

Maids and Mandrakes

Genesis 30:1-24

INTRODUCTION: Passages like the one before us today are why pastors don't tend to preach through books of the Bible - we know chapters like 30 are coming. Chapter 30 is basically the moral disintegration of the family unit into a breeding war marked by jealousy, superstition, and conflict. In other words, it's basically Landman meets Sister Wives, Old Testament style.

However, if we skip it entirely, we miss an opportunity to address a few key cultural challenges that we will face in the days ahead, AND we miss the opportunity to display how the remarkable grace of God can overcome the most dysfunctional of family situations.

CONTEXT: Last week, we saw how Jacob had intended to marry Rachel, but he had been deceived by his uncle Laban into marrying both Rachel and Leah, in return for 14 years of service on his uncle's staff.

Leah, the odd bird in the mixed, unwanted, and unloved, was blessed by God and provided Jacob with four sons - Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Sometime after the birth of Judah is where we pick up in Genesis 30:1.

TEXT: Genesis 30:1–24 (ESV)

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?" 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.

OK - Let's thread this needle very carefully. Here is the situation. As we noted in previous sermons, the ability to bear children was highly important in this period. Children, sons in particular, were your social security and retirement plans.

Leah had produced four sons - that was huge, and Rachel was terribly jealous.

- **First, she blames it on Jacob.** We must remember that circumstances don't always have a guilty party. The fact is, this is not somebody's fault; it is simply the reality at the moment. Have a category in your mind and heart that allows for, "this is simply the way life is east of Eden".

John Maxwell once said, *"Everything rises and falls on leadership"*. The fact is, a lot does rise and fall on leadership, but not everything. There are dozens of factors that can cause something to rise IN SPITE of the leader. There are dozens of factors that

can cause demise IN SPITE of the leader.

Avoid the trap of always looking to blame someone.

- Jacob says immediately, “I didn’t do this to you, God did”. Which is another mistake - the text never says that God stopped Rachel from bearing. It simply says Rachel was barren. Jacob is making the same mistake so many people make in theology: if God chooses some, he must by default be damning others; if God blesses some, he must by default be cursing others. This is a theological reduction to absurdity. Believe what the text says, nothing more, nothing less.

At this point Jacob has 5 sons: Leah gave him - Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Now Bilhah has given him Dan.

- NOW, in Rachel’s mind, she has fixed the problem. Her dreams are coming true. But, how many of you know that if your fantasy is not in alignment with God’s design, misery is coming?

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.

Now Jacob is the father of six sons - Leah gave him - Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Now Bilhah has given him Dan and Naphtali.

Perhaps this is a good time to quit while we are ahead, go home, and call it a night. But no...

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.

I feel like I’m calling play by play from the sidelines, out nowhere comes Leah with Zilpah running block... and put one more point on the board for team Leah.

Let’s go to the tale of the tape...

Leah gave him - Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah.

Then in a surprise move, she brings in Zilpah, a total rookie, and gives Jacob one more son, Gad.

Make that team RACHEL 2, team LEAH an overwhelming 6 sons...

This could be a good time for a commercial break from our sponsors.... IT IS JUDEAN PREPAID... it’s never too early to start thinking about Yeshiva.

Back to our game...oh we did not see this coming... the rookie Zilpah steps into the in zone for child number SEVEN!!!!

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.

Now Jacob is the father of eight sons - Leah gave him - Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Now Bilhah has given him Dan and Naphtali. And the rookie Zilpah put two on the board for team Leah with Gad and Asher.

Doesn't this just seem like the perfect family to honor the God of Abraham? Now, we see the boys are growing up and they get involved in the drama...

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."

Now there was a superstitious belief that mandrakes were effective as a fertility drug. The root of the mandrake looks a bit like a little dude. So, they believed that if I ate a mandrake, I might be able to get pregnant. Reuben brings the mandrakes to Leah, Rachel sees him bring them, and asks Leah to give her the 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.

SIDE NOTE - the sons of overbearing mothers tend to become the husbands over overbearing wives. Rachel is basically pimping out Jacob to Leah. Jacob doesn't rule his home - Rachel does. Very sad situation.

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.

10 sons - Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun
Cut to commercial break... "We're the Morgan Boys...." Yatta, yatta, yatta...

²¹ Afterward she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah.

One girl, 10 sons... later, something horrible will happen to Dinah starting a blood feud with a local prince.

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!"

This son of Rachel will become Jacob's favored son - you know what's coming, a coat of many colors. Later, Rachel will bear again and die in giving birth to Benjamin. Completing the 12 tribes of Israel.

OK, how do you preach that text? What is the practical application?

Let's do it this way -

1. God's Design for the Family

When things get crazy, you always go back to the basics. Remember in Genesis - God said, "it is not good for man to be alone, we will make a helper suitable for him".

The First Marriage:

- One man, One Woman
- The Husband Leads, the Wife Helps
- They were to "Be fruitful and multiply. In other words, have children.
- They were to grow in dominion - fill the earth and subdue it.
- Each subsequent generation was to replicate that model.

It's pretty simple, I must admit - but then sin comes into the equation. Sin is basically believing the Devil's lies more than you believe God.

Satan will always stoke a fantasy that says, "God's way is so boring... I have a better idea" and we fall for it generation after generation.

That's what is happening here - they believe the lie that the good God of Israel needs their assistance in accomplishing His purpose.

Robert Candlish 1868 wrote in his commentary on Genesis - Who are these poor worms of the dust, Laban, Leah, Rachel, Jacob himself, and all the rest of them, that they should go about plotting and planning, after so vile a fashion, for the building of the house or family in which the God of Abraham is to record his name, and out of which the Son and Lord of Abraham is to spring, for the saving of the nations.

What do these wretched bickerings and jarrings mean in that ill-assorted home ? To what purpose is this indecent haste of these women? Why all this miserable game of rivalry, defiling honourable marriage, — this pitiable trade and traffic of mandrakes, — and all the other incidents which so offend us ; — enacted beneath the roof of a professed man of God? Does the Lord stand in need of such devices and doings as these for the raising up of a seed for Abraham? The Lord, who is able " out of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham? " Nay, let Isaac's birth in Abraham's house,

and Jacob's in that of Isaac, — and now the opening of Rachel's womb in the birth of Joseph, — give the emphatic reply - Yes! The Lord might have been trusted to work out his own ends in his own good way.

When it comes to finding a spouse, or being a spouse, or becoming a parent, I have observed that it is best to simply trust God with these matters.

That is not to say that there is any sin in a medically safe and ethically virtuous matter of fertilization, don't hear me say that. But even that step should be taken when the Almighty has made it clear to you that this is His chosen means, and that you would be sinning to forgo the matter.

God's Design for the Family...

2. Man's Disastrous Departure

Let's talk for a moment about Polygamy. There is a spectrum of behaviors championed by both a religious crowd and a secular crowd, of which polygamy is one of the categories.

- **The Religious Argument for Polygamy** - There are strains of Mormonism and Islam that both believe and practice Polygamy.
- **MORMONISM** -
 - **Joseph Smith**, the founder of the Mormon Church, practiced polygamy. Smith had up to 40 wives; the youngest wife was 14 years old.
 - **Brigham Young**, Smith's Successor, had 55 wives and 57 children. Married his youngest wife at age 15 he was 42 years old at the time. Swell guy.

Mainstream LDS churches have officially banned polygamy, but splinter groups continue to practice it.

The LDS CANON scriptures actually still command polygamy - in Doctrine and Covenants section 132.

- **ISLAM** -
 - Muhammad, the founder of Islam, had 11 wives, the youngest of whom was 6 years old. Defenders argue that he didn't consummate the marriage until the little girl was 9 and he was 53.
 - Sharia law explicitly legalizes polygamy. Quran 4:3 allows a man to marry up to 4 wives; the only restriction is that he must treat them justly. If he feels he cannot do so, he should only take one wife.

Polygamy remains legal and practiced in parts of: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Yemen, Sudan, Nigeria (under Islamic law jurisdictions), Afghanistan, and Parts of Indonesia and Malaysia.

Someone might say - well it's in the Bible...

Yes, but it was never prescribed; it was only described, and the descriptions are horrible.

Every polygamous home in the Bible produces: Rivalry, Abuse, Favoritism, Multi Generational damage. Genesis 29–30 is not romance—it's a case study in misery.

ILLUSTRATION: You heard about the guy who didn't know how to read the Bible, and he just believed whatever God wanted him to do that day, he would open the Bible and point to the verse and use it like a fortune cookie. One day he pointed to, "Judas went and hung himself. He thought, " That can't be right, flipped a few pages, tried again, and pointed to, "Go thou and do likewise".

The bible is not to be used like a fortune cookie, nor is everything listed in the Bible there for our recommendation - but rather we are to be sharpened and edified by what we read. Can you honestly read this and walk away thinking - oh, here's what God wants me to do. If so, life is going to be really difficult for you.

Satan is still up to his old schemes - he will plant ideas and concepts in your mind that contradict God's design. It's always a trap.

Today we see:

- **Polygamy** - Multiple Wives
- **Polyandry** - Multiple Husbands - practiced in Nepal and Tibet
- Group Marriage - Multiple men and women all considered married to one another, which is normally a good sign that you've joined a cult.
- **Polyamory and Open marriages** - where the husband and/or wife continues to date others
- **Cohabitation** - Enjoying the benefits of marriage without the commitment of marriage.
- **Pornography** is a version of a departure from God's standard. It's bringing someone else virtually into the marriage.

LISTEN - if you are someone you know who has departed from God's plan and has sought to do life and marriage your own way. I probably don't even have to tell you that it never works.

I will add to that - Jesus did not come to beat you up, but to build you up.

You say, Pastor, is it possible if I've chosen one of these divergent paths, for me to get back on track and honor God? ABSOLUTELY. That brings us to our final point -

3. The Variable of Grace

- This messed-up family will go on to become the 12 tribes of Israel
- From Judah, son of Leah, comes Jesus Christ
- God can draw a straight line with crooked sticks.

- God's grace is always greater than generational sin.

Let me show you something amazing -

Revelation 21:10–13 (ESV)

¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, ¹¹ having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹² It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— ¹³ on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates.

Think of it - when you approach the Holy City you will see it inscribed there - *Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin.*

God does not rename or reject the tribes of Israel. He redeems them. The names forged in rivalry, superstition, and dysfunction are engraved on the gates of the New Jerusalem. That is not because the families were faithful—but because God was.

Why? Because the blood of Jesus Christ went far deeper than the misery and drama of this dysfunctional family. And the blood of Christ is the answer for your family drama as well.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION: Genesis 30 reads like a warning label on the side of a bottle. Everything here says, “Do not attempt this at home.” And yet—astonishingly—God is not absent. He is patient. He is purposeful. He is sovereign. While this family is grasping, bargaining, scheming, and competing, God is quietly doing what He promised Abraham He would do: building a people, preparing a Savior, and advancing redemption.

ILLUSTRATION: This week, Julie and I walked down the streets of St. Augustine. I showed her the stained glass windows of the oldest churches there.

If you've ever seen a stained-glass window up close, it's not impressive. It's jagged. Uneven. Broken pieces of glass—many of them dark, some of them sharp.

But when you stand back at ground level, and the light shines through from the other side, suddenly the broken pieces tell a story. Beauty you could never see up close.

The question is not whether your family story is messy. The question is whether you believe God's grace is strong enough to meet you there.