

Jacob *and* Rachel: Labor of Love



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 29:1–31:16.*

Memory Text: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (*Ephesians 5:25*).

Against the backdrop of an Old Testament culture in which marriages were arranged by the parents, Jacob and Rachel stand out as an example of a love marriage. Esau also had selected his own wives, but he is not recorded as “loving” them. In a case similar to Jacob’s, Moses married the daughter of one with whom he took refuge, but again, he is not stated to have fallen in love with her. Thus, Jacob’s love for Rachel must have been extraordinary to warrant repeated mention. His love has acquired legendary status probably for good reason.

Yet, the marriage of Jacob and Rachel does not end with the “happily ever after” style. When he left Padanaram 20 years after he got there, Jacob had acquired great wealth in terms of flocks and herds. But their relationship underwent many trials and troubles. Though conditions were not always ideal, their love never suffered. Their strong love, it seems, enabled them to endure all difficulties. Rachel’s early death did not diminish Jacob’s love for her children but rather heightened it.

The Week at a Glance: Of all the lessons we can learn from this couple, perhaps the most important one is that our actions and mistakes have consequences that go far beyond ourselves.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 28.*

Marrying Within the Faith

We left off with Isaac and Rebekah sending off Jacob, to keep him from marrying outside the faith and to get him away from his angry brother. Esau had sworn that as soon as Isaac was dead, he would kill Jacob for stealing his blessing (*Gen. 27:41*). We also left off noting that Isaac began the covenant blessing by telling Jacob not to marry from the Canaanites but to take a wife from his own clan.

When you consider the covenant blessing (*see Gen. 28:1–4*), why was the choice of the right wife important for the blessing to be fulfilled?

Marrying within the faith is so important to the patriarchs that the problem of marrying within the family is overlooked. Abraham is married to his half sister, Isaac to his cousin, and now Jacob is instructed by Isaac to seek a wife from among the daughters of Laban—his own cousins. Abraham had strictly instructed his trusted servant not to get a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanites (*Gen. 24:3*). Esau also realized how offensive his pagan wives were to Isaac, so he went and married yet another wife—the daughter of his uncle Ishmael.

What evidence can we find from the wickedness that helped bring the Flood that could help us understand why marrying “out of the faith” was deemed so bad? *See Gen. 6:1–5*.

Some believe that the wickedness was in angels’ marrying humans. But Jesus said that angels do not marry (*Mark 12:25*). Others see the wickedness here as polygamy as practiced by dynastic rulers among the descendants of Cain. Lamech is an example of one (*Gen. 4:19*). One would wonder why polygamy would be condemned so indirectly. The interpretation easiest to understand is that godly descendants, “the sons of God,” were intermarrying with the “daughters of men,” those who weren’t the Lord’s followers, and this was terrible in God’s sight.

Second Corinthians 6:14 gives a principle that should be heeded not only in marriage but in other activities, as well. Inevitably, however, most of us are, at one time or another, “yoked” with unbelievers. What principles should we keep in mind when faced with these situations?

Working and Waiting

Read Genesis 29:1–15. From what we can tell in the text, how pure were Laban’s motives toward Jacob, at least at first?

Whatever his motives were to start, eventually Laban saw in Jacob a bargain. He’d eventually have to marry his daughters off anyway; why not get what he could for a dowry?

Dowry in the Old Testament takes several forms. It appears that the bride’s father gave a maidservant to his daughter at the time of marriage. Thus Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel acquired maidservants (*Gen. 16:1; 24:61; 29:24, 29*). However, the groom, too, was expected to give gifts to the bride’s family. Abraham’s servant gave gold and silver jewelry and expensive clothes to Rebekah and other costly gifts to her mother and brother Laban. In contrast, Jacob had arrived penniless and had nothing to offer except labor, and he offered to work seven years for Rachel.

Read Genesis 29:15–30. What was behind such treachery? What does that tell us about the power of greed to override honesty and decency?

How did Laban justify his act? (*Gen. 29:26*). Why was that such a lame excuse?

As the local man, Laban would have the support of the town’s people. Jacob was the refugee. As the employer, Laban had Jacob at his mercy. At the end of seven years he had paid nothing yet. Most of all, Jacob’s love for Rachel held him captive to Laban. He thus had no option but to submit meekly to the treachery. We see only a mild protest from the helpless young man. He had to work another seven years for Rachel, but he was eventually allowed to marry her.

Look again at Laban’s excuse. In what ways do we need to be careful of doing the same thing; that is, using the excuse of customs or traditions (or anything, really) in order to justify unjust acts?

Family Strife

Read Genesis 29:28–30:24 and then answer these questions:

1. In what ways was this family making the same marital mistakes as their ancestors?

2. In what ways were the strife and envy between the women manifested?

3. How did Jacob's actions make matters worse?

The competition between the two sisters led to them giving their maidservants to Jacob to bear sons for them. When Rachel's maidservant bore her second son, Rachel declared, "I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won" (*Gen. 30:8, NIV*). Rachel had said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die" (*vs. 1, NIV*). These words proved ironic, as Rachel finally died in childbirth (*Gen. 35:16–18*). When she finally bore a son, she named him Joseph, meaning "may he add," saying, "May the Lord add to me another son" (*Gen. 30:24, NIV*). Tragically, the birth of her second son killed her.

Notice the words of Rachel to Jacob in Genesis 30:1 and the desperation that they reveal. When was the last time you were in a desperate situation that only God could solve? How did you react? What lessons did you learn that could help you if something similar were to happen again?

Jacob's Leaving

Review what we've read so far about this family. What were the sins and mistakes that each person made? What does this tell us about how belief alone, even in the true God, isn't enough to change our lives the way that God would have them changed? *See 2 Cor. 7:1.*

Though not graphic, this story of Laban and Jacob and his wives is sordid enough. Each character is guilty in his or her own way. Even Jacob, the patriarch, a follower of the true God, is hardly much of a representative of that God. This is just another biblical account of how far humans have fallen and how desperately in need of grace we all are.

Based on Genesis 30:25–31:16, how would you answer the following questions?

1. What caused Laban's attitude toward Jacob to change? What lesson is there for us?

2. What are some of the good characteristics found in Jacob?

3. What was Laban's daughters' attitude toward their father? Was it justified?

Even amid all this deceit, trickery, passion, jealousy, favoritism, and on and on, the Lord was there, working out His plan despite human foibles. At the same time, how much better this story could have been had people loved God first and one another as themselves. As you go about your daily business, in what ways can you consciously seek to live as God would have you live, thus avoiding much needless pain?

Playing Favorites

Read Genesis 29:30. What recipe for family disaster is found in this verse?

No question, God was working in the life of Jacob, even despite his faults. Yet, those faults weren't minor; they brought pain and suffering not only upon himself but upon his loved ones. When will we learn to think before we act, to contemplate the possible results of the choices we make? How many of us would love to turn back the clock and do things differently? Unfortunately, we can't. All we can do is try not to make the same mistakes in the future.

Of all the mistakes Jacob made, one of the worst was the favoritism he showed toward Rachel. Sure, Leah wasn't the one he wanted, but he was still married to her, and he didn't seem to mind bearing all these children with her either.

Read Genesis 33:1–3. What example of favoritism toward Rachel did he show there?

Even after Rachel died, Jacob continued to show his favoritism to the children he bore with her. Joseph was the recipient of the coat of many colors (*Gen. 37:3*), and Benjamin was the one held back by the father as the others went to buy grain from Egypt (*Gen. 42:4*), even though he already had ten other sons (*Gen. 46:21*).

There's no doubt that this blatant favoritism brought a great deal of suffering to the family. If only Jacob had lived according to the principles of the God he followed, how much better his life would have been. It's a lesson that applies to all of us, as well. How careful we need to be in the relationships we form.

Of course, most of us don't have to deal with the complications arising from polygamous marriages, but we all need to be careful in how we treat others. No doubt Leah and eventually the children she bore were all pained by Jacob's actions. What can you do to be more careful in dealing with the feelings of others who are dependent upon your love and affection?

Further Study: “Rachel,” pp. 924, 925, in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*; also read Ellen G. White, “Jacob’s Flight and Exile,” pp. 183–194, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“Preach in your lives the practical godliness of the faith that you believe. Let it be seen that the truth never degrades the receiver, making him rough and coarse, or fretful and impatient. Make apparent to all your patience, your kindness, your long-suffering, gentleness, compassion, and true goodness; for these graces are the expression of the character of the God whom you serve.”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 400.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Talk about the question of being unequally yoked with unbelievers. How are we as Christians to act when we face this situation? What can we learn from one another’s experiences?
- 2 What advice would you give to someone who was thinking about marrying outside the faith?
- 3 We can learn a lot from the story this week about how not to act. What principles can we learn from what we’ve read that can help us better avoid the kind of mistakes that this family made?
- 4 Greed is a powerful passion within the human heart. What ways can we protect ourselves from being swept up by it?
- 5 If a couple in your class has been married a long time, have them explain what the keys are to a happy marriage. What are the principles? What must couples never do? What should they always do? How can we apply those principles (when applicable) to other areas of our lives?

Summary: Yes, they were a dysfunctional family by all accounts. Their actions all came with bad consequences, too. How important that we learn from their mistakes and not follow the principles of greed and selfishness and jealousy that brought so much heartache.

Watching God Work: Part 1

The break-up of communism in Eastern Europe left many people desperate to earn enough money to live. Maria, like many others, sought work in another country. Though she has a teaching degree, she works for a family in the Middle East, cleaning, cooking, and caring for a child. Although such workers are paid little by the country's standards, it is good money for Maria.

Maria and other Adventist women have found that their new jobs, though menial and seldom praised, afford them a rare opportunity to share their faith. "We—my Adventist sisters and I—are amazed when we think of how God is leading us," she says. "We enter into the homes of wealthy and influential people in this country, care for their homes and children. And even though we do not speak the language of our hosts well, by our lives we can influence people who would never open their door and allow us to share our faith and tell them of God's love.

"People in this country do not want to know about Christians or their God, so we cannot preach to them. But they see God in our lives, and God performs miracles and opens their hearts to our message. Somehow they sense that we are not like other Christians. We don't drink or smoke, and we keep the Sabbath. Many times they tell us, "You are like Muslims; you are very close to us."

In the family for which Maria works, the extended family often gathers for dinner. After they eat, they sit and talk politics and have a drink. One evening as the men talked, Maria's boss asked her to serve them some drinks. Maria gently told her boss that she could not serve the drinks. Suddenly the room became quiet, and 25 faces looked at her. Her boss was surprised by her refusal, and she, too, was embarrassed.

Then Maria felt a power in herself and told her boss, "I do not serve alcohol because I do not drink alcohol. It is forbidden by Allah. And the things I do not take part in, I do not offer to others." Her employer nodded. She left the room, wondering whether she would be reprimanded or, worse, fired.

(Continued next week)

MARIA lives and shares her faith in the Middle East.