

pronounced, and therefore its reasonably exact meaning. We expect to be able to do this today, but it is not always possible in Hebrew.

The last four names are clearly prophetic of Jacob's bearing of the Covenant promises of God, and point forward to a time when the names of these children would not reflect the feelings of the women who bore them, but the work of God through the whole family of Jacob. Chapter 30 comes at the very centre of the stories of Jacob, and it may well be the intention of Scripture to tell us that this was the time at which Jacob's fortunes began to turn. As explained above, Jacob was probably at his lowest point during the bearing of these children; a slave to Laban and to his warring wives. God, however, had much more for him.

Application

If you were to read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, you might be taken aback by how quickly Jesus makes it plain that the path of Christian discipleship is a way of suffering (Matt 5:10,11). The Old Testament too, makes it plain that the way to blessing is often through suffering, as it was in the life of Jacob. When we then consider that our salvation was won for us by Christ's suffering on the Cross, then it is amazing that we do not easily accept today that our own life's path may contain suffering if we are to follow the Lord's plan for our lives. It was recently explained to me that the reason we forget this is not that this is not clear from Scripture, but that if the preaching we hear on Sundays constantly tells us that when we yield all to Christ we will be saved and all will be well, then we don't receive the whole message. God's victories are won through suffering, and we are most blessed when we accept that the sufferings we experience are opportunities for the grace of God to lead us to greater peace, to a deeper walk and to a closer fellowship with our Lord.

It is my sincere hope that no Christian today bears the suffering either of being one of two or more wives in a marriage (for a woman), or (for a man) of being married to more than one woman. Sexual intrigue outside a Godly state of monogamous marriage is always a recipe for disaster. However, there are a thousand other oppressions in today's world that are pernicious; the evils of economic slavery, the inequalities of world pay which alienate the poor, the exploitation of our planet for greed, and the evils of sexual slavery and pornography to name but a few. The question must be faced; are these evil sufferings part of the life of this world which the Lord will guide us through in this life? Or will their solution only come at the end of time? There have been thousands of oppressions in the history of civilisation which have spurred humanity to greater things, often by the grace of God (as in this story of Jacob) and many in the history of the Church. However, do you, like me, ask whether the sheer scale and corruption of the world at the present time speaks of the final return of our Lord and His imminent return?

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you believe that God redeems situations today where people do good things for the wrong reasons (as with Rachel and the mandrakes in this OT story)?
2. What picture do you get of Jacob in this passage of scripture? How has he changed since the beginning of his story?
3. What picture do you get of Rachel in this passage of scripture? How has she been changed by all that has happened?

Suggestions about discipleship challenges

Think and pray about the last point made in the Bible study. Do you believe it is likely that because of the scale of oppression and wrongdoing in our world, our Lord's return is imminent? Is this a realistic debate for God's people to have or should we remain satisfied by Jesus' statement that we 'will not know the day or the hour' (Matt 24:36)? Due to the significant number of films and TV programmes that imply the 'end of the world as we know it', should we be discussing this more fully?

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, You alone know when You will come again in glory and bring all this world's suffering to an end. Strengthen Your people who live through troubled times today, and save them, we pray, from the Evil One; AMEN

Prayer

(Dwell on one or more of these simple prayers as you are led – but remember the pattern; it covers much)

I praise You Lord Jesus Christ
I confess my sin and shame
I request Your help to change my life
I seek Your forgiveness, and offer mine to others
I ask for Your healing and give thanks for Your peace
AMEN

Further Suggestions for Prayer

Weekly Theme: The world of Advertising

Continue to pray for honesty in advertising. Pray especially about advertisements which claim cures or therapies which are bogus and which do much damage. Pray that proper science and medicine is not compromised by those who are simply trying to exploit human weaknesses.

Meditation

Bring love into the heart of our homes, Lord God.

You who can cure the love-lost-ness
that drives so many marriages apart despite their promises;
You who can teach a man and woman
to find with joy that they can love each other more as years go by;
You who can enable growing children
to find their own way, their own life, and still love their parents;
You who can give enduring strength
to those who care for their aged, sacrificing all to do what's 'right';
You who can bind two hearts as one
in life's immeasurable mysteries, with love and grace and passion;

Bring love into the hearts of our homes, Lord God

Bible Study - Genesis 30:14-24

¹⁴ One day around the time of the wheat harvest Reuben found mandrakes as he walked in the countryside, and brought them to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, 'Please give me some of your son's mandrakes.' ¹⁵ But she said to her, "Does having my husband mean so little to you that you would trade him for my son's mandrakes?" Rachel said, "Then he may sleep with you tonight for your son's mandrakes."

¹⁶ That evening, when Jacob came home from the field, Leah went out to meet him, and said, 'Come in to me; for I have hired you, truly, with my son's mandrakes!' So he slept with her that night. ¹⁷ God listened to Leah, and she conceived and gave birth to a fifth son for Jacob. ¹⁸ Leah said, 'God has given me my reward for I gave my maid to my husband'; so she named him Issachar. ¹⁹ And Leah conceived again, and gave birth to a sixth son for Jacob. ²⁰ Then Leah said, 'God has given me a good dowry; now my husband will honour me, because I have given him six sons'; so she named him Zebulun. ²¹ Afterwards she gave birth to a daughter, and she named her Dinah.

²² Then God remembered Rachel. God listened to her and opened her womb. ²³ She conceived and gave birth to a son, and said, 'God has taken away my shame'; ²⁴ and she named him Joseph, saying, 'May the LORD add to me another son!'

Review

The astonishing story of the birth of Jacob's sons continues. If we did not know that twelve of his sons would one day become blessed as the heads of their respective clans of Israel, we might be

tempted to wonder when the whole sequence of events was going to stop! In this passage it stops with the birth of Joseph, the firstborn of Rachel, and the one chosen by God to save his entire family from drought in the famous story at the end of Genesis. In total, twelve children were born to Jacob whilst he was working for Laban in the second of the seven years he worked for him; eleven boys and one girl. In that time, Jacob worked for his father-in-law as a hired labourer (29:27), but longed to go home to his parents. We now know that he would go home a different man than when he left! We will discover later than one more child was to be born; Rachel gave birth to Benjamin some years later, after Jacob had managed to move his family back south to the Promised Land, but this birth would be one of tragedy, as Rachel died in childbirth (35:16f.)

After Yesterday's passage, which included the birth of Jacob's first eight sons, the story of the next three is very strange, and revolves around an odd episode where Leah acquires the right to sleep with her husband again after trading with Rachel some mandrakes found by her son. She was sufficiently interested in the mandrakes to trade them for access to her husband (30:15)! The mandrake was a plant that was highly prized in its day for its aphrodisiac and fertility qualities, and the young Reuben (probably around 6) had inadvertently given his mother a valuable commodity! Mandrake was relatively rare around Mesopotamia where they were living and was an expensive commodity, even in those times! Knowing this, the story becomes simpler. Rachel was the favoured but barren wife of Jacob, and Leah had stopped having access to her husband after the birth of her fourth child (29:35). Leah wanted access to Jacob's bed, and Rachel wanted the fertility treatment in order to conceive! A deal was done, Jacob did what he was told, and Leah conceived three times, bearing two sons and a daughter! Later, Rachel conceived and finally bore the child that she so longed for.

The mandrakes are an intriguing part of the story, and we shall study this more fully later on, but a closer look at the story shows that as in yesterday's full Bible study, the Lord's purposes are explained through the names of the children. Issachar has a name which means 'may God be gracious'; Zebulun's name is difficult to trace, but is clearly related to 'honour' or 'reward'. Dinah means 'vindication (similar to 'Dan') and Joseph means 'may he (God) add...' All these names draw us back to the Covenant blessings of God given to the forefathers and promised to Jacob; the honour of God's choice of His people and their vindication that would bless 'all the nations of the world', and the blessing of fertility (implied by Joseph's name). It is clear that Jacob's life is gradually being turned around by God, and the Jacob we meet in the following chapters is a different man from the one who turned up at Laban's door. The lessons of faith are frequently hard won.

Going Deeper

A great price was being paid by the family of Jacob for the deceptions that led them to be where they were. Yet God was still able to lead them through with a blessing, despite their personal problems and idiosyncrasies (see Rachel and the mandrakes!) The names of Jacob's sons are prophetic, and speak of things to come.

The family background

There was obviously deep a rooted mistrust and suspicion between Rachel and Leah. During yesterday's passage, Leah had seemed contented enough at the bearing of four sons (29:35), giving her fourth son the name 'Judah' ('praise the Lord'). However, she was competitive enough to present her maid to Jacob after Rachel did as if to say 'I can do anything you can do!' (30:9-13). The whole family appeared to be fraught with tensions that lay barely beneath the surface, and this was hardly surprising in a polygamous marriage. By bringing these tensions out into the open, Scripture makes a clear statement that this is not God's purpose for His people; however, the Lord was not going to allow even this to stand in the way of His great Covenant promise to bless the children of Abraham, and it was becoming clear that Jacob's sons would be the means whereby the Lord would substantially extend His people beyond the small family units seen so far in the families of Abraham and Sarah, and of Isaac and Rebekah. It was a dramatic change in the prospects for the people of God's promise.

It remains true to this day that turmoil and strife, whilst painful in themselves, can frequently be the seedbed of change for the better. That certainly seems to have been the case for Jacob. He arrived to greet Laban (29:13) as the great deceiver, and a son thrown out of his home. Yet he was now the one being manipulated by his wives, who were playing games behind his back to try and win his affection (30:16). Jacob had also been reduced to the level of a shepherd (as

we shall discover in tomorrows passage) earning little more than that of a hired labourer, and all for the family that was rapidly growing around him, requiring his time, attention and guidance. He clearly had the love of his favoured wife Rachel, but Jacob seems to be reduced to a man who could do little about the manipulation of his wives described in this passage.

The story of the Mandrakes

Mandrakes were an aphrodisiac. They were a shrub like plants which had a yellow, plum like fruit, and also had large, edible and fragrant fleshy roots. The history of the plant is clear from its name; the Hebrew word literally meaning 'love-fruits'. Centuries later, the Greek god of love and sex, Aphrodite was called 'lady of the Mandrake'! There is also some reasonably clear evidence that even before this time, the mandrake was associated with a number of deities and fertility gods worshipped by the ancients.

Rachel, evidently, was interested in the fertility property of the mandrakes! As senior wife, she had the right of deciding who should have access her husband's bed, and she traded this right for the mandrakes, keen to take advantage in due course of their rare properties. Her desperation was shown in the way she pleaded with Leah 'please let me have ...' (30:14); 'please' can mean many things, and this was anguish rather than mere politeness!

The first results of the exchange were that Leah bore two more sons, making up her contribution to six sons (30:20); and then she had Dinah. It may well be that other daughters were born to Jacob, as they are mentioned later (34:19f.), thought it is quite uncertain as to when these children would have been born. Dinah is mentioned by name because of her important role in the story of Genesis 34.

Rachel's conception of Joseph and his birth was a triumph in more ways than one. Firstly, it is recorded as taking place after Leah's three previous children, roughly three years after the incident with the mandrakes. The significance of this is that the birth of Joseph was not therefore a result of Rachel's interest in love-potions from mandrakes, or other fertility rites! It is very important for the whole of Scripture that when Joseph was born, Rachel gave thanks to God alone (30:23) and she declared 'God has taken away my shame'; adding 'may the Lord add to me another son'. Her strength of feeling about the future was reflected in Joseph's name, which is a form of a verb which means 'He (God) will add ...'

Rachel was loved by Jacob, but there is clear evidence in Scriptures that she was prone to following the other gods of the land of Mesopotamia rather than the God of her husband's forefathers. Later on, there is a famous story of her stealing the 'household gods' from her brother Laban (31:35) deceiving not just her brother but also her husband about her idolatrous worship. We do not know the full story of her spiritual anguish about childbearing, but it was important that when he was born, she was able to say that it was the Lord's work alone.

The names of the sons

Reuben	Leah	My oppression is seen (by God)
Simeon	Leah	He (God) has heard
Levi	Leah	(I will be) attached (to God)
Judah	Leah	He will be praised
Dan	Bilhah / Rachel	(I am) vindicated
Naphtali	Bilhah / Rachel	(I have struggled and) prevailed
Gad	Zilpah / Leah	Good fortune!
Asher	Zilpah / Leah	I am happy!
Issachar	Leah	May God be gracious
Naphtali	Leah	Honour (or glory?)
Dinah	Leah	She is vindicated
Joseph	Rachel	'God will add'

Each of the last four names here are difficult to translate, and scholars have found it difficult to pin the words down and make sense of them, given the different explanations of them that are in various Scriptures (see also Genesis 49, for example). One reason for this is that ancient Hebrew texts have no vowels, and it is therefore difficult to pinpoint how a word was used or