

Finding Your Roots - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Genesis 29:31-30:24** (#519)

Introduction: When I come to passages like this one, where Jacob has multiple wives as well as several servants who end up acting as wives to him, and then I try to decipher the family tree that results – well, I’m tempted to throw up my hands in frustration! That is, until I start to think a bit deeper about my own family tree. In many ways, it may appear simple and straightforward, but there are still plenty of complications. I suspect many of you are in similar boats yourselves. When the whole family gets together, it can be tough to figure out who is connected to who and how!

Genealogy has become a fascination for a lot of people these days. There’s even a very popular TV show about it called “Finding Your Roots,” where the host – Henry Lewis Gates Jr. – meets with a person and they try to trace that person’s family tree. Sometimes, it’s quite interesting, with all kinds of really neat and inspiring links to the past. Other times, it’s tragic – especially when the person had no idea what lurked in their family’s history. While I can’t say that I’ve watched all that many episodes, of the ones that I have, there always seems to be a great disappointment when the family tree isn’t as polished and shiny as the guest thought it was. Which brings a question to my mind: what about your own family tree? Perhaps it, too, is marked by strife, drama, and unwanted history?

As we head back into **Genesis** this morning, we’re going to see that same kind of strife in Jacob’s family – and there will be plenty of drama to go around, too! But here is the surprising part, the truth that you and I need to own: God’s grace isn’t erased by brokenness. As you look at your own life, your own family, your own tree and wonder “can God redeem even this? Does He have any sort of purpose for people like us?” look to the words of this chapter and you’ll see our faithful God, continuing His faithful work, in the midst of very unfaithful and wayward people. That’s grace. That’s the mercy given to us by Jesus. And that’s what we’re going to see today. So, in this special Bible-themed episode of “Finding Your Roots,” let’s turn to **Genesis 29** and pick up the story at **verse 31**...

29:31-35 If you were with us last week, you’ll recall that Jacob – via Laban’s trickery – ended up marrying both Leah and Rachel. Leah was the older of the two

sisters, but apparently wasn't as attractive to Jacob. Rachel was the younger, and Jacob found her much more to his liking. It's not hard to imagine the broken family dynamics that resulted – in fact, the Bible spells it out for us back in **verse 30**, where we read that Jacob "...loved Rachel more than Leah..." This morning, as we've just read, Jacob's love for Rachel is hatred towards Leah. But, as so often in the Scriptures, the Lord loves those who are unjustly hated – and so it is here. Of the two wives, it is Leah who first bears children. In those days, that was the height of womanhood, and so it says something about the honor that Leah would have in contrast to Rachel.

So it is that we find four sons being born to Jacob in these verses. Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Perhaps you already recognize these as some of the names of what will become the twelve tribes of Israel – if you've ever wondered where all that came from, this here is the start.

There are three things to take note of in these verses:

First, each son's name has some sort of meaning or serves as a commentary on Leah's life or thinking. That's fairly common in the Old Testament – names had meaning, they had importance. Sometimes they were intended as a blessing to the child, other times as a commentary on the mother or father's own situation, and sometimes they are almost prophetic. So it is that when Leah bears Reuben – meaning "see, a son!" she sees that as a blessing from the Lord. Sons, as you might recall, were especially valued in the days of the Old Testament. So, even from these early verses, we are seeing that Leah should feel particularly honored.

Likewise, Simeon's name speaks to how the Lord has heard Leah's cries, her anguish at being unloved. Levi's name speaks for the attachment – the love and care and security – that Leah desires to receive from her husband, and yet isn't. Judah's name relates to Leah's thankfulness to the Lord with the bearing of these sons that should surely please her husband and lift her up in his eyes.

Speaking of her husband, that's the second point: do you see the anguish that Leah is going through? She feels unloved, and in her mind, bearing these sons should change that equation. Surely Jacob will love her more when she has borne him

such wonderful children? In their names and in her reactions, we see the broken heart of Leah.

Third, we also see something of her faith: Leah believes that her blessing is coming entirely from the Lord. She attributes these sons to God's work and she sees the Lord as giving to her what is necessary to secure Jacob's love and affection. Whatever else we may think of her, Leah does believe God is at work in all this.

From these early verses, you and I need to see that God loves the unloved. That's a consistent theme throughout the Scriptures, loving those who were thought of as worthless, unlovable, and unclean was a hallmark of Christ's ministry here on the earth and it is something that the church has been known for throughout the centuries. Let me challenge you with two thoughts in light of that truth. First, do you believe in a God who loves like this? Do you believe that He can love even you, no matter your past, your mistakes, your sins? Do you trust Jesus as your Savior, believing that His death on the cross extends love to all who trust Him? If not, then you need to have your picture of God corrected – let these verses do that for you. And – second – if you do know this love of the Lord, do you follow in Christ's pattern and extend it to others? Do you love those whom the world overlooks? Do you love those whom you are tempted to hate? Whatever your reasons or trials, are you asking the Lord to help you hold out His love to others who need it just as desperately as you do? That is the path of following Jesus.

While this may be the end of the chapter, it is certainly not the end of the story. What about Rachel? How will it all turn out? Let's keep reading...

30:1-8 Rachel, for her part, is incredibly jealous. You can sense her frustration when she all but blames Jacob for her not being able to bear children. Of course, this only leads to more strife from his end of things as well, and – like many such arguments – the end result is foolishness, not wisdom. Rachel is so desperate for Jacob to see her as providing him with children that she hands over her servant Bilhah to him, telling him to sleep with her. No mention is made of Bilhah's own thoughts on all of this.

Jacob listens to his wife, sleeps with Bilhah, and the result ends up being two more sons. The first is Dan, whose name is similar to the Hebrew word for judged, in the sense of to “vindicate” somebody. In other words, the arrival of Dan makes Rachel feel that God has seen her plight and ruled in her favor.

In time, Bilhah bears another son, whom Rachel then names Naphtali, related to the Hebrew term for “wrestling.” Note why Rachel chose this name: she sees her and her sister’s relationship as one of being rivals. Far from the love that sisters should share, to Rachel this is a war for Jacob’s affections – and she intends to win it one way or the other.

Of course, Leah isn’t going to let this stand – remember, she thought that she had a doorway into Jacob’s affections, and now that doorway is being threatened. So how will she respond?

30:9-13 Leah’s response is, sadly, to follow the gameplan that Rachel first set. If she can’t bear more children personally, she’ll hand over *her* servant, Zilpah. Just as with Bilhah, Zilpah ends up bearing two sons, first, Gad – whose name is related to “good fortune” in the sense of blessing. Then Asher, whose name is related to happiness.

Let’s pause for a moment and think through what’s just happened. Any relationship that the sisters might have had seems utterly broken at this point: their jealousy against one another has reached such a point that winning at all costs has become the game, and they are willing to hand over their servants to Jacob – *their husband!* – if that means either one can get ahead.

Second, if you can’t tell already, this isn’t going to work out well. There will end up being all kinds of family strife – even generational strife – on account of this jealousy. You and I need to realize that whenever we sin, and it is fair to call this contest sin, the effects aren’t just confined to ourselves. No, they get on everyone else. To use a COVID metaphor, sin is contagious – it affects even those who are merely around you. Never think that your sins are minor, or that they are just “your choice.” You must always realize that when you rebel against God, you end up hurting your family, your friends, your loved ones, your church – even random

strangers – in the process. This is why sin is so deadly. This is why nothing less than the perfect life and sacrificial death of Jesus was what it took to deal with it once and for all.

Third, though the specific circumstances are different, there was a similar story back in **Genesis 16** which resulted in similar strife. There, it was Hagar, Abraham and Sarah's servant. The strife that resulted with Hagar and Ishmael ended up causing all kinds of problems in the family that have reverberated even into today with a lot of the feuds and bad blood that we see between Jews and Muslims (who believe that their spiritual heritage originated with Ishmael).

From this, learn the simple lesson that we so quickly forget: sin is never worth it. It might seem enticing or fun at the time, it might appear like it will be no big deal, but the reality is that sin always hides its true cost. Pastor Tim Keller notes that sin is a deceiver, always hiding its true proportions, something like an iceberg where you can only see a small part on the surface. You and I cannot see the future, and sin is a wicked investment into an uncertain future. So cry out to the Lord – whatever you struggle with. Get help. Ask for somebody to keep you accountable. Make whatever radical changes are necessary in your life to combat sin. Do not make peace with it. Do not give up the fight against it.

For Jacob, Leah, and Rachel, the story only gets worse...

30:14-21 This is despicable, isn't it? The sisters have been reduced to treating Jacob like some sort of bull in the pasture, trading time with one another. Of course, his passivity only makes the problem worse. I realize that the "mandrake" reference is strange to us. The general feeling at the time was that mandrakes had some sort of special powers about them, which is why Rachel thinks that they may be the key to her being able to bear a child personally. The result is that she decides to offer a trade: she'll give Leah – the unwanted wife – time with Jacob in exchange for the mandrake roots that Leah has just received. Leah takes her sister up on the deal (I think we are meant to see shades of Jacob and Esau's dealings with one another here) and goes to Jacob after the day's work demanding that he sleep with her. He does, and the result is that Leah bears a fifth son: Issachar. Yet, even though she attributes this son to God as well, you can sense that something

has changed with her description: this isn't about blessing anymore; no, Leah has sacrificed for this son. Issachar was earned, deserved by her efforts.

In time, Leah conceives again, bearing Zebulun, whose name relates to "honor." There is a sad irony in naming him that, not only because of what Leah so desperately wants from Jacob, but also because of the child that follows: a daughter, Dinah, who will be terribly dishonored in the future.

It's like the whole soap opera has gone from bad to worse, hasn't it? Whatever you might have thought of Leah and Rachel before – not to mention Jacob – it's hard to see them in any sort of positive light now. But let's read a few more verses before drawing conclusions...

30:22-24 Just as it was the Lord who opened Leah's womb, so He now opens Rachel's womb. At this point, there will only be one child, but I'm sure that made all the difference to Rachel. She names this son Joseph, which is a bit of a play on words, emphasizing both the thankfulness that Rachel feels for how the Lord has given her a son directly but also her continued longing: one son isn't enough, not in this terrible battle – and so she wants more.

Dear church, what are you and I to do with such a messy chapter? We've already spoken about the brokenness of it – which there is plenty of. So let me, instead, speak of the hope that is found here. Remember where we're at in **Genesis** – we have been following the promises of God, first given to Abraham, then to Isaac, and most recently passed on to Jacob. What you need to do here is to not forget this – after all, God certainly hasn't! All this backstabbing and wretchedness will not somehow nullify God's promises – and if that isn't the very definition of grace and mercy, I'm not sure what is. So take heart friends: if God loves people as broken as this, then He can love you also, no matter what your own particular brokenness looks like. But there's more also: if God can end up using this soap opera family to – as the promise said: *be a blessing to all the families of the earth* – then He can use you also. It ends up being through this family line that Jesus traces His own roots – and the blessing He offers to all who receive Him certainly qualifies, doesn't it? God uses broken people. His grace is greater than our sin. Let's worship Him for that joyous truth!