

Chapter 6: The Deception of Jacob

Genesis 29:1–30

As we arrive at Genesis 29, Jacob's story balances on two paradoxical factors. On the one hand, God has promised to bless Jacob with the blessing of Abraham and Isaac. On the other hand, Jacob has behaved with cunning manipulation rather than faith. He exploited his brother's desperation to buy the birthright, and he deceived his elderly, blind father to steal the blessing. Why should this scoundrel benefit from God's blessing? Will the man whom God has chosen ultimately tarnish God's glory? Should we think less of God for moving forward with a man such as Jacob? And if not Jacob, then who will God accomplish God's mission in the world?

God knows exactly what Jacob has done. God will not ignore Jacob's sin, but neither will God remove Jacob from his plan of redemption. Rather, God will discipline Jacob. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). In Genesis 29, Jacob will reap from his uncle Laban what he has sowed in his own, immediate family. By this discipline, God avoids condoning Jacob's sin and he avoids rejecting Jacob altogether. Furthermore, God is not distracted by this discipline, as though this were a deviation in his plan for redeeming the world. On the contrary, God uses this discipline for his purposes. Indeed, Genesis 29 teaches that *God fulfills his promises through discipline*.

God Deals Faithfully with his People (Genesis 29:1–14)

Jacob's encounter with Yahweh at Bethel gives the patriarch new confidence as he continues on his journey toward Mesopotamia:

[1] Then Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east. [2] As he looked, he saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep lying beside it, for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large, [3] and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place over the mouth of the well.

[4] Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where do you come from?" They said, "We are from Haran." [5] He said to them, "Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?" They said, "We know him." [6] He said to them, "Is it well with him?" They said, "It is well; and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!" [7] He said, "Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered together. Water the sheep and go, pasture them." [8] But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep." (Gen. 29:1–8)

Literally, the first verse says that “Jacob lifted up his feet, and he went to the land of the people of the east” (Gen. 29:1; my translation). As Allen Ross observes, Jacob this language suggests that Jacob walks with a spring his step: “Esau no longer concerned him; now he was on a mission with the Lord’s promise of protection and provision. This clue strongly suggests that Jacob’s confidence in the Lord’s direction to Laban’s house was very high.”¹

The Fulfillment of God’s Promises at Bethel

Indeed, Jacob should be confident. It is only under the providence, protection, provision, and direction of God that Jacob arrives at a field with a well surrounded by people who know his mother’s brother, Laban.² This is more than a general observation about the situation, since the text uses the word “behold” three times to communicate the same kinds of details that the threefold use of *behold* communicated during Jacob’s vision in Genesis 28:12–13.³ There, the first *behold* told us something about the setting: “...and behold, there was a ladder set up on earth, and the top of it reached to heaven” (Gen. 28:12). Here, the first *behold* also tells us about the setting: “And he looked, and behold [untranslated in ESV], a well in the field...” (Gen. 29:2; my translation). In Genesis 28, the second *behold* described the secondary, attendant characters present at the setting: “And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!” (Gen. 28:12). Here, the second *behold* also describes the secondary attendant characters: “...and behold, three flocks of sheep lying beside it...” (Gen. 29:2). Finally, the third *behold* in Genesis 28 drew our focus to the main character in the scene: “And behold, the LORD stood above it...” (Gen. 28:13). In Genesis 29, the third *behold* also draws our focus to the main character, albeit a different one: “...and behold [ESV: “see”], Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!” (Gen. 29:6).⁴ The same God who appeared to Jacob in his vision of the ladder is the same God orchestrating these events to bring Jacob his future bride: “the vision at Bethel was the promise, and the meeting at the well was the beginning of the fulfillment.”⁵

There is a second connection to Genesis 28 in the appearance of a *stone*. In Genesis 28, Jacob slept with a stone in his head that he then set upright as a pillar to commemorate the vision he received (Gen. 28:11, 18); here in Genesis 29, a stone over the opening of the well “becomes the means by which Jacob meets Rachel.”⁶ The repetition of details about the stone in Genesis 29:2–3 and the fact that the shepherds cannot move the stone until *all* the flocks are gathered emphasize the stone’s huge weight, both in terms of its physical mass and its importance in the narrative.⁷ Once again, the same God whom Jacob commemorated with a stone pillar is the same God who will work through a stone to commend Jacob to his bride-to-be.⁸

An Impatient Patriarch

In Hebrew, Genesis 29:4, 5, and 6 all begin with the same phrase: “And he said to them....” The repetition underscores Jacob’s demanding insistence to find his bride: “His conversation with the shepherds, more of an interrogation than a chat, helps to convey the idea of a pushy young man in a hurry to achieve his own ends.”⁹ We see one more connection to Genesis 28 when Jacob asks whether it is “well” (lit., “peace”) with Laban (Gen. 29:6). Previously, Jacob was concerned only with his own peace (Gen. 28:21), but now Jacob recognizes that his success is bound up in the well-being (peace) of Laban.¹⁰ Once the shepherds identify Rachel to him, Jacob suggests that they water their sheep and take those sheep away to pasture (Gen. 29:7). Is Jacob perhaps trying to get the other shepherds to clear out so that he can have a more private conversation with Rachel? Regardless, the

shepherds reply that they cannot roll the stone away from the opening of the well until all the flocks have arrived (Gen. 29:8): “But Jacob, having been apprised of this convention, does not hesitate to disregard it,” as we will see in the next section.¹¹ Jacob asks seemingly polite questions, but he acts impatiently as he seeks the purposes for which he came.

Rolling Away the Stone

When Rachel arrives, we learn that she is a “shepherdess.” This is the feminine form of the common word “shepherd,” appearing only here in the Old Testament.¹² When Jacob sees his relative, he moves swiftly into action:

[9] While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father’s sheep, for she was a shepherdess. [10] Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother’s brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother’s brother, Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth and watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother. [11] Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. [12] And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father’s kinsman, and that he was Rebekah’s son, and she ran and told her father. (Gen. 29:9–12)

Jacob’s moving this stone is a “herculean” or “Samsonesque” feat of strength that Jacob exerts only here.¹³ After he has moved the stone, Jacob serves Rachel by watering the flocks of her father (Gen. 29:10). The sheer improbability of this whole situation is parallel to the way that Abraham’s servant asked God to reveal the wife for Isaac by the improbable actions of a woman to offer not only him, but also his animals, water to drink (Gen. 24:12–15, 27, 40–50).¹⁴ Later, Moses meets his own wife under similar circumstances when he bravely fights off the shepherds who mistreat the seven daughters of Reuel, the priest of Midian, and then waters their sheep (Ex. 2:17).¹⁵ There are, then, three discoveries of a wife at a well, with each new discovery more intriguing than the last. By far, however, Jesus himself holds the most intriguing conversation at a well with a Samaritan woman who has had both five husbands, and yet no husband (John 4:18). God does not speak, but his fingerprints are all over Jacob’s encounter with Rachel.

Afterwards, Jacob is overwhelmed with emotion. First, he kisses Rachel (Gen. 29:11). In the Bible, kissing almost never describes a romantic event, but usually describes a greeting or a blessing (cf. Gen. 29:13).¹⁶ The intent of this kiss, then, seems to have more to do with greeting a relative rather than making any kind of romantic overture toward Rachel.¹⁷ Second, Jacob “lifted up his voice and wept” (ESV: “wept aloud”; Gen. 29:11). This is the same phrase that described Esau’s grief-stricken weeping after discovering that he had lost the blessing to Jacob (Gen. 27:38).¹⁸ Where Esau lifts his voice and weeps to mourn his loss, Jacob lifts his voice and weeps for joy over God’s gracious, providential guidance on his way. Although Jacob does not expressly say it, we should interpret Jacob’s actions in the same vein as the words that Abraham’s servant spoke upon finding Rebekah: “Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. As for me, the LORD has led me in the way to the house of my master’s kinsmen” (Gen. 24:27).¹⁹ Then, just as Rebekah previously ran to tell her household about Abraham’s servant (Gen. 24:28), so now Rachel runs to her household to tell them about Jacob (Gen. 29:12).

A Family Reunion

Next, just as Laban ran out to greet Abraham’s servant (Gen. 24:29), so Laban now runs out to greet Jacob (Gen. 29:13):²⁰

[13] As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister’s son, he ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, [14] and Laban said to him, “Surely you are my bone and my flesh!” And he stayed with him a month. (Gen. 29:13–14)

Certainly, Jacob’s superhuman actions at the well must help to make a good first impression on his uncle.²¹ Nevertheless, when Laban greeted Abraham’s servant, Laban saw the ring and bracelet that the servant had given to Rebekah, along with the ten camels the servant brought along on his travels (Gen. 24:30). Jacob’s situation is entirely different, for he arrives in Mesopotamia without any wealth whatsoever, putting him at a disadvantage by simple contrast with Abraham’s servant.²² Earlier, Rebekah told her family “all these things” about Abraham’s servant (Gen. 24:28), but now Jacob is the one telling Laban “all these things” (Gen. 29:13). On this point, Gordon Wenham writes:

But how much did Jacob divulge of his past? Did he tell of his tricks to acquire his brother’s birthright and blessing, or only of Esau’s plot to murder him? Did he tell of his parents’ injunction to go and stay with his uncle, or also that they wanted him to marry one of Laban’s daughters? The text is vague, and we are left to guess, but it seems likely that Laban discovered plenty about Jacob’s past and realized that Jacob had not many financial assets to offer and was very much at Laban’s mercy. And this must inform our understanding of his comments.²³

Jacob, perhaps over-confident by God’s promises and the partial fulfillment of those promises, may be revealing information that Laban will use against him over the next twenty years.

Ultimately, Laban acknowledges that Jacob is truly his own bone and flesh—that is, his relative (cf. Gen. 2:23). Here again, though, we must start to evaluate what Laban says in light of our knowledge that he is a deceiver, like Jacob: “This is, of course, an innocent statement on Laban’s part, but the reader has already gotten a taste of Jacob’s nature, and in Laban we will encounter one cut from the same cloth.”²⁴ God has demonstrated his faithfulness to his promises by leading Jacob to Rachel. Laban’s words give us the first hint that God will also demonstrate faithfulness to uphold his own righteousness. God will use Laban to discipline Jacob for what he has done. By staying with Laban for a month (Gen. 29:14), Jacob is fulfilling his Rebekah’s command to stay “a few days” (Gen. 27:44; cf. Gen. 29:20); all that is left is for him to marry one of Laban’s daughters (Gen. 28:2).²⁵ Indeed, all this will come to pass, but not in the way that Jacob imagines that it will go.

God is not Deceived by his People (Genesis 29:15–20)

As time passes, Jacob gains an opportunity to finalize his mission by marrying one of Laban’s daughters:

[15] Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” [16] Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. [17] Leah’s eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. [18] Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” [19] Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” [20] So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. (Gen. 29:15–20)

On the surface, Laban’s offer sounds generous. If indeed Laban and Jacob are kinsmen, why should Jacob serve Laban for free? Certainly, Jacob understands Laban’s words trustingly; however, Laban lives for his own profit, not Jacob’s.²⁶ As Derek Kidner writes, “In Laban Jacob met his match and his means of discipline.”²⁷ If we wondered whether God planned to let Jacob get away with what he did to his brother and his father, we will soon see that Jacob reaps in his dealings with his uncle what he sowed with his immediate family.

A Deal with a Brother

Laban’s word that the ESV translates as “kinsman” gives us an important clue as to his intentions. Literally, this word is “brother,” but in Hebrew it often describes close family relationships in addition to that of siblings. Abraham, for example, called Lot his “brother” (ESV: “kinsmen”; Gen. 13:8). Laban is not only the *brother* of Jacob’s mother (Gen. 29:10 (x3)), but, more broadly, the *brother* of Jacob as well (Gen. 29:10, 15). In this context, Laban’s description of Jacob as a *brother* reminds us of how Jacob treated his own brother, Esau.²⁸ The word *brother* first appears in the Jacob narratives to describe how Esau’s *brother* came out of the womb grasping at Esau’s heel (Gen. 25:26). Then, the word *brother* appears thirteen times in Genesis 27 (v. 6, 11, 23, 29, 30, 35, 37, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45) so that we do not forget for a moment that Jacob is stealing from his *brother*, Esau.

Here, though, Laban’s use of the word *brother* reminds us not of Jacob’s deception in Genesis 27, but of Jacob’s deal with Esau in Genesis 25:29–34 to sell the birthright. There, Jacob asked his brother for a deal: Esau’s birthright in exchange for some of his red stew. These terms were very poor for Esau, but Jacob willingly took advantage of his brother’s desperation (Gen. 25:30–32).²⁹ Here, Jacob is now the desperate brother, for he has fallen in love with Rachel (Gen. 29:18) and is willing to work seven years for her hand in marriage. In those days, marriages required that the groom pay the bride’s family a bride price, and the Mosaic law fixed a maximum of fifty shekels for a bride price (cf. Deut. 22:29) in a time when common laborers earned between one-half and one shekel per month.³⁰ Seven years of service for a bride, then, is the equivalent of paying the maximum price at nearly minimum wage—an extraordinarily high price, especially in light of the fact that Jacob is Laban’s *brother*. Laban accepts Jacob’s terms, but he shrewdly speaks in vague terms about giving “her” to Jacob (Gen. 29:19) without specifying whether he means Rachel or Leah: “Laban’s reply managed to give the appearance without the actual substance of consent. He was covered.”³¹ Not only does Jacob offer disadvantageous terms, but he blindly accepts the loophole that Laban leaves for himself. Ultimately, the terms Laban uses for “serve” and “wages” (Gen. 29:15) will become synonymous with Jacob’s exploitation (cf. Gen. 29:18, 20, 25, 27, 30; 30:26, 29; 31:6, 41; 30:16, 32,

33; 31:7, 41).³² Even so, the Lord will eventually vindicate Jacob's wages at Laban's expense (Gen. 29:15; 30:28, 32, 33; 31:7, 8; 31:41).³³

A Beautiful Wife for a Few Days of Work

It is difficult to know how to translate the descriptions of the appearances of Rachel and Leah. John Walton's words are important as we try to imagine Laban's daughters:

We must recognize, however, that in neither of those descriptions does she necessarily conform to the criteria that are used today. In some cultures a woman is considered attractive if she is strong-boned and stocky. In contrast to Rachel, the feature of Leah that draws comment is her eyes. The NIV translates the descriptive adjective "weak" but notes the alternative "delicate" in a footnote. In other contexts the adjective is generally positive, indicating a certain vulnerability or tenderness. Eyes were considered a component of beauty in the ancient world, so in the end the assessment offered in the text suggests that while Leah is not without striking features, she pales in comparison to Rachel's overall beauty.³⁴

Indeed, a woman's eyes were one of her most important features, since women wore veils that covered their entire face, except for their eyes and cheeks (Gen. 24:65–67; 38:13–14; Song 1:7, 15; 4:1, 3; 6:7).³⁵ Whatever Rachel's actual appearance, her beauty so captivates Jacob that his labor over seven years seems like a small price to pay.³⁶ The phrase "a few days" (Gen. 29:20) is the same that Rebekah suggested as a duration for Jacob's time in Mesopotamia before returning to the land of Canaan (ESV: "a while"; Gen. 27:44).³⁷ When Esau was out hunting game for his father, he labored in blissful ignorance—just as Jacob does now. Like Esau, Jacob has no idea that all his efforts will fail to bring him the blessing that he intends to receive. As soon as those "few days" have passed, Jacob plans to marry his bride and return to his home country. Laban, however, will ruin Jacob's plans.

God Disciplines his People (Genesis 29:21–30)

Earlier, Laban did not specify the name of the daughter he intended to give Jacob (Gen. 29:19). Now, Jacob foolishly fails to specify the name of the wife he intends to marry:³⁸

[21] Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." [22] So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. [23] But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. [24] (Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant.) [25] And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" (Gen. 29:21–25)

Although the seven years of service have seemed to Jacob as but a few days (Gen. 29:20), Jacob's words betray his growing impatience.³⁹ Jacob does not know it, but his frustrations are only beginning.

Disguising the Older as the Younger

Laban says nothing, and instead acts by gathering all the people of that place for a feast.⁴⁰ Jacob's many words in the presence of Isaac almost betrayed his identity (Gen. 27:18–22), but Laban here says nothing that could reveal his deceitful plans. After the feast, Laban makes his move by giving his older daughter Leah to Jacob instead of Rachel. The next morning, Jacob discovers that he has consummated marriage with the wrong woman, requiring him "to fulfil his honorable duty to the woman (cf. Exod 22:16; Deut 22:28–29)" by remaining with her.⁴¹ Laban's trick is monstrous, and we feel terrible for Jacob. Nevertheless, we also know that Laban has done to Jacob what Jacob first did to Isaac. Just as Laban here disguises his older daughter as the younger to trick Jacob, Jacob earlier disguised himself as his older brother to trick Isaac.⁴²

Once Isaac blessed Jacob, Isaac acknowledged that the blessing was irrevocable: "Yes, and he shall be blessed" (Gen. 27:33). When they learned that they had been tricked, Isaac trembled very violently with fear (Gen. 27:33), and Esau cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry" (Gen. 27:34) and then "lifted up his voice and wept" (Gen. 27:38). The narrative captures Jacob's reaction in two ways that express similarly strong emotions. First, the word *behold* appears once again to capture Jacob's shock: "And in the morning, behold, it was Leah!" (Gen. 29:25). We do not read of Jacob's emotions directly, as with Isaac and Esau. Instead, this phrase is "the very embodiment of anticlimax, and this moment a miniature of man's disillusion, experienced from Eden onwards."⁴³ Second, we read of Jacob's anger indirectly in the accusations he levels against Laban. Jacob's question, "What is this you have done to me?" (Gen. 29:25) is nearly identical to God's question to Eve (Gen. 3:13), God's question to Cain (Gen. 4:10), Pharaoh's question to Abram (Gen. 12:18), Abimelech's question to Abraham (Gen. 20:9), and Abimelech's question to Isaac (Gen. 26:10).⁴⁴ Each time, this question expresses outraged shock concerning an unimaginable grievance—and, in the questions posed to Abraham and Isaac, concerning sins of unlawful marriages.

Laban's Deception

While Laban was perpetrating his fraud, he was silent. Now that Jacob has consummated his marriage to Leah, Laban once again speaks to reveal his deceit:

[26] Laban said, "It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.
[27] Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." [28] Jacob did so, and completed her week. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. [29] (Laban gave his female servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her servant.) [30] So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. (Gen. 29:26–30)

Laban's reply about the custom of his country may be true, but he could have and should have informed Jacob of this custom beforehand (Gen. 29:18–19).⁴⁵ Beyond the surface-level meaning, however, Laban's comment contains a vicious critique against Jacob. Jacob, the younger, usurped the role of the firstborn: "Doubtless there is a barbed underhanded dig in Laban's 'It is not done *in our area* to put the younger before the firstborn.' It was not supposed to be done in Isaac's family either, yet Jacob had."⁴⁶

Then, Laban reveals the rest of his intentions by asking Jacob to serve another seven years in exchange for marrying Rachel. This time, Laban will give Rachel to Jacob immediately, after Leah's wedding week is complete, and then Jacob will serve the seven years following the marriage (Gen. 29:27).⁴⁷ Jacob loves Rachel, so there is nothing he can do. Without any further protest, Jacob acquiesces to Laban's second set of terms (Gen. 29:28, 30).⁴⁸ Jacob will not be able to return to Canaan after "a few days" as he planned.

Jacob's Discipleship

Notably, Jacob fulfills his promise by serving Laban for another seven years (Gen. 29:30). When Jacob demanded Laban why he had *deceived* him (Gen. 29:25), he used the verbal form of the noun used that Esau used to decry Jacob's own "deceit" (Gen. 27:35).⁴⁹ Jacob could, then, repay Laban's deception with more deception, taking his wives and fleeing back to Canaan as soon as possible. Furthermore, Jacob could simply murder Laban as Esau intended to murder Jacob (Gen. 27:41). Instead, Jacob here demonstrates a faithful tenacity that was "lacking in Esau" enabling "him to regard the defeat over Rachel as only a setback. By staying the course he was to win a greater prize than he yet knew."⁵⁰

At one level, then, Jacob experiences a punishment that fits his crime as he suffers the same pain that he inflicted on others.⁵¹ By this, God demonstrates that he does not approve of the *way* Jacob obtained the blessing, even if God nevertheless chooses to bless Jacob with the covenantal blessing of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 28:1–4, 13–15).⁵² On another level, Jacob experiences an opportunity to embrace his discipline not as punishment to be rejected, but discipleship to be endured. Indeed, the author of the book of Hebrews encourages us to learn to endure the discipline that God brings into our lives, by which he treats us as sons and trains us for obedience and the peaceful fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:7–11). Then, the author of Hebrews goes on to contrast the discipleship of believers with the apostasy of Esau, who did not repent when rejected, but only lamented his loss of the blessing with bitter tears (Heb. 12:15–17). Laban is cruel to Jacob, but Jacob needs the pain he experiences at Laban's hands in order to be transformed into Israel (cf. Gen. 32:22–32).⁵³ The difference between Esau and Jacob is not that they experienced different circumstances; rather, the difference comes in their respective responses after experiencing similar circumstances. God's people will reap what they sow (Gal. 6:7), so that they will experience sorrow, pain, and suffering when they act in shameful ways.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, God works even in the sin of his people to advance his mission by working all things together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28).⁵⁵ Our sin makes God's work more painful for us, but God's purposes for his own glory and the good of his people cannot be thwarted.

Daughters, Wine, and Sex

Now, it is hard to read this story without wondering how Jacob could have been so deceived in this way. How could he lie down at night with the wrong woman, even in the dark, and even without having previously known Rachel sexually (Gen. 29:21)? The clue that helps us answer this question comes in the nature of the "feast" that Laban made for Jacob's wedding (Gen. 29:22): "For Laban's duplicity follows his 'feast' (*mišteh*, from *šātá*, 'to drink'), i.e., a drinking banquet."⁵⁶ We should remember that alcohol was also one of Jacob's tactics to dull Isaac's senses (Gen. 27:25) while he was perpetrating his fraud.⁵⁷ In fact, wine is the only element that Jacob added to his mother's plan to deceive Isaac (cf. Gen. 27:6–13).

There is, however, an even more scandalous connection than Jacob's deception of Isaac. In Genesis 29:26, Laban uses a different set of words to describe Rachel as the "younger" and Leah as the "firstborn" than appeared in Genesis 29:16. The specific words Laban uses in v. 26 appeared earlier to describe the firstborn and younger daughters of Lot (cf. Gen. 19:31, 34, 35, 37, 38). There is thematic connection between the two stories, as Lot's daughters also "deceived their father, made him drunk, and then had intercourse with him. Here in Gen. 29 is another 'younger' daughter and 'firstborn' daughter, and again inebriation is a part of the story."⁵⁸ Jacob has not only experienced the trickery that he perpetrated on his father and brother; Laban has furthermore defiled Jacob with the trick that Lot's daughters played on their own father. Jacob has already lain with the firstborn Leah, and now he will lie with the younger Rachel too (Gen. 29:30).

The Offspring of Jacob

Finally, we should remember that the daughters of Lot deceived their father with wine in order to gain children by him (Gen. 19:31–32). Childbearing will be the primary focus of the next passage (Gen. 29:31–30:24), and there are a few final details from this passage that anticipate what is to come. First, Laban gives a female servant named Zilpah as a dowry to Leah (Gen. 29:24), and a female servant named Bilhah to Rachel (Gen. 29:29), and these maidservants will bear children for Jacob (Gen. 30:3–13).⁵⁹ The term "female servant," however, is the same term used to describe Sarah's female servant Hagar (Gen. 16:1–8; 25:12), so that this term has an ominous tone.⁶⁰ Abraham experienced sorrow from his two wives (cf. Gen. 25:1); Jacob will experience proportionately greater sorrow from his *four* wives. Even so, all four wives will bear Jacob children to fulfill God's promise to make Jacob's offspring as the dust of the earth (Gen. 28:14).

Second, the last verse of this passage tells us that Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah" (Gen. 29:30). We already knew this in a general sense, since Jacob asked for Rachel, not Leah, as a wife (Gen. 29:18). Now that Jacob has married both sisters, this favoritism remains, and it will cause extraordinary pain. The law of Moses will forbid a man from taking sisters as rival wives with each other (Lev. 18:18), and the story of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel testifies to the wisdom of such a prohibition.⁶¹ While the first seven years of service to gain a bride seemed like a few days, these next seven years will be filled with great suffering and sorrow.⁶² Leah's pain will come in being unloved (cf. Gen. 29:32), while Rachel's pain will come in her barrenness (Gen. 29:31; 30:1). Ultimately, God will be gracious even in this terrible situation, blessing Leah as the mother of Levi and Judah—that is, as the mother of Israel's priestly and kingly lines, including as the eventual mother of King David and of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.⁶³ Then, God gives to Rachel Jacob's two favored sons, Joseph and Benjamin. In the last part of the book of Genesis, God will exceedingly bless Rachel's son Joseph. None of this is ideal, but God is working in all of it to fulfill his promises through Jacob's discipline.

Discussion Questions

1. Is God righteous when he blesses Jacob, given all the things that Jacob has done? Is God righteous when he blesses you and me, given all the things that we have done? Is there anyone who deserves God's blessing? How then can the Apostle John declare that God is faithful *and* righteous to forgive our sins (1 John 1:9)? What do we learn about grace from this passage?

2. Have you ever thought that you got away with something? Are you currently hiding sins that no one else knows about? Can we deceive God by covering up our sin? Why, then, do we try to cover up our sin? What would happen if we brought our sin into the light by confessing it to God and to others? What sins do you need to confess right now?
3. How many ways does the text demonstrate that Jacob's suffering matches his sins? Why does God often cause us to reap what we have sown? Does God act punitively or restoratively by this discipline? How do experiences of poetic justice teach us to hate our sin? How do such experiences of fitting discipline teach us empathy toward those whom we have sinned against?
4. How have you reacted to receiving a taste of your own medicine? Do you think more about how you have been wronged, or about the wrongs you have committed? Where do we see the difference between Esau and Jacob in their respective reactions to suffering? What does this teach us about how we might endure discipline as God's children (cf. Heb. 12:3–17)?

Notes

1. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 501.
2. "Again, he would have us to consider the providence of God, which caused Jacob to fall in with the shepherds, by whom he was conducted to the home he sought; for this did not happen accidentally, but he was guided by the hidden hand of God to that place; and the shepherds, who were to instruct and confirm him respecting all things, were brought thither at the same time. Therefore, whenever we may wander in uncertainty through intricate windings, we must contemplate, with eyes of faith, the secret providence of God which governs us and our affairs, and leads us to unexpected results." (Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 127. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.vii.i.html>>)
3. For the following information, see Chart 24 in Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 498.
4. The ESV's translation of "behold" in Genesis 28:7 is an accurate translation, but it is a slightly different word (הִנֵּה) than the other word used three times in Genesis 28 and 29 for *behold* (הִנְדָּה).
5. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 501.
6. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 253.
7. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 229–30.
8. "It is no coincidence that he stumbles upon some individuals who know Laban well, anymore than it is a coincidence that Ruth happens to glean in the fields of Boaz. Furthermore, the seemingly chance meeting of Jacob and Rachel is not serendipitous." (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 253.)
9. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 229.
10. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 253.
11. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 230.
12. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 463.
13. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 255.
14. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 458–59.
15. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 194.
16. "This is one of the rare instances in a biblical narrative of a man kissing a woman. In the OT kissing (as a sign of greeting or blessing) normally involves two men. For a man kissing a woman, see Gen. 31:28 and

32:1 (Eng. 31:55; Laban and his daughters); 1 K. 19:20 (Elisha and his mother); Cant. 1:2 (the beloved and her lover).” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 256.)

17. “Though his embrace of Rachel no doubt anticipates their later relationship, and Isaac has already directed him to find a wife from Laban’s family (28:2), the narrative seems to play down this interpretation by repeatedly insisting that Jacob watered the sheep, not because they were Rachel’s, but because they belonged to Laban, ‘his mother’s brother.’ There is also no comment yet about Rachel’s beauty (contrast 24:16). This suggests that Jacob’s prime motive at this stage is to ingratiate himself with his uncle.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 231.)

18. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 256.

19. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 193–94.

20. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 231.

21. Kidner, *Genesis*, 171.

22. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 128. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.vii.i.html>>

23. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 231.

24. Walton, *Genesis*, 586.

25. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 231.

26. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 128–29. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.vii.i.html>>

27. Kidner, *Genesis*, 170.

28. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 459.

29. Kidner, *Genesis*, 171.

30. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 235.

31. Kidner, *Genesis*, 171.

32. “Laban’s question sounds concerned and friendly, but the very mention of ‘working’ and ‘pay’ introduces a jarring note. It sounds friendly to offer one’s destitute nephew wages, but should family relationships be reduced to commercial bargaining? The words ‘work, serve’ (עִבַּר) and ‘pay’ (root שָׁכַר) are key terms in the subsequent narrative (29:18, 20, 25, 27, 30; 30:26, 29; 31:6, 41; 30:16, 32, 33; 31:7, 41) and are laden with echoes of the exploitation Jacob suffered at Laban’s hands. But Laban is canny; he has learned Jacob’s motives for coming (29:13) and in the last few weeks has observed his attachment to Rachel, which he is willing to exploit by inviting Jacob to make an offer.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 234–35.)

33. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 456.

34. Walton, *Genesis*, 586.

35. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 467–68.

36. Kidner, *Genesis*, 171.

37. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 228.

38. Kidner, *Genesis*, 171.

39. “The suspicion of grievance on Jacob’s part may be strengthened by the way he demands his rights, ‘Give me my wife,’ without so much as a ‘please.’ Indeed, in two of the three other passages in Genesis where the verb יָהַב ‘give’ appears by itself, there is a distinct note of desperation apparent (30:1; 47:15; cf. 47:16) that would not be out of place here.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 235–36.)

40. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 261.

41. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 469.

42. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 262.

43. Kidner, *Genesis*, 171.

44. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 236.

45. Kidner, *Genesis*, 172.

46. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 237.

47. Kidner, *Genesis*, 172.

48. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 264.

49. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 236.

50. Kidner, *Genesis*, 170–71.

51. “The Bible demonstrates repeatedly the principle that people reap what they sow. This truth has been called poetic justice, or irony. It is, furthermore, a form of divine retribution, a talionic justice in which there is a measure-for-measure turn of affairs, where the punishment fits the crime. Believers do not view such turns of affairs as mere coincidences; rather, believers recognize that God orders the affairs of human beings in order to remind them of their sins and to set things right.” (Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 496.)

52. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 194.

53. Kidner, *Genesis*, 170.

54. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 503.

55. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 238.

56. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 263.

57. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 209.

58. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 263.

59. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 236.

60. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 470.

61. Kidner, *Genesis*, 172.

62. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 237.

63. Kidner, *Genesis*, 171–72.