

The Unexamined Life - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Genesis 29:1-30** (#518)

Introduction: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” So said Socrates at the trial that eventually lead to his death. It’s the sort of thing you’d expect a philosopher to say, isn’t it? Yet, it’s a point that we all should all take notice of: how often do you reflect on your life? I don’t mean thinking about what you want to buy, how much money you can earn, what your next house or car will be like. Instead, I am thinking of the deeper questions: what purpose does the Lord have for you? How has your life honored Him – or not? What opportunities or challenges does this or that circumstance in your life tell you about God and about your own heart?

These can be uncomfortable questions, to be sure, but they are also necessary ones. If we don’t ask ourselves probing questions like these, we’ll find that we don’t understand much about the Lord, about ourselves, or about the world we live in and the life that we are moving through.

This appears to be Jacob’s problem. Up to this point, he seems to be something of a scoundrel, going about deceiving others, always thinking that life is about what he wants and how he can get it. Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of soup – and certainly it is Esau who bears the blame; yet, if Jacob truly cared for his brother he would never have made such a bad offer in the first place. Later, Jacob cheats Esau out of his father’s blessing. Again, we could argue that the Lord had already promised it to Jacob, but that doesn’t excuse either he or his mother’s methods of trying to force the issue. In scene after scene, it appears as if Jacob is going to get away with this sort of behavior. As if he will simply receive God’s blessings and the Lord will turn a blind eye towards his moral failings.

Maybe you feel that way at times – you look around and see the wicked prospering and you wonder why God doesn’t do something? Or perhaps it’s the other way around: you don’t give much thought to the Lord unless something goes wrong in life. You simply assume His grace, and most of your days are filled with plans of your own comfort, your own getting ahead in life.

This morning, I'd like us to see several lessons from Jacob's life – lessons that will only make sense if we take the time to reflect on his story. My goal is twofold: first, that we would see why these verses have been preserved for us by the Lord – what their point and purpose is for our own understanding and belief. And then second, by analyzing this slice of Jacob's life, that we might better learn how to take a hard look in the mirror of our own lives and therefore learn how to better evaluate our own faithfulness. Let's take up the task in **Genesis 29**...

29:1-12 First, remember how all of this started out: there was a time when Isaac gave little thought to who either of his sons would marry. Yet everything has changed now that Jacob has his father's blessing. Esau, of course, didn't take too well to that situation, and so Rebekah came up with the plan to send Jacob off to go and find a wife. Isaac comes to agree and gives directions and further blessing for Jacob on his journey. In the previous chapter, we found the Lord Himself blessing Jacob with the specific promises that were first given to Abraham, all leading to the shocking picture that Jacob – as wayward as he was – would be the heir to the Abrahamic covenant. God's promises would continue through him and through his descendants.

So, we now seem to come to the end of Jacob's journey. The place doesn't exactly seem inspiring at first: there's a well, some sheep, and a few shepherds hanging around. The details of the well seem random at first, but they come to take on significance later in the chapter.

As Jacob draws near to what passes for the local watering hole, he asks the shepherds where they are from and if they know Laban. It's a time before cellphones, after all – Jacob can't simply call Laban and say "I'm here – where are you?" The shepherds reply that not only do they know Laban, but – in fact – one of his daughters is coming to the well as they speak.

I'm not quite sure what **verse 7** intends – it seems as if Jacob is trying to get the shepherds to move on. But whatever he might have wanted, the shepherds still have work to do; they won't move until all the flocks are gathered and watered – and *that* can't happen until the stone is rolled away from the well, which means waiting for the other shepherds and flocks that were still on the way.

It's during this conversation that Rachel finally arrives, and it's no great leap of the imagination to say that Jacob is instantly smitten. We'll read more about Rachel's beauty later, but **verse 10** specifically points out that as soon as he saw her, he readied his manly muscles, went over to the well, and single-handedly rolled the stone away so that the sheep could be watered. Quite the display!

What follows, though, is perhaps as confusing as could be: this manly man then kisses Rachel (not romantically; this would be an acceptable greeting between extended family back in those days) and then starts weeping. We aren't directly told why. Perhaps Jacob never thought his journey would amount to much. Or maybe he wasn't sure that any of Laban's daughters would be all that attractive, and now his worries have turned to joy! I do think we get a bit of a clue with how he describes himself: he is "her father's kinsman," and then – strangely, for the culture of the time – he identifies himself as "Rebekah's son." You can sense that Jacob is a bit too attached to his mother, which makes sense when you think of how she favored him. I should note that Isaac was quite attached to his mother as well: at the end of **chapter 24** we read of his brand new wife being the comfort – even the replacement – for his deceased mother. While that may seem like a random fact, keep it in mind, because the story we read here has a number of parallels and contrasts with how Isaac married Rebekah.

From these early verses, I want you to see that Jacob's journey has depended upon the Lord this entire time. As we'll read in a moment, his finding of a wife will have nothing to do with his own timing or efforts – certainly not his ability to woo a worthy woman. Instead, Jacob has been chosen by the Lord. Therefore, the blessings that Jacob receives will be the Lord's blessings. Friends, it's little different for any of us who call upon the Lord: we receive blessings that we don't deserve; and we often don't receive the punishments that we should. This is entirely by God's grace. Let me say it another way: Jacob will be blessed in spite of himself, and that's the truth of your life and mine, too. None of us have earned God's favor – no amount of tithing or church attendance will make your sins look better in His eyes. No amount of missions work or loving your neighbor. Instead, our salvation comes entirely by grace, utterly by God's good pleasure and His decision. The sooner that you and I recognize that, the sooner that we embrace it,

the sooner we will become a people who are deeply thankful to our Lord. That thankfulness will transform how we act and think: from being worried that He'll abandon us if we fail (He won't), to thinking that our "good works" are somehow necessary to keep us in the faith (they aren't), to removing our grudging obedience to Jesus as if we *have* to serve Him. No, we *get* to serve Him – and that service is enjoyment of our Lord forever. God is gracious to His people; He is gracious to you.

But how does that grace look specifically? Let's see in these next verses...

29:13-20 Laban hears the news about Jacob and rushes out to offer him the warmest of welcomes. So much of a welcome, in fact, that Jacob ends up staying with Laban for a month. Only then does Laban bring up a proposal: apparently, Jacob has been earning his keep in some form or fashion, but Laban doesn't want to seem to take advantage of a family member. The narrator lets us in on where things will be going in **verse 16**, and by that I think we are to realize that Laban fully understands why Jacob is there – the finding of a wife is no secret to him!

So let's talk about these two eligible bachelorettes. Leah is the older, Rachel is the younger. Your "Bible reading alarm" should be going off at this point, because the "older and the younger" was a theme we've already come across several times in Genesis, most recently with Jacob and Esau. Apart from age, we are told that Leah's eyes were "weak" or "delicate." What precisely that means we aren't sure. There are plenty of theories, of course, but the description in the Hebrew isn't as clear as we might want. Whatever it means, we know that by contrast, Rachel was "beautiful in form and appearance." It doesn't take a genius to figure out which one Jacob has already fallen for, and so he offers to continue in service to Laban for seven years if he'll give Rachel to him as his wife. Laban indicates that this is a fair deal, and Jacob serves the seven years. In the most romantic of senses, we read that the seven years seemed only a few days because of Jacob's love for Rachel.

Yet, there are some warning signs we need to notice before moving on. The "older and younger" thing is going to be an issue. In a culture that valued not only tradition, but a certain sense of what was "right," Jacob keeps going against the grain. He is the youngest – yet he possesses his father's blessing. Rachel is the

youngest – yet he wants to marry her. Ladies, I won't pretend to fully understand all the dynamics involved, but I know that even today there is a certain expectation that the oldest daughter will get married before the youngest, so what's happening here should give us pause as well.

Also, Jacob's method of deciding who to marry is about as shallow as it gets: appearance. By this, I don't mean to say that appearance doesn't matter – certainly a man and a woman should be attracted to one another. But unlike the servant who sought out a wife for Isaac, Jacob's strategy doesn't seem to rely on character or worthiness at all. Just appearance. We don't read any sort of deliberating by him about who would make a better wife to carry on the Lord's promises – appearance alone seems to be the deciding factor. Rarely does that sort of thinking work out well in the Scriptures, and this will be no exception.

You and I need to realize something at this point: just because we have been saved by the Lord doesn't mean that we can't make major mistakes. It certainly doesn't mean that we have somehow become perfect in this life and cannot sin! Be careful that you do not presume upon God, thinking that you can do no wrong or that the Lord will protect you from every rebellion and sin you can come up with. Sometimes, He uses our sins to teach us loving lessons about Himself and our need for Jesus. We'll see one of those major lessons in the next few verses...

29:21-30 Jacob's character is clearly revealed in **verse 21**, where he demands his wife. Waiting any longer is unacceptable to him and being respectful to Laban seems beyond the pale. So Laban pulls together the equivalent of a wedding feast, everyone has a great time, and he brings his daughter Leah – *not* Rachel – to Jacob in the evening. I realize we probably have a lot of questions about this seemingly impossible situation, but the Lord doesn't give us further details, which means that everything we need to know is recorded for us right here. Whatever else we might conclude, apparently Leah isn't the only one with "weak" eyes! Between the evening light, the wedding veil, and perhaps a bit of festive drink, all of this is enough to fool Jacob.

He and Leah have marital relations and only in the morning does Jacob wake up to realize that it is the older sister whom he has spent the night with! So he storms off

to Laban, angry as all get out. It's especially instructive that Jacob is angry about how Laban has "deceived him." Ironic, isn't it? This is exactly what Jacob has been doing to others, and now the tables have been turned on him.

As well, Laban points out the other issue that has been a hallmark of Jacob's own life: to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older daughter wasn't proper, and so Laban didn't do it. Whatever else we might think of Laban, he certainly is more than capable of playing Jacob's own game, isn't he?

A deal is made: Jacob will work another seven years and then he can have Rachel as his wife, too. Jacob seems to be ok with this arrangement but, again, as we've seen before in the Scriptures and even recently with Esau: taking multiple wives never works out well. While Rachel and Leah aren't from a foreign people, they will still bring all kinds of strife into each other's lives – not to mention Jacob's. We know this because Jacob seems to egg the situation on all the more: just as he was favored by his mother, so he will have a favorite among his wives. Rachel he will love most; Leah he will love least.

Dear church, I realize this is a bit of an odd passage. Finding applications here seems to be an exercise in frustration. On the one hand, these verses are essential background for what will come up next week – so if you are confused about what any of this has to do with anything, just stick with it. These two wives and this strong-willed man will end up being used by God in powerful ways, even in spite of themselves – a lesson we each need to learn about how God rules all things.

For us today, I want you to see that sin is catching up to Jacob. The deception that he offered to others is exactly what he got in return. Our Sunday school kids have sung before about how sin is like a boomerang, how it always comes back. Perhaps not in the same form or fashion, but sin undoubtedly has consequences. Not only do you need to believe that, but you need to cry out to the Lord about it as well. Cry out for forgiveness, cry out for His mercy, that you wouldn't receive what you deserve. And cry out in thankfulness, that all who turn to Jesus – whatever consequences we justly suffer in this life – all who trust Him will receive what we don't deserve in eternity. That is the Good News for people not just like Jacob, but for you and I as well. Our God is merciful, so let's worship Him!