

“Desperate Housewives” (Genesis 29:31-30:24)

If you are old enough, you may remember the old television program, *ABC's Wide World of Sports*. It used to air on the weekends, in the days before ESPN. It would showcase sports like skiing, ice-skating, and track and field. What I remember most is its opening sequence. As the announcer declared that the program covered the globe in search of sports excellence, it showed us “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat,” with accompanying film clips of a guy winning a marathon for the victory part, and some poor guy wiping out on a ski slope during the agony part. Of course, what I recall most vividly from this show is the man wiping out on the ski slope.

It always seems that the agony of defeat is what is most memorable. Every year champions are crowned, yet we tend to forget who won last year's trophy. But we never seem to forget a memorable failure. Thus far in the book of Genesis, we have encountered a lot of defeat and failure. Even in the midst of apparent victory, there is failure. In the last few chapters, Isaac lost his eyesight, Esau lost his birthright, and Rebekah lost her favorite son. Most recently, Rachel lost to her older sister Leah who was able to marry Jacob first, and Leah lost to Rachel because Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. Everyone seems to be losing. However, we must remember that, for the person who trusts in God, defeat is never final. In Gen 29:31f, we will learn how God overcomes human sin and failure and turns them into something beautiful.

In 29:31, Moses writes, “**Now the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.**” Our story begins with two desperate housewives. One is desperate for love; the other is desperate for children. These women are sisters and both are married to the same man. Ladies, can you imagine this scenario—you and your sister married to the same man? To make matters worse, your husband prefers one of you over the other. Furthermore, each of you is desperate for what the other has. From the start of this story, the tension is so thick you can cut it with a knife.

Moses records that Leah was “**unloved**” (lit. “hated”). This does not mean that Jacob hated her or didn't love her; rather he loved her less than Rachel.¹ He simply wasn't “in love” with Leah; he was in love with her sister, Rachel. As a result, the God who favors the underdog caused Leah to bear children first. He opened her womb while He kept the womb of Rachel closed. God intervened in Leah's life because He “is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps 34:18).² Leah becoming a mother ensured that her stock would rise in Jacob's estimation, as well as the estimation of her family and society in general. This was God's protection plan for the less-loved Leah.

In the next four verses, Leah bears four consecutive sons! Beginning in 29:32, “**Leah conceived and bore a son and named him Reuben, for she said, ‘Because the LORD has seen my affliction; surely now my husband will love me.’**” Leah's first-born son was Reuben, which means “see, a son.” His name actually shows what was going through Leah's mind. She is saying, “I have a son! My position is secure!” Leah saw Reuben's birth as confirmation that the Lord loved her and she made the assumption that now Jacob would love her as well. But this was not to be the case. Jacob was so much in love with her sister, Rachel, that he could never love her.

In 29:33, Leah “**conceived again and bore a son and said, ‘Because the LORD has heard that I am unloved, He has therefore given me this son also.’ So she named him Simeon.**” Leah names her second son Simeon, whose name means “hear or listen.” Now, obviously, she desperately wants to get Jacob's attention. So she's saying, “Listen up man, here's another son. I'm going to name him “Listen” so you will pay attention to me. But, of course, Jacob still doesn't love her. Interestingly though, Leah credits the Lord for the births of both Reuben and Simeon.³ She understands that God is sovereign over the womb, so she acknowledges His hand in the births of her first two children.

In 29:34, Leah “**conceived again and bore a son and said, ‘Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.’ Therefore he was named Levi.”** The name Levi means “attached or associated.” Leah desperately wants to win her husband’s love. She thinks that by giving him three sons he will become emotionally attached to her. But in this particular instance, three times is not the charm. Nonetheless, Levi was an influential child. The book of Leviticus, the tribe of Levi, and Israel’s priesthood would come through Levi. Finally, in the last verse of chapter 29, Leah conceived again and bore her fourth son and said, “**This time I will praise the LORD.’ Therefore she named him Judah” (29:35a). Judah’s name means, “praise.” Praise is the perfect name for this son because the Messiah, Jesus Christ, would come through the line of Judah.**

The last phrase of 29:35 reads, “**Then she stopped bearing.**” This is rather strange. In quick order, Leah gives birth to four boys. After delivering her fourth child, she attributes praise to the Lord. One would think the Lord would have given her more children. Why did He close her womb? The answer seems to be that, at this moment of her life, Leah came to terms with the fact that Jacob wasn’t going to love her. She was hoping for his love but in absence of that the Lord said, “I love you—will I do?” It seems that, for this season, Leah became content with the Lord being her husband, so the Lord didn’t add to her number. Instead, He allowed her to concentrate on Him.

Ladies, many of you have difficult marriages, at best. Maybe you can relate to Leah because your husband doesn’t really love you. Oh, he may say he loves you, but he doesn’t love you as Christ loves the church (Eph 5:25). For others, your husband may be emotionally distant, verbally abusive, or sexually unfaithful. Maybe your husband has abandoned you, with children to raise. The Lord wants you to know that He is enough for you. When you feel discouraged and defeated, He will be there for you like no one else can. In this narrative of desperate housewives, God seeks to teach both sisters this valuable lesson.

Now before moving on, there are two extreme paradigms related to married couples and children.

- ***The first extreme is the mistaken notion that having children will strengthen weak marriages, or that having children will keep a marriage from falling apart.*** Within this paradigm are individuals who believe that by having children, they themselves will be made complete individuals. The Scripture does teach that children are a blessing from God (Ps 127:3); it does not, however, guarantee that those children will be the resolution to all or any of the personal problems of their parents.⁴ Having children is not absolutely essential to a happy marriage or relationship to the Lord. Our ultimate joy is in the Lord, not in our children. This needs to be shouted from the rooftops, because many of us have prioritized our children over our spouse and over our God. We may not want to admit this, but deep down we know it’s true. Many married couples determine to stay together for their children. Now don’t get me wrong, that’s very admirable. What’s not so admirable is failing to devote time to your spouse to build a healthy marriage.
- ***The second extreme is the selfish idea that having children will weaken strong marriages.*** Many couples believe that if children enter their lives their marriage will suffer. I would argue that this does not have to be the case. My marriage has actually grown stronger with the addition of children. I find that Lori and I appreciate and respect each other more and more as we observe the other as a dad or mom. I can tell you that nothing makes me love Lori more than when I see her loving our children. It’s a beautiful thing!

Chapter 30 begins with a bang: **“Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she became jealous of her sister; and she said to Jacob, ‘Give me children, or else I die.’”**⁵ Rachel lets Jacob have it with both guns loaded! She is conveying her feminine emotions. She expresses to Jacob, “I have to have children. That’s where my identity comes from. I’m hurting right now.” Naturally, this is hyperbole for extreme grief (see 25:32; 27:46). Although loved by her husband, Rachel does not consider her life worth living without children (cf. 1 Sam 1:7-12). Ironically, she dies in the process of bearing Benjamin (35:16-19). Rachel’s response is natural, but God calls for our response to be supernatural. Instead of rejoicing with those who rejoice (Rom 12:15), Rachel became jealous of God’s favor upon her older sister. This destroyed her from the inside out. Rachel’s response was wrong; it immediately put Jacob on the defensive. Most men don’t respond well to a strong-willed woman. It can turn the best of men passive.

In 30:2, Moses records Jacob’s response to Rachel: **“Then Jacob’s anger burned against Rachel, and he said, ‘Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?’”** The word **“anger”** (*anaph*) literally means “to breathe hard, be enraged, flare the nostrils.” In Hebrew the phrase reads, “and the anger of Jacob was hot.” He is steamed! Notice Jacob responds with a correct theological truth, acknowledging that he is not God, and hence cannot control Rachel’s womb (cf. 2 Kgs 5:7). In his hot reply, Jacob seems to be implying, “It’s not my fault you have no children. Don’t go after me; go after God. I have kids everywhere.” Obviously, this is not the way that a husband should respond to his wife.

Guys, have you ever noticed that when we don’t have answers and can’t easily fix things, we can have a tendency to get impatient and angry? I’ve had at least one occasion when my wife brought a problem to me and I immediately went into problem-solving mode, only to discover she didn’t want her problem solved! She just wanted me to commiserate and empathize with her. And I’m like, “WHY?” Isn’t the point to fix the problem? The answer is “No!”

At this moment in our story, Rachel didn’t need a lecture on theology or gynecology. She needed the gentle and loving understanding of her husband and the encouragement that only his love could provide.⁶ Jacob should have followed the example of his father, Isaac, when Rebekah had been barren. He prayed for his wife and God blessed her with children (25:21).⁷ No such prayers are mentioned here. Instead, Jacob, in turn, became angry with Rachel. Guys, take it from me, this is always a bad move. Proverbs 15:1 says, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” Peter tells us that we are to “live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered” (1 Pet 3:7).

After reflecting on Jacob’s words, apparently Rachel realized that he was right, so she said to him: **“Here is my maid Bilhah, go in to her that she may bear on my knees, that through her I too may have children.”**⁸ So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her” (30:3-4). You may be saying to yourself, “Déjà vu.” In 16:1-4, when Sarah couldn’t get pregnant, she told Abraham to sleep with Hagar. Rachel is following the example of Sarah. Now, I know what you may be thinking: Are we watching the *Jerry Springer Show*? The answer is, “yes and no.” Ancient documents reveal that when a woman could not provide her husband with a child, she could give her female slave as a wife and claim the child of this union as her own. So this was culturally acceptable and completely legal. However, just because something is culturally and legally acceptable doesn’t make it right for the believer. Abortion is both culturally and legally acceptable, yet it is dead wrong! Jacob should have been an example of faith and godliness to Rachel. He should have immediately rejected her suggestion and turned to the Lord in prayer. Instead, with little or no protest, he passively agreed to Rachel’s plan.⁹

In 30:5-8, our story continues: **“Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Then Rachel said, ‘God has vindicated me, and has indeed heard my voice and has given me a son.’ Therefore she named him Dan** [“vindicated”]. Rachel falsely assumes that God is pleased with her schemes by attributing Dan’s birth to God. **Rachel’s maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. So Rachel said, ‘With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and I have indeed prevailed.’ And she named him Naphtali**” [“mighty wrestlings”]. Rachel adopts both of Bilhah’s sons as if they are her own. Yet, God still hasn’t given Rachel a son of her own. God doesn’t reward jealous spirits. Rachel has only added to the conflict. With Bilhah’s second child, Rachel’s true heart is revealed in her response. In 30:8, Rachel says, **“With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and I have indeed prevailed.”** Can’t you just hear the anger? Can’t you just feel the venom between these two women? Rachel says, “Look, I haven’t had children of my own but due to Bilhah I now have two children.”

This is a classic example of “the end justifying the means.” Sometimes when we sin and things work out, we justify it. We even attribute it to God! If we date an unbeliever and eventually the unbeliever gets saved, we think, “Yes, this was God’s will all along.” When we compromise our convictions and get a job promotion, we quote Rom 8:28: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” But God is not party to sin! Can He use us in spite of our sin? Of course! Can He still accomplish His purposes in the midst of our sin? You better believe it! But He would prefer not to...and He’ll hold us accountable for our sin.

Now this is where the war of the womb intensifies. Since Rachel now has two surrogate children, Leah gets back into the jealousy game. Up until now, Leah has produced her own children. But now that she is no longer conceiving, she resorts to the same tactics as Rachel. Her motto is, “Anything you can do, I can do better.” In 30:9-13, Moses writes, **“When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife.”**¹⁰ **Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, ‘How fortunate!’ So she named him Gad.** [Gad means “fortune.” This is like naming your kid “Vegas, Reno, or Lotto.”] **Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. Then Leah said, ‘Happy am I!** [She sounds like Yoda here.] **For women will call me happy.’ So she named him Asher.”** Asher means “happy.” Leah had temporarily turned Jacob’s attention away from her sister and this made her happy. However, Leah seems to have lost her focus. She is now intent on her own happiness and what other women think and say. Obviously, this is not what God would have us to seek. Rather, He wants us to seek the approval of God not men (cf. John 5:44; 12:42-43).

Our story shifts gears in 30:14-21. And it’s a wild one! In 30:14, the scene begins: **“Now in the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah.”** Little Reuben comes upon some mandrakes. What are mandrakes, you ask? They are a plant that bears bluish flowers in winter and yellowish, plum-size fruit in summer. In ancient times, mandrakes were famed for arousing sexual desire (cf. Song of Sol 7:13) and for helping barren women conceive.¹¹ The Hebrew word for mandrakes is almost identical to the word for “love,” so many ancients called them “love apples.”¹² As we’ll see, both sisters had their reasons for wanting these plants.

Our story continues in 30:15: **“Then Rachel said to Leah, ‘Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.’ But she said to her, ‘Is it a small matter for you to take my husband? And would you take my son’s mandrakes also?’ So Rachel said, ‘Therefore he may lie with you tonight in return for your son’s mandrakes.’”** Rachel commands Leah to give her some of the mandrakes. Well, Leah’s not about to help Rachel, so she refuses her demand. Next, Leah levels a charge of husband stealing against Rachel. Now, this is beginning to sound like one of those afternoon soap operas, isn’t it? Rachel, the favored wife, makes all of the bedtime appointments for Jacob, so she schedules Leah, in exchange for the mandrakes. I know—this is really sick! Fortunately, I don’t write this material, I just preach it!

In 30:16, we see what happens: **“When Jacob came in from the field in the evening, then Leah went out to meet him** [this is an eager woman] **and said, ‘You must come in to me, for I have surely hired¹³ you with my son’s mandrakes.’ So he lay with her that night.”** Most men don’t require a wife to say, “You have to sleep with me.” Most men are all too happy to oblige. However, Jacob has no passion for Leah. Another point also seems to be clear: Jacob lacks spiritual leadership. He is addressed once by Rachel (**“Give me children”**) and once by Leah (**“I have surely hired you”**).¹⁴ Both statements reveal his passivity. Moses is revealing a home without a spiritual leader.

In 30:17-21, Moses writes, **“God gave heed to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Then Leah said, ‘God has given me my wages because I gave my maid to my husband.’ So she named him Issachar** [“wages” or “reward”]. **Leah conceived again and bore a sixth son to Jacob. Then Leah said, ‘God has endowed me with a good gift; now my husband will dwell with me, because I have borne him six sons.’ So she named him Zebulun. Afterward she bore a daughter and named her Dinah”** [This is going to be one spoiled little girl.¹⁵ Dinah’s name means “justice.” It is a prophetic name. In 34:1-31, Dinah is raped and her brothers seek justice.]

Can you imagine how shocking all of this must have been for Rachel? Rachel, who has the mandrakes, remains barren for three more years; Leah, who doesn’t have the mandrakes, has three more kids. She has a total of seven children—the number of perfection.¹⁶ This is more than all the other three women in this story. However, she never received what she desired most—Jacob’s love. How sad! Leah spent all of these years trying to win her husband’s approval, but it never happened. She spent the rest of her life in a loveless marriage, even though she had born half of the sons who would be the fathers of half the tribes of Israel.¹⁷

It appears, in this brief account, that both sisters were initially caught up in the mandrake factor and were not seeking the Lord for their children, or anything else. That sounds a lot like us. Why is it that we are willing to trust in everything but the Lord? We’ll spend hours on the phone with friends, but we won’t spend five minutes on our knees before God. We’ll read self-help books, but we won’t read the Bible. We’ll listen to Dr. Laura and Dr. Phil, but we won’t inquire of the Lord.

In this story, both women wanted what the other had. Leah felt that having sons for Jacob would somehow earn his love, while Rachel was as desperate for children as Sarah had been before her. Giving birth degenerated into competition.¹⁸ I find it interesting that, despite their unique role in the kingdom of God, both Rachel and Leah were unhappy with their circumstances: Rachel: “If only I had sons like my sister!” Leah: “If only I had my sister’s beauty and the love of Jacob.” Have you ever met an “if only ...” Christian? “If only I had a better husband or better wife.” “If only I had a better job and more money.” “If only I had a newer house and nicer furniture.” “If only I didn’t have these kids!” We would do well to remember the words of the apostle Paul: “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation...I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Phil 4:12-13 *NIV*).¹⁹

Our story concludes in 30:22-24: **“Then God remembered Rachel, and God gave heed to her and opened her womb. So she conceived and bore a son and said, ‘God [*Elohim*] has taken away my reproach.’ She named him Joseph, saying, ‘May the LORD [*Yahweh*] give me another son.’”** God remembered Rachel (cf. 8:1). Apparently, Rachel began to pray and God **“gave heed to her.”** As a result, Joseph was born. Joseph became the son who saved his family (the Israelites) during the time of famine. He has been used as a type (an illustration) of Christ throughout the Bible.

The stress of the entire narrative is the movement from barrenness (29:31) to birth (30:22). For all the maneuverings of the sisters, it is still God who opens the womb.²⁰ The point that God is making is this: Birth was not accomplished by human action but by God remembering Rachel.²¹ Rachel had to wait 14 years before she had her first child. Yet, we see that God came through for her.

God is faithful to accomplish His purposes, even through the deceitful actions of Laban and Jacob, and the jealous hatred of Jacob's two wives. God is a God of grace. He used these sinful people. If God can work in and through these wicked and impatient individuals, He can work in and through you! But to receive God's best results, He expects you to exercise patience and trust in Him.

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THE CHILDREN OF JACOB IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER BY WIFE AND WIFE'S MAID²²

LEAH	BILHAH (Rachel's Maid)	ZILPAH (Leah's Maid)	RACHEL
Reuben (Gen 29:32)			
Simeon (Gen 29:33)			
Levi (Gen 29:34)			
Judah (Gen 29:35)			
	Dan (Gen 30:4-6)		
	Naphtali (Gen 30:7-8)		
		Gad (Gen 30:9-11)	
		Asher (Gen 30:12-13)	
Issachar (Gen 30:16-18)			
Zebulun (Gen 30:19-20)			
Dinah (Gen 30:21)			
			Joseph (Gen 30:22-24)
			Benjamin (Gen 35:16-18)

Notes

¹ See Gen 29:30; cf. Deut 21:15; Mal 1:3; Matt 6:24. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50*: NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 266.

² Boice writes, "It is hard not to pity Leah. It seems appropriate to pity her, for this passage tells us that even God had pity on her by opening her womb and giving her many children." James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis 12-36 Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985 [1998]), 787.

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 375.

⁴ Barry C. Davis, *Genesis* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Biblical Seminary unpublished class Notes, 2003).

⁵ This plea echoes Jacob's demand to Laban, "Give me my wife" (29:21) and Esau's plea for blessing (27:36-38). Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Vol. 2: WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 241.

⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Authentic: Genesis 25-50* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1997), 43.

⁷ Rachel's reaction to her barrenness and Jacob's response contrast with how Rebekah and Isaac, and Sarah and Abraham behaved in similar circumstances. Sarah resorted to a custom acceptable in her culture, though contrary to God's will, to secure an heir for Abraham (cf. 16:1-2). Isaac prayed that God would open Rebekah's womb and waited (25:21). Rachel and Jacob followed the example of Sarah and Abraham.

⁸ The phrase "bear on my knees" is an idiomatic way of saying that Bilhah will be simply a surrogate mother. Rachel will adopt the child as her own. Constable writes, "The actions of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah in this chapter, and those of Abraham and Sarah in chapter 16, raise questions about surrogate parenting. Today husbands and wives who cannot have children normally sometimes choose to secure the services of a third person who can provide a needed function and thus enable them to have children. For example, if the wife cannot carry a baby in her womb for a full term pregnancy some doctors recommend that the couple use the services of another woman. If acceptable, they implant the couple's fertilized egg in her womb that she agrees to "rent" for the nine month gestation period. Another example is the securing of sperm from a donor if the husband is sterile. There are many ways in which childless couples can now become parents with this kind of help from a third, and sometimes fourth party. These situations are somewhat similar to what we find in Genesis 16 and 30. The common tie is that in all these cases someone other than the husband and wife is essential to the conception of the child. I do not believe that adoption is similar because in adoption a husband and wife simply agree to rear a child that has been or will be born. They do not require a third party for the conception of the child as in surrogate parenting." Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Genesis* (<http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdf>, 2005), 205.

⁹ If your spouse or anyone else suggests something that is contrary to the clear teachings of Scripture, then you must reject that counsel and follow what the Word of God teaches (cf. Acts 5:29).

¹⁰ Walke writes, "The terms *wife* and *concubine* are used more loosely in the patriarchal period. Three women in the patriarchal period are called both *wife* and *concubine*: Hagar (Gen. 16:3; 25:6 indirectly), Keturah (25:1; cf. 25:6; 1 Chron. 1:32), and Bilhah (Gen. 30:4; 35:22). Each of these concubines is an auxiliary wife to the patriarch, not a slave, but subordinate to the wife who is her mistress. After the patriarchal period, the term *wife* is never used as a synonym for concubine. Zilpah, though never called a concubine (cf. 30:9), has the same social position as Bilhah (cf. 37:2)." Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 411.

¹¹ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 245.

¹² Hughes, *Genesis*, 377.

¹³ The word "hire" (*sakar*) is a key term in the Jacob story (29:15; 30:18, 28, 32, 33; 31:7, 8, 41). Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 247.

¹⁴ Waltke, *Genesis*, 409.

¹⁵ Finally, after ten sons, Jacob becomes the father of a daughter, through Leah. Other daughters were born (Gen 37:35; 46:7, 15), but Dinah is the one who receives the greatest attention.

¹⁶ Eight of the tribes of Israel would trace their descent back to Leah and her maid.

¹⁷ Gene A. Getz, *Jacob: Following God Without Looking Back* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 96.

¹⁸ Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 126.

¹⁹ Bob Hallman, *Waging Worldly Warfare* (Genesis 30:1-43):

http://calvarychapel.com/kauai/teachings/genesis_pdf/gen_30_notes.pdf

²⁰ Waltke, *Genesis*, 408.

²¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: IBC* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 255.

²² Davis, *Genesis*.