

## A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church

By Chris Fillingham

“Loving Leah”

second in the series, “Learning to See”

Genesis 29:15-28

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Jacob grew up always being second choice. Even though he was a twin, his brother Esau was technically the first-born. And his brother Esau was bigger and stronger. Jacob was the runt.

So on the playground you can imagine, **Esau** was always chosen first.

Jacob was picked last.

Scripture says, their father Isaac loved **Esau** best... because he was a good hunter...

**Esau** was an all around guys' guy. Which meant **Esau** was always in the limelight.

Jacob on the other hand?...was more of a momma's boy. He spent his time in the kitchen learning to cook... and... learning to *scheme*.

Jacob's name means, “supplanter” or “tricky” you might say. And he lived up to that one... trying to live up to momma's expectations... trying to find a way to not be second choice.

And so, Tricky manipulates Esau into handing over his birthright. Then he gets in cahoots with his mother to trick dear, old, blind Dad and steal the family blessing away from Esau.

Of course Esau is outraged. He begins spewing murderous threats, and Tricky has to run for his life. And this morning we heard about this same Jacob a few years later being tricked himself, marrying not one, but two sisters...

So in light of *all* that:

I figured it would be a good time to preach on... biblical family values.

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Jacob does make a long journey to the land where his uncle Laban is supposed to live. And next week we're going to hear about what happened along the way on that journey. But it's when he gets to Laban's hometown that he sees *her* for the first time.

Rachel walks up to the well with her sheep and Jacob was smitten right then and there. Something captured Jacob's fancy.

I don't know if it was the mixture of dust and sweat caked on her forehead in this sexy way. Or the smell of sheep that followed her around.

But apparently the pheromones were thick... because when she walks into the scene, he kicks into “macho mode” and plays the hero.

The well was covered with a large stone. Jacob struts up with his chest puffed out like a frat boy on parade. “Let me take care of that for you.” He rolls the stone back, waters the sheep for her, and even sneaks a quick, innocent kiss.

Once Rachel finds out who he is, she runs home to tell her father, Laban, who welcomes Jacob into his house to stay.

And Jacob took him up on it...  
night after night... after night... after... night?(Jacob does have a price on his head back home, remember)

You know how it is.... houseguests can get old... after a week... maybe two... and Jacob's been there a month now. So rather than being a leech, Laban hires him on.

“What should your wages be?” Laban asks.

“I want to marry your daughter, Rachel. Will you give me her for... seven years of servitude?”

“Sounds good” Laban says. They shake on it and the deal is done.

Now as much as I love the Bible, I'm sure glad Dan didn't pull this one out when I asked for Jessi's hand in marriage. Then again, the Bible says it. I believe it. **So Biblical Family Value Lesson #1: If you want to marry my daughter, you have to be my indentured servant for 7 years!**

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That's what Jacob did. He worked those seven years... while flirting with Rachel. You know how they were. Always holding hands. Sitting a little too close for everyone else's comfort. Giving each other those googly eyes... longing to be married.

All those hours out in the fields with the sheep gave Jacob plenty of time to write her poetry:

*Roses are red, violets are blue*

*It's worth the wait, to marry you.*

*Your eyes are like the sun.*

*Your hair like wool on the sheep*

*Your beauty lights my days*

*Your presence haunts my sleep.*

They laughed and giggled, and snuck a kiss when no one was looking. They got the butterflies in their stomachs... just thinking about their wedding day. The scripture says those seven years, “**seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.**” ...Isn't that sweet?

Well, the day finally came. The long awaited time. So Laban planned a big celebration and wedding. They invited all their friends and all the neighbors and had a feast.

But you know the story.

That night Jacob went to the wedding chamber to consummate the marriage. And when he awoke the next morning, he looked over at the woman sleeping next to him...

and to his great surprise...

the woman he spent the night with wasn't Rachel,

but ***her older sister Leah.***

Now the question everyone always asks about this story is, how in the world did that happen? How did he not know?

Leah and Rachel are not the twins in this story. Irony isn't it?

So how did it happen?

Well... I have no idea.

But somehow Laban pulled it off. **So Biblical Family Values Lesson #2:** If I still don't like the guy after seven years servitude, he may not get to marry my daughter after all.

Jacob, the trickster, had been tricked. And you can bet, Jacob was furious.  
He didn't want Leah. He wanted Rachel.  
This was not the deal he made.  
This was not the woman he fell in love with.

And he had some words for Laban.

Laban tried to smooth things over. "You see Jacob, in our part of the world, you have to marry the older daughter first."

"Funny," Jacob says, "You forgot to mention that seven years ago... or last night for that matter!"

"Well... you know how it is. Seven years ago I thought I'd have plenty of time to marry off Leah, but it seems no one's really interested in her."

"No joke." Jacob said spitefully. "Neither am I."

"Tell you what," Laban bargains, "You finish this wedding week with Leah. Give her these seven days. And I'll give you Rachel to marry next week... in exchange for another seven years of servitude, of course."

And so that's what they did.  
Because this is how you make a happy, peaceful home, right?

Or not.

You can imagine the kind of animosity this creates between Leah and Rachel. And the way the Bible describes it is pretty entertaining. The two sisters start pawning over Jacob, competing for his attention, trying to be the perfect wife...  
keeping house, doing the laundry, *even using dryer sheets!*

They start competing with each other to see who can give him the most babies, even making deals with each other to spend an extra night in *his* bed. → [It's pretty obvious the scribes writing this story were men, isn't it!]

Truth be told though, it's not what Jacob wanted either. He didn't want Leah. He hadn't fallen in love with her. It was Rachel that he wanted,  
Rachel he'd written those poems about,

Rachel he'd flirted with and imagined life with for all that time.  
***But if he wants Rachel, he's going to have to accept Leah too.***

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And that... is not just true of Jacob.  
It's true of us all.

Because *when you get married... you're always marrying both Rachel and Leah.*

Yes, Rachel is the one you fell in love with. She's the one that gave you butterflies in your stomach. But one day you wake up and look at the person sleeping in your bed and realize that you're married to Leah.

It might happen in the first morning for you... but it might...  
It might not happen for years,  
but it ***will*** always happens.

You look over and realize that this is not what you bargained for. This is not the person you thought you were marrying.

Rachel is who you love.

Leah is who you get, and she is someone you barely know.

And I hate to tell you this, but *Leah, she isn't all that excited to be married to you either.* You weren't her first pick. You were just the last guy on the playground. And she lets you know that from time to time.

And so you fight, and you hurt one another. Your small, insecure selves and your wounded egos act against each other. And either consciously or unconsciously, you keep trying to turn her back into Rachel, ***but Leah is never going to become the Rachel you want her to be.***

That doesn't mean that Rachel is lost. But it does mean that if you want to be with Rachel... then your task, your work... the spiritual work of marriage, will always be... ***learning to love Leah too.***

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Now whenever I talk with people about marriage, I'm painfully aware that there are times when a marriage needs to end. There are times when the lies run too deep and the threats too great for a marriage to continue.

But I also know that there are times when we are tempted to jump ship too quickly. So somehow in the church we're invited to acknowledge both, and to hold up both the sanctity of marriage, and the depths of God's grace and love when divorce is a reality.

But for the vast majority of us who are married, and for those thinking about marriage, our spiritual work will always be to learn how to love both Rachel and Leah together.

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And that's a work that all of us are invited to, whether you are married or not. Because that reality... goes way beyond our marriages. It's true in all kinds of contexts and commitment. And ***it's most certainly true... here... in the church.***

You know it is. You visit and find a church that fancies you a bit. And when you find one, you start courting that place. And of course, they flash their best smile at you hoping you'll stay. Somehow, they *never* seem to introduce you to Leah.

So most of us fall in love with a Rachel church. And we're excited to have found this place, and glad to be there. But then one day, we bump into Leah... She's sitting across from us on some committee or in a Sunday school class

Or heaven forbid Leah shows up wearing your pastor's clothes. She will, you know.

And you hope it's a fluke. But it happens again and after awhile you realized that you've married both Leah and Rachel. Both are there.

Both are here... among us. And both are here... in me.

And so we will... this church will... disappoint you at some point.

I will disappoint you.

And you will disappoint me.

That will always be true.

**The question is for all of us, can we learn to also love Leah?**

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There's a really fascinating Hebrew word used in verse 17 to describe Leah's eyes when we're first introduced to her. It's a very confusing word. In fact the only thing that scholars agree about this Hebrew word is the fact that we don't really know how to translate it, or what its intention was.

In this passage, it could mean two very different things.

Either it could suggest that Leah's eyes were delicate and "lovely", or they were "weak" and squinty, giving her a homely, un-attractive look. Either this word is a complement about her beauty, or a remark about how unattractive she was. And the thing is, the best scholars in the world don't know which it should be.

But they have to translate it somehow. They can't just ignore it. So when translators come to this word in the story, they have a choice to make. Neither is wrong. It's completely up to the perspective of the individual translator. One writes her eyes are weak. Another writes Leah's eyes are lovely. Neither is more right than the other.

Of course I don't know what the original intention of this word was, but I can't help but wonder if the Holy Spirit is at work in the mystery of this word... inviting us to a deeper reading. ... inviting us to recognize that we too *can choose* our perspective. We can see Leah as homely... or **we can change perspective and see Leah as delicate and lovely.**

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Jacob seems to make that shift... or at least in part. There is on-going tension between Rachel and Leah... But an interesting twist happens in the story.

Rachel dies while the whole clan is journeying between two regions. And so Jacob buries Rachel on the side of the road, leaving her behind.<sup>1</sup>

But when Leah dies, he buries her in the family plot. He buries her alongside his grandparents, Abraham and Sara, and his parents, Isaac and Rebekah. In other words, Jacob lays Leah to rest in the place of honor.

And **years later**, when he was on his deathbed in Egypt, he made his children promise to bring his remains back from Egypt where they were, to be laid alongside... Leah.<sup>2</sup>

Life has a way of helping us change perspective.

Along the way you can learn to love Leah... and be at rest beside her.

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And if you do, it may just save much more than your marriage.

It may save your soul.

Because not only do Rachel and Leah exist in your spouse, and exist in your church, and exist in your friendships....

***Rachel and Leah exist... within you,***

the parts you love and the parts you hate about yourself,

the parts you're proud of, and the parts you try to hide,

your beautiful eyes and your weak eyes...

one and the same... within you.

But remember, you are, we are, the beloved of God.

God has said, "You are my beloved... the one I cherish. Not because I only see Rachel, but because I have created both Leah and Rachel and love the whole of who you are."

So work on loving Leah in your spouse.

And work on loving Leah in your church.

But most of all, learn to love Leah in you...

so that one day you might lay down in peace...

with the eternal lover of your soul.

Amen.

Silent Meditation:

*The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within our reach is joy. There is radiance and glory in the darkness could we but see - and to see we have only to look. I beseech you to look!*

~ Fra Giovanni, 1513

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 35:19

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 49:29-32