

Family mess, faithful God

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[0 : 00] Thank you, Claire. I was 18 years old at college in London back in 1993 and I'd just become a Christian. I was sitting on the grass outside the engineering department and I was reading my Bible in the sun and a young man came up and introduced himself to me.

And he smiled and he said, I see you're reading your Bible, that's great. And he said he was a Christian too. And we chatted. I can't remember the guy's name, I was trying to think about it this week, but I do remember he was very smart.

And sharp, sharp haircut, sharp mind, with a winning smile and kind of easy conversation. The kind of person you think you'd like to be. He was very hot for holy living. We've got to live for Jesus, Chris.

And he seemed very, very clean and really on fire for God. And to be honest, I'd only been a Christian for a few months, I felt a bit dirty and half-hearted next to him.

Maybe a week later he bumped into me again. I realised, I suspected, I felt there was something about his manner that grated a bit. He was almost too presentable, too good.

[1 : 11] But we got talking again, and this time we were talking about how to spread the gospel amongst other students. I'll not forget the gist of what he said. I remember this. He looked at me with zeal in his eyes and he said to me, Chris, you and I can be instruments in God's hands here.

But God works through excellent people. You and I need to be excellent for God. And then he will use us.

I wonder what that guy would make of us today. You and me and our families and our lives and our church. And I wonder, actually, what he'd make of Genesis and Jacob.

Because in this chunk, what do we discover in what we've just read? We discover not much excellence at all. Rather, do you not see this?

What a painful, sinful family mess. Do you not think? This is what's happened. Having left his family in Beersheba, Jacob's been sent by himself to Paddan Aram, to Uncle Laban's house, to find himself a wife.

[2 : 28] That's what he's meant to do. And on the way, if you were here last week, Jacob had stopped for the night and he dreamt of a stairway to heaven. And the Lord God had appeared to him and made promises to him, saying, I'm with you, I'll watch over you wherever you go.

And Jacob arrives in Paddan Aram, start of chapter 29 that David read, and things start just great. He happened to bump into Laban's shepherds, and Rachel just happened to be coming along. And Jacob goes strongman beast mode and rolls the stone away. And then he kissed Rachel and weeps. And they all went back to Laban's house, who hugged Jacob. You're my own flesh and blood.

Happy days. Happy families. Except Jacob has been drawn into Laban's sticky web. Laban says, this sly uncle, I'll give you wages to serve me.

There's two daughters, Leah. She's got weak eyes. They lack a bit of sparkle. Whereas Rachel is a beauty. And Jacob falls for her. But he can't pay the bride price. So he agrees to work seven years in return for her.

[3 : 34] Seven years, which seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her. And we go, oh, so lovely. Seven years come up and Jacob says, give me my wife. I want to make love to her.

But Laban has other ideas. It's after a drinking feast. It's late, I guess. Lots of wine drunk. And Laban brings Leah in under a heavy veil. And Jacob makes love to her.

And in the morning, it's Leah. Jacob says, Laban, you deceived me. Laban says, finish your bridal week with Leah and then have Rachel too in return for another seven years work.

And so Jacob does. What do you think of that? It's not excellent. You think for sure what a sly, manipulative uncle Laban is.

He is meant to be part of the people of God. What an abominable dad, actually, to take his daughters and put them in that position and send Leah in.

[4 : 36] And you think Leah, Rachel, Jacob, could they have acted differently? Maybe they could. But by verse 30, things are set.

Jacob made love to Rachel also. And his love for Rachel, unsurprisingly, because she was the one he wanted, was greater than his love for Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years. Now, verse 31 onwards covers seven years in the life of this new, not quite how we wanted it, family. I think it's a chance to make the best of it, maybe.

To live excellently under God, even. Doesn't happen. What a painful mess. In verse 31, see how it starts this section.

The Lord saw that Leah was not loved. The word is hated. You do not have to be in a three-way marriage to experience the misery of being unloved by a man who should love you.

[5 : 40] To be honest, there's a fair number of Christian marriages like that. And you're locked in. And you suspect he doesn't really want you. Now, verse 32, Leah became pregnant.

That's good. And she has a son. And she names him Reuben. And she says, it's because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now. Names have meanings. Reuben means see a son.

This isn't a happy family moment. What happens? Jacob enters the room. Leah holds the baby up. See a son. Now will you love me? Leah conceives a second time, has a second son.

And says, because the Lord has heard I'm not loved, he gave me this one too. So she named him Simeon. All she's thinking about is the fact that her husband doesn't love her. Again, a third son.

Now at last my husband will become attached to me because I've borne him three sons.

So he was named Levi, which sounds like attached. She had a fourth saying, this time I will praise the Lord. And she named him Judah. And then she stopped having children.

[6 : 46] That's Leah. Desperately longing for the love of her man. And miserable. Churning out babies, hoping that he will notice her and appreciate her.

What do we say about that? Maybe having multiple kids isn't today's way of winning a man's love. Instead, what? I'll lose weight. I'll try to look younger.

I'll give him his space. I'll do better at work. I'll do the sport he does. I'll perform better at home or in the bedroom.

Surely he'll love me now. That's Leah. What about Rachel? Back in verse 31, when the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive.

But Rachel remained childless. She's got the love of her husband. But she's barren. Unable to conceive. And she can only watch as her sister produces son after son.

[7 : 56] Chapter 30, verse 1. When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. A few chapters back, two brothers battled it out, Jacob and Esau.

Now the rivalry of two sisters. Which is what real life is like, isn't it? In families. Your sister is different from you in some way.

She's got something you don't. She's got love. She's got children. She's cleverer. She's done better. And you're jealous. Like you've always been. And it eats away at you.

In her pain, Rachel envies her sister. And so she says to Jacob, give me children or I'll die. And Jacob became angry with her. This is the first thing we hear about their marriage.

And said, am I in the place of God who's kept you from having children? And so Rachel hatches a plan. She doesn't ask her servant girl Bilhah, would this be okay? She offers her servant girl to her husband.

[8 : 58] Sleep with her and then she can bear children for me, she says to Jacob. Jacob's got no issue with that. Bilhah bears a son. Rachel says, God has vindicated me. Bilhah bears a second son.

What will Rachel name him? Verse 8, Rachel said, I've had a great struggle with my sister and I've won. So she named him Naphtali, which means my struggle.

Imagine naming your kid that. She's not giving thanks to God for the birth of children. She just wants to beat her sister. Do you know what that's like?

The cold satisfaction of winning. Except Leah is still in the game. When she saw she'd stopped having children, verse 3, she weaponised her own servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a concubine wife.

And so another two sons arrive through Leah's servants. What good fortune, says Leah. How happy I am. Are you? In verse 14 onwards, things get more grubby still.

[10:07] Reuben, I guess he's four or five years old, and playing in the field, he finds some mandrake plants and he brings them to his mum, Leah. Mandrake plants are love fruits. They're an aphrodisiac.

They're meant to stimulate sexual desire. And childless Rachel thinks, maybe this will help me. So she says to Leah, please give me some of your son's mandrakes.

Her sister hisses back bitterly. Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too? And so they do a sordid deal.

Very well, Rachel said. He can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes. Rachel is the, well, wife number one. And somehow she gets to rent her husband out for a night of sex.

So when Jacob came in from the field that evening, Leah went out to meet him. You must sleep with me, she said. I've hired you with my son's mandrakes.

[11:12] And so passively, doing as he's told, Jacob lay with her. So Leah bears a fifth son. God has given me my wages for giving my servant to my husband.

She named him Issachar. Then she brought Jacob one more son. She said, God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honour, won't he? Because I've borne him six sons.

She named him Zebulun. And she had a daughter called Dinah. And then finally Rachel gives birth to a son. And so there it is.

What do you make of that seven years? Seven years of pain, bitterness, jealousy and anger.

Sisters longing for love, craving children, struggling with each other, crowing over each other, using people under them, their servants, to get what they want.

And then Jacob, I think the opposite of an upright man of God, a weak and passive pawn, really, in the sisters' battle, just allowing himself to be used for sex.

[12:25] What a painful, sinful family mess. Don't you think? I wonder if you look at this family and think...

I wonder if you look at this family and think, how come they're not excellent, like me and my family? I'm trying to get you to think in a certain way. Could it be that in this family's mess, we do see in part a reflection of ourselves?

Do you think? Not exactly the same situation, of course. But some of us will know the bitter misery of not being loved, in family life or beyond.

And how we do almost anything to be noticed. Some of us, in family life or beyond, may be very passive men.

Like Jacob. We get a bit angry from time to time, but mainly we simply do as we're told and never stand up for what's right. Some of us have grown up with a brother or a sister.

[13:37] And the jealousy and competition between you eats away at you. And in a way, maybe you're an adult now, but you're still trying to win whatever it takes. It's ugly, that.

Bubbling away. Your conversations with a brother or sister strained and a bit bitter, if you're still speaking to them. That can be family life, can't it?

Behind closed doors or out in the open. Struggle, lack of love, envy, flashes of anger, power games. It can be church family life too.

Christian brothers and sisters in God's family, envious of each other, wanting what the other person has got, fighting with each other and trying to win. Christian sisters at each other.

One church member, weaker in some way, left on one side, ignored and unloved. In churches, Christians fight for power, vie for attention, use others for their own ends.

[14:44] All the time saying, God is for me. The point is, I think, as you read verses like this, excellent people they are not and excellent people we are not.

Rather, look at Jacob's family. Look with an honest eye maybe at us and our families and our church and honestly what a painful, sinful family mess we might be in.

And yet, here's the remarkable thing in Genesis and with Jacob's family.

The remarkable thing is that knowing exactly what they're like and knowing exactly what we're like, wonderfully the Lord God does not turn away from us in disgust.

He does not say to us, you're not excellent enough. I won't be with you. I can't use you. But rather, right in the middle of this painful, sinful mess, would you notice with me, secondly, finally, what a kind and faithful God he is with his family?

[16:01] Look at this in the text. Firstly, see how kind God is. And back to verse 29, verse 31. When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive.

They're not beautiful? Leah, the less attractive sister, is used by her dad. She's neither loved nor wanted. She's consigned to a loveless marriage.

Like Hagar, a few years before. What utter misery. And so in his kindness, the Lord opened her womb.

Leah says, verse 32, the Lord has seen my misery. I've been seen. Verse 33, because the Lord heard that I'm not loved. I guess she poured out her soul and her misery to him in prayer.

He heard that I'm not loved. And he gave. That is, our God does not abandon us in our misery. We who are neither loved nor wanted.

[17:06] What you see here in this ancient moment is classic God. It is what he's like back then and today. Do you feel relationally trapped, like Leah, unseen?

Your father sees you. He hears you when you cry out to him. And in his loving kindness, he delights to give you, if not an open womb, then life with him.

And his comfort and his presence and the blessing of eternal life. Would that not move you to name your child Judah? I will praise the Lord for his kindness to someone such as me.

He's so kind, our God. He's kind later on with Leah. In verse 17, look, we're told God listened to Leah and she became pregnant.

What's going on there? Right in the middle of this grubby mandrake scandal after Leah has hired Jacob for sex, I guess at the same time she's praying for another kid.

[18:20] Not the pure and worthy prayer of a godly woman at that moment, you'd think. Yet God listened to Leah. As he did to Rachel.

In verse 22, finally, God remembered barren Rachel. He listened to her and enabled her to conceive. See, through all these years of childlessness and plotting and struggle, she'd been praying.

Not pure prayers. But prayers riddled through with jealousy. And I want to beat my sister. And please could the love fruit work. As she uses her servant, then rents out her husband to try and get her way.

Which she's praying to God about too. Our God does not only answer excellent prayers. He takes the mixed up longings of our aching, twisted hearts.

And in his kindness, he is able to give us what we need. Rachel doesn't deserve God's mercy. Yet she became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, God has taken away my disgrace.

[19:29] What a kind God towards people like us in our pains and sins. But he's not just kind here.

He is also unstoppably faithful. Because lastly, what we should see here is that in and through this whole tangled web of jealousy and sexual deals and hurts, the Lord God is at work.

And he is faithfully keeping his promises. Back in chapter 28, the Lord had promised Jacob, your descendants will be like the dust of the earth.

And Jacob had arrived in Haran, a single man. And yet by chapter 30, verse 24, 14 years later, Jacob has 11 sons and one daughter.

What has started to happen? The answer is God is keeping his promises and growing his family. Does that mean God approves of two wives and two concubines and anger and sisterly jealousy and self-serving bread?

[20:38] No, no, no, it doesn't. But make no mistake about it. Right here and in the mess of these not excellent people, he is faithfully keeping his promises.

In fact, stand back from the story and see this a touch more. Because who are these children here? These children who are born through all these circumstances?

Reuben and Simeon and Levi and so on. Who are they? They're the sons of Jacob. Who will, as history rolls forward, become the 12 tribes of Israel?

They'll become the hope of the world. Because God is faithful. As history rolls forward, these 12 tribes of Israel will themselves sin and fight and split and be very not excellent.

