

SERIES gods at war
 SERMON **Fight Over Love (Genesis 29.1–35)¹**
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 LOCATION Church of Christ at Manor Woods (Rockville, MD)
 DATE 19-Feb-2023

DEFINED BY A DEFINED LOVE

If I had better foresight, it might have been a bit more fitting to have had this sermon given last week, since it was so close to Valentine’s Day. That holiday when so many go all out to show (*or sometimes prove*) their love and devotion for their beloved. But let’s face it: what we do on Valentine’s Day is a bit odd when considering what happened historically. Or as someone recently posted: “*Roses are red, violets are blue, I was beaten with clubs, beheaded, buried under the cover of darkness, disinterred by my followers, and you commemorate my martyrdom by sending each other chocolates.*” To which, some might say: “*Well, yeah; celebrating the other way is way better and much less of a downer.*” Fair point, but it dodges the bigger point in preference for the easier one.

So, let’s come at it like this. How many splashed-out on Valentine’s Day this year? How many did something bigger this year than you did last year? How many felt like they needed to do something bigger this year—either because last year felt like it was just above average, or because you were told something like, “*That wasn’t your best effort*”? How many didn’t do much of anything at all this year? How many are now getting some not-so-pleasant treatment because of that? Or to come right out with it: how many, either knowingly or subconsciously, believe that Valentine’s Day serves as a definer (*or even proof*) of one’s love? Who believes that it’s something of a make-or-break holiday for relationships? Screw this up, and either the rest of the year is horrible or things are done. Why am I banging on with all these questions and traipsing over something like Valentine’s Day?

Simple. But to get to the simple, we need to ask one more question: what about all of the other days of the year? Do they not matter or count? Does a misstep or failure on the one day negate all the good that’s been done on all the others? (*Okay, that was three questions...my bad*). But all of that brings me to the basic point: we’ve somehow allowed one day on a calendar (*that we established as a holiday*) to become the definer of our loving relationships, instead of allowing our loving relationships define every day for the whole of life. And I think if we’re honest, what we’ve allowed to be the case is the result of our desire for love and its proof to be determined by our definitions and expectations, which tend to be quite self-interested and subjectively judged. However, what we need to allow to be case is the result of God’s desire for love and its proof to be determined by His definitions and expectations, which are others-focused and objectively measured.

This morning, we continue in our series, “**gods at war**” and we’re going to be dealing with the topic of love—specifically, how we define things stands at odds (*if not in complete conflict or even contradiction with*) how God defines them. The kinds of love we often pursue are typically the ones that reflect who we were and we desire to live rather than the one love that reflect who God truly is and His desires for how we are to live as His holy, redeemed, and other-than people. After a quick heads-up about what’s at stake, we’re going to look at an account in the Bible where we see not only this conflict between the love we prefer to create and the love God designed, but also how that conflict deeply affects our

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations will follow the New English Translation (NET).

relationships with others—especially intimate relationships. And has been the case throughout this series, we’ll come to a point where we must decide which love we’ll allow define us. Ours, or God’s?

—PRAY—

WHEN “LOVE IS LOVE” IS NOT LOVE

How’s that for a heading? It’s meant to call attention to a truth that’s been snubbed over the past few generations. We use the word “love” to describe just about everything we enjoy. Food, drinks, snacks, activities, hobbies, pastimes, animals or pets, music or bands, times of year, vacations, locations, TV shows, movies, books, etc. And we certainly use it to define the various kinds of relationships—e.g., family, friends, dating, sexual, and marriage. I hope we begin to see an inherent problem. No matter the situation, each area of enjoyment is being defined with one word: “love.” So, part of the problem is that this definition (*by itself*) does not make the necessary—let alone, helpful—distinctions. So, at the word level, “I love coffee” is on par with “I love my wife.” If those two loves are equal, then something serious is wrong. And find me a counselor. Quick....

But the bigger problem is this: when this broadly applied “love is love” definition is uncritically accepted as adequate and meaningful (*and not the meaningless tautology that it is*), then any sort of meaning assumed for “love” is at risk of losing its desired meaning. And that risk has two sides. First, when a single term is used or allowed to define everything, it can wind up becoming a term that’s useless for defining anything. And that’s where another side of the risk comes into play—especially with what the Bible teaches about love; or more to the point: what we think the Bible says about love; thoughts and interpretations we have because we’ve imposed our definitions of love onto the text, rather than allowing the text to speak to us on its own terms and relying upon its definitions. But when we approach things from a biblical perspective, we quickly realize: “love is love” is not biblical. What’s biblical is that “God is love,” which means: it’s His love that must define both love and us.

And just as a brief reminder: when it comes to talking about “love” in the ancient world, especially the Graeco-Roman world, even they would say “love is love” doesn’t make sense. They understood and knew that there were various types and expressions of love, and each one was not to be confused with the others. First, there is *στοργή* (*storgē*), which largely refers to the love between parent and child. Although, there are instances where this can be used to describe the depth of one’s loyalties to another who was not family. However, because of that deep loyalty, the person might as well be family. Second, there is *φίλος*, which is a deep sense of fondness for another, but could be used of siblings, but mostly employed to describe close friendships. Third, there was *ἔρος*, which is a romantic, desirous, passionate, and lust-filled love expressed between lovers. As you can guess: from this word we get the term and idea, “erotic” and it’s one that has explicit ties to the god of Love (Eros).

Unsurprisingly, given the cultural climate of the time: *ἔρος* is, by far, the most commonly used (*and celebrated*) in Greek literature when talking about love. But it’s not once used in the NT. And finally, there is *ἀγάπη*—ordinarily understood to refer to a true, complete, perfect, no-matter-what kind of love; sometimes described as unconditional, or even a just-because love. (*But to be clear: that type of love is not a tolerating-everything or affirming-anything love*). Whatever the case, most of these views about *ἀγάπη* would have been something of a stretch for the average Greek. For them, *ἀγάπη* was a

rather general form of love.² It was almost an entry-level for one's journey to higher forms of love (typically, ἔρος). Thus, it was simply seen as a warm regard for or interest in another person. There was no real emphasis on close relationships, and certainly no ties to sexual attraction of any kind. Those require different kinds of love. However, in texts like 1 Cor 13.4–8, we see God redefining what was ordinary in something extraordinary. Something other than what the world expects or even upholds as worthy. Something that reflect Him and how He relates with us, since, as 1 Jn 4.8 declares: ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν. (God is love).

But we must not do the Oprah Winfrey thing and turn this around to say, “Love is God”—a declaration that is not only unsupported by Scripture but also unbiblical. However, in practice and maybe even subconsciously, we do what we must not. Similar to what we saw with the gods of pleasure, we take what the one true God gave for us to enjoy in life and corrupt its true nature and purpose so that it can find personal satisfaction from it. But the bigger issue here with doing that with God's love, is that we're corrupting something that was meant to be definitional of who we are and how we relate to both God and others. And the Ten Commandments reflect God's intended design for both of those relationships. Commandments 1–4 speak to our relationship with God, characterized by our faithful love for Him. Then commandments 5–10 speak to our relationships with others, characterized by our faithful God-reflecting love for them.

And to set us up for where we need to go this morning: too often, what we might call the horizontal relationships struggle because we struggle with the vertical relationship. Or more directly: we have little concern for meaningful relationships with others—in the ways that God designed and intended—because we have little concern for sustaining a meaningful relationship with God. In both cases, God-reflecting and God-defined love has been neglected or even exchanged for how we wish to reflect the kind of love we prefer. And not only is it at this point that the otherwise meaningless tautology, “love is love” prove to be false (and nothing more than a catchy sale-pitch). But it also becomes the catalyst for an endless pursuit in life to use (and even exploit) the love we prefer to full the void we've created by rejecting the love we need. And so, while things play out in different way or through different methods, the overall picture is the same: what's pursued is the source of love that must fill the void.

IT'S A FAMILY TRADITION

To get a handle on what's about to happen in our text for this morning (*Bocephus would be proud of that heading...*) we need to consider briefly the backstory that leads to it. The first part of Gen 25 is about the final days of Abraham. A period of life when he remarries (*some time after Sarah's death*) and has more children. And at the end of that life—at the spritely age of 175—not only does he leave his entire inheritance to Isaac, but Isaac and Ishmael come together—but only this occasion and to bury their father. It's the last time these two and even their family lines will be side-by-side in peace.... The rest of Gen 25 and the whole of 26 provides a glimpse of Isaac's life, which includes episodes that revival some soap-operas or reality TV shows.

It begins with Rebekah not being able to have children because she's barren. But Isaac prays to God for intervention, and God answers. Twofold. They're expecting twins. While in the womb, the two boys fight and Rebekah goes to God for answers. He tells her: this is how it's going to be between them (*and*

² For the sake of comparison: ἀγάπη appears c.370 times in the NT; in later Christian writings, c.690 times (with c.480 of those from a single writer: Basil of Caesarea); in Josephus (the 1st century AD Jewish historian), c.65 times. But in Greek writings, of roughly 37 authors, ἀγάπη appears c.920 times (with c.270 of those coming from one author: Plutarch), and the typical usage of the term hovering c.6 times per author.

their descendants), and the outcome will be that the older will serve the younger. They're born: Esau first, with Jacob right on his heel. Literally. And they grow up in two different ways: Esau is the rugged, strong, outdoorsy-type who likes to hunt; Jacob is the indoorsy, simple, civilized type who likes to relax in the home-tent. But that's not too much of a big deal. The problem is that: Isaac favors Esau, because Esau brings in fresh meat for hearty meals. And Rebekah favors Jacob, because Jacob is a home-body. You know: those solid foundation stones of love and a good relationship.

Sarcasm aside: when one parent favors a child over another, and the other parent favors the other; this creates division at all levels in the home. Husband against wife, father against one child, mother against the other, and one child against the other child. And that necessarily creates endless battles against each other in the unhealthy pursuit to sustain the favored affection. None of which is good—at a general relationship level—or obedient to God's design for families. And evidence of this ungood and undesign reveals itself as the story continues to unfold. In fact, as it unfolds, we discover a deeper problem: there seems to be little concern or appreciation for God's covenant promise to Abraham, of which Isaac and his family are the next recipients.

We see this in the episode with Jacob basically swindling Esau out of his birthright. Although, Esau didn't seem to care about it; all he wanted was an easily accessible meal to satisfy his immediate hunger. The moment was more vital than the long-term. Thus, as it says in v.34, in making the trade, *"Esau despised his birthright"*—the language means: he saw it as worthless, and treated it accordingly. Then the story is put on hold while the family has to move into Philistine territory because of a famine. While there, Isaac lies about his relationship with Rebekah—and he does so entirely out of fear and self-preservation. (*To which Rebekah says, "Thanks a lot, chump"*). And they live this lie for quite some time. But it's found out and exposed by King Abimelech, who rebukes Isaac for his behavior and how his actions could have brought evil upon the land. Notice what's happened: a foreigner and one not tied to the covenant promises realizes that one loyal to Yahweh is behaving wrongly, and says so.

Once the famine ends and Isaac accumulates a decent amount of wealth, the entire family moves back to their homeland and settle in Beersheba. Here, the story of Esau and Jacob resumes (*near the end of Gen 26*). It begins with Esau marrying two Hittite women, which again shows his lack of real concern for any covenant relationship with Yahweh. The desire to give up the birthright for a quick snack was bad enough, but marrying two women with foreign and pagan ties adds insult to injury. He's really taking steps to make sure that he'll have no part in the covenant promise. So, it's no wonder text says: Esau's marriage *"caused Isaac and Rebekah great anxiety"* (26.35)—with the language meaning: deep bitterness. This then leads us to Gen 27, and the familiar story of Jacob—under the persuasion and assistance of Rebekah—tricking or deceiving his own father to give him the inheritance.

What's telling about this scenario is that, at no point before the ruse, does Jacob stop and say: *"You know, mom, this is probably not a good idea"* or *"There's no need to do this; Esau already surrendered his birthright to me."* Instead, he carries on with the deception, which not only proves successful at first but also backfires a bit when Esau returns. At which point, Esau finds out what happened and he vows to kill his brother. Now, let that sink in for a moment: Esau gave the birthright to Jacob (*for self-interested reasons*); Jacob was therefore the legitimate recipient of the blessing; Jacob gets the blessing (*albeit through deception*); Esau goes off the rails because Jacob got what Esau already said he could have, yet somehow, Jacob is in the wrong; and the system of judgment for all of this is not some external rule or law, but Esau's self-determined, self-interested, and self-given authority.

Back to the story. Rebekah catches wind of Esau's plan and tells Jacob he needs to leg-it to the city of Haran and stay with her brother, Laban. Just for clarity: Haran is nearly 500 miles north of Beersheba. Then, to sell the plan to Isaac, Rebekah tells him that it's time for Jacob to find a wife (*he is nearly 77 years old at this point, soo...yeah, it's time*), and it would be best he traveled to the land of their relatives and find a wife. So, she lies. At the start of Gen 28, we see that Isaac agrees—especially since it means Jacob won't be marrying a pagan Canaanite woman (*which Isaac strongly forbids*)—and so he gives Jacob another blessing. One that reminds him of the covenant promise from God. Esau hears this and makes what appears to be a stick-it-to'em reaction: he goes off and marries a third wife—a daughter of Ishmael. A decision that explicitly removes him from receiving the covenant promise.

Like I said, this appears to be a stick-it-to'em reaction. But closer inspection reveals something else. He didn't marry a Canaanite woman, so he didn't defy what his father said was forbidden. Instead, he marries the daughter of Ishmael—a descendent of Abraham, though not the true heir of the promise. Could it be that Esau—as maybe a last-ditch effort to win back the favor, love, and blessing of his father—did this as an attempt to rejoin the family lines? We can't know for sure if that was his goal, but we can be fairly confident about his motivation. He's acting in a way that he hopes will restore his standing with his father—a standing he held with him for nearly his entire life. Wasn't a healthy standing, but it's the one he knew. But here's what we can also know: Esau's new family, national connections, and subsequent history will be in constant struggle and conflict with the line of Jacob.

Since that family feud is beyond this morning's focus, let's get back to Jacob's story (*in the rest of Gen 28*). After being blessed by Isaac, Jacob leaves Beersheba, travels about 50 miles, and makes a random stop for the night. While asleep, Jacob has a dream of the stairway to heaven, with angels going back and forth between heaven and earth. This opens up his worldview about creation, especially about what happens in the spiritual realm not seen, but apparently very active “behind the scenes,” so to speak. But this is not the only thing that happens. He receives a direct revelation from God—one that restates the covenant promise given to Abraham and declares that it's now being given to Jacob. And along with that revelation is a promise: “[And so all the families of the earth may receive blessing through your and your descendants. I am with you! I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until you have done what I promised you](#)” (Gen 28.14–15).

No longer is the covenant promise something Jacob vaguely knows about and not really a big deal for him. It is now necessarily a part of who he is and how he is to live the rest of his life. No longer is Jacob under the watchful love, care, and protection of his mother, who's got a reputation for getting involved with some not-so-good schemes. He is now under the ever-present love, care, and protection of God Himself, who has an unbeatable reputation for doing all that is perfect, good, and holy. So, it's no surprise that Jacob wakes from this dream and declares: “[Surely the Lord \[יהוה\] is in this place, but I did not realize it!](#)” (Gen 28.16)—a truth that we would do well to remember, realize, and celebrate. A truth that understands that God is neither distant nor localized. He is always near and unhindered by creation's boundaries. We just don't see Him because we're either not looking for Him or are focused on Him. But when we do see Him, everything else we see has new meaning. And so Jacob builds an altar, makes a vow of allegiance, and names the place: Bethel, which means: house of God.

FIGHT OVER LOVE

That brings us to where we need to go next: another episode in Genesis that's often described as a modern day soap-opera or reality TV show. While the focus-text is Gen 29, we'll need to consider some

details from Gen 30. Before we get into the detail, here's a big-picture truth that we need to hold onto—not just for this morning, but also throughout Scripture and even our daily lives as God's people: nobody is too messy for God's love, and God is fully capable of working through our messiness to bring about His life-changing restoration of who we are. Thus, within that truth is the expectation: God working through our messiness is not permission to remain messy; it's a summons to live His holiness. But that life can only be truly lived when true love for God alone defines who we are. When the love that God deserves is not given to anyone or anything else as though it's the God we love and serve.

So with that in mind, let's get into this wild and crazy love-story. It begins with Jacob leaving Bethel and walking the rest of the way to Haran—c.400 miles north. When he drew near, he not only found a well with a huge rock over the opening, but also three flocks of sheep (*and some shepherds*) hanging around the well. In v.3, we get a little passing note that the shepherds would often wait until there were enough of them to move the rock out of the way so that they could water their sheep (*...and watch them shrink*). But Jacob doesn't know that bit yet. He's the new guy. And as the new guy, and contrary to how guys are often depicted today, he basically asks for directions. He wants to know where the shepherds are from and if they know Laban. And while their covering these details, v.6 tells of the entrance of Rachel—Laban's daughter—and the sheep she's shepherding for him.

While she's still on approach, Jacob continues his chat with the other shepherds—asking why they don't water the sheep and let them graze. (*Again, he's the new guy*). They tell him they would, but they're waiting on the rest of the flocks to arrive and to have more help in moving the huge stone out of the way. Then comes a total dude-move...from a 77-year-old: as soon as Rachel arrived, Jacob goes over and moves the stone all by himself. (*Show off. Either that, or the stone really wasn't that big of a deal and the other shepherds were just lazy*). But not only does Jacob move the stone by himself, but he also personally drew and gave water to Rachel's flock. And once that's done, he takes what we might see as a bold step and kisses Rachel...and then he wept. Not because he did something stupid and now wishes he thought things threw better, but because—as one old commentator put it: he gave her a kiss of love and his love-filled heart gave him tears of joy.

a. Jacob's Love for Being in Love

And it's in this moment that we're introduced to the first kind of love being fought for: Jacob's fight for being in love with Rachel. And that's a fight he won't surrender.... Hang on to that as we continue with the story. After revealing to Rachel who he is, she runs off to tell her dad, and he returns to the well with her and smacks Jacob around for getting fresh with his daughter on the first meeting. No wait...that's what other dads would do. Laban, instead, embraces Jacob and takes him back to their home, and they all celebrate that the family bloodline will continue. And Jacob stays with them for an entire month, and presumably did some work around the house and maybe in the fields.

After this month, Laban comes to Jacob and basically says: **"I can't let your efforts go unappreciated; tell me how I can repay you and even how much you want"** (cf. Gen 29.15). Then we get something of a side-note, but one that's crucial for the story: vv.16–17 say, **"Now Laban had two daughters; the older one was named Leah, and the younger one Rachel. Leah's eyes were tender, [יָרָה, weak] but Rachel had a lovely figure and beautiful appearance"**—or: **"beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance."** The point being: Leah was not Rachel. (*I know a dad who, while walking around a college campus with his son—getting a feel for the place—saw a number of the female students, and said: "Yeah, personality's really going to count."* Back to the text). Now, please don't read or hear this as

Jacob showing up to the house and Laban says, “I have two daughters, take your pick;” and after seeing Rachel now for the very first time, he shallowly says, “Oh that’s easy, I choose the really pretty one.”

One guess is that: there was something beyond the visible beauty of Rachel that made Jacob (*as the text says*) fall in love with her at first sight; so much so, that even if Leah was the prettier one, it wouldn’t matter. Jacob’s heart was already fighting for Rachel and no one was going to stop that. So, following that side-note, we see that a deal is struck—and it looks like Jacob is the one who offers it. A deal that says: he’ll work for seven years in exchange for marriage to Rachel. Again, remember: the dude is 77 years-old, and he’s willing to wait and work for seven years before getting married to the woman he loves. That would fly in the face of so many in our day—those who either think three dates is enough before things escalate or believe: “If you don’t know where we’re going after six months or a year, it’s time to move on to other things (or other people).” Not Jacob.

He knows that love and marriage are not sprints but marathons; they’re not momentary flights of fancy, but life-long commitments of unyielding devotion. And then comes a great line in the text: “So Jacob served for seven years for Rachel, and the seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her” (Gen 29.20, ESV). That’s when you know your love for the other is deep, real, and worth having: no matter the time that passes, it lives in heart as brand new. The heart cares not about time. In fact, the one the heart beholds makes time stand still. Now, it would be awesome to end the story right there on that sappy, cheery note. But we can’t. On the way to God’s eternal happily-ever-after, there are many moments of holy-dumpster-fire-Batman. And a small handful of those happen next.

After the seven years of service, 84-year-old Jacob comes to Laban and asks for Rachel’s hand in marriage. Laban prepares for the wedding feast—one that will last seven days. But on the night of the wedding itself, Laban pulls a fast one: he gave Jacob Leah as his bride, but Jacob doesn’t realize it because of the veil. It’s on the next morning—after the “knowing” took place—that he gets the shock of his life. When Jacob confronts Laban—not only reminding him of the agreed upon deal, but also accusing Laban of “tricking” him (*a term related to word used when Jacob craftily got the blessing from Isaac*), Laban seems to make up some excuse—i.e., “That’s right, you’re still the new guy in town. We have a traditional custom that says the older daughter must be married off first.” Whether it was a legit tradition remains a point of debate. But here’s what cannot be missed: if it truly were a thing, it’s rather underhanded of Laban to wait seven years, and after a wedding, before mentioning it to Jacob.

b. Laban’s Love for Self-interest

It’s here that we encounter the second kind of love being fought for: Laban’s self-interest, which plays itself out more in Gen 30–31 and how he continues to treat Jacob. But here in Gen 29, we see an example of it when he does something that basically devalues of Rachel. He tells Jacob: “Complete my older daughter’s bridal week. Then we will give you the younger one too, in exchange for seven more years of work” (Gen 29.27). So, not only does a promised word mean very little to Laban, and not only is his own daughter (*Rachel*) treated like a consolation price (*despite the fact that Laban and Jacob agreed she was Jacob’s first and only desire*), but Jacob now being told he needs to serve seven more years to fully receive what was rightfully his and his heart’s desire from the beginning.

So, Laban creates a serious problem for Jacob, justifies it with an appeal to some sacred tradition, and then tells Jacob what he needs to do fix the problem. (*Not sure why that way of thinking and behaving would be relevant for today, but there it is*). So, with the new deal on the table—which includes that

seven extra years of work for Jacob—we might expect him to burst into the refrain, “I’d do anything for love, but I won’t do that.” However, that’s not what we find...or hear. Instead, and some might say surprisingly, Jacob agrees. Because of his deep love for Rachel, he will do whatever is required to get what he truly desires. And it’s in that agreement that things get even messier. A messiness that creates more and more struggles in the relationships—not to mention brings to the surface personal anxieties or even flaws that people would have wanted to keep deeply hidden.

And that reality (*and tendency*) shows how self-interest as a definer of love can be a fairly common struggle. I’m sure we all know someone (*and maybe some of us are that someone*) who, when in a relationship, only reveals the parts of their lives that they see as worth being seen. For if the other saw the true self—the flaws and maybe even the damage within—then the other would not love in the way the person hopes or even wants. That’s love being defined on one’s own terms. Terms that benefit and protect the self, instead of allowing the other the opportunity to know the truth and freely choose to love no matter what. To get back to the text: notice what’s underlying Laban’s request of Jacob.

When he says, “Complete my older daughter’s bridal week,” he’s not only telling Jacob: “Look, you slept with Leah, which means you’re now married, so you better honor your marriage vow to her;” but he’s also telling Jacob: “Look, I arranged this entire wedding, paid for all the festivities, and gathered all of these people here to celebrate your marriage to Leah, so you better not make me look bad by not fulfilling your vow to her.” So, on the one hand: Laban’s focused on his personal image before others. On the other hand, he also knows he needs to retain his relationship with Jacob...for personal benefit. So he privately agrees to allow Jacob to have Rachel after the bridal week with Leah. To which Jacob is probably thinking: “You mean, you’ll do what you openly promised me you’d do before you tricked me and made me look the fool?... Schmuck.”

Did he think that? We have no idea. What we do know is what the text says: “Jacob did as Laban said. When Jacob completed Leah’s bridal week, Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. [which, technically speaking, she already was when Laban agreed to the marriage in the first place] (Laban gave his female servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her servant). [he did the same thing with Leah, by giving her his female servant Zilpha (cf. 28.24)] Jacob slept with Rachel as well. [funny, no mention of a wedding ceremony this time. Maybe it’s implied, or maybe Laban didn’t want to splash again so soon] He also loved Rachel more than Leah. Then he worked for Laban for seven more years” (Gen 29.28–30). Now, just to be clear: just because polygamy happens in the Bible, and that it even happens by those who are meant to be God’s people; that doesn’t mean God approves or applauds it. His intention—as revealed in Gen 2 and repeated by Jesus in Mt 19—is: one man and one woman.

c. Leah’s Love for Being Loved

And it’s when that intention is downplayed, disregarded, redefined, or outright defied, and the wants of what the self wants become the primary focus of the relationship; that’s when conflicts emerge—between those involved. And we find an example of that in v.30, where it clearly says: Jacob “loved Rachel more than Leah.” Leah was his by marriage, but not by love. Theirs was a relationship on paper, not from the heart. At least from his perspective. I wonder if she viewed it otherwise. Sure, she might have been the overlooked daughter because she wasn’t the “looker” of the two sisters. And sure, she likely dreamed of getting married, but had maybe resigned herself to that as not a real possibility. But here she is now in a marriage—though not in the way she dreamed (*at least I hope not...if she dreamed of entering into such a relationship through devious means, that’s a different conversation to have*).

And maybe she's thinking: **"While it's not the best way to enter this relationship, I'm in it now and I'm going to make the best of it."** But that desire to make the best of it is constantly slapped in the face by Jacob's deep love for and commitment to the better of the two sisters. So, it's here that we see the third kind of love being fought for: Leah's desire for being loved. Not as some recipient of love that's defined on a piece of paper, but as one who's loved from the heart of the other in the bond of marital love. The more I read and worked through this text this week, the more I came to realize how Leah's heart is basically in the right place—she's not wrong in hoping for or expecting mutual love and commitment. Marriages don't work if the husband and wife are not fully committed, and they certainly don't work if the husband and wife have entirely different (*if not competing*) views on what marriage is all about. That mutual understanding and mutual commitment, protected under mutual, godly love is likely what Leah wants.

But where she goes a bit sideways is found in how she thinks it can be achieved—i.e., how she can get Jacob to love her as much as she loves him. And it's an approach that's not only not mutually formed, but determined by her, but it's also one that unfortunately takes advantage of God's blessings and using them for personal gain. Look with me at vv.31–34:

"When the Lord [יְהוָה] saw that Leah was unloved, He enabled her to become pregnant while Rachel remained childless. So Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, 'The Lord [יְהוָה] has looked with pity on my oppressed condition. Surely my husband will love me now.'³ She became pregnant again and had another son. She said, 'Because the Lord [יְהוָה] heard that I was unloved, He gave me this one too.' So she named him Simeon.⁴ She became pregnant again and had another son. She said, 'Now this time my husband will show me affection [לָוָה] (*lâvâh*)= *be joined with me*], because I have given birth to three sons for him.' That is why he was named Levi."⁵

To put this rather bluntly: with each child born, Leah relies upon that child's presence and life to be the cause for Jacob's love for her. She's wrongfully using what God graciously gave her so that she can get what she desires. And while she might recognize God's role in the blessing; the blessing itself (*not to mention the much bigger picture involved*) is accepted only in so far as benefits her right now in her pursuit of Jacob as her true love and provider. She's effectively angry with Jacob because he won't change his allegiance to her in light of all that's she done for him in her fight to be loved by him. But she's failing to see her change of allegiance from God, despite all that He's done for her from His love.

Now, to be fair: there seems to be something of a change some time after Levi's birth. In v.35, we read this: **"She became pregnant again and had another son. She said, 'This time I will praise the Lord [יְהוָה]. That is why she named him, Judah. Then she stopped having children."** And just for kicks (*sort of*): the name Judah ought to sound familiar, for it is from the line of Judah that Jesus—God-incarnate—enters the world. Now, I would love to end Leah's story here and say she finally got what truly needed to be gotten—i.e., that her value, her joy, her sense of being blessed, and even her expression of love could only truly be known and experienced when God is the true focus of her love. That He alone—not Jacob,

³ Don't miss that connection of ideas and the rationale behind it: "God has enabled me to do what my sister can't, so Jacob will have to love me now." But it doesn't happen. Jacob's love is elsewhere.

⁴ Just for clarity: the name "Simeon" is related to the Hebrew word, *shema*, which means: hear.

⁵ Similar rationale as before, but this time God is missing; now, it's simply: "Jacob will have to show me affection—he will bind himself fully to me, not Rachel, especially since she hasn't given him a single child, and I've given him three."

not Rachel, and not even her children—He alone is the One who truly loves her and defines her life with true meaning.

That's where she seems to be with the birth of Judah, and that's why I would love to say things stay good from that point forward. But I can't. Because that's not how we silly humans tend to operate. We often find ourselves in that struggle between what we know to be true and living out that truth. And that's where Leah struggles, too. In Gen 30, Leah not only becomes desperate for more attention—partly because she's suddenly unable to have any more children, and she tries to fix it through some fruit that's got some seductive myths attached to it, but primarily because Rachel demands some of the same fruit-remedy. (*We'll see why in a moment*). Leah returns to that fight for being loved, on the basis of her abilities to have children for Jacob. He has once again become the focus of her affection and love, even when God again blesses her with two more sons and a daughter. While she sees God as the giver of such blessings, she uses them to gain favor from and a place with her husband.

d. Rachel's Love for Being "Normal"

Now, there's one final part of this entire story we need to see, and it reveals to us the fourth type of love being fought for—one that's been largely quiet throughout the narrative (*which in this case, means many years*), and it's one that experienced in the same way for many today. And that fight is: Rachel's love for being "normal." What does that mean? As found at the start of the story: in everyone else's eyes, Rachel is both stunningly beautiful and a worthy leader (*of sorts...she's a shepherdess*). That's what everyone sees and knows about her because all of that is clearly visible. But as the story unfolds, there's a side to her life that only she sees and knows, and, in her eyes, is neither beautiful nor worthy. She's barren—unable to have children.

A state-of-being that was often thought to be a curse or a form of judgment from God. And that reality of barrenness—along with her struggle with it—is always in the background, but largely silent, throughout the narrative. A reality whose lament is not only quietly voiced, but also one that, if voiced, would be overpowered by the frequent shouts of praise that Leah has given birth. Again. A sense or feeling of brokenness that seems to have far too many pieces to repair and no hope of it ever being fixed. She longs to be "normal," like her sister, but it's a longing that remains unfulfilled. And as we see in Gen 30, she even gets desperate and seeks to find some relief—or sense of normalcy—not by prayer and supplications to God, but by her own ingenuity. She gets Jacob to "know" her servant Bilhah.

And when Bilhah gets pregnant and has a baby (*called, Dan*), Rachel declares her belief that: "God has vindicated me. He has responded to my prayer and given be a son" (30.6). (*But she never prayed*). And when Bilhah has another child, Rachel reveals too much when she says: "I have fought a desperate struggle with my sister, but I have won" (30.8). Notice that she's claiming a victory that's not really hers (*i.e., the child did not come from her*), but also that the praise is to be focused on her and her belief that's she's bested her sister. God does not appear to be anywhere near her heart, nor does He seem to figure anywhere in what she believes matters or how she can overcome her brokenness. And this reveals itself even more when Rachel learns about Leah's son (Reuben) finding "mandrakes" in a nearby field. A fruit that, in that time and culture, was believed to have seductive powers and even overcome infertility.

So, Rachel demands from Leah that Reuben give her some of the fruit so she can break this curse upon her life. But it doesn't work. Nothing works. And so, she continues on in her silent fight with and within

herself to be restored and made “normal,” believing that being “normal” is how she’ll find meaning in life, love, and marriage. Now, there is a moment of light in her story of shadows. While it’s purely a guess, there seems to be a time when she hits rock-bottom and realizes: nothing she can do will ever be enough. And it’s in that place of letting go of all the schemes and even control over her life, that we hear this: “Then God took notice of Rachel. He paid attention to her and enabled her to become pregnant. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son. Then she said, ‘God has taken away my shame.’ She named him Joseph, saying, ‘May the Lord [יְהוָה] give me yet another son’” (Gen 30.22–24).

Now, similar to before, I would love to say Rachel’s story carries on from that happy note, and that she remains faithful with God alone as the one who lovingly restores and blesses. But I can’t. Not long after the birth of Joseph, and when it comes time for Jacob and his entire family, servants, and flocks to leave Haran; Rachel went into her father’s house and stole his cherished idols and hid them away for herself (cf. Gen 31.19, 34–35). This suggests she held some attachment to her father’s gods. An attachment she kept quiet for who knows how long. But what’s more troubling is that: she likely prayed to these gods in her pursuit to be freed from her barrenness. And when the one true God is the one who sets her free; sure, she gives Him praise and even hopes that He’ll do more of the same again soon. But that praise seems to be in word only. Her heart is still loyal to the other gods.

However, it’s worth pointing out: something eventually changed in her heart and life. As we saw a couple of weeks ago: in Gen 35.1–5, so after Jacob wrestles with God—and as the song says, “If you wrestle with God, then bring a crutch for your hips”—and after making amends with Esau, while in Shechem, Jacob summons his household and says: “Get rid of the foreign gods you have among you. Purify yourselves and change your clothes. Let us go at once to Bethel. Then I will make an altar there to God, who responded to me in my time of distress and has been with me wherever I went. So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods that were in their possession and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob buried them under the oak near Shechem and they started on their journey” (Gen 35.2–5).⁶ And not long after this, Rachel gives birth to Benjamin. When the only One who can make you whole is the only central devotion for the whole of life, there is restoration and blessing.

[connect and close]

⁶ And while, not long afterward, she does have another son: Benjamin; it sadly cost her her life (see Gen 35.16–20).