

Lesson 43

Jacob's Family Grows

Jacob marries Leah and Rachel and has many children.

Overview

Lesson Focus

Isaac and Rebekah sent Jacob to Rebekah's brother Laban to find a wife. Laban tricked Jacob by giving him Leah to marry first, but Jacob worked another seven years to marry Rachel, too. God blessed Jacob with many children.

Key Passages

Genesis 28:12, 29:22–23

Memory Verse

Proverbs 3:5–6 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Prepare to Share

Scriptural Background

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages for this lesson along with this background.

After Jacob's deceit enabled him to steal Isaac's blessing, Esau threatened to kill him. Rebekah wanted Jacob to flee to her brother Laban for safety and to find a wife. On Jacob's journey, God appeared to him in a dream. Jacob saw a ladder stretching from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it and the Lord at the top. God gave Abraham's promises to Jacob: his offspring would be given the land of Canaan, they would be as numerous as the dust, and a special descendant (Jesus) would bless all the families of the earth (Genesis 28:13–15). Jacob was afraid after his vision of God, and he named that place Bethel, which means "house of God." He vowed to follow God and give a tithe if God would provide for him, be with him on his journey, and bring him safely back home (Genesis 28:20–22).

Jacob continued his journey to Haran, the area of Abraham's relatives and the region where Abraham's servant had traveled to find Rebekah as a wife for Isaac. Haran was located in what is now modern-day Turkey. Genesis 29 begins with Jacob stopping at a well to inquire from the local shepherds. They were from Haran and knew his uncle Laban and cousin Rachel, who happened to be coming to the well to water the flock. Removing the stone from the well was usually accomplished by several people (Genesis 29:8), but Jacob rolled the stone away himself and watered Laban's flock for Rachel. Overcome with emotion, Jacob greeted Rachel and told her his relationship to her father Laban. Rachel immediately reported his arrival to Laban, and Laban ran to the well to greet him. Laban welcomed Jacob into his home. God led Jacob to his mother's relatives just like he'd guided Abraham's servant to Abraham's relatives.

After Jacob had worked a month, his uncle asked him what his wages should be. Laban had two daughters: the younger Rachel was beautiful while the older Leah had “weak” eyes. Weak eyes may refer to bleary eyes, possibly caused by an eye condition, or it may simply mean that her eyes lacked the vibrant sparkle that was valued in her culture. Jacob loved Rachel, so he offered to work seven years to marry her. This arrangement was likely necessary because Jacob had no gifts or money to offer Laban as a dowry like Abraham’s servant gave to Rebekah and her family (Genesis 24:53). Laban agreed, and Jacob began his work, which flew by because of his love for Rachel. However, at the wedding, Laban gave Leah, instead of Rachel, to Jacob. In the morning when Jacob realized the switch, he demanded an explanation from Laban. Laban offered an excuse about the older daughter marrying before the younger in his country. To compensate, he offered Rachel as a bride if Jacob would wait one week to marry her and agree to work another seven years. Laban’s deceit, an obvious ploy to keep Jacob’s services, is reminiscent of Jacob’s deceiving of his father Isaac, when he had pretended to be Esau to steal the blessing. Jacob married Rachel one week after Leah and began another seven years of service to Laban (Genesis 29:26–30).

Jacob loved Rachel, but God blessed Leah with four sons, which made her sister jealous. Just as Sarah had given Hagar to Abraham, Rachel gave her servant Bilhah to Jacob to bear children. Leah followed suit with her servant Zilpah, and both servants bore two sons for Jacob. Leah bore another two sons and a daughter before God intervened on Rachel’s behalf and opened her womb. Her son Joseph was the last child born while Jacob lived with Laban. Rachel’s second son Benjamin was not born until they had returned to Canaan where she died in childbirth. Amid the turmoil of competing wives, Jacob was blessed with 12 sons who would become the tribes of Israel.

Historical/Apologetics Background

One question that arises from the life of Jacob is his polygamous marriage to sisters. It was Laban’s idea for Jacob to marry Rachel as well as Leah (Genesis 29:27), but Jacob agreed. So, what does the Bible teach about polygamy?

First, God created Adam and Eve to be one flesh (Genesis 2:24), which established his plan for marriage to be one man and one woman for life. The first polygamous marriage recorded in Scripture is Lamech, who had two wives (Genesis 4:19). Second, the Bible, as a true history book, includes the failings as well as the victories of both sinful and godly men. Just because polygamous marriages are recorded does not mean that they are condoned. Instead, polygamous relationships in the Bible are almost always associated with resulting negative consequences. In Abraham’s life, Sarah and Hagar experienced conflict and bitterness. When King David and King Solomon disobeyed God’s command for kings not to take multiple wives (Deuteronomy 17:17), David’s family was plagued by rebellion among his sons, and Solomon’s wives turned his heart away from the Lord. These examples serve as a warning rather than an ideal for marriage to more than one woman.

In Jacob’s case, the whole situation was marked with conflict. Laban’s treatment of his daughters led to bitterness against him as they felt like he had

sold them (Genesis 31:14–15). Then there was the fierce rivalry between the two sisters: Leah striving for Jacob's love and Rachel striving for children. Genesis 30:1–2 says, "When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die!' 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?'" Rather than waiting on the Lord, Rachel chose to give her servant Bilhah to Jacob to bear children. Leah reacted by giving her servant Zilpah to Jacob. This elevated the servants to concubine status although their sons were counted as Rachel's and Leah's, since they named them. The competition for sons even led to Leah's telling Jacob that he must lie with her because she had "hired" him with her son's mandrakes (Genesis 30:16). This favoritism and jealousy between Jacob and his wives eventually extended to their children, resulting in Joseph's slavery in Egypt.

While God's ideal is monogamy, no direct command against polygamy had been given by Jacob's time. The culture was very different: women relied on men for protection and provision, and children were highly valued. Later, God did command the Israelites not to marry sisters while both were alive (Leviticus 18:18), and several New Testament passages specify that men should have one wife (1 Timothy 3:2, 3:12; Titus 1:6; Ephesians 5:23). Jesus also confirmed that God's design for marriage is one man and one woman when he quoted from Genesis in Mark 10:5–9. By examining the whole of Scripture, it is clear that although Jacob faced the consequences of his family's jealousy and bitterness to the point of losing his favorite son Joseph, God still blessed Jacob in spite of his less-than-ideal marriages.

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