

Jacob *and* Rachel: Labor of Love



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 29:1–31:16.*

Memory Text: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (*Ephesians 5:25*).

Against the backdrop of an Old Testament culture in which marriages were arranged by the parents, Jacob and Rachel stand out as an example of a love marriage. Esau also had selected his own wives, but he is not recorded as “loving” them. In a case similar to Jacob’s, Moses married the daughter of one with whom he took refuge, but again, he is not stated to have fallen in love with her. Thus, Jacob’s love for Rachel must have been extraordinary to warrant repeated mention. His love has acquired legendary status probably for good reason.

Yet, the marriage of Jacob and Rachel does not end with the “happily ever after” style. When he left Padanaram 20 years after he got there, Jacob had acquired great wealth in terms of flocks and herds. But their relationship underwent many trials and troubles. Though conditions were not always ideal, their love never suffered. Their strong love, it seems, enabled them to endure all difficulties. Rachel’s early death did not diminish Jacob’s love for her children but rather heightened it.

The Week at a Glance: Of all the lessons we can learn from this couple, perhaps the most important one is that our actions and mistakes have consequences that go far beyond ourselves.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 28.*

Marrying Within the Faith

We left off with Isaac and Rebekah sending off Jacob, to keep him from marrying outside the faith and to get him away from his angry brother. Esau had sworn that as soon as Isaac was dead, he would kill Jacob for stealing his blessing (*Gen. 27:41*). We also left off noting that Isaac began the covenant blessing by telling Jacob not to marry from the Canaanites but to take a wife from his own clan.

When you consider the covenant blessing (*see Gen. 28:1–4*), why was the choice of the right wife important for the blessing to be fulfilled?

Marrying within the faith is so important to the patriarchs that the problem of marrying within the family is overlooked. Abraham is married to his half sister, Isaac to his cousin, and now Jacob is instructed by Isaac to seek a wife from among the daughters of Laban—his own cousins. Abraham had strictly instructed his trusted servant not to get a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanites (*Gen. 24:3*). Esau also realized how offensive his pagan wives were to Isaac, so he went and married yet another wife—the daughter of his uncle Ishmael.

What evidence can we find from the wickedness that helped bring the Flood that could help us understand why marrying “out of the faith” was deemed so bad? *See Gen. 6:1–5.*

Some believe that the wickedness was in angels’ marrying humans. But Jesus said that angels do not marry (*Mark 12:25*). Others see the wickedness here as polygamy as practiced by dynastic rulers among the descendants of Cain. Lamech is an example of one (*Gen. 4:19*). One would wonder why polygamy would be condemned so indirectly. The interpretation easiest to understand is that godly descendants, “the sons of God,” were intermarrying with the “daughters of men,” those who weren’t the Lord’s followers, and this was terrible in God’s sight.

Second Corinthians 6:14 gives a principle that should be heeded not only in marriage but in other activities, as well. Inevitably, however, most of us are, at one time or another, “yoked” with unbelievers. What principles should we keep in mind when faced with these situations?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

► **Key Text:** *Ephesians 5:25*

► **Teach the Class to:**

Know: In marriage we should be equally yoked.

Feel: Favoritism leads to jealousy.

Do: Learn from Jacob's and Laban's mistakes.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. Being Equally Yoked (*Gen. 28:1–4*)

A Esau takes not one, but two wives: Bashemath and Judith. The Bible says that they were a grief of mind to Isaac and Rebekah, provoking her to say “I am weary of my life.” Why is it important that we, like Jacob, choose our spouses from among those who love God?

B Jacob marries Rachel after seven years of labor. What responsibility do we have to be able to provide for a family before starting one?

II. Greed, Deceit, and Retaliation (*Gen. 29:15–30*)

Jacob wakes up married to the wrong wife. Laban offers him Rachel for another seven years of back-breaking work. No doubt Laban's manipulation of the situation reminds Jacob of the advantage he once took of Esau. Why does God permit us to be dragged over the ground we've dragged others over?

III. Desperate Housewives (*Gen. 29:30, 33:1–3*)

A Ever hear of couples having a baby to save their marriage? Leah's sons' names betray her desperation. Of Reuben she says, “Therefore my husband will love me”; of Simeon, “Because the Lord hath heard I was hated”; of Levi, “Now this time will my husband be joined unto me.” But after Judah she says, “Now I will praise the Lord.” It takes giving birth four times to be born again herself! How does this show that in marriage first our affections must be upon the Lord?

B Rachel's desperation to have a baby brings to mind Sarah. Suddenly, Bilhah finds herself promoted from Rachel's maid to wife; Leah retaliates by giving her maid to Jacob. It is only when Rachel turns to God that He “hearkens unto her,” and she conceives. Why must we wait on God to fill our needs?

► **Summary:** Christians are to make wise choices, be honest in their dealings, and not show favoritism to anyone.

Working and Waiting

Read Genesis 29:1–15. From what we can tell in the text, how pure were Laban’s motives toward Jacob, at least at first?

Whatever his motives were to start, eventually Laban saw in Jacob a bargain. He’d eventually have to marry his daughters off anyway; why not get what he wanted for a dowry?

Dowry in the Old Testament takes several forms. It appears that the bride’s father gave a maidservant to his daughter at the time of marriage. Thus Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel acquired maidservants (*Gen. 16:1; 24:61; 29:24, 29*). However, the groom, too, was expected to give gifts to the bride’s family. Abraham’s servant gave gold and silver jewelry and expensive clothes to Rebekah and other costly gifts to her mother and brother Laban. In contrast, Jacob had arrived penniless and had nothing to offer except labor, and he offered to work seven years for Rachel.

Read Genesis 29:15–30. What was behind such treachery? What does that tell us about the power of greed to override honesty and decency?

How did Laban justify his act? (*Gen. 29:26*). Why was that such a lame excuse?

As the local man, Laban would have the support of the town’s people. Jacob was the refugee. As the employer, Laban had Jacob at his mercy. At the end of seven years he had paid nothing yet. Most of all, Jacob’s love for Rachel held him captive to Laban. He thus had no option but to submit meekly to the treachery. We see only a mild protest from the helpless young man. He had to work another seven years for Rachel, but he was eventually allowed to marry her.

Look again at Laban’s excuse. In what ways do we need to be careful of not doing the same thing; that is, using the excuse of customs or traditions (or anything, really) in order to justify unjust acts?

Learning Cycle

► STEP 1—Motivate!

Just for Teachers: This week’s lesson again illustrates the sovereignty of God, something we should never forget as we walk the Christian way. If we believe God has a purpose for each of us, how do we know about it? What should we do?

Does God have a purpose for our lives? Think of God’s assurance to Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations” (*Jer. 1:5, NKJV*). Centuries earlier, God revealed to Rebekah that she was carrying twins in her womb, and that “the older shall serve the younger” (*Gen. 25:23, NKJV*)—a promise Paul refers to in discussing God’s purpose in history (*see Rom. 9:12, 13*). That God knows the end from the beginning and that His plans will be fulfilled (*see Isa. 46:10*) is a central message of the Bible. In view of this, God’s children are to wait patiently for His plans to be fulfilled. But here are examples of how saints often falter: Abraham and Sarah in seeking the fulfillment of the covenant through Hagar; Rebekah and Jacob in their own deceit. The end result of such distrust of God is only sadness and grief. Rebekah would never again see the son she loved, and Jacob’s own life “was weighed down with self-condemnation.” —Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 180.

Discuss: Why is patience as waiting upon the Lord an important characteristic of God’s people (*Heb. 6:12, 12:1, James 5:11, Rev. 14:12*)?

► STEP 2—Explore!

Just for Teachers: As you explore the lives of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah—their love, marriage, and complex relations within the family—focus on how God works to fulfill His purpose despite the failure of His chosen people.

Bible Commentary

The birthright, the blessings, the headship of the family, the inheritance of

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Family Strife

Read Genesis 29:28–30:24 and then answer these questions:

1. In what ways was this family making the same marital mistakes as their ancestors?

2. In what ways were the strife and envy between the women manifested?

3. How did Jacob's actions make matters worse?

The competition between the two sisters led to them giving their maidservants to Jacob to bear sons for them. When Rachel's maidservant bore her second son, Rachel declared, "I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won" (*Gen. 30:8, NIV*). Rachel had said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die" (*vs. 1, NIV*). These words proved ironic, as Rachel finally died in childbirth (*Gen. 35:16–18*). When she finally bore a son, she named him Joseph, meaning "may he add," saying, "May the Lord add to me another son" (*Gen. 30:24, NIV*). Tragically, the birth of her second son killed her.

Notice the words of Rachel to Jacob in Genesis 30:1 and the desperation that they reveal. When was the last time you were in a desperate situation that only God could solve? How did you react? What lessons did you learn that could help you if something similar were to happen again?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

the covenant—all these did not provide the joy and the courage Jacob needed to lead a normal life. He flees from his father’s home; he is separated from his mother, whom he will never see again; he runs in fear of Esau; and he exchanges the security of his home for the uncertainty of an unknown future. But there is something about Jacob’s character that held the shattered pieces of life together: “His mind was ever reaching forward to the future, and seeking to grasp its unseen blessings.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 178.

In that reach to the future, Jacob knew that God was in control. We see this control, despite Jacob’s many follies, in the events between Bethel and Peniel.

I. Bethel: The House of God

A ladder to heaven. As he flees from the safety of his home, unfamiliar with the woes and pitfalls of the wilderness, Jacob finds himself in an utter predicament of fear. What would his future be? Will he awake to see the dawn without falling prey to the creatures of the night? Jacob needs to learn that his security lies elsewhere. God’s covenant promise is based, not on his cunningness or selfishness but on God’s own faithfulness. A deeply troubled sleep yields to a reassuring dream of a ladder ascending to heaven. A disturbed soul, fallen down, a prey to hopelessness, he needs to look up and claim the assurance, “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (*Ps. 121:2, NKJV*), as Isaiah did (*Isa. 50:7*). God lets down a ladder whenever we turn away from self-scheming to trust Him who will fulfill His purposes.

Discuss: What do these promises mean to you? “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me” (*Ps. 23:4, NKJV*). “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear” (*Isa. 59:1, NKJV*).

“**This is the gate of heaven**” (*Gen. 28:17, NKJV*). Although the dream has its drama of angels ascending and descending from God, assuring Jacob that he is not completely cut off from communication with His Maker, the significant focus of the entire experience is God’s renewal of the covenant with Jacob—the covenant of the God of Abraham and

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Jacob's Leaving

Review what we've read so far about this family. What were the sins and mistakes that each person made? What does this tell us about how belief alone, even in the true God, isn't enough to change our lives the way that God would have them changed? *See 2 Cor. 7:1.*

Though not graphic, this story of Laban and Jacob and his wives is sordid enough. Each character is guilty in his or her own way. Even Jacob, the patriarch, a follower of the true God, is hardly much of a representative of that God. This is just another biblical account of how far humans have fallen and how desperately in need of grace we all are.

Based on Genesis 30:25–31:16, how would you answer the following questions?

1. What caused Laban's attitude toward Jacob to change? What lesson is there for us?

2. What are some of the good characteristics found in Jacob?

3. What was Laban's daughters' attitude toward their father? Was it justified?

Even amid all this deceit, trickery, passion, jealousy, favoritism, and on and on, the Lord was there, working out His plan despite human foibles. At the same time, how much better this story could have been had people loved God first and one another as themselves. As you go about your daily business, in what ways can you consciously seek to live as God would have you live, thus avoiding much needless pain?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

of Isaac. The continuity of the covenant, in spite of erratic human decisions, is the unbroken thread that runs through biblical history. Humans may fail, but God? Never!

“Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it” (*Gen. 28:16, NKJV*). How much is this experience like that of any of us. It takes a sense of absolute lostness and helplessness to realize that God is here. God’s promise is ever unfaltering: “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (*Matt. 28:20, NKJV*). Blessed is the person who recognizes it!

Discuss: “The ladder represents Jesus, the appointed medium of communication. . . . Christ connects man in his weakness and helplessness with the source of infinite power.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 184.

II. Jacob, Rachel, and Leah: Love and Turmoil

The upward reach or the outward beauty? At Bethel God gave a fourfold assurance to Jacob (*Gen. 28:15: I am with you; I will keep you; I will bring you back; I will not leave you*), and that should have been sufficient for Jacob to entrust his future in God’s hands. But he chooses to bargain with Laban to get Rachel and finds instead a match in deceit. Decisions based on the beauty of the outward at the expense of the inward, not taking into account God’s purpose and direction, often end up in grief and sorrow. The rush of youth, the love for the beautiful Rachel, and the darkness of tradition combine to produce the unexpected tragedy of another seven years of labor. Jacob finds himself married, not to his love but to Leah, and the path of deception with which Jacob left his home comes around to a full circle. The wages of deception are disappointment and grief.

Consider Leah, Rachel, their maids, and Jacob’s relations with them. Why cannot polygamy produce a happy home?

Discuss: Rachel was beautiful and romantic and held the heart of Jacob, but Leah felt slighted and longed for Jacob’s attention. Yet, God chose Leah to bear the lineage of the progenitor of Christ. Is there any lesson we can draw from this?

Playing Favorites

Read Genesis 29:30. What recipe for family disaster is found in this verse?

No question, God was working in the life of Jacob, even despite his faults. Yet, those faults weren't minor; they brought pain and suffering not only upon himself but upon his loved ones. When will we learn to think before we act, to contemplate the possible results of the choices we make? How many of us would love to turn back the clock and do things differently? Unfortunately, we can't. All we can do is try not to make the same mistakes in the future.

Of all the mistakes Jacob made, one of the worst was the favoritism he showed toward Rachel. Sure, Leah wasn't the one he wanted, but he was still married to her, and he didn't seem to mind bearing all these children with her either.

Read Genesis 33:1–3. What example of favoritism toward Rachel did he show there?

Even after Rachel died, Jacob continued to show his favoritism to the children he bore with her. Joseph was the recipient of the coat of many colors (*Gen. 37:3*), and Benjamin was the one held back by the father as the others went to buy grain from Egypt (*Gen. 42:4*), even though he already had ten other sons (*Gen. 46:21*).

There's no doubt that this blatant favoritism brought a great deal of suffering to the family. If only Jacob had lived according to the principles of the God he followed, how much better his life would have been. It's a lesson that applies to all of us, as well. How careful we need to be in the relationships we form.

Of course, none of us should have to deal with the complications arising from polygamous marriages, but we all need to be careful in how we treat others. No doubt Leah and eventually the children she bore were all pained by Jacob's actions. What can you do to be more careful in dealing with the feelings of others who are dependent upon your love and affection?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 3—Practice!**

Just for Teachers: Discuss with your class the following so as to bring out practical lessons helpful in day-to-day Christian living.

Thought Questions:

- 1 God had revealed to Rebekah even before the twins were born that the younger son shall be the heir to the covenant. So, what is wrong with Rebekah trying to prevent Isaac from passing on the blessings to Esau?
- 2 Ellen G. White says, “Rebekah and Jacob should have waited for God to bring about his own purposes, in his own way, and in his own time, instead of trying to bring about the foretold events by the aid of deception.”—*Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 3, p. 115. Can you cite instances in which you, too, may act that way?

Witnessing

How can a married life be a witness to God’s love and guidance?

► **STEP 4—Apply!**

Just for Teachers: Let the class discuss the following, and note how each can have the experience of Bethel, as well as Peniel. Let members share some ups and downs in their lives.

In spite of his sin and deception, Jacob was chosen by God as the inheritor of His covenant with Abraham. What lessons can you gather from this that are applicable to your life?

Further Study: “Rachel,” pp. 924, 925, in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*; also read Ellen G. White, “Jacob’s Flight and Exile,” pp. 183–194, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“Preach in your lives the practical godliness of the faith that you believe. Let it be seen that the truth never degrades the receiver, making him rough and coarse, or fretful and impatient. Make apparent to all your patience, your kindness, your long-suffering, gentleness, compassion, and true goodness; for these graces are the expression of the character of the God whom you serve.”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 400.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Talk about the question of being unequally yoked with unbelievers. How are we as Christians to act when we face this situation? What can we learn from one another’s experiences?
- 2 What advice would you give to someone who was thinking about marrying outside the faith?
- 3 We can learn a lot from the story this week about how not to act. What principles can we learn from what we’ve read that can help us better avoid the kind of mistakes that this family made?
- 4 Greed is a powerful passion within the human heart. What ways can we protect ourselves from being swept up by it?
- 5 If a couple in your class has been married a long time, have them explain what the keys are to a happy marriage. What are the principles? What must couples never do? What should they always do? How can we apply those principles (when applicable) to other areas of our lives?

Summary: Yes, they were a dysfunctional family by all accounts. Their actions all came with bad consequences, too. How important that we learn from their mistakes and not follow the principles of greed and selfishness and jealousy that brought so much heartache.