

Yo-yo Spirituality 9-25-07

Genesis 29:31 –30:24

When I first read the text for this week, I asked my wife to pray for me. At first glance I had no clue what the sermon would be about. I thought of skipping over this passage, and the one for next week, but as I dug into the details, lessons emerged. (2Timothy 3:16) That seems to be the pattern more often than not. I'm sure the Spirit of God requires that I hunger and thirst for what He has in the text before I begin to see the application to my life. (Matthew 5:6) Once I find a personal application, I know that you can use it too. Out of what first appears to be a desert, I find springs of living water. (Psalm 105:41) You can do the same thing if you time with the text and the Lord.

Some of you have asked about how I prepare for a sermon. I have made a pledge that I will not refer to a commentary until after I have sought the Lord to guide me through the text and written out the sermon. I want to bring to you what the Lord shows me, not just what man can teach about factual information. After I finish with the main points of the sermon, I read commentaries to see what I may have missed or another interpretation and add to the sermon any relevant points. To prepare like that, I have to spend Friday the week before alone with the Bible passage and the Lord. (Matthew 7:7-8) During the following week I usually find time to read the commentaries and think about the sermon. Saturday before it is preached I go over it again several times adding to it what the Lord has shown me during the week.

Our text today begins after the marriage of Leah and Rachel to Jacob. Multiple wives were common in that age. Though God had said a man and woman would become one flesh, the patriarchs went along with that custom of the world around them, causing a great deal of strife and pain. (Genesis 2:24)

In the first verse of our passage, we see God's love for the hurting. ³¹When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. Though we often see the God of the Old Testament as a harsh and demanding God, a closer look shows us that He is the same gracious God as the God of the New Testament. He cares for the unloved. Leah, though a willing participant in deceiving Jacob, was pushed into this situation by her greedy father. God had mercy on her and allowed her to become pregnant. Women of that day saw their purpose and value in life in bearing children. (Genesis 1:28) They saw children as a blessing from God. (Psalm 127:3) That is a Biblical worldview. In Leah's loneliness and sorrow, God gave her a gift to show her she was loved by God. This is the God of the Bible, who cares for the orphan and widow, the hurting and lonely. (James 1:27) But sometimes we misinterpret or misuse those signs.

³² Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, "It is because the LORD has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now." If a child was a blessing, a son was a double blessing. A son, especially a firstborn son, meant the heir of the household and future leader of the family. That is why she named him Reuben, "see, a son!" It is a declaration of God's awareness

Commented [notes1]: 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,

Commented [notes2]: 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Commented [notes3]: 41 He opened the rock, and water gushed out; like a river it flowed in the desert.

Commented [notes4]: 7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Commented [notes5]: 24 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

Commented [notes6]: 28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Commented [notes7]: 3 Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him.

Commented [notes8]: 27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

of her misery by blessing her with a firstborn son. But notice the conclusion she draws, "Surely my husband will love me now." "God cares about my situation and has come to make Jacob love me by giving me a son." That seems to be her interpretation of the blessing. Where God was showing His compassion for her and blessing her, He was not promising to make Jacob love her.

We can easily read into the Providence of God what we desire. Instead of focusing on God's love for her, because He is the Giver of the blessing, she saw it as a means to get what she so desperately wanted, Jacob's attention. God wasn't fixing the problem; He was meeting the need in her heart. That is often the way He deals with us. Jacob has free will. Leah has weak eyes. (Genesis 29:17) God isn't going to change that. But He did show her He cared and was involved in her life. If only we would let the depth of that sink into our souls so that we were satisfied with that. But she will go on trying to change something that couldn't be changed.

Commented [notes9]: 17 Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form, and beautiful.

There is a lot of wisdom in the Serenity Prayer:
God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; Enjoying one moment at a time; Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him Forever in the next. Amen. --Reinhold Niebuhr

³³ *She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Because the LORD heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too." So she named him Simeon.* This time she seems to get the point. She named her son "the One who hears". It's all about God this time. "God hears me! He knows my loneliness. He cares about my sorrow. He gave me this son, not to change Jacob, but because God is showing me He is more than I could ask for." It's all about God. No mention of Jacob. A spiritual high point has been reached in Leah's life. She is rejoicing in God instead of whining about her situation. (Numbers 11:1)

Commented [notes10]: 1 Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the LORD, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.

You've been there. A blessing has come into your life and your focus shifts from what you think you are missing to the all that you have in the Lord. You know God is real and present. You know He understands, but then, day by day, that exuberance wanes, and slowly but steadily your focus shifts back to old desires.

³⁴ *Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." So he was named Levi.* This is a subtle shift in her desires. If she can't get him to love her with numerous sons, at least he'll be attached to her. So she named the child Levi, meaning "attached". No mention of God. Do you see how her redirected desire has brought her back down to the hope of satisfaction in something of this world? We can't blame her. If we were in her situation, we'd surely be saying the same thing. We probably have. This is the yo-yo spirituality of the carnal believer. It isn't that we haven't made a commitment to Christ. It is just that we are constantly looking somewhere else for satisfaction, for fulfillment. (Psalm 148:13)

Commented [notes11]: 13 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.

³⁵ *She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "This time I will praise the LORD." So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children.* Down and up, down and up again. This surely is an up note. She has seen that her attachment dream would not come to pass either, so she turns back to God. Why do we so often turn to Him last, when He is so much more than anything His creation can offer? She calls the child Praise. She is determined to stop whining and start praising. Just to be sure we get the point that this is the direction we all need to go, the lineage of Judah produced the Messiah, our Savior Jesus. (Matthew 1:3)

Commented [notes12]: 3 Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram,

Praise God for His blessings. They show you how much He cares. They reveal His love. (Psalm 107:8) Instead of trying to use them to get something else, turn your attention on Him. Love and adore Him. Seek to go into a more intimate relationship with Him. (James 4:8) Seek to be satisfied in Him. No relationship in this world will ever come close to the one that Jesus desires to have with you.

Commented [notes13]: 8 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men,

Commented [notes14]: 8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

In chapter 30 the competition between younger and older heats up. The birth of all these boys has Rachel worried and jealous. She had no need to worry. Jacob will always love her first and foremost. She began to fear what would never really come to pass. That irrational kind of fear is something we all experience. ¹ *When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!"* Do you think this behavior made Jacob love her more? Jealousy only drives us apart from the one we love. Jacob knew he couldn't do anything about it and told her, *"Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?"* In other words, it isn't me that is keeping you from having children. Take it up with God. It was a sad thing that she didn't follow his advice. Instead she went about solving the problem in her own way. (Jeremiah 10:23)

Commented [notes15]: 23 I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps.

Jealousy causes us to act in ways detrimental to our own cause. She decided she would never have children, so she did what her grandmother-in-law did. She used her servant girl, Bilhah, as a surrogate mother. Does that make any sense to you? If you are jealous of your sister's relationship with your husband, would you give him another wife? You see, jealousy causes reasonable thinking to go out the window. Instead of learning from the pain in the story of Abraham and Sarah, she just repeated the same mistake. This world's solution to problems will often get you into more trouble than when you started. (Proverbs 16:2)

Commented [notes16]: 2 All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD.

It is like borrowing on your credit card because you can't pay your bills. Hmmm? Does it really make any sense to pay my 6% loan payment with my credit card that will charge me 18%? The old saying is true, "Common sense isn't so common!" If God is withholding something from you, either you are being taught to walk in faith, reaping what you have sown, or it isn't good for you. (Psalm 84:11) Don't try to fix it by creating a bigger problem. I've seen women try to get their husbands to take more interest in them by flirting with other men only to end up destroying their marriage. The world's solutions are not the answer. Go to God! Get His direction.

Commented [notes17]: 11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.

⁶ *Then Rachel said, "God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son." Because of this she named him Dan.* Here we have another

misinterpretation of the grace of God. Just as Leah concluded that her husband would love her now, so Rachel justified her actions because Bilhah bore a son. She believed her own propaganda to such an extent that she named the child Vindicated. Mr. Vindicated will head up the first tribe that went headlong into idolatry, the tribe of Dan. Way to go Rachel. It doesn't matter how you justify sin, you will still reap what you sow. (Numbers 32:23)

Commented [notes18]: 23 "But if you fail to do this, you will be sinning against the LORD; and you may be sure that your sin will find you out."

Bilhah had a second child. Rachel raised the level of mutual animosity with his name. ⁸ Then Rachel said, "I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won." So she named him Naphtali. She declares victory by naming the son Struggle. I don't get it. Two boys to four and she thinks she won. She won before she offered Bilhah to Jacob. She just didn't know it. The struggle isn't over; it is just beginning to escalate. Did Rachel really not foresee Leah using the same tactic?

⁹ When Leah saw that she had stopped having children, she took her maidservant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. What happened to, "I'm just going to praise the Lord?" A taunt like Rachel's declaration of victory can often pull us down from the place of victory **if** we listen to it. (Nehemiah 6:3) Leah had the victory by focusing on God and His goodness to her, but Rachel's taunting took her focus off God and back on the sibling rivalry. Tit for tat the battle continues. Zilpah had a boy. We want to say, "Come on Leah, don't sink to Rachel's level. Get your eyes back on God." We can see her spiritual state by what she'll name the next son.

Commented [notes19]: 3 so I sent messengers to them with this reply: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"

¹¹ Then Leah said, "What good fortune!" So she named him Gad. There are two equally valid translations for the Hebrew text. "Good Fortune" or "A Troop Comes" are probably both what Leah had in mind. No mention of God. Now she just says it was good luck, and a whole troop is coming. In other words, she is now taunting Rachel, "Ha, you think you've won. I've got a whole baseball team on their way!" Zilpah had another son that Leah named him Asher or Happy. She's happy, not because God loves and cares for her, but because the score is 6 to 2.

The next passage is somewhat of mystery because it comes from ancient superstitions. The weight of authority seems to be that a Mandrake is Mandragora officinalis. It is a plant that has both stimulating and narcotic properties. It is commonly called a "love-apple". The firstborn of Leah found the fruit. It still grows today near Jerusalem. Rachel wanted some of them. Some speculate that she wanted them to use on her husband like an aphrodisiac. It doesn't seem she needed it, as Jacob always seems to love her above all others. I think she was hoping for it's renowned (but untrue) fertility effect. Remember she is still childless.

¹⁵ But she said to her, "Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?" "Very well," Rachel said, "he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes." Leah accused Rachel of stealing her husband. Do you get the feeling she has never really faced up to how she ended up being married to Jacob? He was supposed to be marrying Rachel when he was tricked into marrying Leah. Who stole whose husband? Isn't it amazing how we can spin things? But I've no doubt in my mind that that is what Leah believed. She saw Jacob as hers and that Rachel was stealing him. Maybe she was stealing his

attention and keeping him from sharing her bed, but who can blame her? The inclusion of Leah in the marriage was utter deception. The end of the argument was that Rachel got the mandrakes and Leah got Jacob for the night.

Jacob seems to have accepted the surrogate mothers without complaint, but when he came out of the field that day after leading sheep around the hills and Leah declared he was hers for the night, well, lets just say he probably wished he had one wife even if she was childless. The constant fighting must have worn him down day after day. Some men envy his position. Like I said earlier, "Common sense isn't very common." (Deuteronomy 17:17)

Lo and behold, Leah got pregnant that night. ¹⁸ Then Leah said, "God has rewarded me for giving my maidservant to my husband." So she named him Issachar. Another bizarre conclusion by Leah, justifying her actions just like Rachel had before her. Issacar means "reward".

She had one more son after that and named him Zebulun, meaning "honor". Since she gave up on love and attachment, she had reinvested her hope in Jacob honoring her. Notice how worldly hope is set lower and lower and lower. She has gone from hoping he would love her, to being attached to her, to at least honoring her. By contrast, a realization of what God is offering in a relationship with Himself only increases in hope and expectation. (Psalm 36:7-9) She also had a daughter named Dina.

²² Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb. ²³ She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, "God has taken away my disgrace." ²⁴ She named him Joseph, and said, "May the LORD add to me another son." It seems Rachel finally looked to God. She was so outnumbered; her use of the maidservant failed and her mandrakes didn't work. When we finally give up on solving our dilemmas on our own, God steps in and shows us what could have happened earlier if we would have looked to Him. (Psalm 34:5) She finally had Joseph, the favorite son of Jacob. But the last words in our passage for today sound an ominous warning. She wants to make it 4 to 8. Instead of being satisfied that God had taken away the disgrace of her bareness, she wanted to enter back into the competition with her sister. She will, but with sad consequences for all.

How destructive these sibling rivalries are. God blessed both wives, but they tended to see it as a means to gain prominence over the other. The yo-yo life of spirituality and carnality took so much joy from their home. Is it robbing your home of joy and peace? Learn a lesson from these two women. Don't go down this path of competition and one-up-manship. Be satisfied in God and His love and goodness toward you. Refuse to accept the taunts, whether from a sibling or a mate. Praise God for all the good things He has blessed you with. Jesus said we should bless those who curse us, how much more so when they are in our own family! (Matthew 5:44) That is the way to keep from being drawn down into the ugliness of strife. Stay where Leah was when she named her fourth son Praise. Keep your eyes focused on God's incredible love and grace toward you and continue to praise God.

Commented [notes20]: 17 He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

Commented [notes21]: 7 How priceless is your unfailing love! Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings.
8 They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights.
9 For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

Commented [notes22]: 5 Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.

Commented [notes23]: 44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,