

# LIFE BIBLE STUDY

## SESSION OBJECTIVE: GENESIS 29:1-30

To learn about how Jacob ended up marrying both Leah and Rachel.

## Get Permission!

One of the longest standing traditional and biblical practices is the practice of marriage. The first man and woman were joined together, and their joining was the basis upon which marriage was understood all the way back to the time of Moses (Gen. 2:24). Being as old as the practice of marriage is, there are many traditions



that come along with it, and one of the longest standing traditions involves the man asking the woman's father for permission to take his daughter in holy matrimony.

In Genesis 29, Jacob travels to Haran to look for a wife and there finds a woman named Rachel. Her father, Laban, gives Jacob permission but with a condition: He must work for seven years! This working relationship (pun very much intended) causes a major divergence in the trajectory of Jacob's life when Laban deceives him into marrying his older daughter Leah. While it was not Jacob's plan to marry Leah, Leah's role in the development of Israel is tantamount, as we will discover in our next session.

## Similar Beginnings

Chapter 29 begins with Jacob going to find a woman suitable for marriage, and it says, "he came to the land of the people of the east" (Gen. 29:1). He comes across a well in a field and three flocks of sheep, all of which

are well watered (pun intended again). The similarities in Jacob's journey to find a wife and the journey of Abraham's servant to find a suitable woman for Isaac are hard to miss. Both of them come to the land of Abraham's kin. Abraham's servant ends up in Nahor (Gen. 24:10); here, Jacob arrives in an unknown area. However, Nahor is a Mesopotamian city, and it is not unlikely that Jacob has ended up there as well. Jacob is looking for a man named Laban who happens to be the son of Nahor, after whom the city of Nahor is named. Both of them also find the woman suitable for marriage near a watering well. Abraham's servant looks for a woman who will not only offer water to him, but also to his camels (Gen. 24:14); Jacob finds men who direct him to Laban, the father of the women he will eventually marry.

There is also a subtle repetition in the stones in Jacob's story. In chapter 28, it is a stone that he lays his head on when he dreams of the ladder (Gen. 28:11). He then uses that stone to erect a pillar and renames the place Bethel (Gen. 28:18). Now, at the well, Jacob will move the stone that covers the well so that Rachel can water her father's sheep. The first stone is present when he encounters Yahweh; the second is present when he encounters his future wife.

## The Wedding Arrangements

Jacob meets Rachel and kisses her, signifying his intent to marry her. Below is an outline of some of the important details that unfolded in the wedding arrangements.

### **THE WAGES**

In verse 14, Laban recognizes Jacob as family, and we are told that Jacob stays with Laban for a month. This does not mean that Jacob left after a month, but that after a month the next sequence of events began to take place. Jacob was staying with Laban which entailed that he was also working the land and livestock with him. After a month, Laban proposes to pay Jacob for his work, noting that just because he is family doesn't mean he should work for free (Gen. 29:15). Rather than paying a normal wage, Jacob asks for Rachel's hand in marriage. This arrangement was not the normal custom, however, and Laban had already made that clear. Normally, the younger daughter would not be married off before the older daughter. In this case, Rachel was the younger daughter and Leah was the older, and so it should be by custom that Leah would marry Jacob. However, "Jacob loved Rachel" (Gen. 29:18).

This whole scenario seems very difficult to rationalize, but we must realize that these were very normal practices of the ancient world. Children had value beyond the love a parent has for them. Ownership of land, crops, livestock, etc., came at a high level of work, and children were useful in the upkeep of such things. Rachel was valuable to Laban's economy, and for her to be married meant she would no longer belong to his economy, but Jacob's. It was customary then, for the man in pursuit of the daughter to pay some form of compensation for the marriage. Work was the ideal fit here.

### **DECEIVED**

After the seven years of work is completed, Jacob rightfully asks for what has been promised to him; marriage. However, after the feast (another custom of weddings still present today), Laban deceitfully makes Leah pretend to be her sister, and when the marriage is consummated, it is Leah, not Rachel, that ends up marrying Jacob.

This part of the story is very difficult to understand. How could Jacob engage in sexual intercourse (the consummation) with the wrong woman? There are several factors that play into this.

For one, it was after the feast. It does not explicitly indicate that Jacob had imbibed, but it certainly is a possibility. There is greater strength for this argument in the presence of the terms, “firstborn,” and “younger,” being applied to daughters. This is only the second time this happens, the first being the daughters of Lot. Lot’s impairment is what led to the impregnation of both of his daughters. Alcohol impairment could have easily contributed to such a mix up with Jacob and Leah as well.

Secondly, this happened at night. Nighttime in our modern context is very different than the ancient world. There were no surrounding cities with lights and high rises. Nighttime was very dark, and inside of a tent it would have nearly pitch black. Visibility would be nearly non-existent. The text indicates this as a major part of the narrative in that it isn’t until morning, when daylight breaks, that Jacob discovers what has happened.

Third, Jacob, by custom, had not had any physical contact with Rachel and therefore would not have thought that Leah physically felt any different. This assumes that Leah and Rachel were not dramatically different, physically speaking. There is nothing in the text that indicates any attributes regarding either of them, other than Leah’s eyes being weak (Gen. 29:17). That translation, however, has been reexamined quite extensively in modern scholarship. The word weak can mean anything from tender, soft, or delicate to inexperienced or young (1 Chr. 22:5; 29:1; 2 Chr. 13:17). In light of that last rendering along with the details of Leah and Rachel’s ages, it is likely meant to be taken that Leah, although the older, looks younger. This is, then, not a negative description but a positive one. Leah was likely attractive, but that didn’t matter; Jacob loved Rachel (Gen. 29:18).

This begs the question, why didn’t Jacob just demand the right woman be given to him instead? The answer is simple, yet perhaps not as impactful in our desensitized culture. Leah would have been a virgin, and after sexual intercourse, Jacob was required to fulfill his duty to her (Ex. 22:16; Deut. 22:28-29). Sexual purity was highly valued. For a woman to lose her virginity would make it very difficult for her to ever marry again, because she would have been seen as unchaste, a characteristic frowned upon in the ancient world (how things have changed!).

After Jacob’s discovery, Laban reemphasizes why he did what he did: “It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn” (Gen. 29:26). His plan was to keep the custom, albeit in a very deceitful manner. That brings up another interesting point. The great deceiver of this story *should be* Jacob, and yet it is he that has been deceived. Take note of the irony: While Jacob, the younger brother, deceived his father into thinking he was the older brother, the father Laban deceived Jacob into thinking that Leah was the younger sister.

#### **PHASE TWO**

This plan of Laban’s was hatched on the very first night of the wedding week. In ancient customs, the marriage lasted seven days, and yet Laban switched the brides the first night. This is noted in that he says to Jacob in verse 27, “Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” At this point, Laban does extend an act of trust to Jacob. Jacob completes the wedding week with Leah and then is immediately married to Rachel, completing a second wedding week with her, not having worked the full seven years. Jacob does, however, fulfill his commitment to Laban (Gen. 29:30).

There are many questions that are not answered by the text. How did Leah feel about all of this? Nowhere are we told what her thoughts were in this deception. She did what her father asked, but what choice did she

have? Leah is really the one that loses the most in this transaction (she is later repaid in another way) because she is married to a man that also is married to her sister, and he loves her sister and not her. She was used in a ploy by her father to be joined to a man that didn't love her. It's a tragic outcome for her and one that rarely gets attention.

## The Aftermath

The marriage to Leah and Rachel was certainly not the intention of Jacob, but it turns out to be an important factor in Jacob's life. There are details in this chapter that seem almost unnecessary regarding the midwives. Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to Leah and Bilhah to Rachel (Gen. 29:24, 29). Why is this included? This whole marriage narrative is building us to what will happen in verse 31 and into chapter 30. Jacob has been blessed with many descendants, and thus those descendants must actually be born. As we will find out next week, the twelve sons of Jacob (who become known as the twelve tribes of Israel) are not all born from one woman, but Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah. The inclusion of these female servants is to set the stage for their involvement in the coming chapters.

## Study Questions

### Day One

1. Read Genesis 29:1-3. Where did Jacob arrive? What did he first see upon his arrival? What was used to cover the mouth of the well?

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2. Read Genesis 29:4-8. Where did the men say they came from? Who did Jacob ask if they knew? Who showed up as he was talking to the men? What was she coming with?

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### Day Two

1. Read Genesis 29:9-12. What was Rachel's occupation? What did Jacob do with her? What did Jacob tell Rachel and what did she do in response?

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2. Read Genesis 29:13-14. What did Laban do when Jacob arrived? What did Laban say to Jacob?

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### Day Three

1. Read Genesis 29:15-20. What were the names of Laban's daughters? How is Leah described? Who of the two daughters did Jacob love? What does Jacob propose to do for Laban in exchange for permission to marry Rachel?

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2. Read Genesis 29:21-24. What does Laban do in preparation for the marriage? What deceitful thing does Laban do before the marriage is consummated? Who is given to Leah as a servant?
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### Day Four

1. Read Genesis 29:25-27. What is Jacob's response upon finding out that he had been deceived? What is Laban's response to him? What deal does he offer Jacob?
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2. Read Genesis 29:28-30. Does Jacob take the deal? Does he uphold his end of the bargain? What does he get in return? Who is given to Rachel as a servant?
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## Week 23 Discussion: Perseverance

In Genesis 29, Laban deceives Jacob into marrying his older daughter Leah when he thought he was marrying the younger daughter Rachel. It took him seven years to earn the right to marry her, and when it was all said and done, he was tricked into marrying the wrong one. He then had to work an additional seven years to marry the woman he intended to marry to begin with. It took him fourteen years, and while he was frustrated, he did what was needed to achieve what was desired. It took perseverance. Talk as a group about the need for perseverance in your own life in your relationships, job, and spiritual journey.

1. Icebreaker: Do you consider yourself someone who demonstrates perseverance in your life? Would other people agree?
2. Perseverance requires patience, but what else does it require? What is perseverance?
3. Talk about a time you persevered through something and what you gained from it?
4. Talk about a time when you needed to persevere through something but you didn't. What was the result of that?
5. In what ways does our, "Me first, instant gratification" culture make perseverance even more challenging? Is perseverance something that is highly sought after in the world today? Why or why not?
6. What does perseverance cost?

## Takeaways:

1. Laban deceives Jacob into marrying his daughter Leah instead of his daughter Rachel.
2. Jacob eventually marries Rachel as well.
3. Jacob works for Laban for seven years for the first marriage, and an additional seven years for the second.

### **PRAYER REQUESTS:**