

Psalmist begins by bringing to God a problem or complaint of some kind, often about injustice or oppression (see Psalm 10 or 13, for example), and then proceeds to appeal to the Lord; the Lord hears the prayer offered and then the Psalmist rediscovers how to praise God, discovers victory in the situation they face, before praising God with renewed joy!

The same pattern can also be seen in Jacob's life, although as far as Scripture is concerned, we are only half way through the story, and there are four more sons and a daughter yet to be born! Jacob arrived at Haran to find himself oppressed by Laban, yet the Lord heard his prayers and granted him the blessing of children far in excess of his forefathers Isaac and Abraham. His acknowledgement of God's authority (30:2) was highly significant, and in giving God the rightful place of honour in the bearing of children, he was giving God 'praise' (in the Old Testament, 'praise' means honouring God's existence and creative authority).

The truth is this, embedded within the names of Jacob's sons is both his own experience of faith, and a life experience so common to humanity and the people of God in general that it is echoed in large numbers of Psalms! The technical arguments about the details of each son's name are complex, and some may debate what I have outlined above; but this is all highly significant, and very applicable to the spiritual journey we each face.

### Application

There are few of us who have not walked the path that leads from oppression or injustice through to faith and then joy again. This is not the place in Scripture to discuss the details of why it is that we fall into oppression or sin in the first place; a book such as 'Judges' will help us far more with that. Genesis lays out the ground rules of how God deals with errant humanity, and this pattern is a vital clue. If we cry to the Lord in the midst of our oppression (whatever it is), then it is the Lord's nature to respond in some way. It is certainly true that we do not always recognise what the Lord is doing, and again, other Scriptures (Job, Psalms) deal more fully with these issues. However, when we recognise that the Lord has heard our cries and we commit to Him as He commits to us (see Levi – above), then we can work through our struggles, and with praise in our hearts, eventually reach a place of peace and joy!

It is true that as I write this down, this journey explains a number of things that have happened in my own life. The great value of this model of our relationship with God is that it starts with trouble; the very circumstances in which we need to remember the Lord and cry to him for help. Often, when life is dark and difficult, the journey back to joy again seems impossible, but the very fact that this is a common experience of humanity for thousands of years is our guarantee that the Lord will bring us through, whatever the problems we face!

### Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Have you experienced the journey of faith described in the Bible study? How easy is it to hear God's voice in the midst of oppression?
2. Discuss in your group whether you find it easy or difficult to try to find spiritual truth from a story which involves polygamy?
3. Are you comfortable with the way society today handles issues of surrogacy? What do you believe to be contrary to God's will?

### Discipleship

Each of us might well be able to apply the spiritual path of Jacob outlined above, to any number of situations in our own lives. Given that Jacob was the forefather of the people of Israel, is it possible to discern this same journey of faith in the life of God's people as a whole? Consider your own church; it may be that it is under oppression – but through faith it will go forward. It may be at a place of joy, but the enemy may well create distress and bring it under oppression again. What can you do to help your own church?

### Final Prayer

In whatever state we are, Lord God, You have the answer to the way forward! You know whether we should be cautious, advance quickly, or keep steady. Inspire us directly by Your Holy Spirit to do what is right, for our good and the good of those we love; AMEN

### Prayer

As we read Your Word and pray, Lord Jesus Christ; implant the truths of life and faith so deeply within us that we never forget them. Fill our minds with godliness and goodness, integrity and passion for others; then, as we live our lives, may we discover that we are fulfilled because we have followed You! Thank You, Lord Jesus Christ; AMEN

### Further Suggestions for Prayer

#### Weekly Theme: The world of Advertising

Please pray today against the advertising of sexual services in newspapers and increasingly on some TV. If you see advertisements that are objectionable, then please complain. The world's Christian heritage is eroded when we do nothing about such issues.

### Meditation

Jesus saw the wonder of Your Creation, Lord God,  
In a flower of the field; and taught us not to worry.  
Holy Spirit; remove our fears, so we may live in peace.

Jesus saw faith that he did not find in Your people, Lord God,  
In a soldier who knew about authority and discipline.  
Holy Spirit, train us now in the true path of discipleship.

Jesus saw the glories of Your Kingdom, Lord God,  
In a child who was worthy of the Kingdom of God.  
Holy Spirit, guide our eyes see the truth like this.

Jesus saw the hatred of the world as He died, Lord God,  
In the eyes of those who slaughtered him; yet he forgave them.  
Holy Spirit, give us courage to forgive like our Lord.

### Bible Study - Genesis 29:31-30:13

<sup>31</sup> When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he made her fertile; but Rachel was barren. <sup>32</sup> Leah conceived and gave birth to a son who was named Reuben; for she said, 'Because the LORD has seen my distress; surely now my husband will love me.' <sup>33</sup> She conceived again and gave birth to a son, and said, 'Because the LORD has heard that I am unloved, he has given me this son as well'; and she named him Simeon. <sup>34</sup> She conceived again and gave birth to a son, and said, 'Now this has happened, my husband will surely be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons'; which is why she named him Levi. <sup>35</sup> She conceived again and gave birth to a son, and said, 'Now I will praise the LORD'; so she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children.

<sup>30:1</sup> When Rachel saw that she was not able to bear children for Jacob, she became jealous of her sister; and said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I will die!' <sup>2</sup> Jacob was angry with Rachel and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has prevented you from having children?" <sup>3</sup> So she said, "Here is my servantgirl Bilhah; sleep with her, so that she may give birth on my knees; then I may have children by surrogacy." <sup>4</sup> So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife; and Jacob slept with her. <sup>5</sup> Bilhah conceived and gave birth to a son for Jacob. <sup>6</sup> Then Rachel said, 'God has given me justice and has heard my voice as well, by giving me a son'; so she named him Dan. <sup>7</sup> Rachel's maid Bilhah conceived again and gave birth to a second son for Jacob. <sup>8</sup> Then Rachel said, 'I have struggled with God and fought with my sister, but have prevailed'; so she named him Naphtali.

<sup>9</sup> When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing children, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. <sup>10</sup> Then Leah's maid Zilpah gave birth to a son for Jacob. <sup>11</sup> And Leah said, 'What good fortune!' so she named him Gad. <sup>12</sup> Leah's maid Zilpah gave birth to a second son for Jacob. <sup>13</sup> Leah said, 'I'm happy, and the women will call me happy'; so she named him Asher.

## Review

We could be tempted to read these Scriptures with a degree of disinterest. Today's passage together with that of tomorrow, combine to describe the births of eleven of Jacob's sons and one daughter, which all occurred in the seven years Jacob worked for Laban as the agreed pay for his second wife Rachel (see yesterday's passage and notes). Remarkably, the story of these births is not simply a list of one or other women bearing children to Jacob. If we look carefully, we can see within it the deep feelings of love and insecurity that were generated by the involuntary polygamous marriage that Jacob was forced into by his father-in-law Laban. Scripture does not appear to 'approve' of polygamy, instead, it uses this difficult episode of Jacob's life to illustrate his personal and spiritual struggles in a fascinating way. We will find that all the names of Jacob's sons illustrate the spiritual life of Jacob, the man who would one day be named Israel!

We will look in detail at the names of the sons in the main body of the Bible study, but to give an example of this, see how the first child borne by Leah was named Reuben (29:32). The name Reuben is a play on words which means 'oppression is seen', and expressed Leah's belief that God had seen her plight as unloved and therefore given her a son. It is a great theme of Scripture that God acts when He sees injustice or oppression, despite the sinful nature of the people he comes to save. This was certainly true of Leah, the wife Jacob did not want (29:25). More than that, it was also true that God had seen the oppression of Jacob. His is the bigger story in Scripture, and we have reached a point where despite his past involvement in deceit, he was now the one who was being treated shamefully by Laban; but God was now beginning to bless him. Both his fathers had experienced difficulty bearing children, but in the midst of his second seven years of hard labour for Laban, Jacob's prospects in God's greater plans were being turned around by the birth of children who would make the Covenant blessing of becoming a 'numerous' people, come true!

There are also many other important themes in the story; for example, that of God's preference for choosing the younger over the older. We know that this is an important part of the story of Jacob generally, beginning with his feud with Esau; but in this passage, Judah (meaning 'He will be praised') was the youngest of the first four children born to Leah. Judah would one day rise to become the dominant tribe of Israel and the tribe of both David, the first King of Israel, and Jesus, the Messiah.

The whole passage is also a study of the difficult relationship between love, represented by Rachel; and the bearing of children, represented by Leah. At the very least, it could be said that Scripture suggests that the real lesson of Jacob's enforced and unhappy marriages is that love and the bearing of children belong together, not apart. In an age where, for scientific reasons, we are able to separate these two, this Word of God should not be cast aside too quickly!

## Going Deeper

We will examine the names of the eight sons born in this passage, and what they mean for their mothers, and for Jacob's spiritual journey. There are also a number of ways in which this story echoes other important stories of the forefathers, helping us to understand the generational issues that surrounded God's chosen people. A heritage still relevant today!

### ***A story of unhappiness overcome?***

Jacob was locked into a marriage with two sisters, the younger, who he loved passionately, and the elder, who had been used by her father to cheat him. In the broader scheme of things, we can say that when it came to deception, Jacob had met his match in Laban; but there would be stranger twists in the story to come! In our passage today, Jacob is left in the position of having to work as hard as he ever did for his father-in-law, and also live with two wives who both wanted children, and saw this not just as a blessing from God but as a competition between each other. Jacob had previously used his own position as a younger but favoured child to his advantage, and now had to watch while his own family was all but torn apart by the results of similar competitive urges in Rachel, his own favoured wife.

Rachel was Jacob's first love, and the first verse of our passage says that Leah was 'unloved'. Some translations say she was 'hated'; but we should not go that far because the Hebrew word

is not straightforward to translate. Literally, it is the opposite of 'loved', but it does not necessarily mean hated; merely not one that receives the favour of being loved. This should be obvious, because Jacob had time in the marital tent with Leah as well as Rachel in the early years of family life, otherwise the whole situation described in our text would not have arisen.

Leah conceived first and quickly bore four children in succession. At first, she was desperate for her husband's love, as reflected in her explanation of her first child's name (29:32). Quickly, however, she realised that true love was not overcome simply by the bearing of a child, and although she had access to Jacob, he loved Rachel and not her. In this situation, the names of her next three children showed a gradual acceptance of that fact as she turned to the Lord. In naming her second son, she accepted that she was not Jacob's true love, her third son's name expressed the hope that because of her sons, her husband would be 'joined' to her, even if he would not love her, and in the fourth, she rejoiced in the Lord alone. At this point she 'stopped having children' (29:35) either because Jacob refused her further access to his tent or because now that she had found peace with God, she no longer felt she had to prove anything to Rachel her sister or to Jacob.

All of this was intolerable for Rachel. It is disturbing that the first time we hear words from the beautiful Rachel, so loved of Jacob, she complained bitterly to him (30:1). It was a husband's job to pray for children, and her accusation 'give me children, or I die' was the equivalent of saying that he had not prayed hard enough for her; but her words were laced with a passion typical of the strong-minded women who married the forefathers; Sarah and Rebekah. Jacob's reply also indicates that he was beginning to find some proper perspective on his relationship with God; for he who had previously manipulated events to his own advantage now recognised that some things were God's to do, not his.

The remainder of the passage describes the birth of the next four children, two by Rachel's maid and two by Leah's maid. Subtly, the Hebrew text upgrades Bilhah and Zilpah from mere maids to their mistresses and describes them as 'servant-girls' to Jacob (see 30:3 and later on); the same word used to describe Abraham's relationship with Hagar, his concubine. They were, despite their lowly role, matriarchs of the nation of Israel through their sons! The way that Rachel and Leah used their maids to have children for them by Jacob is beyond our bounds of acceptability, as is polygamy itself, but in the social context of the day, it was relatively accepted. (Who knows what future generations, let alone God, will make of modern surrogacy methods!) The names of Bilhah / Rachel's two sons reflected Rachel's sense of vindication (Dan) after years of struggle (Naphtali) with her sister. The names of Zilpah / Leah's two sons reflect simple unaffected happiness; 'good fortune' (Gad) and happiness (Asher).

However, there is unfinished business for both women in the matter of access to Jacob's tent. There is more to be said about their relationship, and the conflict continues tomorrow!

### ***The names of the first eight sons***

In the following chart, the first eight sons of Jacob are listed, together with their mother and the core meaning (as near as we can get to them) of their names:

Reuben	Leah	<b>My oppression is seen</b> (by God)
Simeon	Leah	<b>He (God) has heard</b>
Levi	Leah	(I will be) <b>attached</b> (to God)
Judah	Leah	<b>He will be praised</b>
Dan	Bilhah / Rachel	(I am) <b>vindicated</b>
Naphtali	Bilhah / Rachel	(I have struggled and) <b>prevailed</b>
Gad	Zilpah / Leah	<b>Good fortune!</b>
Asher	Zilpah / Leah	<b>I am happy!</b>

What is remarkable about this table is the list of name 'meanings'. This particular passage of Scripture comes right in the middle of the whole story of Jacob, and this means that from the manner in which most Hebrew narratives are constructed, it can be expected to have special meaning for the story as a whole. The sequence of thoughts that we are offered here is remarkably similar to two things. Firstly, is it typical of a large number of psalms, in which the