

West Van Baptist, May 10  
**Family Foundations – The Battle of the Babies**  
Genesis 29-30

I. A text for Mothers' Day?

A very happy Mothers' Day to all the moms, grandmoms, soon-to-be moms, as well as the aunts, surrogate moms, and everyone else who plays that special, irreplaceable motherly role in the lives of others! You are precious, and we love and appreciate you!

Mothers' Day is a great day, but it does raise questions for a pastor. What do we study this week? If we were in Proverbs, we'd just look at chapter 31 ... again! Or in the gospels we might talk about Mary. But we're not in Proverbs and it's not Christmas. We're doing a series about the family, rooted in Genesis. So what text should we explore this week? Maybe something about Eve? After all, *Adam named his wife Eve, because she would be the mother of all who live* (3:20). But we've already spent time with Adam and Eve. So ... hmmm. What to do?

After some thought and prayer, I finally felt led to Genesis chapters 29-30. There we find a story about 2 mothers: Rachel and Leah. These ladies weren't perfect; I *don't* recommend following their example. But they are 2 of the more famous mothers in the Bible. In fact, many years later they were part of a blessing at a wedding for Ruth and Boaz, where the people said: *"May the Lord make this woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, from whom all the nation of Israel descended!"* (Ruth 4:11).

Genesis 29-30 is another of those odd passages that preachers usually ignore. It's certainly not a typical "Mothers' Day" text. But it's in God's Word for a reason, and He will speak to us through it if we're willing to listen. I think it offers some helpful insights on motherhood and family in general.

II. A quick overview of the story

Let's start with a quick overview of the story. We read the introductory part this morning, and I'll fill in some more as we go.

Chapter 29 begins with Jacob, Abraham's grandson. Jacob is a twin. He has a brother—Esau—who is an outdoorsy guy and Dad's favorite. Jacob is a home-body, and very close to his Mom. Jacob is also a sneaky fellow. Over time he has cheated Esau out of some of the family inheritance, as well as Dad's blessing. Esau is furious, and wants to kill his brother, which is why when we meet him, Jacob is running away from home.

Where to go? Abraham's family came from the Plain of Aram, near the border of modern Syria and Turkey. Some of the family still have a sheep ranch in those parts. So Jacob flees to the city of Haran, hoping to get help from his uncle Laban. *Jacob hurried on, finally arriving in the land of the east* (29:1).

Jacob stops at a well where local shepherds water their flocks. He asks, "Does anyone know my uncle Laban?" He's in luck! (Or better, God is guiding him.) Laban's daughter brings her sheep to this very well every day. Wait a bit and you'll meet her.

Jacob waits, and he's rewarded with a very pleasant surprise. He's probably expecting to meet a girl with a beard, the body of a football player, squinting from the sun, and smelling like a goat pen. Not so! It turns out *Rachel had a beautiful figure and a lovely face* (29:17). Jacob falls in love at first sight, and immediately sets out to impress her by moving the stone lid of the well all by himself.

We're not told whether Rachel is impressed, but she goes to find her father, telling him a long-lost relative has come for a visit. Laban welcomes Jacob, offers him a place to stay and a job. Jacob is delighted. He has room and board, and he'll see Rachel around the farm. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow!"

One thing leads to another, and Jacob asks permission to marry Rachel. Laban likes the idea. Jacob is family, which is good; and Jacob has no money for the bride-price, which is even better. Laban can make Jacob work 7 years to earn his daughter's hand in marriage. So: *Jacob worked seven years to pay for Rachel. But his love for her was so strong that it seemed to him but a few days* (29:20).

Well, it turns out that Uncle Laban is a sneaky fellow, too. He has 2 daughters: Rachel and her older sister Leah. The young men in the neighborhood aren't lining up to marry Leah. We don't know all the reasons. Perhaps she has a beard and a squint, and smells like a goat pen? Even if Leah is lovely, we're told that she has weak eyes—which is a big deal in the centuries before the invention of eyeglasses. A girl with very bad eyesight would be unable to do what regular people can do.

In any case, Laban knows that finding a husband for Leah is not going to be easy. So he cooks up a plan. When the time comes for Jacob and Rachel to marry, Laban has Leah dress and act like the bride. She's wearing a veil, and she'll keep it on through the wedding feast until the party is over. By that time it's dark, and I imagine Jacob is a little drunk. So he heads off to the bridal suite with the wrong sister. Then, *when Jacob woke up in the morning—it was Leah! "What have you done to me?" Jacob raged at Laban. "I worked seven years for Rachel! Why have you tricked me?"* (29:25).

Laban already has a solution. "Spend your 7-day honeymoon with Leah, then we'll have another wedding, and you can marry Rachel too—as long as you work for me for another 7 years."

Yikes! What a terrible way to start a new family. And there are hints of trouble to come. *Jacob slept with Rachel, too, and he loved her much more than Leah* (29:30). But *When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, He enabled her to have children, but Rachel remained childless* (29:31).

That's where our reading stopped this morning. The rest of the story is mostly a list of baby names with some explanation. I'll summarize it quickly. I call it "the battle of the babies."

First we read that Leah has 4 baby boys, one after another. Babies were really important in that time and culture; they were a family's hope for the future. Those 4 boys mean Leah can hold her head high. By contrast, even though Rachel is Jacob's favorite, having no children is a source of shame for her, and I'm sure Leah points that out regularly.

Eventually Rachel has had all she can take. *She became jealous of her sister. She pleaded with Jacob: "Give me children, or I'll die!"* (30:1). Of course, this isn't something Jacob can control. So Rachel gets creative. She tells her husband: *"Take my maid, Bilhah, and sleep with her. She will bear children for me, and through her I can have a family too"* (30:3). Jacob complies, and soon Bilhah has 2 baby boys. So now Jacob has 6 sons, 2 wives, plus a concubine bearing children as Rachel's surrogate.

Not to be outdone, Leah tries the same strategy. *She took her servant, Zilpah, and gave her to Jacob as a wife* (30:9). Zilpah adds 2 more baby boys to the brood. So now Jacob has 8 sons, 2 wives, and 2 concubines. Then Leah gets back in the game herself. We're told: *God answered Leah's prayers. She became pregnant again and gave birth to a fifth son for Jacob.... Then Leah became pregnant again and gave birth to a sixth son* (30:17,19).

You can see why I call this the “battle of the babies”!

Finally, after long years of waiting, *God remembered Rachel’s plight and answered her prayers by enabling her to have children. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son (30:22)*—the boy Joseph. A while later she’ll have one more son, though she will die in childbirth, bringing the battle to an end.

What a mess! From the very beginning, Jacob’s family is divided, angry, and bitter. His 12 sons will fight with each other. Eventually they will become the 12 tribes of Israel, and they’ll continue fighting for centuries. They’re not a model family, and Rachel and Leah are definitely not the ones we would choose as poster girls for Mothers’ Day. They mostly teach us how not to live—though they also become examples of God’s patience and grace.

All the same, I was drawn to this passage because there are practical lessons to be learned from this very messy story. Three come to mind this morning.

### III. Some practical lessons

#### **(1) Multiplying partners is a bad idea**

These days it has become popular to claim that monogamous marriage isn’t really normal for human beings. Some people find it hard; and they point to other cultures that structure the family differently. “And,” we’re reminded, “aren’t there lots of examples of polygamy in the Bible itself? Maybe the Bible isn’t as committed to traditional 1-man-1-woman marriage as people think?”

Don’t be fooled. People who make this suggestion haven’t read the Bible carefully. It’s true that Scripture has examples of men with more than 1 wife: Abraham, Jacob, David, definitely Solomon, and others. But if you read these stories closely, you will quickly see that *every time someone has multiple wives, it causes nothing but trouble*. There are no happy polygamous marriages in Scripture. Not one. The Bible recognizes that people sometimes depart from God’s intended plan for marriage, but it consistently tells us that this produces unhappy, unhealthy, unstable family situations. It’s never a source of joy; it’s always a dumpster fire. Jacob’s family isn’t the first example of this in Genesis, but it is the clearest.

Now, I said that today’s lessons would be practical. How is this practical? It’s tempting to think: “This might be relevant in some other place, but not in Canada. Polygamy is illegal here.”

Fair enough. No one here this morning is debating whether to marry a second wife or husband. However, our culture—like most of the world in 2026—is impacted by a huge problem with multiplication of sexual partners. We don’t see advertisements recommending that we all marry more than one person. But all around us, in the media and in our social circles, we’re constantly bombarded by messages saying it’s OK, maybe preferable, to have a whole lot of different sexual partners over a lifetime.

The Bible’s message on this point is very clear, and very different. From cover to cover it tells us that—apart from exceptions related to widowhood and remarriage—multiplying sexual partners (before and after marriage) is a departure from God’s intention, and a very bad idea. It brings all the same basic problems that come with multiple wives or husbands: comparison, competition, and jealousy; awkward personal history; loss of the ability to share true intimacy; reduced capacity to stay faithful; family stress created by tangled, complicated relationships; all multiplied from one generation to another. These

problems are illustrated by Rachel and Leah and others in the Bible, and there are plenty of examples all around us today if we open our eyes and look.

I'm not telling you anything new. This is part of basic Christian sexual ethics, and it should sound familiar to anyone who has spent any time in the church. But it's very counter-cultural, so it needs to be said over and over again. We all need the reminder, and it's especially important for us to teach it to our children and to people who are new to the Bible and the church. If we don't keep making the point, the Bible's message will be drowned out by the constant "anything goes" messaging of modern society.

Please understand: I don't say this to criticize anyone for things that have happened in the past. We all have things in our background that didn't conform perfectly to God's will. The joy of following Jesus is knowing that God forgives and heals and restores and helps us to move forward. Our Lord can turn Jacob's messed-up family into His own chosen people. He can redeem and bring good out of any situation when He is given control. We live in His grace, and that's wonderful news.

At the same time, there is an important lesson in this story. If we want to have healthy, godly families, wherever possible we need to build healthy, faithful marriage partnerships that reflect God's design. When men and women live in purity, and come together in marriages that are faithful and exclusive and loving, it's much easier to nurture faithful, loving, godly families who will carry that tradition on to future generations. This is especially relevant for husbands and wives, but it is something we all need to embrace and promote in our own families and in our church.

## **(2) Old sins keep coming back**

A second lesson echoes earlier sermons in this series: "History repeats itself." Old sins can come back to haunt us, especially in the family.

We point the finger at Jacob, Rachel, and Leah for their failures. But we've already seen these same errors earlier in Genesis.

- Abraham and Sarah can't conceive. What do they do? Abraham sleeps with Sarah's servant as a surrogate.
- Siblings are fighting long before the battle between Rachel and Leah. Remember Cain and Abel? Isaac and Ishmael? Jacob and Esau?
- We shake our heads at Laban's deception. But Jacob also deceived his brother Esau and his own father—dressing up as if he was someone he isn't.

None of these earlier stories ended well. They all divided families. You'd think that later generations would remember this history and avoid repeating it. But no, Jacob, his uncle, and his wives all make the same mistakes.

Someone once said that "the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results." If that's true, then what we have here is "family insanity": making the same mistakes we've seen others make, but expecting good results when they got bad ones.

We're all children of Adam and Eve, capable of family insanity. If we want to build healthy, happy, stable, godly families, we need to break this habit. We need to recognize past mistakes for what they were, and resolve not to repeat them. Not to cheat or lie to solve a problem just becomes someone else did. Not to open a door to addiction because someone else did. Not to speak unkindly or give the "silent treatment" because that's what we've seen. Not permit unfaithfulness because someone else took that

path. Not let old sins come back into our lives and our families. Let's help each other with this—and give each other permission to help us when we don't recognize it.

### (3) Competition tears us apart

There is a constructive kind of family competition. “Hey kids, who can pick up all their toys fastest?” “Hey guys, who can come up with the best location for Mothers' Day lunch?” There is a place for friendly competition that improves performance and encourages effort.

But too often people compete over which family member has the most value. Who is the favorite? Who is loved most? That kind of competition doesn't make us better; it divides a family (or community) into winners and losers. When that happens, everyone loses.

Rachel and Leah show us that unhealthy competition is a problem. And they remind us that competition is often fueled by stingy love, which can be an even bigger problem.

We didn't read the full “battle of the babies” story this morning. If you do, you'll find a list of baby names—and their meanings. Over and over, the baby names signal things that are missing in this family. For example, we have:

- Reuben (which means “seen”), named by a mother who did not feel “seen” or loved.
- Simeon (“heard”), because God heard Leah's cries when she wasn't loved.
- Levi (“attached”), because Leah longed to feel attached to her husband.
- Dan (“vindicated”), because Rachel felt cheated.
- Zebulun (“honor”), because Leah hoped she would *finally* be honored.

Everyone wants to feel that they are “seen” and “heard,” that family members are “attached” to them, that they get fairness and “honor.” Wives and mothers have a legitimate need for these things—and not just on Mothers' Day! Husbands need them. Kids need them to be healthy. In-laws need them if there is to be family peace. We all need the basic respect, appreciation, and love that Rachel and Leah longed for. When these things are shared generously in a family, there will be family health. When they are held back, there will be competition and trouble.

The thing is, it's not necessary to ration these things out in a stingy way. If my kids want money from me, I only have so much to give, and I have to ration it so there's enough for everyone. The same is true of private time with me—I only have so many hours in a week. But when I show love to one member of my family, “seeing” and “hearing” them and communicating that I am “attached” to them, I don't have any less ability to show the same love to the others. Real, biblical love isn't a limited commodity that runs out after I give some away. The more you express love to others, the more you have to give!

Jacob's father Isaac didn't understand this. He thought he could only bless one son, that once the blessing was gone there was nothing for the other boy. Jacob took the same approach. Rachel was his first love, so “of course” he'd have no love left for Leah—even though he was now married to her and responsible to care for her. He didn't know how to love, “see,” and be “attached” to more than one person, choosing love instead of just “feeling” it. So he added gasoline to the fire of competition between these sisters, and the result was a multi-generational battle that tore the family apart.

Here again, we're all capable of making the same mistake. We can show favoritism, praising one member of our family or community, smiling, speaking kindly, conveying how valuable they are, while at the same time treating others as if they have no value. Not just treating them as different individuals,

but implicitly ranking them as though one is more worthwhile than the other. It can happen easily, unintentionally, for all sorts of reasons. But it's something to watch and resist, because it fuels unhealthy competition that can tear a family (or a church) apart.

It's not how God loves. God tells Abraham: "I'm going to bless the whole world through you."

If we want to build healthy, godly families and a healthy church community, we need to keep on learning how to love as God loves, understanding that every member is a precious gift, uniquely valuable, worthy of our care.

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Jacob is one of Israel's founding fathers, so people tend to assume that he must be a good example. Here again, we need to read our Bibles carefully. For the most part Jacob is not an example of the right way to live. Neither is his family. His story is a cautionary tale—an example of what not to do—and of how God is gracious in spite of our failures.

One of Jacob's big problems is an inadequate concept of love. Jacob is like many people in our world today. In his mind, love is like a match. Strike it against the right surface—the right stimulus, maybe a beautiful shepherdess—and there will be a spark. Good chemistry produces a flame, warm and bright. Hopefully, if the match is long enough, it will keep burning for a while. Yet the flame is fragile; it can't be shared very far, and it may burn out, leaving you to look for another spark and fresh chemistry somewhere else.

This is not what biblical love is like. In the Bible, God is our model for true love. He cares for us in a way that is bright and warm and giving, and His giving spirit is not dependent on circumstances, not even on our lovability. It flows out from inside, from His own caring heart. [I'm going to use a lamp as an illustration here, though it's not a perfect example.] Because its source is strong and consistent, God's love is faithful and consistent. It can be shared with everyone, and it doesn't grow dim when it's spread around. In fact, the more we pass it around the brighter it grows.

When we started this series, we were reminded that God created human beings to image Him—to be like Him—both as individuals and in our relationships. In part that means learning to love as God loves, growing in the love that Jesus demonstrates and teaches. A caring love that flows out from the inside, seeking what is good for everyone around us. A love that is patient and kind, not envying or boastful or proud, not dishonoring or self-seeking, not angry or resentful, delighting in truth, enduring, hoping, trusting, staying faithful (1 Cor 13:4-7).

Healthy families need that kind of love. So do healthy churches. May God grant us the grace to grow in His love, on this Mother's Day and always.