

Chapter 7: The Offspring of Jacob

Genesis 29:31–30:24

What if God were only faithful to us to the degree that we are faithful to him? Certainly, all believers understand that God acts more faithfully than we do. What we do not always appreciate, however, is the infinite degree to which God’s faithfulness extends beyond our own. We tend to overestimate our own faithfulness, imagining that God is merely a better version of ourselves. In fact, God acts with faithfulness that we cannot fully understand. The Apostle Paul reminds us that “if we are faithless, [God] remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). In other words, God would have to become unfaithful to *himself* before he could become unfaithful to us.

The logic of God’s faithfulness, then, does not follow human concepts of achievement, merit, or justice. Instead, God’s faithfulness emerges from his unmerited, undeserved, unearned grace. God remains faithful to those who least deserve it, for no one deserves God’s faithfulness in the least. So, as Genesis 29:31–30:24 brings us into the intimate, painful struggles of Jacob and his four wives, we see God’s grace exalted from the sinful ruins of personal favoritism, sibling rivalry, sexual misconduct, and pagan-leaning fertility practices. God does not give us this text to cause us to recoil from Jacob’s family in horror. Instead, this text is a mirror that reveals our own sin so that we may better understand how God deals graciously and faithfully with us. Therefore, the lesson of this story is not that we should follow the example set forth by Jacob and his wives. Rather, this text teaches us to entrust ourselves to the grace of the God who was faithful to them, for still to this day *God remains faithful to his faithless people*.

God Remains Faithful to his Distressed People (Genesis 29:31–35)

It was not Jacob’s fault that Laban tricked him into marrying Leah instead of Rachel.¹ Even so, Jacob bears responsibility for his own actions following the discovery of Leah in his bed the morning after the wedding (Gen. 29:25). Specifically, Jacob not only takes Rachel as his second wife (and, later, Bilhah and Zilpah as his third and fourth wives), but he demonstrates ongoing personal favoritism in loving Rachel more than Leah (Gen. 29:30; 30:4, 9). In this passage, we see the fruit of the “bitter seed” that Jacob continues to sow in his family relationships—this time, not by deceiving his brother and father, but by cultivating rivalry and strife between the sisters he has taken as wives.² Furthermore, we see the Lord intervene to correct “Jacob’s extravagant love” for Rachel over Leah.³ This intervention begins when God *sees* Leah’s plight: “When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren” (Gen. 29:31). This is the first explicit statement about the Lord’s activity since Jacob’s vision of the ladder to heaven at Bethel (Gen. 28:12–15).⁴ Before we study what the Lord *sees*, however, let us briefly consider the critical issue in this text: polygamy in the Old Testament.

Polygamy in the Old Testament

Polygamy was not God’s original design for marriage. From the beginning, God intended marriage to be between one man and one woman for life (Gen. 2:24). Throughout the Old Testament, the Scriptures demonstrate again and again the disastrous effects of violating God’s principle marriage as a lifelong, covenantal, one-flesh union between one man and one woman—even though the Old Testament never explicitly forbids polygamy. Beginning with the first polygamy practiced by brutal Lamech (Gen. 4:19–24), we then see God judging Pharaoh and Abimelech when those rulers take Abraham’s wife Sarah for themselves (Gen. 12:17; 20:3–7). Sadly, Abraham himself takes Hagar as a second wife, bringing extraordinary pain into God’s chosen family (Gen. 16; 21:1–21). Later on in history, the Scriptures will directly attribute King Solomon’s apostasy of worshiping foreign gods to his many foreign wives (1 Kgs. 11:1–8; cf. Deut. 17:17). Of all polygamous marriages in the Bible, the Scriptures give us the closest look into Jacob’s disastrous marriages to Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah.⁵ So, although the Mosaic Law never explicitly forbids polygamy, the Old Testament bears extensive witness against the practice.

In the New Testament, Jesus himself affirms, clarifies, and strengthens this vision for marriage as the lifelong union between only one man and one woman by adding, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matt. 19:6). The New Testament clearly affirms the absolute permanence of marriage between one man and one woman except in cases of sexual immorality or abandonment (Matt. 5:31–32; 19:1–12; 1 Cor. 7:1–16; cf. Mal. 2:13–16). Furthermore, the Apostle Paul teaches that elders and deacons in Christ’s church must be the husbands of only one wife (1 Tim. 3:2, 12; Tit. 1:6). Although God’s old covenant people practiced polygamy to a limited extent, God gradually restricted the practice to restore marriage back to his original design from creation.

Even in the Old Testament, however, the Mosaic law forbids a man from marrying sisters as rival wives (Lev. 18:18) and from favoring one wife over another (Deut 21:15–17; cf. Ex. 21:10; 1 Sam 1:5–6).⁶ Jacob, then, not only takes multiple wives; he violates the two laws that most explicitly restrict polygamy in the Old Testament. In Jacob’s disastrous family relationships, we see the great pain comes when people divide the one-flesh union of marriage. Rachel and Leah each become desperate for what the other has: Rachel wants Leah’s fertility, and Leah wants Rachel’s love from Jacob.⁷ First we saw the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau, and then between the Laban and his “brother” Jacob (Gen. 29:15); now we see sibling rivalry between Leah and Rachel.⁸ Ultimately, this tension within the household of Jacob will find its fullest expression in the divided kingdoms of northern Israel and southern Judah.⁹ The Lord, however, is at work even in this desperately broken situation. First, the Lord uses this sin of polygamy to fulfill his promises of making Jacob’s offspring as numerous as the dust of the earth (Gen. 28:14). Second, the Lord intervenes to comfort and draw this whole family closer to himself in faith.

The Lord Sees

With this in mind, let’s come back to the Lord’s *seeing* that Leah is hated (Gen. 29:31). When the Scriptures tell us that the Lord *sees* something, we should understand the meaning as a statement of the Lord’s intention to act decisively, “often in defense of the weak and oppressed (cf. 6:5; 7:1; 18:21; 31:12; Exod 2:25; 4:31).”¹⁰ This is the first of three critical words in this passage that demonstrate the Lord’s covenantal faithfulness to his people: the Lord *sees* (Gen. 29:31; 30:1, 9), *hears* (Gen. 29:33;

30:6, 17, 22), and *remembers* (Gen. 30:22).¹¹ The Lord also *heard* and *saw* the plight of Abraham's mistreated wife, Hagar (Gen. 16:11, 13).¹² Later, the Lord will *see* Jacob's affliction from Laban (Gen. 31:42).¹³ God also *remembered* Noah (Gen. 8:1) and Abraham (Gen. 19:29). Later, God will *see*, *hear*, and *remember* his covenant promises to the Israelites during their afflictions in Egypt (Ex. 2:24–25; 3:7; 4:31; 6:5).

Here in Genesis 29:31, the Lord sees that Leah is “hated”—or, perhaps better in context, “unloved” (cf. Deut. 21:15ff).¹⁴ Leah's lack of love tears her apart emotionally, and her deep pain comes out when she names her children. Leah has four children in rapid succession, beginning with Reuben: “And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, ‘Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me’” (Gen. 29:31). In Gen. 29:31–35, Leah is “is the sole speaker; indeed, apart from v 31, which supplies background information for understanding her comments, Leah is the only actor. Her soliloquies after the birth of each child underline her isolation and her longing for Jacob's affection.”¹⁵ The name Reuben plays on the words of Leah's explanation in two ways. First, the word “Reuben” very literally means “Look, a son!”¹⁶ Because the Lord has *looked/seen* her affliction, so now Leah may call others to *look/see* the son born to her. Importantly, Leah gives glory to the Lord for opening her womb.¹⁷ Leah may be isolated from her husband and from her rival sister, but the Lord has not forgotten her.

Second, when Leah declares her desire that “now my husband will love me,” the word “love” (*ye'ehābani*) partially sounds like the word for “son” (*bēn*), the second half of Reuben's name.¹⁸ She not only calls attention to her son, but she also plays off the words to express her deep desire for Jacob's love. Sadly, she will not gain what she most desires. As Victor Hamilton sadly observes, “Leah is not the last woman to discover that her pregnancy is not a guarantee of a spouse's support and love.”¹⁹ Leah's tragic loneliness continues.

The Lord Hears

Leah names her second son Simeon: “She conceived again and bore a son, and said, ‘Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also.’ And she called his name Simeon” (Gen. 29:33). The theme of Leah's first son was the word *look/see*, and the theme of Leah's second son is *hear*. The name *Simeon* (*shim'ôn*) sounds like the word for “hear” (*shama*), and Leah explains the name Simeon: “because the LORD has *heard* that I am hated, he has given me this son also.” The same kind of play on the word *hear* appeared for Ishmael's name: “You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has *listened to/heard* your affliction” (Gen. 16:11). Later, this play on the word *hear* will also appear for the prophet Samuel's name: “...and she called his name Samuel, for she said, ‘I have asked for him from the LORD’” (1 Sam. 1:20), thus implying that the Lord has *heard* what she asked. Once again, however, Leah's pain spills out of in Simeon's naming. She hoped that giving Reuben to Jacob as a son might solidify her husband's love, but that desire does not come to fruition.²⁰ The Lord maintains his faithful care of her, but her husband still does not love her.

May Jacob Be Attached

At the birth of Leah's third son, Leah's faith seems to be faltering. Instead of clinging to the Lord as her only comfort, she names Levi without any reference to the Lord whatsoever: “Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, ‘Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.’ Therefore his name was called Levi” (Gen. 29:34). The name Levi

sounds like the word for *attach* or *join*. Later, the same wordplay will occur to describe how the Levites will *attach to* (ESV: “join”) Aaron to serve the priests as the priests serve in the tabernacle (Num. 18:2, 4).²¹ Here, Leah’s words are less mindful of the eventual role that the descendants of Levi will play in the worship of God’s people. Instead, she only wants her husband’s heart to be joined to her in love and affection. The lack of reference to God here may perhaps suggest that Levi’s birth came at a particularly low moment in Leah’s relationship with Jacob.

Praising the Lord

In naming her third son, Leah made no mention of the Lord’s provision and only lamented the lack of Jacob’s love. In naming her fourth son, however, Leah offers no lament, but she only acknowledges the Lord’s grace toward her: “And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, ‘This time I will praise the LORD.’ Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing” (Gen. 29:35). Here, Leah makes a wordplay on the word “praise” to name her son *Judah*. We have no reason to believe that her relationship with Jacob has improved. Nevertheless, Leah acknowledges God’s grace toward her in providing four sons.²² Whether Leah has resolved in her heart to walk by faith or resigned herself to her sad circumstances, she puts her focus back on the Lord after expressing such pure despair during Levi’s birth.²³ At this point Leah stops bearing children temporarily (cf. Gen. 30:19–21), although the text does not tell us why. Has Leah become temporarily infertile, or does Jacob neglect Leah entirely during this period of time?²⁴

God’s Election of Leah

Leah is *unlike* Jacob in that she is the older sibling in her family. Even so, Leah is *like* Jacob in that she is the unlikely, despised choice in comparison with her sibling, Rachel.²⁵ Jacob desired to marry Rachel, but Laban tricked him into marrying Leah first. Once the two marriages happen, though, the Lord closes the womb of the likely, beautiful wife and opens the womb of the unlikely, unloved wife (Gen. 29:31). This is a critical point in the theology of Genesis, as John Sailhamer points out:

Thus in two major reversals in Jacob’s life, we can begin to see the writer’s theme taking shape. Jacob sought to marry Rachel, but Laban tricked him. Then Jacob sought to build a family through Rachel, but she was barren and God opened Leah’s womb. Jacob’s schemes, which had brought him fortune thus far, were now beginning to crumble. Such schemes would not be sufficient to carry out the further plans of God. Jacob, too, would have to depend upon God to bring about the divine blessing.²⁶

With Abraham, God fulfilled his promises of multiplied offspring through barren, elderly, unbelieving Sarah (Gen. 21:1–7). With Isaac, God fulfilled his promises through Isaac’s prayers to open his the womb of his barren wife, Rebekah, and by choosing the younger twin over his older brother (Gen. 25:21–23). Now, God sets aside Jacob’s choice wife (Rachel) by making her barren. Then, God raises up Jacob’s unlikely, unloved wife (Leah) to bring forth Jacob’s two most important sons. First, Leah’s son Judah will become the ancestor of David, to whom God promises to give the throne of Israel forever (2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17). Second, Leah’s son Levi will become the ancestor of Aaron and the Levites. Therefore, God makes Leah—not Rachel—the mother of Israel’s priestly *and*

kingly lines.²⁷ The offspring of Abraham who will bless all the families of the earth will come into the world through Jacob's beloved wife, but through the wife whom he demeans and disrespects.²⁸ God will fulfill his promises apart from the scheming of his people.

God Remains Faithful to his Desperate People (Genesis 30:1–8)

In the previous passage, we read that the Lord *saw* Leah's affliction (Gen. 29:31). The second section of this text begins with the same verb of *seeing*, although it is a different person who *sees*:

[1] When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" [2] Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (Gen. 30:1–2)

When the Lord saw Leah, he intervened to help her. When Rachel sees her own barrenness, she becomes envious of her sister—and, therefore, bitter and desperate about the work of the Lord to bring forth the promised offspring.²⁹ This is a complicated situation. On the one hand, we cannot blame Rachel for her pain and envy in this situation. God created motherhood as a blessing for women, but the curse of sin brings pain and suffering into motherhood (Gen. 3:16). This pain is not limited only to the act of labor, but to the entirety of motherhood. This pain includes the *absence* of motherhood, as Rachel experiences here.

On the other hand, Rachel allows her pain to cause her to speak intemperately by demanding children from her husband. In response, Jacob rightly points out that only God can open and close wombs.³⁰ Still, it is possible that Rachel is referring to the fact that the Lord responded to the prayers of both Abraham and Isaac by opening wombs (Gen. 20:17–18; 25:21); however, God will later open Hannah's womb in response to *her* fervent prayers, not her husband's (1 Sam. 1:10, 20).³¹ God is working out his plan, but Rachel can only see her pain. Finally, we should observe the dark note of irony in Rachel's demand, since Rachel *will* die later in the midst of giving birth to her second son, Benjamin (Gen. 35:16–19).³² What she expresses from her desperation becomes true in reality.

A Human Solution to a Divine Promise

As Sarah earlier instructed Abraham to take her female servant Hagar as a wife (Gen. 16:2), Rachel now instructs Jacob to do the same with her own female servant, Bilhah:³³

[3] Then she said, "Here is my servant Bilhah; go in to her, so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her." [4] So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her. [5] And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. [6] Then Rachel said, "God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son." Therefore she called his name Dan. (Gen. 30:3–6)

The phrase that the ESV translates as "give birth on my behalf" more literally says, "give birth *upon my knees*," an expression that describes children counted as one's own (cf. Gen. 50:23).³⁴ Rachel is proposing the same kind of surrogate motherhood that Sarah proposed to Abraham, even quoting

Sarah's words, "that I may be built up from [ESV: "obtain/have children by/through"] her" (Gen. 16:2; 30:3).³⁵ Rachel's desperation leads her to speak and to act in ways that do not yet take away her reproach (cf. Gen. 30:23) but only increase her pain.³⁶ On one level, we have great compassion for Rachel; on another level, we recognize that she is increasing her anguish with self-inflicted wounds.

God's Vindication

Like Abraham, Jacob says nothing in response to his wife's suggestion and complies.³⁷ Unlike in the story of Abraham, however, the narrator tells us about Jacob's going in to Bilhah without explicit condemnation (i.e., "Abraham obeyed his wife"; Gen. 16:2).³⁸ The overall context of Jacob's relationship with his wives supplies sufficient condemnation without needing to be as direct as in Abraham's story. The fact that Rachel names the son born to Bilhah is important, since naming the child implies that she has adopted him as her own son: "Bilhah functioned only as a surrogate mother."³⁹ When Rachel explains the name *Dan*, she declares that God has *judged* (that is, *vindicated*) her by hearing her voice and giving her a son (Gen. 30:6). Is this true, though? The text told us explicitly that when the Lord *saw* Leah, he opened her womb (Gen. 29:31). Therefore, Leah rightly names her first two sons to commemorate that the Lord *saw* her affliction (Gen. 29:32) and *heard* that she was hated (Gen. 29:33). The text does eventually tell us that God *listens* to Rachel, but not until much later in Genesis 30:22—and when God listens to Rachel, he acts (as with Leah) by opening her womb.⁴⁰ Rachel seems to be reading her own thoughts into her interpretations of God's providence.

Rachel's Wrestlings

After Dan, Bilhah gives birth to another son for Jacob:

[7] Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. [8] Then Rachel said, "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed." So she called his name Naphtali. (Gen. 30:7–8)

Naphtali's name is a play on the word Rachel uses for "wrestlings." Describing the process leading up to Naphtali's birth in terms of "mighty wrestlings" reflects the ongoing emotional and spiritual strain that Rachel experiences in the midst of a four-way marriage. Rachel remains the only wife not to have given birth to children. Giving Bilhah to Jacob produces children for Rachel, but not peace.

Nevertheless, Rachel once again gives an interpretation of Naphtali's birth that the narrator does not corroborate: "By naming this child Naphtali, Rachel may have thought that divine justice was rewarding her tenacity."⁴¹ Rachel has sinned by giving her husband yet another wife, but she sees the children born to Bilhah as proof that God has justified her choices. The word "prevailed" will later describe Jacob's own *prevailing* (ESV: "my life *has been delivered*") in *his* wrestling with the angel of God (Gen. 32:30).⁴² Just as Jacob struggles with and prevails over a sibling and with God, Rachel believes that she has done the same thing by giving her female servant as a surrogate mother to Jacob. Certainly, the Lord is working in this situation to provide yet more sons to Jacob in fulfillment of the promise to multiply Jacob's offspring (Gen. 28:14).⁴³ Nevertheless, God is blessing Jacob *in spite* of what he and his family are doing, not because of it.

God Remains Faithful to his Divided People (Genesis 30:9–24)

Once again, the verb *saw* opens the new section. First, the Lord saw Leah, and then Rachel saw her infertility. Now, Leah sees that she is the one who has failed to produce children for awhile, so she follows Rachel's lead:⁴⁴

[9] When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. [10] Then Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. [11] And Leah said, "Good fortune has come!" so she called his name Gad. [12] Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. [13] And Leah said, "Happy am I! For women have called me happy." So she called his name Asher. (Gen. 30:9–13)

Previously, the Lord was Leah's companion in the midst of her loneliness. Even though she was rejected by her husband, the Lord opened her womb to bear four sons for her husband. Suddenly, however, Leah realizes that her fertility has come to a halt while Rachel has produced children for herself through Bilhah. Leah therefore succumbs to the competition with her rival sister and gives her female servant Zilpah to Jacob as a wife.

Good Fortune and Happiness

Except in the naming of Levi, Leah named each of her sons with some reference to the Lord's kindness in opening her womb. When her last son, Judah, was born, Leah resolved to praise the Lord in spite of her circumstances. Now that Rachel is gaining children through Bilhah, however, Leah's attention wanders from trust in God's provision. So, Leah names Zilpah's first son Gad. The word "Gad" means "good luck, fortune," and it contains superstitious, religious overtones.⁴⁵ In Isaiah 65:11, the Lord decries those who forget *God's* holy mountain and instead set a table for the false god, *Fortune* (in Hebrew, *Gad*).⁴⁶ It is probably not a coincidence that Leah names a son after pagan *Fortune* when she utilizes pagan practices to gain that son. Now, this does not necessarily mean that Leah is explicitly worshiping a pagan god, but simply that she slips into using pagan concepts to express her joy over the birth of Gad.⁴⁷

The same pagan overtones emerge in the birth of Asher (Gen. 30:13). Asher is a word that means *happy*, and it can describe the blessed *happiness* (ESV: "Blessed") of the man who delights in the law of the Lord (Ps. 1:1). In the context of a son named *Fortune*, however, naming the child *Happiness* might be more likely connected with the pagan gods, such as the Assyrian god Ashur or the Canaanite goddess Asherah.⁴⁸ Again, while Leah may not be explicitly worshiping a false god, her thoughts and attitudes slip from acknowledging the true, living God to speaking in pagan terms and concepts. Her sentiment that women (lit., "daughters"; cf. Gen. 30:21) will consider her "happy" anticipates language regarding other biblical women (cf. Ruth 4:14–15; Prov. 31:28; Luke 1:48).⁴⁹

Hiring Jacob for Mandrakes

Even though Leah speaks about herself as *fortunate* and *happy*, the next scene clearly reveals her ongoing bitterness:

[14] In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” [15] But she said to her, “Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son’s mandrakes also?” Rachel said, “Then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son’s mandrakes.” [16] When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, “You must come in to me, for I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes.” So he lay with her that night. [17] And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. [18] Leah said, “God has given me my wages because I gave my servant to my husband.” So she called his name Issachar. (Gen. 30:14–18)

John Walton gives important background on the nature of the mandrakes over which Rachel and Leah fight:

The mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*) is a stemless, perennial root in the potato family that grows in stony ground. It has narcotic and purgative properties, which explain its medicinal use. Its shape and pungent fragrance may be the origin of its use in fertility rites and as an aphrodisiac (see Song 7:12–13). It has dark green, wrinkled leaves, from which rise a violet, bell-shaped flower. Its fruit is a yellowish berry approximately the size of a small tomato, which can be consumed.⁵⁰

Clearly, all the people in this story believe mandrakes to be an effective fertility drug (Gen. 30:14). The fact that Reuben brings Leah the mandrakes suggests that he intended to give his own mother an edge in her childbearing competition with Rachel. Rachel asks for the mandrakes because she still has not conceived, and Leah responds defensively in part because she has ceased to conceive.⁵¹

Much of the competition between Leah and Rachel seems passive-aggressive, but here they directly confront one another. Leah’s explosive anger toward her sister is one more reminder in this story of the pain Jacob has caused by taking for himself multiple wives.⁵² In direct questions, the word for “small matter” often expresses great frustration (cf. Num. 16:9; Josh. 22:17; Isa. 7:13; Ezek. 34:18).⁵³ From Leah’s perspective, Rachel has stolen *her* husband. Leah was Jacob’s wife first, albeit not by Jacob’s own intention. When Rachel entered their marriage as a third party, Leah’s own sister took her husband away from her. Rachel does not dispute the matter, but offers a deal: “Then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son’s mandrakes” (Gen. 30:15).

Leah apparently accepts the deal, for she greets Jacob as he returns from the field and demands that he come in to her, “for I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes” (Gen. 30:16). The word “hired” is a key word that describes Laban’s exploitation of Jacob (cf. Gen. 29:15; 30:28, 32, 33; 31:7, 8, 41).⁵⁴ Here, Jacob comes in from his *hired* work in Laban’s field to go to his *hired* work of procreating with Leah. This is hardly an ideal situation, and yet we read that “God listened to Leah” so that she conceived and bore Jacob another son (Gen. 30:17). This word *listened* is the same word Leah used in Simeon’s name to describe how the Lord *heard* that she was hated (Gen. 29:34). When, though, did Leah pray about conceiving a fifth son? John Calvin raises this question, writing, “For who would have thought, that, while Leah was hatefully denying to her sister the fruits gathered by her boy, and was purchasing, by the price of those fruits, a night with her husband, there would be any place for prayers?”⁵⁵

Notably, this line informs us that the mandrakes were *not* the cause of an additional child for Rachel or for Leah.⁵⁶ Instead, God alone opens Leah's womb after she gives away the fertility drug that her son procured for her. That is, Leah conceives *without* the fertility drug. Therefore, she commemorates the birth of her fifth son by explicitly making mention of God's work; however, she believes that the *wages/reward* of *Issachar* is for giving Zilpah to Jacob as a wife: "God has given me my *wages* because I gave my servant to my husband" (Gen. 30:18). Elsewhere the same word for *wages/reward* appears in relation to child-bearing: "Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a *reward*" (Ps. 127:3).⁵⁷ As when Rachel believes God has *vindicated* her when Bilhah gives birth to *Dan*, and that she has *prevailed* over her sister when Bilhah gives birth to *Naphtali*, so Leah believes that *Issachar* is her wages for giving Zilpah to Jacob. Both women project their own, competitive mindset onto the providence of God.

A Good Endowment

Leah conceives and gives birth to her final children: her sixth son and her seventh child, a daughter:

[19] And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son. [20] Then Leah said, "God has endowed me with a good endowment; now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons." So she called his name Zebulun. [21] Afterward she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah. (Gen. 30:19–21)

Having given birth to six sons, Leah rejoices over the good *endowment* with which God has *endowed* her, the word which she plays into the name *Zebulun*.⁵⁸ As she believed that her first and third sons could guarantee her husband's love, Leah now believes that her sixth son will bring her Jacob's honor (Gen. 30:20). Once again, the text gives no indication that this happens as Leah wishes that it would.

Leah's final child is not a son, but a daughter. Rachel will give birth to her second son, Benjamin, much later in Genesis 35:16–21. Therefore, including Dinah in this list of children's names brings Jacob to twelve *children* by the end of this section—then, when Benjamin will be born, Jacob will have twelve *sons*.⁵⁹ The name *Dinah* also foreshadows the story about her later on in Genesis, for Leah uses the same root word Rachel used for the name *Dan*, meaning "judgment, vindication": "Dinah's appearance does not just make the number of children born to Jacob up to twelve; it signifies that she too will be an actor of note in a tale of judgment and vindication (chap. 34)."⁶⁰

God Remembers Rachel

Although God defends Leah throughout this narrative, especially by bringing forth Levi and Judah from Leah (Gen. 29:34–35), God does not neglect Rachel. At this point, we read that God *remembers* Rachel and *listens* to her by opening her womb:

[22] Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. [23] She conceived and bore a son and said, "God has taken away my reproach." [24] And she called his name Joseph, saying, "May the LORD add to me another son!" (Gen. 30:22–24)

As is the case whenever we read that God *remembers* someone, this does not mean that God has forgotten, but that he now *acts* on someone's behalf.⁶¹ Earlier, the Lord opened Leah's womb when he *saw* and *heard* her (Gen. 30:31–33), and now God opens Rachel's womb by *remembering* and *hearing* her.⁶² The next passage suggests that Joseph's birth comes at the end of Jacob's second set of seven years of serving Laban, since Jacob immediately asks to leave (Gen. 30:25). If so, then Rachel has waited fourteen years since her betrothal to Jacob to bear him a son—seven years of engagement, and seven years of marriage without children.⁶³

Why would God *remember* Rachel, though? Rachel is the least godly person in this whole narrative. Rachel is the first to give her female servant to Jacob as a wife, prompting Leah to follow suit (Gen. 30:1–4, 9). Rachel baptizes the pagan practice of surrogate motherhood, calling it God's vindication of her and a victory over Leah (Gen. 30:6, 8). Rachel purchases mandrakes to control her fertility, as if by magic (Gen. 30:14–15). Later, it will be Rachel who steals her father's idols when Jacob's household flees from Laban's house (Gen. 31:34). What has Rachel done to deserve God's *remembrance*?

The answer may not come in recognizing something that Rachel has *already* done, but in what Rachel does in response. Rachel may not have deserved God's kindness, but God's kindness prompts Rachel to faith. Notably, when Rachel conceives, she says nothing about using mandrakes; rather, she acknowledges that *God* has taken away her reproach.⁶⁴ Then, she makes a play on the word for *add* by naming her son *Joseph*, saying, "May the LORD add to me another son" (Gen. 30:24). The first part of this narrative used the covenant name *Yahweh* to speak of God (Gen. 29:31, 32, 33, 35), but then once the competition heated up between Rachel and Leah, they spoke simply of *God* until Rachel invokes *Yahweh* here.⁶⁵ Her prayer expresses "faith pressing on for more than God has yet given."⁶⁶ Leah seems to start with a strong faith that wanes at times in the heat of competition. Rachel's faith, on the other hand, only emerges clearly when God remembers her. She may not have received children earlier if she had walked by faith through these fourteen years, but she would have avoided self-inflicted pain and instead comforted herself in the grace of God. It is always better to trust and obey.

The Logic of Grace

What do we learn from this story? Whose actions do we try to imitate? God gives us this story not to give us a model to follow, but to learn something about his grace toward his people. Through all the favoritism, bitterness, shame, fear, rage, blasphemy, and sexual immorality, God nevertheless remains faithful to his promises. This is not the logic of human achievement or merit; instead, this is the logic of grace. God's grace overturns expectations, exalts the lowly, humbles the proud, unravels our schemes, and blesses the blameworthy. By the logic of grace, God deals faithfully with his faithless people—whether they are distressed, desperate, or divided. He does this not because of who *we* are, but because of who *he* is. Importantly, this does not mean that God is apathetic about our sin. Make no mistake—our holy God loathes our sin. Instead, this means that God acts not in *response* to our goodness, but that he works to *create* faith and obedience by his kindness toward us. God's actions here toward the household of Jacob set out a pattern that he will follow most ultimately when he sends his faithful Son to the cross to bleed and die for his faithless people—for you and for me.

Discussion Questions

1. What suffering does God see in your life (Gen. 29:31–32)? What does God hear from your lamenting prayers (Gen. 29:33)? How can you be confident that God cares about your suffering? What has God already done to demonstrate that he sees and hears you? How can God's redemptive work in your life give you reason for praising him in the midst of your distress?
2. When Rachel gives Bilhah to Jacob as a wife, she acts desperately because of her envy of Leah (Gen. 30:1–4). What matters are you faithlessly taking into your own hands rather than trusting God? How have you justified your actions by pointing to your outward success as evidence of God's blessing, vindication, or triumph in your life (Gen. 30:4–8)?
3. Although Leah first acknowledges the Lord's hand, her conflict with Rachel leads her to act in desperation too (Gen. 30:9). What conflicts are weighing on you right now? Have those divisions caused your confidence in the Lord's faithfulness to drift? What evidence demonstrates that God not only *has* been faithful to you, but that he will *continue* to be faithful to you?
4. How many ways does Rachel behave faithlessly toward God in this passage and in Genesis 31:34? Why, then, does God "remember" her to open her womb (Gen. 30:22)? Why does God remember you and me? What response does God's kindness toward Rachel prompt from her (Gen. 30:23–24)? Does God's kindness actually prompt the same response from you?

Notes

1. Wenham calls this situation Jacob's "involuntary bigamous marriage to Leah and Rachel." (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 240.)
2. Kidner, *Genesis*, 172.
3. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 134–35. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.vii.i.html>>
4. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 265.
5. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 240.
6. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 479.
7. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 240.
8. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 472–73.
9. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 506.
10. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 243.
11. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 477.
12. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 267.
13. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 243.
14. Kidner, *Genesis*, 172.
15. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 243.
16. Kidner, *Genesis*, 172.
17. Calvin, *Genesis*, 136. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.vii.i.html>>
18. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 509.

19. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 267.
20. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 243.
21. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 509–10.
22. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 244.
23. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 510.
24. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 244.
25. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 266.
26. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 195.
27. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 268.
28. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 195.
29. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 244.
30. Calvin, *Genesis*, 141. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.viii.i.html>>
31. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 482.
32. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 270.
33. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 241.
34. Kidner, *Genesis*, 172–73.
35. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 244.
36. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 505.
37. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 271.
38. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 245.
39. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 271.
40. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 245.
41. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 511–12.
42. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 245–46.
43. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 473.
44. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 246.
45. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 246.
46. Kidner, *Genesis*, 173.
47. “If the name was used for a pagan god, there is no indication in the text that Leah so thought of it or used it....All that can be concluded about Leah’s expression is that she sensed that fortune had smiled upon her.” (Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 512.)
48. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 486.
49. Ruth 4:14–15: Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 485–86. Prov. 31:28 & Luke 1:48: Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 246.
50. John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 588.
51. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 246–47.
52. Calvin, *Genesis*, 146–47. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.viii.i.html>>
53. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 247.
54. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 275.
55. Calvin, *Genesis*, 147. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.viii.i.html>>
56. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 247.
57. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 275.
58. “As often in her choice of names, Leah gives a dual explanation of the name, the first focusing on God’s mercy. ‘God has endowed me with a good endowment.’ The root זבד ‘endow(ment)’ occurs only here as a noun and verb, but it is often found in Israelite names, e.g., Zebediah, Zabdi, Zebedee. The first two consonants of Zebulon are the basis for the paranomasia here.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 248.)

59. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 248.

60. Ibid.

61. Calvin, *Genesis*, 148. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.viii.i.html>>

62. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 277.

63. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 248.

64. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 278.

65. “Here we notice that the personal name ‘The LORD (Yahweh)’ is used to explain the name as in 29:32, 33, 35. At other points in this episode, God (Elohim) is always preferred. It is characteristic of the editor of Genesis to use ‘The LORD’ at the beginning and end of sections and often to use other epithets elsewhere (cf. 17:1; 20:18; 21:1, 33); this may be sufficient explanation here. In 3:1–7, the narrative uses ‘God’ instead of ‘The LORD God’ as elsewhere in chapters 2–3 to draw attention to the alienation between God and his creations in this scene. The same motive may be present here. After a relatively cheerful start to the marriage (cf. 29:32–35), alienation between husband and wives and between the wives and God creeps in so that they speak of him as ‘God,’ not the LORD. Only in this last scene, with her prayers answered, is the more intimate covenantal name ‘the LORD’ invoked again by Rachel.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 249.)

66. Kidner, *Genesis*, 173.