

4. Jacob and Rachel: Labor of Love

Biblical material: Gen. 29-31:16

Quotes:

- All the scheming and plotting in the world won't result in something lasting, transcendent. *Jose Saramago*
- Women are natural guerrillas. Scheming, we nestle into the enemy's bed, avoiding open warfare, watching the options, playing the odds. *Sally Kempton*
- It seems to me that there are two kinds of trickery: the "fronts" people assume before one another's eyes, and the "front" a writer puts on the face of reality. *Françoise Sagan*
- The craftiest trickery are too short and ragged a cloak to cover a bad heart. *Johann Kaspar Lavater*

Questions

How comes the schemer Jacob is the one who is "schemed" by his uncle Laban? How is the story of Jacob an example of "natural consequence"? What does Jacob's continuing commitment say about his love for Rachel? What do we learn about the nature of deception in contrast to the truthfulness of God? What comfort can we gain from the story of Jacob?

Discussion/ Comment

"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." (Wednesday's lesson.) How do you react to this statement? How do you see the balance between individual responsibility and dependence on God?

The fact the cheater himself gets cheated seems to be poetic justice of a kind. It might almost seem that in order to learn the hard way about the damage caused by deception, Jacob has to experience being deceived firsthand. Some may even suggest that this was inherent in God's plan. But we do not need to blame God for Laban's actions. It seems that this society, like many others, "valued" sharp dealing. In the same way that Jacob exploited Isaac's love for Esau, Laban exploited Jacob's love for Rachel.

The deception is worse for being family. Laban welcomes Jacob as his "own flesh and blood" and then proceeds to exploit him—twice. One wonders what kind of tensions built up within the extended family, especially after the switching of Leah for Rachel. And how would Jacob have treated Leah, knowing that she had colluded in the deception?

Then begins the child-bearing competition, with all the compounded tragedies. Something of Leah's agony is expressed in her naming of her son Reuben, "because the LORD has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now." Genesis 29:32 NIV. She knows Jacob really loves her sister Rachel... Certainly a real Old Testament soap-opera!

Rachel then becomes jealous of her sister, and argues with Jacob. Once again, the mistake of Sarah is repeated, and Rachel seeks to have children through her servant-girl. The web becomes even more tangled, as servant-girl-concubine-surrogate mother bears a son. Notice how Rachel names surrogate son number two: "I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won." Genesis 30:7 NIV. Hardly happy families, is it? Even down to the two women

haggling using plants to decide who sleeps with Jacob. Leah tells Jacob, “You must sleep with me. I have hired you...”

In all of this, God is credited with opening and closing wombs, with hearing and remembering the women in their mutual distress. So what was God *really* doing, and how does this apply to us? What does this tell us about how families should operate, and how we should relate to God? Does he play procreation games, or is even God trying to do the best in very less than ideal circumstances? In this tawdry story of human sinfulness we simply see ourselves, and the results of our sinful natures. While we may be appalled at the situation we see here, we recognize our own loves are not very different. Instead of complicating things, we need to come back to God’s principles, and live in harmony with the best that God desires for all of us.

Ellen White Comments

Seven years of faithful service Jacob gave for Rachel, and the years that he served “seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her.” But the selfish and grasping Laban, desiring to retain so valuable a helper, practiced a cruel deception in substituting Leah for Rachel. The fact that Leah herself was a party to the cheat, caused Jacob to feel that he could not love her. His indignant rebuke to Laban was met with the offer of Rachel for another seven years’ service. But the father insisted that Leah should not be discarded, since this would bring disgrace upon the family. Jacob was thus placed in a most painful and trying position; he finally decided to retain Leah and marry Rachel. Rachel was ever the one best loved; but his preference for her excited envy and jealousy, and his life was embittered by the rivalry between the sister-wives. {PP 189-90}

From the hour when he received the birthright, Jacob was weighed down with self-condemnation. He had sinned against his father, his brother, his own soul, and against God. In one short hour he had made work for a lifelong repentance. This scene was vivid before him in afteryears, when the wicked course of his sons oppressed his soul. {PP 180}

Though Jacob had left Padan-aram in obedience to the divine direction, it was not without many misgivings that he retraced the road which he had trodden as a fugitive twenty years before. His sin in the deception of his father was ever before him. He knew that his long exile was the direct result of that sin, and he pondered over these things day and night, the reproaches of an accusing conscience making his journey very sad. As the hills of his native land appeared before him in the distance, the heart of the patriarch was deeply moved. All the past rose vividly before him. With the memory of his sin came also the thought of God’s favor toward him, and the promises of divine help and guidance. {PP 195}

Jacob had sinned, and had deeply suffered. Many years of toil, care, and sorrow had been his since the day when his great sin caused him to flee from his father’s tents. A homeless fugitive, separated from his mother, whom he never saw again; laboring seven years for her whom he loved, only to be basely cheated; toiling twenty years in the service of a covetous and grasping kinsman; seeing his wealth increasing, and sons rising around him, but finding little joy in the contentious and divided household; distressed by his daughter’s shame, by her brothers’ revenge, by the death of Rachel, by the unnatural crime of Reuben, by Judah’s sin, by the cruel deception and malice practiced toward Joseph--how long and dark is the catalogue of evils spread out to view! Again and again he had reaped the fruit of that first wrong deed. Over and over he saw repeated among his sons the sins of which he himself had been guilty. But bitter as had been the discipline, it had accomplished its work. The chastening, though grievous, had yielded “the peaceable fruit of righteousness.” Hebrews 12:11. {PP 237-8}

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