

When God blesses the weak

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if you've been following our series closely, then you may have picked up a common theme running through the series so far. Each week, as we follow the story of Jacob, we've seen God's sovereignty as the common theme.

God is in control of His world and accomplishing His purpose. But each week, there has also been variations on the theme. Because God's sovereignty is actually played out in different situations and circumstances.

So in the very first week, we saw how God's sovereignty works alongside human responsibility. God's in control, but humans are still responsible.

Two weeks ago, in chapter 27, when Jacob and Rebekah had deceived Esau and Isaac, we realized that not even human sin can frustrate God's purposes.

In fact, God's sovereignly able to use even human sin, mysterious though it is, for His purpose. And finally, last week, we saw God's able to work even when our faith is weak or tentative.

[1 : 1 2] Well, this week, we continue to see God at work. But this time, we see how, in His sovereignty, God's habit is to bless the weak. Hence the title.

To raise up the lowly to bring about His purposes. So, let's get into this week's story with its many twists and turns. Now, one thing about good stories, I think, is that when there are complex characters, that is, people who aren't one-dimensional, that makes for good storytelling.

So, this is when the good guys have flaws, let's say, or the bad guys have redeeming features. In other words, characters that are actually human, instead of one-dimensional.

And I think part of what makes the story tonight so captivating are that we have complex human characters. There's actually two stories here, one nestled within the other.

And in each, a pair of characters face off against each other. And so, to begin with, we have Jacob and his uncle Laban, which I've labeled on the outline D1 and D2.

[2 : 2 4] So, the ABC kids have two bananas in pajamas, B1 and B2. We have two deceivers here in chapter 29, D1 and D2. D1, Jacob, we've already met before, when he deceived his brother Esau.

And last week, we found D1 at his low point, having to leave home and uncertain of his future. But after God's reassuring dream to him, Jacob, this week, begins with a spring in his steps.

So, verse 1, if you look at me, it says, Then Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the eastern peoples. Now, the phrase, Jacob continued on his journey, is literally, Jacob lifted his feet, implying that he was being purposeful.

And now we see, as the story unfolds, that this purposefulness actually translates into his actions as well. Julian has already read this part of the story, so I wouldn't sort of do it again.

But what we find is Jacob arriving at a well, where some shepherds have already gathered. They want to water their flocks, but as we read in verse 2, Because the stone over the well is large, they are waiting for others to get there, so that they can all roll it away together.

[3 : 43] So Jacob strikes up a conversation with them, hoping to find his uncle Laban. And his payoff is immediate, as we read, because these shepherds hail from the same city as Laban, the city of Haran.

In fact, they say, look, Rachel, his daughter, is on her way to this well. Well, as Rachel arrives, Jacob, in a rush of adrenaline, single-handedly lifts the stone off the well, something that a few hardy shepherds couldn't do before him.

And in his enthusiasm, he kisses Rachel and bursts into loud weeping. Now, it may be that Jacob's trying to impress Rachel here.

Many of you may have tried that before as guys. Simply, you know, anyway, if you're interested in a goal. Or it may just be that this is a man who was just so excited that he's found his uncle so quickly.

We don't know. But actually, when we read verse 13, and he next meets Laban in person, in his excitement, he tells his uncle all the things that has happened to him so far.

[5 : 03] And this to a man that he's really not met before. It also says there that Laban hurried out to meet Jacob.

And Laban himself embraced and kissed Jacob and brought him to his home. And this little phrase or couple of sentences actually reminds us of the same thing that Laban himself did many years ago back in chapter 24.

So we did that last year in our series. There he met Abraham's servant who had come to the same place to find a wife for Isaac, Jacob's father.

Back then, this servant had brought many gifts with him. And so giving away Rebekah to Isaac actually turned out to be a good deal for Laban.

It was lucrative for him, actually. And so perhaps this may explain his initial excitement to see Jacob. Back then as well, Laban had tried to detain the servant, if you recall.

[6 : 06] He tried to make him stay for another 10 days. And so as the story unfolds, we're wondering as well now, is Laban going to try something similar this time as well?

But what I want to do is actually ponder Laban's response in verse 14. For after Jacob has told him all these things, Laban says to him, we read there verse 14, you are my own flesh and blood.

Now this is actually a rather ambiguous statement. On the face of it, we take it that Laban is welcoming Jacob. Yes, Jacob has proven his flesh and blood.

So yeah, come on in, welcome. But Laban may also be expressing an obligation to take him in, even though he's got nothing to offer. Yeah, all right, you are flesh and blood.

I guess I have to take you in. But in the back of the mind, he might be thinking, what am I going to do with this burden that's just come? And I have to put him up. And then as we continue with the story, there is even a third possibility.

[7 : 17] Laban might be thinking, and seeing in his own flesh and blood, a dependent who's happy to get food and board, he might be thinking, this might be my chance to actually take advantage of him.

Yes, my flesh and blood. Now see what I can make of him, as it were. And so the scene is set for a showdown between D1 and D2, something which will then actually play out, not just tonight, but over the next few chapters as well.

But first, Laban says to Jacob in verse 15, after he's been there for a month, just because you're a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be.

Now again, there's ambiguity in this offer, because at face value, it seems like a fair thing to do. But notice, Jacob's already been working for a full month, for free, for no pay.

But more to the point, if Jacob's truly flesh and blood, then why are we even talking about wages? I mean, that's not the way you treat family, is it? To be doing this kind of deal.

[8 : 25] And if Jacob has told Laban all things, then surely he knows that Jacob's desire is for a wife. He's here because he's looking for a wife, and possibly from taking one of his daughters.

And in fact, immediately we're told that Jacob does have his eye on one of them. Not the older one, Leah, who unfortunately has weak eyes, but Rachel, who is lovely in form and beautiful.

Now, we're not sure what weak eyes means. It's possibly a physical defect of sorts. But the idea really is just to contrast Leah with the beautiful Rachel.

Notice she's lovely in form and beautiful. And so Jacob makes this offer in verse 18. I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter, Rachel.

And it's a deal which Laban readily accepts. Because I think as scholars have worked out, it's actually twice the going rate for a dowry. So this was a good deal for Laban.

[9 : 32] So the deal is done. And then the next two verses, I consider actually to be the most romantic verses in the whole story.

So to get us in the mood, I'm actually going to get David to accompany the reading with some romantic music on his violin. So David...

David... David... David... David... David... David... David...

David... David... So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel. But they seem like only a few days to him. I keep playing, David. David... David... David... David...

Because of his love for her. you get the drift right, don't you?

[10 : 29] in fact David actually played at his wedding this very piece for Yvonne as she was walking down the aisle so you know can you feel your heart melting for this couple?

what sacrifice from Jacob what great love it must be true love but the thing is romantic as that is it actually comes to a screeching halt in the very next verse in verse 21 because when the time was up we hear these rather jarring words from Jacob give me my wife my time is completed and I want to make love to her now if you were Rachel I mean you'd be a bit taken aback wouldn't you?

where's that tender wooing and romance? you know it almost feels like she's being traded, isn't she? between Jacob and Laban so transactional but notice here again the ambiguity in the words it actually sets the scene for Laban's deception now early in verse 19 Laban had actually already avoided mentioning Rachel by name and now Jacob inexplicably does the same all he says is give me my wife I want to make love to her there's no mention of Rachel's name which actually allows Laban to capitalize on that ambiguity he can now claim that he's not being deceptive when actually his every intent was to deceive Jacob and so here we have the irony of the drama play out because what Laban does now is exactly what Jacob actually did to Isaac a couple of chapters ago he does a switcheroo except now it's the older instead of the younger that is present so Leah under the cover of darkness goes with Jacob on the wedding night and come the next morning as the curtain is parted and the first light shines on the wedding bed

Jacob gets the shock of his life and verse 25 is quite comical actually when morning came there was Leah ta-da looking demurely at Jacob with her weak eyes now Jacob's shock I think turns to outrage but there's really no comeback for him is there because Laban never actually promised Rachel by name moreover the custom was to marry the older before the younger and so Jacob's actually trapped since this marriage is consummated but Laban now in sort of like an act of generosity as it were he offers him Rachel but for another seven years of labor and it even comes like a concession because he says all Jacob needs to do verse 27 is finish this daughter's bridal week that's Leah's then we'll give you the younger one also in return for another seven years of work in other words he's saying marry first pay later good deal now just as an aside

I want to say that the Bible here is not approving of polygamy it's simply just reporting things as they are warts and all and in fact as we read the story we see the effects of this polygamy actually which brings a lot of strife to Jacob's family not just in his day but even to the next generation now most of us if we're asked at this point in the story would probably be siding with Jacob and Rachel in this conflict because that's our modern western mindset isn't it what Jacob and Rachel have is true love and that's essential for a happy marriage but for people who are from a traditional culture perhaps if you're Asian your grandparents even or their parents they would actually read this slightly differently just like the original readers of this story they would have had mixed feelings because on the one hand they would actually be feeling for Leah who actually did deserve to be married first and they might perhaps even side with Laban's actions because he's doing the right thing by the family marriage was for securing the future of the family not simply about romance but against that

[14 : 51] Laban's deception would have been offensive plus the way he's actually used his daughters to effectively get 14 years of free labor they would not have been pleased by that and I think we wouldn't either but all this deception actually sets up the conflict for the next pair of characters Leah and Rachel two wives which I've called W1 and W2 locked in marriage to the same man and both vying for his love but just like what his parents did verse 30 tells us that Jacob showed favoritism he loved Rachel more than Leah and so what happens is that Leah the older and first wife finds herself instead of being the matriarch rather at the bottom of the pecking order whereas Rachel the younger but more beautiful wife she ranks ahead of her because she's favored in Jacob's eyes now we're gonna

I've left the reading off of this next section until now but here's what I would like you to do as I read from verses 31 of chapter 29 to chapter 30 of verse 24 end of the passage I've got a little table for you in the handout and I'd like you to just have a go at jotting down each child's name as they're born under their mother's name now there are four mothers there in case you sort of missed it but I skipped over earlier that Leah was also given a maidservant Zilpah as part of a marriage that's a sort of custom that sort of a maid to help in the marriage while Rachel got Bilhah as part of her so that's why we have four women there okay so if you've got your bibles there again on verse 31 I'm gonna start reading and I'm gonna then ask you to put those names down in the right column okay ready when the Lord saw that Leah was not loved he enabled her to conceive but Rachel remained childless

Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son she named him Reuben for she said it is because the Lord has seen my misery surely my husband will love me now she conceived again and when she gave birth to a son she said because the Lord heard that I am not loved he gave me this one too so she named him Simeon again she conceived and when she gave birth to a son she said now at last my husband will become attached to me because I have borne him three sons so he was named Levi she conceived again and when she gave birth to a son she said this time I will praise the Lord so she named him Judah then she stopped having children when Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children she became jealous of her sister so she said to Jacob give me children or I'll die Jacob became angry with her and said am I in the place of God who has kept you from having children then she said here is

Bilhah my servant sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and I too can build a family through her so she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife Jacob slept with her and she became pregnant and bore him a son then Rachel said God has vindicated me he has listened to my plea and given me a son and because of this she named him Dan Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son then Rachel said I have had a great struggle with my sister and I have won so she named him Naphtali when Leah saw that she had stopped having children she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son Dan Leah said what good fortune so she named him Gad Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son Dan Leah said how happy I am the women will call me happy so she named him

Asher during wheat harvest Reuben went into the fields and found some mandrake plants which he brought to his mother Leah Rachel said to Leah please give me some of your son's mandrakes but she said to her wasn't it enough that you took away my husband will you take my son's mandrakes too very well Rachel said he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes so when Jacob came in from the fields that evening Leah went out to meet him you must sleep with me she said I've hired you with my son's mandrakes so he slept with her that night God listened to Leah and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son then Leah said God has rewarded me for giving my servant to my husband so she named him Issachar Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son then Leah said God has presented me with a precious gift this time my husband will treat me with honor because I have borne him six sons and so she named him

[20 : 09] Zebulun sometime later she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dina then God remembered Rachel he listened to her and enabled her to conceive Joseph she she became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said God has taken away my disgrace she named him Joseph and said may the Lord add to me another son he will and said if you want to check your answers I've got that on the side as well it's rather telling isn't it if this was a soccer match then Lea United is ahead nine goals isn't it and Rachel City is three goals now if you take away the substitute wives at the bottom it looks even worse for Rachel, isn't it? 7-1.

But who's responsible for all this? Well, verse 31, it's the Lord, isn't it? Who saw that Leah wasn't loved and enabled her to conceive. Meanwhile, he closes Rachel's womb.

And so early on, in quick succession, Leah goes 4-0 up. Now, if we look at the names of her son, we actually get a story of her emotional state. Now, as parents, we know that naming our children is a great privilege. And Alyssa and I took great care with Emma and Lauren's names. And in particular, we chose to tell the gospel, at least we're trying, with their middle names.

So Emma is Emma Grace, and Lauren is Lauren Faith. So now, hopefully, as they grow up, they will always remember in their names that there is a reminder of God's grace and the encouragement to respond in faith.

But poor Leah's children. Their names, look at their names. It's a record of her struggles, isn't it? Children are meant to be a testimony of the love in a marriage.

[22 : 12] Instead, they are testified to the loveless marriage that she was stuck in with Jacob. So her first son's name is Reuben, because verse 32, The Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now.

Verse 33 with Simeon, Because the Lord heard that I'm not loved, He gave me this one too. Verse 34 with Levi, Now at last my husband will become attached to me.

Rather hoping, rather than speaking reality, because I have borne him three sons. Each name is sort of like a cry to Jacob, isn't it? Hey, Jacob, I'm here.

Love me. And yet, you know, she isn't. Later we see a glimpse of how she's treated. She's supposed to be the first wife and that whole mandrake affair, it actually suggests that she was being deprived of her conjugal rights.

It seems that Rachel's the one who gets to decide who Jacob sleeps with each night. And Leah had to resort to giving away mandrakes in order to hire Jacob for the night.

[23 : 22] Now in case you're wondering, mandrakes are meant to be aphrodisiacs and that's why they're being traded like that. Rachel was actually on top, wasn't she, in this power struggle because Jacob loved her and Leah is at the bottom.

But as God blessed Leah with children, then her status in the family slowly rises. And you see the names reflect that as well. She may not be loved by Jacob, but now she's the mother of Jacob's heirs.

At the same time, Rachel starts with her stocks higher. Jacob loves her and she's got every expectation of having children. But then, the longer she goes without them, the lower her stocks fall.

And so the story also tells of her frustration as well. Jacob and Rachel, for example, are meant to be in love with each other, but the very first exchange we read between them is actually a quarrel, isn't it?

Rather dramatically, Rachel says to Jacob in verse 1 of chapter 30, when she can't conceive and she's jealous, she says, give me children or I'll die. That's fairly dramatic, isn't it?

[24 : 33] And to which Jacob retorts, am I in place of God who has kept you from having children? Now of course that's true, but that's a rather, you know, you should have to ask my wife, but that's a rather uncaring way to say something, isn't it?

And if you contrast that, for example, with what Isaac, his father, did, remember what he did when Rebecca couldn't have children? He prayed for her, right?

He prayed on behalf of her. Don't see that happening with Jacob. And so in desperation, Rachel makes Jacob, you know, sleep with her maidservant and then she bears two sons for Rachel.

Of course, not to be outdone, Leah does the same because she stopped having children too and her maidservant, Zilpah, has two as well, so sort of cancels each other out. That's sort of open warfare, isn't it?

That's such a dysfunctional family. And then, as I said earlier, Rachel tries using mandrakes. It's meant to be a free aphrodisiac, meant to work, but still, no children.

[25 : 33] And then in a final insult, Leah goes on to have another two, Issachar and Zebulun, and then a daughter to boot as well.

And God has really brought Rachel low, hasn't he? And I think she finally realizes that without God's blessing, she actually has no hope. But it's at that point, it's at that low point in her life, that God finally does, verse 21.

God remembered Rachel. Those are beautiful words. Whenever God remembered something, it's significant. He listened to her, enabled her to conceive.

She became pregnant and gave birth to her son and said, God has taken away my disgrace. She's got it now. She understands. She named him Joseph and said, May the Lord add to me another.

Not may Jacob, not may I, but may the Lord add to me another. No more blaming Jacob because she's looking for God to provide.

[26 : 45] Well, that's the story. And I think the reason that the story is here, first and foremost, is because it was important for the Israelites to know how their nation began.

in this rather messy and undignified way, God was building Israel. God was starting his nation, his people, Israel.

And this is a clear sign of how God is providing for Jacob and for the nation of Israel. But I think the story is also here because again, we see how God acts in the midst of humanity.

And the consistent picture or message in this story tonight is that God blesses the weak and the lowly. He blessed Leah when she was weak, unloved by Jacob, despised by Rachel.

But God gave her children and raised her esteem. She's the one that God uses to fulfill his promises. She becomes the mother of six tribes in her own right.

[27 : 49] And if you count Zilpa, that's eight. That's a clear majority of the twelve plus the daughter. But God also blessed Rachel. But only after she had been humbled and brought low, she finally gets a son.

And her disgrace, as she says, has been taken away. And so it's just as Peter says in our New Testament reading tonight, God opposes the pride, but he shows favor to the humble.

I'll put it back on the slide so you can see. And even if Jacob, and even Jacob, if you think about it, he too is blessed by God in his weakness too, isn't he?

Because in the whole story, Laban has the upper hand. He's just exacted 14 years from him. He's given him a wife that he doesn't really want. And yet, through all this, God is being, God is able to fulfill his promises through the events.

God was using all this to start to begin to make him into a great promise, a great nation, just as he promised. And so, I guess as we look at ourselves, that's the sort of thing that we can think about as well.

[29 : 05] How do we feel when we find ourselves at the bottom? Perhaps through no thought of our own, being discriminated against or bullied. It may be at school, it may be at work, it may even be at home where there's favoritism between brothers and sisters.

It's not a nice feeling, is it? To be overlooked, to be left out, to be unfairly treated. But I want to suggest that actually, when we know that God blesses the weak, it makes a difference to how we respond and look at life.

It actually makes a difference in how we respond when others are treated unjustly and we sort of stick up for them compared to when we ourselves are being unfairly treated.

Knowing that God blesses the weak should help us actually not to feel as if we need to rise up and retaliate. Now, I'm not suggesting that we never speak up or take actions that are within our control to try and bring fairness to our situation, but I want us to remember that we have a God actually whose eyes are on the weak and humble and that however we respond, we do so with the firm belief that God has got us covered.

He's the ultimate security we have. Then even if we are powerless to do anything, we know that God is in control and actually He's not indifferent to injustice, but that His favor is actually on those who are powerless.

[30 : 45] And you know, we can think of this as an example with us as a church as well because increasingly there are those in society, those with voice, those with power who are trying to marginalize us, aren't they?

To discount anyone who has faith, especially those with faith in Jesus. But we actually, we don't need to lose hope even though the tide of public opinion might be turning against God's people.

Why? Because we have a God who remembers His people just as He remembered Rachel. So Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 and verse 9, which I've got on the slide, that God's power is made perfect in weakness, in our weaknesses.

And again, on a similar vein, in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 27, Paul says, God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, the weak things to shame the strong, the lowly and despised things, the things that are not to nullify the things that are, so that no one can boast before Him.

So friends, let us never despair when we find ourselves in a position of weakness, when the strong take advantage of us because that's when God's glory and power can be most perfectly displayed in us.

[32 : 05] that is, after all, what we see in His own Son, Jesus, in the way He died, humbling and shameful though it was, and yet God raised Him up in glory and seated Him at the right hand.

And God used Him in weakness to achieve His great purposes for this world. And that's why Peter, in the two verses after that, verse 5 in our reading tonight, He likewise encourages us to humble ourselves, therefore, under the mighty and, can I add, sovereign hand of God.

Why? That He may exalt us in due time. Friends, we don't have to exalt ourselves or our name. We don't have to run around, you know, trying to big note ourselves in this world.

God has His eye on us. We can live at peace with our circumstances even when we are being mistreated. We can continue to look to God and allow Him to bless us in due time, to raise us up in due time.

And so, I want to encourage us to take that kind of attitude into our lives. The world doesn't know this kind of way of living. It's always, if you don't stand up for yourself, no one will stand up for you.

[33 : 27] But we have a God who will stand up for us even when we can't stand up for ourselves. Well, let's look to Him now in prayer and praise Him for that.

Father, we thank You again and again for Your great mercy and love upon us for how You look on the weak and the lowly and rather than despise them, You love them and You raise them up.

We thank You that even as we look to You through Your Son, Jesus, as we put our trust in You and realize our own helplessness to save ourselves, that we're not as great as we want others to think of us.

Yet, You look upon us and rather than look down on us, You save us and You raise us up. Help us to take that great confidence and assurance into our lives.

Help us to know that this is true because that is Your promise to us in Your Word. We pray this and ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.