

meaning 'trouble') to go with Rachel. It does appear that Laban did not wish Jacob or his daughters well as they began their family life together! Scripture records the names of these maids because in the course of time, and for reasons that we shall examine later, they became mothers of some of the sons of Jacob; and in the end, all four women were 'matriarchs' of the 'people of Israel'.

Application

There is an expression in a famous passage of scripture which may be explained by this story of Jacob, and though it is not a connection that is normally noticed, it is highly significant. In Isaiah 40, the Scriptures read 'Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.' (Isa 40:2). This is one of a few occasions in Scripture where God's people are described as paying the price for their own sins, and the prophet Isaiah spoke of a 'double' punishment, thereby referring to the story of Jacob to make his point. Jacob was 'exiled' from his own home in the Promised Land because of his sin, even though he was God's chosen. He had to go and find a future for himself in a way that he could not do at home because of his sin, and he had to 'pay double' (twice over!) for the wives and family that would secure the heritage of God's people. Isaiah saw in this a parallel with the people of Israel in later years who would be exiled to Babylon because of their sins (2 Kings 24:1f.). In exile they learned the lesson that the Lord was with them wherever they were, despite the loss of Jerusalem and the Temple (an agonising trial described largely in the book of Jeremiah), and Isaiah's prophecy told them they would be able to return (see Isa 40:3f.) when, like Jacob, they had paid a 'double' sentence for their sins. There is much discussion as to what this 'double' punishment really is, and we will reserve this for a later discussion of Isaiah, but it is helpful for us to know the origin of the idea.

We, who are now God's people need to know this. We have a call to be the agents of God's mission in the world today. Even though we know that Jesus has paid the price for our sins once and for all, we also know that there is no Christian who can avoid the trials of this world or the works of the Evil one. Satan specifically seeks to pull down the work of God's people the Church, and enters through our sins. Often for cultural reasons (as with Jacob, and Isaac and Laban as well), we are unwilling to accept the Lord's ways which appear different from what we might expect. Like Jacob, we too often attempt to do the Lord's work for Him, and end up in a mess. We do well to heed the warning that the Lord's people 'pay double' for their sins.

This is not an easy message, but it is important. Facing responsibility, as Jacob does eventually, and accepting the Lord's hand in punishment, makes us better able to do His will: 'for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves' (Hebrews 12:6).

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Would you describe Jacob as deceitful in this story? What lessons would he have learned about his own deceit?
2. Do you think that the narrator of our story approves of marriages that are not monogamous? What do you think about the polygamous origins of Israel?
3. In what ways does the Lord discipline His people today?

Discipleship

As God's chosen people, the Church is riven with sin, the sins of division, denial of Christ or the Holy Spirit, or of compromise with ungodly culture. Each of us must ask whether we play a part in this. For example, do we allow the world's 'fashions' to determine the music we play and sing in church? It is certainly sinful when musical opinion is placed above godliness, doing much harm! How can we help the church (of which we are a part) to a place of repentance?

Final Prayer

Jesus, we are deeply conscious that we cannot live up to our calling except in your strength and through the power of Your Holy Spirit. Keep us ever alert to the sins of the world which the Devil uses to distract us from our calling. Be gentle with us we pray; AMEN

Prayer

Bring a simple song into our minds today, Lord Jesus; a simple song of praise and love to you. And as it goes around in our minds breaking into our consciousness from time to time, enable us to worship You throughout the varied circumstance of our day; to Your praise and Glory; AMEN

Further Suggestions for Prayer

Weekly Theme: The world of Advertising

Please pray for those in your country who have the responsibility of deciding what advertising is acceptable and what is not. Pray against the immoral and degrading images which are created with the purpose of influencing people. Pray that for the good of all, this is properly regulated.

Meditation

Forgive us, Lord, for the times we search for something new,
Because we want some excitement rather than the path of faith:
Forgive us, Lord, for the times we make ourselves contented,
With the bits of Scripture we like, rather than seek its deeper truths:
Forgive us, Lord, for the times we think our private sins don't matter,
And tell ourselves the flagrant lie that 'what we do is our own business':
Forgive us Lord ...

And when we truly face the self-centred rotten core of our mortal frame,
And accept the Spirit's prompting about what we know is wrong;
And take a Godly, spiritual stand against the devil's footholds within;
And realise that what we keep on doing holds Christ in agony upon the Cross;
And reach the point of saying to ourselves and in His strength;
'No more!' ...

Then by the Spirit's power our tired souls are liberated with resurrection joy!
To live again and breathe and be fulfilled in You!

Bible Study - Genesis 29:15-30

¹⁵ Then Laban said to Jacob, 'Just because you are a relative of mine, you should not serve me for nothing! Tell me what you want for wages?' ¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah's eyes were soft, and Rachel was shapely and beautiful in appearance. ¹⁸ Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, 'I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.' ¹⁹ Laban said, 'I would rather give her to you than give her to any other man; stay with me.'

²⁰ So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him like only a few days because of his love for her. ²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife, my time is finished and I wish to go and claim her.' ²² So Laban invited all the neighbours in the vicinity, and gave a feast. ²³ But when evening came he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. ²⁴ (Laban assigned his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah as her maid.) ²⁵ Now, when morning came, Jacob was aghast to find Leah!

Jacob said to Laban, 'How could you have done this to me? You knew I served you for 'Rachel'? Why have you swindled me?' ²⁶ Laban said, 'I could not give the younger in marriage before the firstborn – not in our culture. ²⁷ Finish the bridal week for this daughter, and I will give you the younger one as well in return for serving me another seven years.'

²⁸ Jacob did this, he completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. ²⁹ (Laban assigned his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maid.) ³⁰ So Jacob took Rachel as well, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for a further seven years.

Review

This is a powerful story of deception with one clear motto; 'you reap what you sow'! Jacob had deceived his own brother and father to obtain a blessing; and now, he was trapped by the deceptions of Laban! He had been sent from his home by his mother and father partly in disgrace and partly for his own protection, but with a command to go and seek a wife; but he was given nothing, and he had neither means of support nor wealth with which to buy a bride. Despite this, with the promise of God ringing in his ears (28:10-22) he had quickly found his destination and was overjoyed at the sight of the lovely Rachel. Jacob has his eyes firmly set on obtaining her as His wife; but how could he do that from his vulnerable position? Scriptures say that Jacob told Laban 'everything' (29:13), but looking back, he may have said too much, giving Laban all the information he needed to get his own back on the family of Abraham that had previously 'taken him for a ride'.

Initially, Jacob stayed with Laban for a month (29:14), before his uncle offered to pay him (29:15). Laban undoubtedly knew what Jacob was after, and took advantage of the generous deal that Jacob, blinded by love, offered for Rachel (29:18). With cunning that cruelly echoed that of Jacob himself, Laban gave the appearance of acting properly and correctly, but deceived Jacob out of his heart's desire by exchanging the elder and less attractive Leah for the beautiful and shapely Rachel! (29:25) Jacob had previously subverted social convention by deceiving Esau out of his inheritance, but Laban now deceived Jacob to force him to accept social convention (29:26) and the priority of the elder Leah! Now in a position of power over Jacob, Laban surprisingly gave Jacob his younger daughter Rachel after only a week, but the price of a further seven year's labour for her was a heavy blow to Jacob, who knew that he had an anxious mother waiting at home.

It is typical of Scripture that this story is told without saying much about the feelings of those involved (only rarely do we get a glimpse of true feelings, as in 29:11 where Jacob 'wept aloud'). This makes the story very powerful, for it invokes emotions in us; feeling insulted at the way Laban treats his daughters, for example, or being incensed at the deceptions involved. It is natural to respond in this way, but it does not help us get to the heart of what Scripture is saying to us. This story is in God's Word for a reason, and if we hold back our emotions, then we will see that Jacob was being taught a lesson by God. He was indeed God's chosen son of Isaac upon whom the future of God's plans would rest, but this did not mean that his sin would go unpunished, or that he was immune from discipline. As the prophet Amos said many years later 'you have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities' (Amos 3:2). The truth is that now, even after the life and death of Christ, the Lord still has to discipline His people today (Hebrews 12:6), and the truth of this is all the more urgent.

Going Deeper

The details of this story lead us to understand the extent of Jacob's punishment. We begin to realise that Jacob was indeed going to be blessed by God, but he would have to walk a hard path in order to discover it. There is no small amount of controversy in the life of Jacob, but it makes the story all the more real and its message clearer.

Laban and his deception

All deception starts with being reasonable, in fact it often depends upon it! Laban appeared to be very generous when he first offered Jacob some wages for work done around the family home (29:15). Herding sheep and cattle was the main occupation of nomadic groups such as this, and Jacob would have been familiar with the practices, even if he had taken advantage of his favoured position back at home to do little work. He would now have to make up for that!

The offer made by Laban appeared to be very reasonable, for it allowed Jacob to 'name his wages'. The issue was not straightforward, though, and Laban knew that Jacob was attracted to Rachel (he had not made a secret of the fact! – 29:11) and Jacob wanted to make an offer of work that would secure Rachel as his bride; for he had no other means or wealth. In such marriage bargaining, the potential bridegroom had to make a generous bid; but what could Jacob do? A typical 'bride-price' arrangement of those days (as scholars have discovered) was around 50 shekels. We also know that the average monthly wage for a labourer was 1½ shekels. With a little mathematics, you will quickly see that 3 years labour would have just

secured a bride for Jacob; however, in the position of having to make an opening bid that was flattering, he offered to work for twice this plus one, to make the perfect seven; an offer that was very generous to Laban. Jacob would have expected the usual polite bargaining of the day which would have lowered the amount, but Laban immediately accepted the deal (29:19), and however surprised Jacob was, he accepted because of his love for Rachel (29:20). What Jacob did not notice, however, was that when Laban accepted the deal, although Jacob had made clear he was negotiating for Rachel, Laban did not mention the name of the daughter he was offering in marriage. It is a detail that slips by in the story, but which comes back to dominate it at a later stage!

One other detail should alert us to Laban's scheming. When Abraham's servant had come to negotiate the hand of Rebekah for Isaac, he was keen to leave Laban immediately, with almost undue haste and certainly denying Laban's family the chance of a wedding celebration. There was no way that Laban was going to let the young Jacob leave as quickly!

Rachel and Leah

The story recounts how Laban, doubtless under the cover of the darkness of night, the veiling required of a bride and the blindness of Jacob's love, tricked Jacob into spending the nuptial night not with Rachel but her elder sister Leah, and the results of this were swift, as Jacob bitterly complained (29:21)! A marriage feast was supposed to last anything up to a week, with the bride and groom as guests of honour, but after the first night the groom was infuriated, and demanded the wife he had paid for! There was no politeness in the curt demand of Jacob, but Laban was now fully capable of driving the situation and was prepared with his answer. Jacob would have to accept the social convention of the priority of the elder over the younger; something he had spent his whole life denying.

The two daughters Rachel and Leah both ended up as wives of Jacob; both became the mothers of his sons, Leah bearing more than Rachel. Both are vital to the story of God's people. Leah, the elder is described in some translations as having 'beautiful' eyes. The word in Hebrew is 'soft'; 'soft eyes' were regarded as reflecting a meekness that was attractive to men, at a time of male dominance in society (though we should not assume too much about this given the strength of the characters of Sarah and Rebekah described in Genesis). However, the description of Rachel is without parallel in Scripture; the Hebrew quite literally describes her as stunning in both shape and appearance. We are left to wonder how Jacob could have not known the difference on his wedding night! To add to the contrast between the two, Rachel means 'ewe lamb' and Leah means 'wild cow'! We are also left to wonder, in an age when names were considered as an important guide to character, how Laban was going to marry his elder daughter except by deception!

Rachel is the one we are led to feel most sorry for. The woman that Jacob loved appeared to be the one who suffered as a consequence of his past and present mistakes. She was given to Jacob at the end of his marriage 'week' with Leah, and had no wedding day or marriage feast; it is only a small but significant omission from the story line, but her father denied her a woman's privilege of being the centre of attention on her wedding day. Jacob's own deception and trickery was turned back on him by Rachel's father, who sought to teach Jacob a lesson by letting Rachel be married off to him as second best. Normally, a second wife would be called a concubine, subservient to the elder and more senior wife. But our text makes it clear that Jacob loved her and favoured her in a way that copied the Lord's choice of him over the elder Esau.

Jacob

There was no negotiation over the 'bride-price' for Rachel. It was a punitive arrangement that kept Jacob tied down to Laban's household for a further seven years. The (more than) double pay that he gave for Leah was itself doubled, and there was little that Jacob could do about it. Whilst the first seven years seemed to Jacob 'like only a few days because of his love for (Rachel)' (29:20), the second seven years were ones in which he had to both work for Laban and also provide for his two wives and growing family (we will learn about them later). They were a supreme test; but that is what the Lord meant them to be.

The only benefit that Jacob received from Laban was the indirect gift of the maids that he gave to his daughters; Zilpah (possibly meaning 'handful') to go with Leah, and Bilhah (possibly