

Jacob: What goes around comes around. Genesis 29:1-30:22

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Intro to Scripture: I have told you that the stories from the Old Testament were put there to teach us lessons; many of which are profound, such as: **God's overarching purposes will always be achieved through our lives regardless of our opposition or deservedness.**

The best example of God quietly directing our lives comes out of the string of stories from Abraham to Joseph that we are reading right now. Two hundred years before Joseph and six hundred years before Moses, God had told Abraham that his descendants would eventually travel down to Egypt for a four hundred year sojourn, after which they would emerge as a nation and return to take possession of the land. Both of these prophecies would require the future ill-fated adventures of Joseph along with actions of Pharaoh's daughter, who found and gave a princely upbringing to one particular Hebrew baby.

Since we read these stories as history we take little notice of the profound interweaving of God's invisible hand(?) in our daily lives which always brings about His inevitable purposes. Such as the reason behind why Joseph became the despised younger brother which resulted with him being sold into Egyptian slavery.

So how did Joseph get to be the despised brother? By being the spoiled only child born late in life to a man who, while loving one woman, yet still ended up with three other wives whom he already had ten sons and a daughter; which is the story we are headed into today.

So I will tell you in advance, while there are no "GREAT" world shaking lessons to be learned from today's story, yet there are two practical lessons we can take away from the early years of Jacob's married life.

1. The first lesson is anecdotal proof from the life of Jacob that we tend to get what we deserve, doing good usually in time returns good. Doing bad usually returns bad. Or as one truism phrases it: *what goes around comes around.*
2. The second lesson is a very visual example of why God designed humanity to only live in a monogamous relationship: one man and one woman *leaving and cleaving and becoming ONE flesh for life.* Changing that equation in any fashion, from today's "open marriages" to the ancient yet still practiced idea of polygamy, just about guarantees heartbreak in one form or another to someone or everyone.

Now let's set the stage for our scripture reading.



Having fled for his life from home and told to go seek a wife among his distant cousins, Jacob has now walked for over two months when he arrives at the town of Haran. Upon asking, he learns that this is indeed the home of his uncle Laban and just over there happens to be his beautiful daughter Rachel coming out to water the family flock.

To say that for Jacob this was love at first sight would be an understatement. Earlier Abraham's servant had used Rebekah's willingness to water his camels as a sign that she was the one to marry Isaac. Now it is Jacob who draws water for Rachel's sheep. She then brings Jacob home to meet the family where he stays for a month as Laban's guest. This is where today's scripture reading picks up the story.

Read Genesis 29:16-32



Aesop's Fables tells the story of a donkey and a fox who went into partnership and sallied out to forage for food together. They hadn't gone far before they saw a lion coming their way, at which they were both dreadfully frightened. But the fox thought he saw a way of saving his own skin and went boldly up to the lion and whispered in his ear, "*I'll manage that you shall get hold of the donkey without the trouble of stalking him, if you'll promise to let me go free.*" The lion agreed to this, and the fox then rejoined his companion and contrived before long to lead him by a hidden pit, which some hunter had dug as a trap for wild animals and into which he fell. When the Lion saw that the donkey was safely caught and couldn't get away, it was to the fox that he first turned his attention. After he quickly finished off the fox, then at his leisure he then proceeded to feast upon the donkey.

Through the ages, Aesop's Fables have provided a moral guide in his timeless stories. Here are simple truths that every generation must learn;

- **pride goes before the fall**, that one can be too clever for their own good,
- that **you reap what you sow**
- or as we titled today's story, "**what goes around comes around.**"

These expressions all codify the same basic truth that you usually get out of life what you put into it. What people these days sometimes call "Karma." To frame this truth in more Biblical language, Job declared that "*those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same*" (4:8). In the end, the fox sealed his own fate. He was trapped by his own treachery and he got what he deserved.

This principle of getting what you deserve is also especially evident in the life of Jacob. Up until now, he has made his way in the world by deception and trickery. He displaced his brother and deceived his father, but now the table will be turned. The trickster will be tricked. Jacob the player will become the played when he meets in his uncle Laban a man even more self-serving and deceptive than himself.

After a month of living under Laban's roof, Jacob has pretty much settled in. He has also found Rachel, the woman whom he deeply loves and wants to spend the rest of his life with. But he has no money by which to pay her required dowry. So he agrees to work seven years for Laban in exchange for the privilege of marrying his youngest daughter. The Bible says that these years felt like just a few days because of the love Jacob had for Rachel.



After seven years of work, Jacob asks for his wife. So Laban prepares the wedding feast and readies the bride. Late that night the probably drunk Jacob is ushered to bed with his new wife ...only in the morning to discover that the woman sleeping beside him was not his beloved Rachel but her older sister Leah.

Now married to the wrong woman, Jacob angrily confronts uncle Laban, who slyly replies that in their culture the older sister is always married off first, but in exchange for another seven years of work Jacob can have the younger sister as well.

So what is wrong with Leah that Laban has to dupe someone into marrying her? Our Bible only says of her that "*she had lovely eyes,*" but no one is really sure what the ancient Hebrew is saying here. All we know is that Leah is not as pretty as Rachel and certainly was not the one whom Jacob loved...so he had to be tricked into marrying her.

Realize that Leah was also in on this trickery and agreeing to it. Just as Jacob had earlier pretended to be Esau, she now sits there quietly all evening under her veil pretending to be Rachel until it was too late to undo the contract. Like it or not, Jacob is now married to Leah as his first wife.

Where was Rachel while this hoodwinking was going on? Laban had probably thrown a sack over her head and ordered his workers to keep her out of sight until the next morning.

Earlier Jacob had swindled his father Isaac out of the blessing, now uncle Laban swindles Jacob into a bad marriage. And while Jacob stole the birthright from brother

Esau, now Leah steals the marriage from her sister Rachel. *What goes around comes around.*



But for Leah also, *What goes around comes around.* Whether in his bitterness over the wedding swindle, or just because he has and always will love Rachel more, even though she is also his wife, Leah feels unloved and neglected in this relationship. However, she does get her conjugal rights and quickly births four sons through whom she hopes to earn Jacob's affection. Their names tell the world of her struggle, **Reuben**, "Look! a Son," because Leah thought, "*now my husband will love me.*" **Simeon**, "hear," *because the Lord has heard that I am unloved.* **Levi**, "attached;" because Leah is thinking that now, with three sons, my husband will accept me and finally **Judah**, "praise the Lord," this time Leah apparently accepts her fate and finds her life in the children she has born.

All this time, while Leah was making babies, Rachel has been unable to conceive – I am sure not for lack of trying. So Rachel gives her handmaid **Bilhah** to be Jacob's third wife in order that she might adopt and claim as her own any children that her handmaid bears. Bilhah quickly obliges by birthing two more sons **Dan** and **Naphtali**, their names also reflecting the jealousy and struggle growing between these two sister wives.

Thinking her baby making days are over and not to be outdone by her sister, Leah then gives her handmaid **Zilpah** to be Jacob's fourth wife, who gives him two more sons **Gad** and **Asher**.

Leah then moves back into the baby rotation birthing **Issachar**, **Zebulun** and finally a daughter **Dinah**.

If you have been keeping count that is now ten sons and one daughter. Finally, fourteen years after they were first married, God allows Rachel to conceive and she gives Jacob his eleventh son whom she named **Joseph**, "*He adds,*" as her way of asking God for another. Approximately ten years later after Jacob and his family have settled back home, Rachel will get her wish, but will die in the process of giving Jacob his twelfth son whom he will name **Benjamin**, "*son of my right hand.*"

This is a story for another day, but at least now you know why **Joseph**, Rachel's first born son, was so deeply loved and spoiled by Jacob, his widowed father, if you can call a man who still has three other wives "widowed." Also why **Benjamin**, the baby, was kept close to home while all the other brothers were sent out to work in the fields.

So we now come to the moral of this tale, the lessons we need to learn.

It is easy to see the lesson of getting back what you have sown – ***what goes around comes around*** – in the story of Jacob, the trickster getting his comeuppance as uncle Laban uses Jacob to enrich himself.

This is justice. Jacob got his due, he received exactly what he deserved. He had lived a life of dishonesty and his reward, his payment, was dishonesty. Jacob received payment for the moral quality of his life. Even though he had been chosen by God and blessed by his father, Jacob could not escape God's justice.

Is this fair?

Is it right for God's chosen one to be treated so?

Nowhere does scripture teach that the elect are immune from God's discipline and punishment. In fact, it is just the opposite. The Lord says to his chosen people in Amos, *"You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities"* (3:2).

In the New Testament, the letter to the Hebrews encourages us saying, *"My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for ...*

the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,
and chastises every child whom he accepts."

Hebrews 12:5-6

Because God loves his children, he disciplines them, often allowing them to experience the result of their sinful ways and desires. **But this is not where God leaves us.**



Even though Jacob got a taste of his own medicine, God continued to bless him and in turn, to bless the world through him. Through what he considered his misfortunate marriage to Leah, the ugly sister, 6 of Jacob's 12 sons were born.

Through Laban and the bickering sister wives, Jacob received the justice of God, the just payment for his lack of faithfulness, but God's justice was also tempered with mercy. God's promise to Jacob was accomplished and Jacob got precisely what he did not deserve, he got more than his due. Over these twenty years with Laban, Jacob prospered as much in wealth as he did in Children. Near the end of

his time of exile, not only Jacob but also Laban and everyone else in Haran knew that Jacob had been richly blessed by God.

This still leaves us to deal with the **polygamy issue**. While the Bible clearly teaches the wisdom of one man cleaving to one woman in a marriage in which the two spiritually become one flesh, it never strictly forbids having multiple wives. But every Biblical example of a man taking multiple wives always seems to end badly. When you read these and other accounts of polygamy it should make you want to stay away from this practice.

- Lamech, Cain's great, great, great grandson was a godless man and the first recorded as having 2 wives.
- Abraham & Sarah made the mistake of adding Hagar to the marriage and you know what that did to the family dynamics thereafter.
- Esau known as a man who only lived for his immediate satisfaction took 3 wives.
- The sons of King David's multiple wives ended up fighting over his kingdom and making the end of David's life sorrowful.
- Solomon's multiple wives, against which he was strictly warned, turned his heart away from God, bankrupted Israel, and brought about the splitting up of the kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 11).

Like all other stories in the Bible these accounts teach us a lesson and give clear warning to stay away from the practice of having more than one wife.

A Mormon acquaintance once pushed Mark Twain into an argument on the issue of polygamy. After long and tedious expositions justifying the practice, the Mormon demanded that Twain cite any passage of scripture expressly forbidding polygamy. "*Nothing easier*," Twain replied. "***No man can serve two masters.***"

Jacob has 4 wives, 12 sons, and a daughter. One big unhappy family. But that's how polygamy always ends. It's just not meant to be this way. God always intended for only one man to be married to only one woman for life. Think how the love story of Jacob and Rachel might have ended if they only had each other?

The Bible does clearly lay down the principle for monogamy right from the beginning along with a double prohibition given in the Ten Commandments against adultery or coveting your neighbor's wife (Genesis 2:22-25, Leviticus 5:16-21).

In His turn Jesus would answer the people's questions concerning divorce by reinforcing the monogamy principle laid down from the very beginning: "leaving and cleaving," marriage has always been about two becoming permanently one (Mark 10:2-12).

In summary, if God wanted twelve tribes for Israel, could He not have given Jacob as many children through Rachel alone? Certainly. Down through the ages individual mothers have birthed and raised a dozen children or more. But perhaps four bickering wives were needed to set up the family dynamic in which the older brothers from different mothers thought nothing of selling their younger sibling into slavery. We all know where the story will go from there.

Here again are the two lessons we can take from Jacob's marriage to four women: *what goes around comes around*. Jacob the swindler got swindled into a marriage situation which gave him little peace for the rest of his life, as the Bible teaches one wife for one husband is enough, any more than that usually ends badly.

But even through his travails, by the grace of God Jacob received more than what he deserved. The twelve sons of Jacob would one day grow into the twelve tribes of Israel, with whom God would then work for another thousand years to bring to pass – in the fullness of time - the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

So that is enough story telling for today. Next week we will watch and listen in, as after his twenty years of exile God tells Jacob that it is time to go home to face Esau. Rest assured the humbled and hard working man who returns to his family home is far different from the spoiled swindler who had earlier run away penniless.

Let's pray about this....