

Earlier in Genesis 29:17, we were introduced to Jacob's future wife, Rachel. That portion of Scripture described Rachel as someone who had a *"...beautiful figure and beautiful features"* (GW). Judging from that description, Rachel's physical beauty likely provided her with a desirable advantage over others.

But while there may have been some who envied Rachel's external beauty, the opening verse of Genesis chapter thirty offers a poignant glimpse into her deep emotional turmoil...

"Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister, and said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or else I die!'" (Genesis 30:1).

Today, we might consider Rachel as one of those fortunate individuals who seemingly "have it all." But external appearances may be misleading, and Rachel's natural beauty concealed her inner conflict. In this instance, we're told, ***"Rachel was very jealous of Leah for having children"*** (CEV).

So Rachel possessed two external advantages:

1. She was physically beautiful.
2. She was favored by her husband ([Genesis 29:30](#)).

Yet despite those advantages, Rachel was plagued with an inner sense of jealousy. This reminds us that those who seemingly "have it all" may face unseen hardships or internal conflicts that hidden from us.

Those who recall the events of [Genesis chapter sixteen](#) may remember that Abraham's wife Sarah shared Rachel's heartbreaking struggle with infertility. Both women faced the same cultural realities of that era, for a woman's sense of worth was often linked with the number of children she bore. Thus, a woman's social standing increased with the number of children she conceived. But Rachel's childlessness, coupled with Leah's growing family, clearly intensified her emotional distress.

A closer look at Rachel and Leah' plight reveals a complex portrait of two women who struggled with inner discontent:

- Rachel was physically attractive and her husband was deeply in love with her. However, the absence of children deprived her of the honor and respect accorded to her sister, Leah.
- Leah's many children brought her admiration and esteem. But her husband didn't love her, and she lacked Rachel's physical beauty.

So each sister possessed something the other coveted, thus resulting in a mutual sense of discontent. Thankfully, God's Word offers some practical guidance that can help us avoid a similar pitfall...

"Each of you should go on living according to the Lord's gift to you, and as you were when God called you. This is the rule I teach in all the churches" (1 Corinthians 7:17 GNB).

Instead of dwelling on the things we lack, we would do well to focus on the divine blessings God has already given us. In that way, we can find fulfillment in the things He has provided for us.

"Jacob became angry with [Rachel] and said, 'Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?'" (Genesis 30:2 NIV).

So Jacob essentially said to Rachel, "Don't blame me for our lack of children- I'm not God." That led Rachel to offer a familiar solution...

“So she said, 'Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, and she will bear a child on my knees, that I also may have children by her.' Then she gave him Bilhah her maid as wife, and Jacob went in to her” (Genesis 30:4-5).

Much like Jacob’s grandmother Sarah before her, Rachel outlined a plan that would have her maid act as a kind of surrogate mother. According to the customary practice of that era, Rachel could then elect to recognize a child born to her as a legal son or daughter. That would enable Rachel to raise a family of her own and avoid the social disgrace that accompanied childlessness in that culture.

“And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Then Rachel said, 'God has judged my case; and He has also heard my voice and given me a son.' Therefore she called his name Dan” (Genesis 30:4-6).

So why would the act of employing a surrogate mother cause Rachel to say, “...*God has vindicated me*” (NIV)? The answer to that question comes next...

“And Rachel’s maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, 'With great wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and indeed I have prevailed.' So she called his name Naphtali” (Genesis 30:7-8).

This suggests that Rachel’s motive went beyond the cultural stigma associated with childlessness. You see, Naphtali's name means “wrestling.”⁽¹⁾ His name suggests that Rachel viewed herself as a participant in a competition for supremacy with her sister, Leah.

However, their father, Laban, was the true instigator behind this rivalry, for he deceitfully arranged their marriages to serve his personal interest. The negative impact of that decision produced a lasting effect in the lives of both his daughters.

(1) *Naphtali* - *Smith’s Bible Dictionary Online*. (n.d.). Bible Study Tools.
<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/smiths-bible-dictionary/naphtali.html>

So Rachel seemingly gained a competitive advantage in her rivalry with Leah when her maid gave birth to a second son. But Leah wasn’t ready to concede so easily...

“When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took Zilpah her maid and gave her to Jacob as wife. And Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, 'A troop comes!' So she called his name Gad. And Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. Then Leah said, 'I am happy, for the daughters will call me blessed.' So she called his name Asher” (Genesis 30:9-13).

So Leah employed a similar “surrogate mother” approach by giving her maid to Jacob as a fourth wife, thus potentially adding to the number of “her” children.

Zilpah went on to have two children that Leah named Gad and Asher. Gad's name means “fortune” or “luck.”⁽¹⁾ The implication is that Leah felt a sense of good fortune in maintaining her competitive edge over Rachel. Asher's name means “happy.”⁽²⁾ His name expressed Leah's sense of pleasure at her growing number of offspring; four of whom she bore to Jacob, and two she “adopted” from his relationship with Zilpah.

Of course, this inter-family competition could have been avoided if the participants had simply followed God’s original “one man–one woman” [design for marital relationships](#). But that was not the case, and soon another chance arose to escalate this unhealthy rivalry...

“Now Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, 'Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes’” (Genesis 30:14).

We may struggle to understand the significance of this discovery from our 21st century perspective. However, the mandrake plant was thought to possess certain properties that were important to each of these sisters.

A mandrake is a plant that allegedly possessed the ability to increase fertility rates. This explains why Rachel held an interest in them, but Leah wasn't eager to give them away...

“But she said to her, 'Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also?'" (Genesis 30:15a).

It's easy to sense the marital rivalry that was simmering below the surface of this relationship. But there was something else as well. You see, Leah seemed to believe that Rachel had stolen her husband away when the opposite was true. Thus, it seems that the sibling rivalry that raged between these sisters had skewed their ability to interpret and accept reality.

But while Leah held little interest in giving up these supposed aphrodisiacs, Rachel refused to take no for an answer...

“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 have hired you with my son's mandrakes.' So he slept with her that night" (Genesis 30:15b-16 NIV).

It's easy to see why Leah accepted Rachel's offer. You see, Rachel leveraged Leah's desire for acceptance from her husband and used it to obtain something of value: the ability to secure access to a plant that would supposedly enable her to succeed in bearing children. This represented little more than a business deal between them, and Leah promptly informed Jacob of their arrangement before he arrived home from work.

Since Leah had stopped bearing children after conceiving her fourth child, Rachel may have concluded that her childbearing years were over. That may explain why she felt secure in making an arrangement that allowed Leah and Jacob to resume their marital relations.

But as it turned out, the one thing Rachel *didn't* want to happen was the thing that *did* happen.

(1) *Gad* - *Easton's Bible Dictionary Online*. (n.d.). Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/eastons-bible-dictionary/gad.html> "Gad" *Easton's Bible Dictionary*

(2) *Asher (1)* - *Meaning & Verses | International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. (n.d.). Bible Study Tools. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/encyclopedias/isbe/asher-1.html>

“And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son” (Genesis 30:17).

Rachel's experience highlights the value of patiently allowing God to implement His plan instead of attempting to force a solution with the limited knowledge we possess. As the Biblical book of Proverbs reminds us, ***“We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps” (Proverbs 16:9 NLT).***

Unfortunately, Rachel's plan lacked a foundation of faith, and she never sought God's blessing or direction. That approach surely leads to pain and frustration, two emotions Rachel likely experienced as she continued to struggle with infertility during her sister's fifth pregnancy.

“Leah said, 'God has given me my wages, because I have given my maid to my husband.' So she called his name Issachar. Then Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son. And Leah said, 'God has endowed me with a good endowment; now my husband will dwell with me, because I have borne him six sons.' So she called his name Zebulun” (Genesis 30:18-20).

“Zebulun” means honor ⁽¹⁾ or dwelling. ⁽²⁾ This name seems to express Leah’s desire for a place of respect with her husband even though his affections were clearly elsewhere. But even though Leah presented Jacob with six sons, that did not appear to alter his feelings towards her.

Much like Rachel, Leah's experience offers a reminder for today. If we hope that that an external action will cause another person to love or honor us, then we may experience the same pain Leah experienced in her relationship with Jacob.

You see, our external actions should reflect the love that is already present within a relationship. If we find ourselves in a position where we feel as if we must earn someone's affection through an external act, then we would do well to step back and reassess God's direction for that relationship.

“Some time later [Leah] gave birth to a daughter and named her Dinah” (Genesis 30:21 NIV).

We’ll meet Dinah again in Genesis chapter thirty-four, where her life will serve as a cautionary message for parents and children alike.

(1) *Zebulun - Meaning & Verses | International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.* (n.d.). Bible Study Tools.
<https://www.biblestudytools.com/encyclopedias/isbe/zebulun.html>

(2) *Zebulun - Easton’s Bible Dictionary Online.* (n.d.). Bible Study Tools.
<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/eastons-bible-dictionary/zebulun.html>

“Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. And she conceived and bore a son, and said, 'God has taken away my reproach.' So she called his name Joseph, and said, 'The Lord shall add to me another son'” (Genesis 30:22-24).

This passage opens by telling us, “...***God remembered Rachel.***” While some may understand this to mean that God had forgotten the fact that Rachel was childless, that view does not reflect God’s character or the context of this passage.

Instead, the Biblical phrase “***God remembered...***” signifies God’s decision to re-engage with a community or an individual following a period of inactivity. We use a similar expression today whenever we speak of “remembering” someone on his or her birthday or other special occasion. This does not mean that we have forgotten about that person throughout the rest of the year; it simply means that we plan to commemorate that person's special day. In a similar manner, this passage uses the phrase “***God remembered...***” as a figure of speech to convey God's plan for Rachel.

We should also note another important detail from this passage: God *listened* to Rachel. This implies that Rachel approached God in prayer. It also suggests that she had given up on the idea of trying to make things happen on her own and presented her needs to God.

The New Testament epistle of Philippians encourages us to follow a similar path whenever we are faced with a problem, difficulty, or concern...

“Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7 CSB).

The Biblical book of 1 Peter adds the following...

“So, humble yourselves under God’s strong hand, and in his own good time he will lift you up. You can throw the whole weight of your anxieties upon him, for you are his personal concern” (1 Peter 5:6-7 Phillips).

Thus, we should bring our needs to God in prayer and remember to thank Him for His answers.

The children referenced here in Genesis chapters twenty-nine and thirty form the ancestral foundation for what will later become the twelve tribes of Israel. They also fulfill the promises God made to Abraham in [Genesis chapter 12](#), to Isaac in [Genesis chapter 26](#) and to Jacob in [Genesis chapter 28](#).

Rachel's son Joseph will eventually become a pivotal figure in Israel's national history, but the primary narrative of his life won't begin until we reach Genesis chapter thirty-seven. For now, Joseph's birth signals the end of the first half of Genesis chapter thirty. The second half of this chapter will focus on the changes Jacob sought to make in his relationship with his employer and father-in-law, Laban.

“And it came to pass, when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, 'Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me go; for you know my service which I have done for you'” (Genesis 30:25-26).

So Jacob had now fulfilled the terms of the business arrangement he negotiated with Laban so many years earlier. In making that arrangement, Jacob agreed to a fourteen-year labor contract in exchange for the right to marry Laban's daughters. Jacob subsequently fulfilled his obligation under that agreement, and now it was time to begin working for himself and his family.

However, there was another aspect to Jacob's discussion with Laban. You see, Jacob understood that his agreement with Laban was never meant to be permanent. Instead, he clearly knew that he belonged in the land that God had promised to his grandfather, his father, and to him as well.

Notice that Jacob asked for his release in order to return to his own country. This offers some insight into Jacob's mindset. You see, Jacob still considered the place he left as his proper home, even though he had been gone for well over a decade. Of course, that also provided ample time for Jacob's brother, Esau, to get over his resentment at the fact that Jacob had [swindled him](#)- or at least that's what Jacob hoped.

So Jacob expressed his desire to leave, but Laban was ready with a new working arrangement for Jacob to consider.

“And Laban said to him, 'Please stay, if I have found favor in your eyes, for I have learned by experience that the Lord has blessed me for your sake.' Then he said, 'Name me your wages, and I will give it'” (Genesis 30:27-28).

A careful reading of Laban's proposal offers an important clue concerning his relationship with God. You see, several translations of passage render Laban's response in this manner: ***“...I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you” (ESV)***. This tells us that Laban's experience with God involved divination, or *“the practice of attempting to foretell future events or discover hidden knowledge by occult or supernatural means.”* ⁽¹⁾

As used in the passage quoted above, this word “divination” can also mean, *“to observe signs,” “to practice fortunetelling,”* or to *“whisper a (magic) spell.”* ⁽²⁾ Since Laban understood that ***“the Lord”*** had blessed him, it seems that he was willing to acknowledge God's existence. But when it came time to approach Him in prayer, Laban apparently sought guidance through another means. ⁽³⁾

In this respect, Laban was not unlike those who allege to “believe in God” while simultaneously engaging in various forms of occultic activity today. The Scriptures offer several cautionary messages regarding such practices. For instance, [Deuteronomy 18:10-12](#) delivers a clear and unambiguous warning that prohibits any type of involvement with the occult. Another example appears in [1 Chronicles 10:13](#) where we're told that Israel's King Saul lost life because he visited a medium with a request to [bring the prophet Samuel back from the dead](#).

Instead of duplicating Laban's error, we would be well-advised to follow the counsel given to us in the Old Testament book of Proverbs...

“...if you want better insight and discernment, and are searching for them as you would for lost money or hidden treasure, then wisdom will be given you, and the knowledge of God Himself.; you will soon learn the importance of reverence for the Lord and of trusting Him.

For the Lord grants wisdom! His every word is a treasure of knowledge and understanding. He grants good sense to the godly- His saints. He is their shield protecting them and guarding their pathway. He shows how to distinguish right from wrong, how to find the right decision every time. For wisdom and truth will enter the very center of your being, filling your life with joy” (Proverbs 2:3-10 TLB).

(1) *Dictionary.com | Meanings & Definitions of English Words*. (2024, November 27). Dictionary.com.
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/divination>

(2) H5172 - nahas - *Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (kjv)*. (n.d.). Blue Letter Bible.
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h5172/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

(3) The word used for “divination” in Genesis 30:27 can also mean “to learn by experience.” That's the way that this word is translated in Biblical versions such as the KJV. So Laban simply may have recognized that God was blessing him through his working relationship with Jacob. However, the following chapter tells us that Laban also kept small idols that supposedly offered insight into the future (see [Genesis 31:19](#)). While Laban may have recognized that God had blessed him through Jacob's efforts, it seems that he used an alternative supernatural source to make that determination.

As a shrewd businessman, Laban understood that Jacob's potential departure presented a significant threat to his financial prosperity. So Laban essentially told Jacob, “*If you want to stay, you can name your own salary.*”

That offer put Jacob in an interesting position. Even though Jacob had worked for Laban for fourteen years, he had little in the way of money or possessions. However, he had gained four wives, many children, and the task of supporting them. Thus, Laban's offer must have been highly attractive.

On the other hand, Jacob knew that Laban was an unscrupulous negotiator, especially considering the way Laban took advantage of him and switched his bride on his wedding night. So here's how Jacob responded to Laban's offer...

“Jacob said to him, ‘You know how I have worked for you and how your livestock has fared under my care. The little you had before I came has increased greatly, and the Lord has blessed you wherever I have been. But now, when may I do something for my own household?’

‘What shall I give you?’ he asked.

‘Don't give me anything,’ Jacob replied. ‘But if you will do this one thing for me, I will go on tending your flocks and watching over them: Let me go through all your flocks today and remove from them every speckled or spotted sheep, every dark-colored lamb and every spotted or speckled goat. They will be my wages.

And my honesty will testify for me in the future, whenever you check on the wages you have paid me. Any goat in my possession that is not speckled or spotted, or any lamb that is not dark-colored, will be considered stolen” (Genesis 30:29-33 NIV).

This was an offer that was too good for Laban to refuse. Instead of asking Laban to provide him with a specific number of animals to start his own ranch, Jacob offered to maintain their working relationship if Laban agreed to let him keep the animals that were born with less desirable markings. In essence, Jacob was offering to work for Laban in exchange for the animals no one wanted.

To do so, Jacob proposed to separate the black sheep and off-colored animals into one group. That would prevent the groups from interbreeding and passing on their genetic characteristics. Jacob was only permitted to keep the animals that were born with spotted or speckled markings under this arrangement; everything else went to Laban.

If we were to rephrase this offer in a contemporary manner, we might say that Jacob proposed to take the animals with a recessive gene coloration and give Laban the animals that possessed a dominant gene coloration. Of course, this arrangement offered an important side benefit as well...

“In the future you can easily find out if I have been honest. When you come to check up on my wages, if I have any goat that isn’t speckled or spotted or any sheep that isn’t black, you will know that it has been stolen” (Genesis 30:33 GNB).

This provision offered a foolproof method for categorizing each group. However, this approach also seemed to benefit Laban, since goats were typically solid colored and the sheep were generally white. So why would Jacob make an offer that clearly seemed to favor Laban at his own expense?

To address that question, we can first say that this offer showed Jacob’s faith in God’s provision. However, there was something else as well. The following chapter will tell us that Jacob had some “inside information” from God in the form of a dream concerning Laban.

In that dream, God told Jacob that He would act to protect him from Laban’s dishonesty (see [Genesis 31:6-12](#)). That gave Jacob confidence in making this proposal, for he knew God would provide for him despite anything Laban might try to do.

So Jacob offered to manage Laban’s solid-colored animals in exchange for the speckled or spotted offspring that were born from his flock. This was an offer Laban could hardly decline, but that didn’t prevent him from attempting to manipulate the odds in his favor...

“‘Agreed,’ said Laban. ‘Let it be as you have said.’ That same day he removed all the male goats that were streaked or spotted, and all the speckled or spotted female goats (all that had white on them) and all the dark-colored lambs, and he placed them in the care of his sons.

Then he put a three-day journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob continued to tend the rest of Laban’s flocks” (Genesis 30:34-36 NIV).

For Laban, this must have sounded like something that was too good to be true. First, he didn’t have to part with any animals he didn’t already possess. Next, it seemed highly unlikely that solid colored sheep would produce offspring that were striped or spotted. But just to make sure that he would come out ahead on this arrangement, Laban tilted the odds in his favor by allowing his sons to manage the off-colored animals. That provided Laban with two benefits...

1. Laban’s sons were not likely to show much interest in caring for animals that were inclined to produce offspring that would go to Jacob.
2. Since an average flock generally produced fewer off-colored animals, Jacob probably had more animals to look after. That meant less work for Laban and his family, and more work for Jacob.

Laban then separated the two flocks by a three-day journey (about 50-60 miles [80-130km]) to prevent the groups from crossbreeding.

So Jacob was now on his own with the responsibility of managing a group of animals that were genetically unlikely to benefit him. However, Jacob had gained many years of experience in livestock maintenance while working for Laban, and now it was time to put that experience to good use.

As Jacob began to manage the flock that had been assigned to him, he implemented a few sound breeding techniques, as well as some that were considerably less so...

“Jacob, however, took fresh-cut branches from poplar, almond and plane trees and made white stripes on them by peeling the bark and exposing the white inner wood of the branches. Then he placed the peeled branches in all the watering troughs, so that they would be directly in front of the flocks when they came to drink. When the flocks were in heat and came to drink, they mated in front of the branches. And they bore young that were streaked or speckled or spotted.

“Jacob set apart the young of the flock by themselves, but made the rest face the streaked and dark-colored animals that belonged to Laban. Thus he made separate flocks for himself and did not put them with Laban’s animals. Whenever the stronger females were in heat, Jacob would place the branches in the troughs in front of the animals so they would mate near the branches, but if the animals were weak, he would not place them there. So the weak animals went to Laban and the strong ones to Jacob” (Genesis 30:37-42 NIV).

It appears that Jacob believed that these striped branches would somehow help his livestock produce streaked or spotted offspring. However, our text doesn’t say that Jacob's animals were born with certain characteristics *because* he took that approach. It simply tells us that “...***they mated in front of the branches. And they bore young that were streaked or speckled or spotted.***”

Jacob's actions did nothing to affect the genetic characteristics of his livestock, even though it may have seemed like a good idea to him. Instead, Jacob’s successful breeding program resulted from the fact that God was protecting him from his devious father-in-law.

This meant that Jacob could have put anything (or nothing), in front of these animals while they mated and the result would have been the same. Since God elected to help Jacob and protect him from Laban, he was destined to succeed, no matter what.

But Jacob did something that made good common sense; he used selective breeding methods to improve his herd by mating the stronger animals and separating the weaker ones. While this was certainly helpful, the critical thing was that God was with Jacob and blessed the results of his work.

“Thus the man became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks, female and male servants, and camels and donkeys” (Genesis 30:43).

While this was great for Jacob, not everyone was glad about his success, as we’ll discover in the next chapter.