now that he knows she is Laban's daughter. And we read:

Genesis 29:9-10

Now while he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess. And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, that Jacob went near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother.

So, Jacob thinks 'forget all this waiting around' and goes and opens up the well, and, opposite to how his mother who had watered Eleazar's camels, Jacob now waters the flock of Laban's that Rachel is caring for.

Next, we read:

Genesis 29:11

Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted up his voice and wept.

As we read this in our culture, it both sounds very forward, and also like it was a pretty bad kiss. But the kissing wasn't as we might first picture in our culture, and the weeping wasn't because of the kiss! First, kissing someone on the cheek was a normal way of greeting — especially family or close friends — such as when Laban kisses Jacob just 2 verses later in this chapter, or where Isaac kissed Jacob 2 chapters before, or with Moses and his father-in-law, David with Jonathan, or the father with the prodigal son.

Second, his weeping is one of happiness. Remember he had been instructed to flee home, and to find a wife from among his mother's relatives. And after travelling 200 miles or so on foot, here, the Lord had immediately led him to this young, beautiful and eligible woman from that family. Imagine what worries or fears he might have had on the way. Not merely that Laban's daughters might all have had pink and orange hair, and brown teeth, or that it would have taken months to find them. But that he might not have found them at all.

And so, it seems the circumstances leading to this, and the one he now finds himself in, leave him a little overcome with emotion. But evidently he composes himself, for we next read:

Genesis 29:12

And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's relative and that he was Rebekah's son. So she ran and told her father.

Rachel, learning who Jacob was, and just maybe impressed with a man who was able to cry, runs to tell her father, Jacob's uncle Laban, of this exciting news — that they have family in town. As an aside, are we that happy when we have family in town? I'm not even talking about our physical families (though isn't it a pleasant thing to be happy to see family!), but more so about our spiritual family. When other believers visit here from time to time, isn't it a joyful thing? They should be dear to us, that we might show hospitality as Laban now does to his actual family:

Genesis 29:13

Then it came to pass, when Laban heard the report about Jacob his sister's son, that he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. So he told Laban all these things.

And this is a lovely picture of a family reunion. Imagine for a moment this family sitting down, with Jacob telling them how his parents were, how Rebekah loved him, and how his journey was — that God had met him on the way and given him these great promises — and how the purpose of his journey was to come and find a bride from among his extended family, rather than marry one of the women from the Land of Canaan. Of course, we don't know what details of the *purpose* of his trip he shared at *this* point, though it wouldn't be long before *all* became clear.

Genesis 29:14

And Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh." And he stayed with him for a month.

So, Uncle Laban welcomes him in as family, which isn't a surprise — for not only *was* he family, but remember how Laban's eyes lit up when he saw the gifts given to his sister, Rebekah, when Eleazar came many years before to find a bride for Isaac. Laban did pretty well out of that situation, receiving gifts himself. And now this young man from that same rich family has arrived, though this time only with his staff, of course. So what could Laban receive from him? Well, after a month it seems Jacob has given the impression he could be useful to Laban, and cleverly of Laban, we read:

Genesis 29:15

Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what should your wages be?"

Does this imply Jacob was already working hard, perhaps to earn his keep? Maybe. But now, Laban implies that Jacob should work for him, and he is going to properly lock him into that for a long time, as we'll see. But first, Jacob can name his price, so to speak, and he aims pretty high. We read:

Genesis 29:16-17

Now Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were delicate, but Rachel was beautiful of form and appearance.

So, we have a description of Laban's two daughters, and we'll shortly see that Jacob is attracted to Rachel — the one he met first (back by the well) — and she is clearly described here as the physically attractive one. Does that mean Leah was unattractive? Well, that might be a bit harsh. But what we *are* told is that Leah's eyes were delicate, that word being translated as *tender* in several other places in the Bible, *soft* in some other, and *weak* in one place in 2 Samuel. Some translations say Leah's eyes were *ordinary*, or *had no sparkle*. So which is it? Well my honest opinion is that there was something about her eyes that was special, and reflective of her character.

Why do I think this? Because of what we read in Genesis 49, that as Jacob drew to the end of his life, he gives instructions to his sons to bury him somewhere specific. And that isn't with Rachel, who was buried in Bethlehem, but with his ancestors, and notably he says "where I buried Leah", in the field of Machpelah. Rachel doesn't get a mention at all. And I think at the end of his life, Jacob recognised how special Leah was, and that the line through the Messiah would be through one of her sons, not Rachel's.

Now, God is an incredible artist, of course, and physical beauty is something we can appreciate. But we must not let it dominate our lives or our thinking. Indeed, we are wise to keep in mind what we read toward the end of Proverbs chapter 31 — a chapter that talks about the better qualities of a woman — we read in verse 30:

Proverbs 31:30

Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised.

Ladies, and especially younger ladies here this morning, make up is fine. And fashion is fine. But if you want to truly be the beautiful woman you can be, then you're not going to find how to be that in TikTok makeup videos, or the ultimate Pinterest board, or the over-processed filtered photos on Instagram. You're going to become beautiful in who *you* are by reading the Bible, and by applying it to *your* life.

Peter writes in his letter:

1 Peter 3:3-4

Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel— rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.

That's not saying give up trying to look tidy. Brushing your hair (and your teeth) are a good idea. Just don't let your outward appearance ever be more important than what's going on inside.

Now, all that isn't to say Rachel was vain. But we'll indeed see in chapter 31 that *she* is the one that stole idols from her father's household. Indeed her character doesn't seem to match that of Leah's.

But what *is* written here was that she was naturally physically beautiful. And no doubt Jacob *was* attracted to her in that way, but his feelings for her went deeper than that, for we read:

Genesis 29:18

Now Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for Rachel your younger daughter."

On one hand, Jacob really goes for it — for Laban had asked what his wages should be. And Jacob asks for nothing less than one of his daughters. But Jacob, in love with this young lady, makes clear how *long* he'll work for Laban, that he might receive the blessing of her hand in marriage. And he says that he'll work for Laban for 7 years for this privilege. And that's a long time — especially as the implication is that he'll work these 7 years *before* he'll get to marry her. He's not paying on Klarna, or any other get-now-pay-later instalment plan.

But why, you might wonder, did he have to work for her at all? Couldn't he have just asked for her hand in marriage, separate from any agreement to work for wages? Well, Finnis Dake notes that *in European society the father gave a dowry with his daughter. In the East he received it for his daughter*. Not necessarily a good thing. But this was the expectation. And of course, remember that Jacob had arrived in the land with just his staff to his name. Yes, he had a wealthy family back home, but they were all the way back in Canaan — it's not like there was the option of bank transfers at that point in history!

And so, Jacob offers his own service for his bride, for this woman that he loves:

Genesis 29:19

And Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to another man. Stay with me."

That doesn't sound like a ringing endorsement by his father in law to me! — but actually, I think he really means this, for he knew somewhat of Jacob's background and lineage, he'd seen that he was an able and willing worker, and it was also customary then to marry within extended family, rather than to a foreigner. Being cynical, we could perhaps see how maybe Laban was also looking at how *he* could benefit from this; that it was better for *him* to have Jacob marry Rachel, because here is a man who is willing to work 7 years for her.

But, putting that to the side for a moment, the positive is that he is showing an interest in whom his daughter marries. The application here for fathers of daughters, is that you really should take interest in whom your daughter marries, that he is a suitable man, not unwilling to work, but most importantly one whom is in your extended Christian family. You have a part to play in teaching her, leading her, and supporting her in whom she chooses. You're not going to be able to make that choice for her, but your job is to do all you can in leading her to a good and Godly choice.

Here, Laban approves of Jacob's request...

Genesis 29:20

So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed only a few days to him because of the love he had for her.

Isn't that lovely?! What a wonderful picture of love this is! That 7 years of work seemed as nothing to Jacob, because he loved Rachel so much. Indeed, love for us should make work, even hard work, feel short and easy in comparison to what it would seem without love. Where should that show up in our lives? Well, we should certainly see it in *our* romantic relationships.

Of course, this tends to be quite visible in the early days of our relationships – when Sian and I met, we lived 2 hours apart. I recall doing crazy things like driving up to Windsor after work on a Monday to see her for just a few hours, despite having driven to see her in Brighton on the Saturday. And despite the distance we lived apart, we continued to see each other pretty much every weekend until we married. And it was effortless. That doesn't mean that the driving itself was always fun, or the journeys were always easy. But it didn't matter. That's what love does!

And should dating turn to marriage (and even into family life), that willingness and lightness to the relationship should continue. It doesn't mean each day is easy, it doesn't mean there aren't trials. But it should mean that couples don't take each other for granted, and instead continue to try to out-give each other in the little things... even in the mundane routines of unloading the dishwasher or taking the bins out when it's not your turn or chore. Love should mean these things, and even *much* bigger things, are as nothing, because of the love a couple has for each other.

Why do I say all this? Well, in part because we should consider our marriages. But also because I want each of us to consider how our love for God, affects our service to God. Let me read you Hebrews 6:9-12 again:

Hebrews 6:9-12

But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner. For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

That is, these folks were labouring in *love*. They were showing diligence in their work. They were indeed finding that Jesus' yoke was easy and His burden light. And Paul here is saying he wanted to see them *continue* in that, and not become sluggish as the newness of their relationship with the Lord became a memory, but rather that they would continue in their walk with the Lord, showing patience, running their race well to the end. Oh what challenge there is for us.

The encouragement I have to you is that years and years of serving the Lord will only feel like a few days if we truly love Him! If we do it grudgingly, then it will feel like a long, long time. I know this to be true. I've never been so busy in serving the Lord, but while I might be tired *in* the work, I'm not tired *of* the work — I want to do more! God is worthy. He is worth it all. He has given me — and you — eternal life and so much more... why would we not love, adore *and* serve Him?!

On any day where you feel tired *of* the work, start reading one of the gospels again, and see Jesus' life poured out for you. Or take the time at one of our communion services to truly consider how much Christ did for you on the cross. For in seeing His love for *you*, and as your love for *Him* is renewed, the work won't seem as hard. Doesn't mean that it won't *be* hard — that's not what I'm promising —and it doesn't mean you should be unwise in how you use your time. But rather, you'll feel what Jacob did, that 7 years of *service* seemed only a few days to him.

Likewise, set your mind on the things above. Consider what eternity will be like in Jesus' presence, free from sin, and free from all the pain and suffering in this world, living forever among the saints, and the stresses and strains of this world, even hardships in serving God, will grow strangely dim.

I like how Matthew Henry puts it:

If we know how to value the happiness of heaven, the sufferings of this present time will be as nothing to us. An age of work will be but as a few days to those that love God, and long for Christ's appearing.

Matthew Henry

Another way of putting it; love is patient. And Jacob's example is indeed one that demonstrates this. He waited (and worked) 7 years to marry Rachel. And, from what we're about to read in the next verse, we see that there was no physical intimacy between them in this time. That is, they were not sleeping together. How could they wait this long? Because love waits, where lust won't. Love gives, where lust takes. Love is patient, where lust offers pressure. Where lust says now, love says no. There's a massive difference between the two.

Now, as we read on, we see Jacob has reached the end of this 7 years of serving:

Genesis 29:21

Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in to her."

Wow, this is quite something to say to your father-in-law to be, right? But of course, he and Jacob had previously agreed that Jacob would serve him for 7 years, and since that 7 years was now up, Jacob isn't being unreasonable. But again, note the implication, that Jacob and Rebekah had not been sleeping with each other during these 7 years! That's a great example in purity to follow, as indeed the Bible clearly teaches that there is to be no sex outside of a marriage relationship at all.

The only caution I would give in applying *Jacob's* example, is to not aim for a 7 year engagement — in fact, I'd go as far to say that it is a bad idea to have an engagement *that* long. If you are going to get married, find the earliest practical point to do so, and do it.

Now here, Laban, acknowledging that Jacob is within his rights to ask for this, based on his agreement with Jacob, now gives him his daughter to be his wife. Well, sort of. We read:

Genesis 29:22

And Laban gathered together all the men of the place and made a feast.

All good so far, right?

Genesis 29:23-24

Now it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. And Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah as a maid.

Wait, what?! Wasn't it supposed to be Rachel? It was. So, we might wonder, how did Jacob not know? Simply; a heavy veil over her face. And obviously a wedding dress that left something to the imagination. Not very 2024, huh? And furthermore, it seems reasonable to think that they wouldn't have been alone until nighttime, when there would have been no light — not even the glow of a TV screen or mobile phone.

Genesis 29:25

So it came to pass in the morning, that behold, it was Leah. And he said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served you? Why then have you deceived me?"

It must have been quite the shock, to find out that you *literally* married the wrong girl. And now, Jacob (the heel-catcher, the deceiver) understands what it feels like to be deceived, as he had done to his father. But of course, our sin always looks worse on *other* people, and so he is very direct with Laban here.

Genesis 29:26-27

And Laban said, "It must not be done so in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. Fulfill her week, and we will give you this one also for the service which you will serve with me still another seven years."

So, Laban appeals to the customs of the land, that were such a big deal that he forgot to mention them to Jacob for *seven years*! Of course, this is a poor excuse, and we can see right through it, because he knew how much Jacob loved Rachel, that he'd willingly work for him for another 7 years.

And so he tells Jacob to fulfil her week — a Biblical term for 7 years, such as is also used in the book of Daniel — and then he'll give Jacob Rachel as well. And this puts Jacob in a terrible position; though the law of Moses had not yet been given, it was never God's intent for a man to have more than one wife. But Jacob can't divorce Leah, and he's essentially engaged to Rachel, who is the love of his life. There's no pleasant way out of this situation, and so Jacob, still besotted by Rachel after these 7 years, still sees it as nothing to work yet 7 years more, and so we read:

Genesis 29:28-30

Then Jacob did so and fulfilled her week. So he gave him his daughter Rachel as wife also. And Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as a maid. Then Jacob also went in to Rachel, and he also loved Rachel more than Leah. And he served with Laban still another seven years.

So, having served Laban another 7 years, Jacob finally marries the girl he'd met at the well some 14 years and a month before. And he must have been happy. So must have Rachel. But what of poor Leah? None of this could have felt fair on her. She wasn't Jacob's first choice, and you can only imagine how she felt on their first day of marriage as Jacob was so very upset at having married her. And now, she's no longer Jacob's only wife, and probably feeling like she's doing well to come in second place to Rachel. Oh the mess of polygamy!

Now, we might look on this in horror, but feeling like that wouldn't happen today. But friends, I really think it might. In my perception, there have been an increasing number of secular news articles in recent years about open relationships, even the desire for polygamy. And I'm sure that the request, then the demand for it to be legalised is coming — after all, when the world's mantras are "love is love" and "you can't help who you love", then there is nothing to say you can't love two people. And therefore why shouldn't you be able to marry two people? But it's a wicked thing, just as all distortions of Godly marriage are, and we must be prepared to stand our ground. For anything outside of what God ordained plays havoc on the family, and havoc on society. So therefore we need MPs who will hold fast to Biblical principles, even if they are not Christians themselves. Remember that when they or their representatives come door knocking for your votes in the coming year.

Here, poor Leah must be so very sad as the inevitability of an unbalanced polygamous marriage comes into play. But, her tears were not unnoticed by God, for we read:

Genesis 29:31

When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, He opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.

That is, God, who is ultimately the giver of life, blesses Leah out of the two sisters. And evidently, while Jacob loved Rachel more, he still loved Leah to some extent, and there was physical intimacy between them still, which we know as the next verse says:

Genesis 29:32

So Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben; for she said, "The LORD has surely looked on my affliction. Now therefore, my husband will love me."

Leah, then, is the first to bear a child for Jacob. And she names him Reuben, meaning "behold a son" — hoping now that Jacob will finally love her more (at least, more than he has previously). But no such change is recorded.

Genesis 29:33

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." And she called his name Simeon.

So she calls her second son Simeon, meaning "hearing" or "heard" referring to how the the Lord had heard she was unloved. But, still no change in Jacob is recorded.

Genesis 29:34

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 his name was called Levi.

Her third-born, then, she calls Levi, meaning "joined to" — and we're given the reason right here, that she hoped that *finally* Jacob might love her as a doting husband, not as someone who had been tricked into being her husband. But was there to be change? Well, it doesn't appear so at this point. And so it's notable what we read next:

Genesis 29:35

And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Now I will praise the LORD." Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she stopped bearing.

Judah, then, means "praise". And we see her response is different this time, as the name of her son has nothing to do with her circumstance and what she hoped would happen next, but rather she praises God for what He had done, in giving her four sons. And what a reminder that should be for us, that when we turn our attention from what we are hoping God *will* do, to what He has *already* done (in sending His Son), then our response will be praise too. And indeed, this name was most fitting, for it would be through Judah that the line through to Christ would come.

Conclusion

As I close our study this morning, I think it a good moment to remind you that not all things we read in the lives of those Bible records were good things. Indeed, polygamy is one such example of something the Bible never suggests or endorses, but does record. Why does it record it? Because, as we read in Romans 15, these things are written for our learning. Not that we might acquire knowledge, but that we might learn to be wise.

Application questions

So then, I encourage you to ponder these questions this week as you consider what we learn from this chapter of Genesis:

- Are you valuing physical appearance over spiritual qualities?
- Are you so in love with the Lord, that serving Him seems but a small thing?
- Is your focus on what you yet want God to do, or what He has already done?

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