

Heart Idols in a Troubled Home

Genesis 29:31-30:24

Introduction There is no greater temptation to the heart than to love, to want a good thing too much.

Illustrative List

- Peace
- Being loved
- Our Children
- Intimacy
- Friends
- Control
- Order

Think of things that are good that we all tend to love too much, to want at all costs. Think of the things that you feel like are needs, things you can't live without.

What a raft of trouble and trial comes when we do not please God. The Bible narratives show us often the natural consequences and Divine chastening attendant to sinful and unwise living. It is power of the Bible stories. They ring true in the midst of the mess while existing as sign-posts to Christ and all that He is and offers for hope and help.

We have come this morning to a text that is both difficult to really grapple with and yet so plain in its trouble. How do we get here? Well, Jacob has married two women, one greatly loved and the other somewhat despised – what terrible heart trouble and strife this brings. It is all set up for us in verse 30 of Genesis 29. “He (Jacob) loved Rachel more than Leah and served Laban for 7 years for her.”

So, what is the point of this text? Leah is almost pathetic in her yearning for her husband's love. Rachel is clearly a wife after Jacob's own heart. Jacob appears to be willing to be intimate with a wife whom he does not seem to love yet over 7 years produces a child a year. When there ought to be great joy what we see are heart idols in a troubled home.

The Unloved Blessed by God (29:31-35)

The first four children are born with heart exposing sentences of pain and longing mingled with trust and praise.

Her Dependence upon God

Through this paragraph we see the Leah's dependence upon God. She acknowledges that each son she bears comes from God. Her deep faith in God who loves her and blesses her causes her to walk in obedient worship. She responds to God as the giver of her blessings – He has taken notice of her (v.32) and has heard her (v.33). So she will praise Him (v.35).

We are encouraged then to be intentional in our dependence upon God. There is a kind of dependence that is forced upon us. God kicks all the slats out from us and we either hang on to Him or we sink. Too many Christians are quietly and simply self-reliant, depending on themselves. Maybe this is you. It takes major catastrophe to shake your self-confidence and self-reliance. Then you can look so spiritual when in the desperate times you cry out in private and public dependence.

But it is so much better for us to choose to recognize what is true all along anyway. Self-reliance is a mirage, a myth, an illusion. God desires and designs that

we be self-consciously dependent on Him at all times. This is a function of praying without ceasing. A heart that is dependent on God will send up sentences of prayer for grace, wisdom, insight, help and even love, praise and adoration.

And you ought to love it to be like this. It ought to thrill your heart to be utterly dependent upon God *and to say so all the time*. Then we will know that God takes notice, hears and moves on our behalf so that we will praise Him.

Her Progression of Sons

She is blessed as she produces a progression of sons. At the human level, this is a bit astonishing. She is Jacob's wife. She is the first wife. She loves him and presents herself to him. We can wonder from our perspective about the why's and what's of their intimacy. Yet over 4 years, she becomes pregnant each year and gives birth to a son.

Israel's familial and tribal lineage is being rehearsed here. The family squabbling and strife simply grows up over the centuries into tribal dissent and division. Yet God is pleased to bring into existence the first of His chosen people. From the progression of the first four sons of Leah come the prominent tribes. She brings forth Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah. Later on, Levi will be chosen and set aside as the priests unto God. Judah will become the royal tribe from which Israel's kings will descend and whose great end will be in Jesus Christ, the final King.

Her Expressions of Pain

The names she gives the sons speak of her pain. She is unloved (maybe even hated – see verse 31). She has become a wife through deceit. She was not the one who was loved, longed and labored for. She was the surprise the morning after. It is almost certain that she had little or no choice in the matter. She was eldest. She was to marry first. She was to do what her father said. Now she is in a marriage where her husband loves her not and her sister is the apple of his eye.

Listen to her longing in the boy's names.

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| Reuben | She is experiencing affliction and longs for her husband's love. |
| Simeon | She is experiencing hatred and rejection and knows God's care. |
| Levi | She is experiencing loneliness and alienation and longs for her husband to be attached to her. |
| Judah | Now there is no complaint. Upon the birth of the son from whom future kings will come, there will be nothing but praise. |

It would be easy to wonder about whether her desire to be loved by her husband has become an inordinate desire. I do not think anything in the text points us to that at this point. What we see seems to be more hope and longing mixed. Her husband is intimate with her. Out of that a son is born. Hopefully now he will see her value and treasure her, love her and become attached to her. But it was not to be.

This is often the way it is. You have a real and legitimate desire for what God commands someone else to give you. Maybe, it is the love and affection due a spouse. Maybe it is the rightful recognition due someone under your authority. But then they withhold it or even deny it. How will you respond? Will you crave it to the point you will sin to get it or sin when you don't have it? Will you be content to continue to long for it, but stay submitted to the sweet and good providence of God?

Now, beloved, this is where our Christ-centered trajectory must be wise and Biblical. Leah shows us how God blesses us even when we are despised and rejected by people who ought to love us. Maslow and Dr. Phil are wrong – we do not have a need to be loved. We have a desire to be loved and in many, it is a craving. We have a responsibility to love, to love God and neighbor as we actually do love ourselves. Leah shows us how to be God dependent while rightly longing for the kindness and love of others.

Here is the lesson for the nation of Israel and for all of God's people. We will often be hated and despised. Sometimes by people who ought to care for us. We cannot respond with bitterness and anger on the one hand nor self-pity and depression on the other. We can depend on God, know that He gives attention to our plight, hears our prayers and delights in our praise. And we may even experience unmeasured blessing and the sweetness of His care.

Yes, Jesus came to His own people, and they rejected Him, despised Him and finally crucified Him. But O, the progression of sons and daughters that have come out of His holy obedience even when it was painful, sad and hard.

The Rivals Contending for Preeminence

(30:1-18)

How often it is hard enough without aggravating circumstances. So here, Leah is not only unloved by her husband, she is envied, taunted and finally humiliated by her sister. The contention and rivalry escalates. And blundering through all of this is weak, inept Jacob whose foolish love for Rachel binds him to her and blinds him to Leah.

In the Use of their Handmaids

O how envy and jealousy rules Rachel's heart. She has the love and devotion of her husband. Yet her sister does not. She is jealous of her sister's sons and the place they will now have. Without sons, her future is insecure. Jacob will pass on the complete inheritance to Leah's sons. What will she have? Her sister has it all. What folly envy is! Its fierce gaze on what God has given others blinds you to what God has given you.

Rachel stands in stark contrast to her sister. Her desires become demands. You have to love the childish petulance of Rachel. "Give me children or I die." What!?! She is going to threaten him? What is he supposed to do about it? To any thinking person it is obvious that the problem is Rachel, not Jacob. Leah has had no problem getting pregnant. But Rachel is barren. Leah is blessed by God. Rachel is barren by God.

Jacob well knows all this. He is not God nor is he in God's place. He cannot cause what only God does. In his response is a rebuke, as well. God had withheld the fruit of her womb. So what is he supposed to do about it?

So Rachel proposes a family old solution – take my handmaid and we will have children by her. So Jacob fathers two boys, Dan and Naphtali, by Rachel's handmaid. O, listen to the triumph in Rachel's voice. She has competed with her sister and now has prevailed. She is so foolish. How can two boys fathered on her handmaid possibly be a triumph over a sister with four natural born sons?

Contrast the naming and statements of her two sons with that of Leah. In Dan she sees the reversal of the judgment of God. In Naphtali she has wrestled and overcome her sister. In neither of these is there real dependence on God nor the sense of presenting a gift to her husband. She has reversed God's disfavor and scored points against her sister.

Meanwhile, Leah has stopped bearing children as well. The way this is stated implies that she is not having relations with Jacob and so is now having no children. She is not going to be outdone by her sister. If only she had been as content to wait on God for her rightful place over her sister as she was her rightful place in her husband's heart. So, she offers her handmaid Zilpah to Jacob. She bears him two more boys, Gad and Asher. In her naming of them and her response to God's giving of them, listen to her happiness. She is joyful and glad in her good fortune and in her public favor. She is happy for others will call her happy.

Can you see the difference? I am impressed by Leah – yes, there are things here to be concerned over. How many of you would come to the place that you will be glad in the favor of God even if you do not have the much sought after love in a relationship you prize?

In the Trading of Favors

Moses now writes to show the pettiness and pointlessness of their strife. Because we have monogamous marriages, what we read here is a bit mind-boggling. But listen for a moment to the story.

During the wheat harvest, Leah's son Reuben found some man-drakes, a plant that was thought to be a fertility drug. It is referred to in the Song of Solomon as enhancing intimacy. Many also thought that it would help a barren woman conceive. So began a bizarre negotiation. Rachel wanted some of the man-drakes to help her infertility. Leah refuses. Her bitterness against Rachel is evident. "You took my husband; now I am supposed to help you have children with him?"

Rachel responds by offering to trade several nights with Jacob in return for the man-drakes. This confirms the implication earlier in the text that Leah has stopped bearing children because Jacob has stopped being intimate with her. Leah agrees to the trade. It seems that her heart has now begun to bow to an idol, the idol of her husband's affection and attention.

So, she meets Jacob on the way home from harvest that evening. "You are mine tonight – I have hired you (dig at Jacob), paying by giving my son's man-drakes (dig at Rachel and her barrenness). Jacob lies with her and she conceives a son.

Don't you love all the earthiness of some of these stories!

God has dealt with her, given her due wages, for doubting Him and giving Jacob her handmaiden. So, Issachar is born and named.

Well, this is kind of sordid, isn't it? Here is Israel with all their national prejudice and tribal pride hearing the inspired account of the travail and trouble by which they became a people. They should be humbled. They should be thankful that God designs the sad state of human relations and brings about His good and great purposes. We are not often far from this. We so rely on our ingenuity and strategy to get what we want. But how much better to trust, depend and wait on God. What an encouragement to know that even when we don't, God is still at work to accomplish what He desires and designs.

The Births Concluding the Family (30:19-24)

The final two paragraphs bring the story to its climax.

In Leah's Great Endowment (v.19-21)

God blesses her with a gift in this last son. Zebulun is born. This sixth son is a great gift from God. This word endowment implies not only a great and unexpected gift from God, but a rich blessing to be eagerly passed on.

Now, she hopes to be honored by her husband. This is now six sons she has borne him. Maybe now he will see her worth. Maybe now he will hold her up in honor. Six sons of her own she has brought him. Will he look to her now with affection and honor? Will he see her as blessed of God? Will he despise her still?

And she bore the first daughter in the family, Dinah. Sad to be a footnote, isn't it?

In Rachel's Lifted Reproach (v.22-24)

God lifts Rachel's reproach. He takes notice of her and moves on her behalf. It is God's mercy and grace, not plants and human ingenuity, which will make the barren ones rejoice as the mother of children. God had closed her womb. God opens her womb.

For the first time in this text, Rachel acknowledges with a true heart. God has taken her reproach away by giving her a son. She names him, Joseph. His name means, "May he add" but it sounds like, "Be taken away." The irony of his naming and the history of his life – but that's for another day.

This text ripples through the Bible in some unexpected ways. Moses preaching to Israel over 40-45 years later, warns Israel about the treatment of firstborn sons of unloved wives. Listen to Deuteronomy 21:15-17 **Conclusion**

If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him children, and if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, ¹⁶ then on the day when he assigns his possessions as an inheritance to his sons, he may not treat the son of the loved as the firstborn in preference to the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn, ¹⁷ but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his.

So while Jacob may prefer Joseph because he loves Rachel, Reuben is the firstborn with all the rights and privileges that go with it. This sibling stuff is going to frame and fuel terrible sins by nearly everyone involved.

How do you respond when someone's disobedience leaves you without?

YOU CANNOT DEMAND WHAT OUGHT TO BE FREELY GIVEN. Yes, you can ask. You ought to hope. You should pray much. You seek counsel to bear it well. You learn to be content by seeking your satisfaction in God alone. But your desires should not become demands.

YOU OUGHT NOT DENY WHAT HAS BEEN GRACIOUSLY COMMANDED. Jacob withheld what was commanded him to give – the affection and attention due his wife. It does not matter how the relationship began. It is still his responsibility to respond to God and reflect His love by loving her. You love by grace whom you ought.

YOU MUST NOT ALLOW EVEN THE GOOD FROM GOD TO BE CRAVED so much that you will sin to get or sin when you don't have it. Yes, there are wrong desires. But I find people more often sin in an idolatrous craving for what is good and right.

My challenge to you? To most of you, this text sounds strange. To all of us, it should ring true. Join with me as we search our hearts and cry out to God, confessing our sin and longing to be holy before our great King. We must be satisfied and submitted, content and conquered by our Lord Jesus Christ.