



Unit .03

Session .02

God's Gift of Love

Scripture



Genesis 29:21-35

21 Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” **22** So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. **23** But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. **24** (Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant.) **25** And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” **26** Laban said, “It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. **27** Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” **28** Jacob did so, and completed her week. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. **29** (Laban gave his female servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her

servant.) **30** So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. **31** When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. **32** And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, “Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me.” **33** She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also.” And she called his name Simeon. **34** Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, “Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.” Therefore his name was called Levi. **35** And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, “This time I will praise the LORD.” Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing.

Intro Options



Main Point:
Love is a gift from
God and is meant
to be shared with
those around us.

Option 1

Great love stories have compelling and often complicated story lines. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Elven princess, Arwen, falls in love with a human king, Aragorn. But to stay with him, she must give up her immortality. In the *Star Wars* saga, Anakin Skywalker, a Jedi knight, falls in love with Padme Amidala, a senator of the Republic. Jedi are not allowed to develop attachments to others and so they marry in secret. In *Romeo and Juliet*, two young members of warring families fall in love. Just when their plans to be together are nearly realized, a mistake in judgment ends in both lovers dying. In all these stories, immense love is surrounded by intense struggle, wrapped up in the evil and failings of humanity.

▪ What other love stories can you think of that include intense struggle?

What makes these love stories great is that they invite us into the reality of love in a broken world. We see in the characters something of our own predicament: our love is imperfect too. We all suffer from the faults, twisted desires, and selfishness of others, as well as of ourselves. Yet even in the midst of all the distortions of love in this life and the countless times our hearts have been broken, there is something driving us on to love and to be loved; that something is God Himself, who is Love (1 John 4:8). The true power of these stories, then, is that they point us on to the fact that there is a real love—a pure love—that is grounded in the very real God who created all things.

Option 2

Think about the last time someone you love did something really nice for you. It could be a parent, sibling, friend, mentor, and so on. With one other person, describe what that person did for you. As you talk think about the following:

- What kinds of gifts communicate love to you (time, presents, words)?
- How do other people give and receive love in different ways?
- Do both members of your pair give and receive love the same way?

With the entire group, discuss what you learned about the gift of love.

▪ Did anything you discussed in pairs surprise you? Why or why not?

Our love is never perfect, but God's love is. And He gave us the most perfect gift of His own love. What better gift could we share with others?

TEACHING PLAN

Jacob's deception to wrestle the blessing away from his brother created a schism in the family. Upon learning of Jacob's trickery, Esau flew into a murderous rage and Rebekah warned her younger son to flee. At this point in Jacob's story, the worst seemed to be behind him. He was on a new path—one that would advance the fulfillment of God's promise to bless the world through him as he found a wife and began a family of his own. Jacob entered the land, found a well, and as he was talking with the shepherds waiting to water their flocks, a shepherdess named Rachel approached in order to water her flock. Jacob discovered that Rachel was the daughter of his uncle, Laban. He wept with joy over having found his family and Rachel ran home to tell Laban the good news.

Genesis 29:13-20 tells of Jacob's initial encounter with his uncle, Laban. In this encounter, Jacob willingly offered to work seven years for his uncle to secure the hand of Laban's youngest daughter, Rachel, whom he loved. Laban agreed to the arrangement and the seven years "seemed like only a few days" to Jacob because of his love for Rachel. 

Read Genesis 29:21-30.



Echoing how the seven years passed as only a few days for Jacob, the narrative covers that span in one short verse. Now, seven years later, Jacob tells Laban it is time to make good on his end of their agreement. Jacob was ready to hold his prized Rachel in his arms; he demanded that Laban give her to him immediately and even explained why.

So Laban began a celebration and invited all the men to a feast. That evening, Laban gave Jacob his "wife," but Jacob was unaware that it was not Rachel but Leah. Concerned that his older daughter was being bypassed in marriage, Laban saw the opportunity to take advantage of his nephew and his ploy was successful. The deceiver was deceived. Jacob slept with Leah, who was perhaps obscured by a wedding veil and the darkness of the night.

Then as the morning dawned, Laban's deception was fully revealed. Imagine the pain and anger of this deception. Jacob truly loved Rachel, a woman he worked and waited seven years to marry. But in what should have been a joyous occasion of finally being married to the woman he loved, he discovered he had been bound to a woman he did not love—and both Leah and he knew this to be true.

- **How do you think this might have caused Jacob to think deeply about his own lies and deception toward Esau?**

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 96, DDG)

God is Love

To say that God is love is to say that God is the essence of love, or that perfect love both resides and resonates within God Himself—one God in three Persons. The imperfect love that human beings share between one another is a dim reflection, a sign that points to the perfect love that resides within God. The greatest act of love by God toward humans isn't the giving of earthly goods but the giving of Himself in Christ so that we might become reconciled to Him.

COMMENTARY

Genesis 29

Main Point:
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29:13. The world might view Jacob's encounter with Rachel as luck. How "lucky" of him to have such a chance encounter with the woman he would come to love and marry. Just think, if he had arrived earlier or later, he would have missed her. Or what if he had gone to a different well? It has all the makings of a Hollywood romantic movie—a man down and out stumbles across the love of his life and they live happily ever after.

But the people of God know that there is no such thing as luck. God was at work to providentially bring Jacob and Rachel together. Jacob did not find love; it was provided to him by His loving Father.

29:17. Everything seemed to be going according to plan. Yet, a worrisome theme in Jacob's life reappeared—favoring the younger over the elder. Jacob loved Rachel because she was shapely and beautiful. But Rachel had an older sister, Leah, who had "tender eyes." We aren't sure exactly what this phrase means—but the context suggests Leah was not as attractive. While Jacob's reason for favoring Laban's younger daughter is troubling, someone else noticed the oversight of the older sibling and came up with an even more troubling solution.

29:25. In this moment, Jacob knew exactly how Esau felt when the blessing was ripped out from under him through lies and deception. The parallels in the story are clear: the matter of the firstborn, the exploitation of desires, and tragic deception. And that is the point. This is what God wanted Jacob to experience—the pain and fury of deception, especially deception at the hands of a relative that was at the very core of human intimacy—a place where we are supposed to feel safe and loved.

God used Laban's trickery to teach Jacob a lesson he needed to learn, to discipline him. Not because He was fed up with Jacob—but because He loved him. God disciplines the ones He loves (Heb. 12:6). No discipline is enjoyable—it is painful—but it produces the fruit of peace and righteousness (Heb. 12:11). Jacob was a manipulator, exploiter, and deceiver. Although none of that disqualified him from receiving God's promised blessing, God loved him too much to leave him there. God wants to purify His own and that purification sometimes comes through pain.

In Defense (p. 98, DDG)



Unlike the atheistic worldview, the Christian worldview can easily account for the existence of love. Atheism must reduce "love" to nothing more than a chemical process in the brain or a feeling we get under the right biological conditions and nothing more. Such a belief is understandably difficult for many atheists, who have to admit that their "love" for their kids can be reduced to the chemical and biological impulses of their brains. The struggle is this: Many have an intuition that love is real and something more than a collection of chemicals. However, the Christian worldview offers a comprehensive picture of love, including the emotional feelings we get as well as how love goes beyond emotions and into action for someone else's good. The Christian worldview believes love is a real thing, because God—who is love—is real and has first loved and pursued us. Therefore, we can in turn genuinely love others.

TEACHING PLAN

When Jacob confronted Laban for his deception, Laban appealed to custom. It was not custom to marry off a younger daughter before an older daughter married. Laban made his nephew an offer: If he would work for another seven years, he could have Rachel and Leah. There is no record of any conversation that followed. All we read is “Jacob did so” (Gen. 29:28).

- **What would you say to someone who says the Bible allows a husband to have multiple wives?**

During this time, God worked even through the sins and wrong choices of His people. God designed marriage to be between one man and one woman, and marriage to two sisters would later be expressly forbidden (Lev. 18:18). When we encounter polygamy (marriage to more than one person at the same time) in the Bible, problems follow, and this relationship would be no different (as hinted in v. 30). Still, God used Jacob’s marriages to Leah and Rachel to bring His promises to pass.

Read Genesis 29:31-35.



- **What do we learn from this account about God’s love toward those who often go unloved by others?**

When we read of Laban’s deception (giving Leah to Jacob on his wedding night), we most likely focus on Jacob’s pain the next morning when he discovered he had been tricked. But we cannot miss the pain this caused Leah as well. Here was a woman who followed her father’s direction and the expectations and customs of her day, and she would only experience sorrow and suffering. Leah was the source of Jacob’s pain. He did not love her and she knew it. As we have already discovered, God shows love to His people, even to those who are unloved by others.

- **Why should God’s never-ending, never-failing love be a constant source of encouragement for us in all aspects of our lives?**

By the time Leah bore a fourth son—whom she named Judah, “I will praise the Lord”—she made no mention of her condition and offered no hope of acquiring her husband’s love. Instead she turned to God in praise. She may have given up on Jacob’s love, but she would not give up on God’s. Even in her distress, words of praise freely fell from the lips of a woman who learned she was indeed loved—by the Lord. 

This is what God’s gift of love does. It changes our perspective. It motivates us. It sustains us. It was love that motivated the Son of God to take on flesh, endure suffering and shame, and lay down His life at Calvary (John 15:13; 1 John 3:16). And it is love that carries us as we seek to follow Him (John 14:15). Our love of Christ is what changes our perspective of life, motivates us to endure difficulties, and sustains us in the ebbs and flows of life. This is why loving Christ is so essential. Love truly is a wonderful gift from God—a gift that reflects God, who is love Himself (1 John 4:7-11). 

- **How have you seen God develop your love for others through an understanding of His love for you?**

COMMENTARY

Genesis 29

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29:31. To say that Leah was merely unloved doesn't quite carry the strength of the Hebrew word used here. It also suggests hatred. Jacob wasn't just apathetic toward Leah—he despised her, perhaps because she reminded him of how he had been beaten at his own game of deception. But the Lord saw this, had compassion for her, and opened her womb giving her the gift of children—four sons recorded in this text.

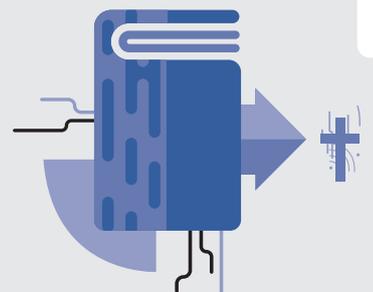
29:32-34. She named the first son Reuben, which literally means “See, a son!” Leah recognized her son as a gift from the Lord because He saw her affliction. She then voiced the jarring statement that this son would surely lead her husband to love her. It was the desperate hope of the unloved—a desperate hope that went unfulfilled. Reuben's birth didn't seem to move Jacob; he didn't even participate in naming his own child.

Leah conceived a second son, Simeon, whose name means “one who hears” or “hearing.” And once again, she recognized this child as a gift from the Lord because He heard that she was unloved. She then conceived a third son, Levi, whose name means “attached,” hoping her husband would finally be attached to her. But once again her hopes went unrealized.

The LORD, who had seen and provided for Hagar previously in her time of need (16:13-14), now saw that Leah was unloved (lit “hated”) and opened her womb. In a society where a woman's prestige depended almost entirely on her success in bearing sons, the Lord gave Leah four sons before she temporarily (31:17) stopped having children. Three themes are present in Leah's remarks: her conviction that God provided these children in response to her affliction and unloved condition, her hope that the births would cause her husband to love her, and her praise to the Lord for what he had done.¹

(p. 97, DDG) Christ Connection

Jacob's love for Rachel was deep, persistent, and yet flawed by sin; he played favorites. However, Jesus loved the world and gave His life to save sinners, including the outcasts and the unloved.



Our Mission

God's Story has always been designed to connect with our story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own. Suggested answers to these questions can be found on the right-hand side of the page for leaders.

Head



Why is it a good thing that God disciplines those He loves?

How has God's discipline been a positive thing in your own life?

Heart



Do you tend to think of God as an overbearing judge in the sky or as a Father who loves His children and wants their best?

What ways might God show His love for us? What is by far the greatest way God has shown His love for humanity?

Hands



Why should Christians actively seek to reflect the love of Christ to others?

What can you do to show someone who may feel unloved how much he or she is loved by God?

Main Point:
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Head

When it comes to God's loving discipline in Jacob's life, we need to remember that the same is true for us. It's easy for us to look at Jacob from a safe distance and feel for him in this moment of deception but still conclude that he did deserve it. He had this coming to him, but so do we. We may exhibit our sins in different ways than Jacob—we may not swindle and deceive—but we still sin. And as such, we are also in need of God's loving discipline. In this story of Jacob's trials, we see the wondrous love of God. Specifically, we see that He knows our evil, but does not turn away from us nor leave us to our demise. Rather, God disciplines us so that we might become a blessing to others.



Heart

Jacob's love story, though filled with exploitation, deceit, and distress, is also filled with the abundant love of God. As we have seen in Jacob's story, God's love for us involves His discipline and His provision. No matter what situation you find yourself in today, God loves you. Don't take that to be a cliché statement. To say that the One who created the universe loves us is to say something of immensity and great weight. Jesus' defeat of sin and death by rising from the dead is an event of cosmic proportion. This demonstrates God's intense love for human beings and for all of His creation; His love transcends all of time and history. So, when we think about all the ways God might love us, this is the greatest example: He gave Himself to us to restore us to be in a right relationship with Him through His Son, Jesus.



Hands

Like Leah, there are people around us each day who don't feel very loved by others. Christians are called to reflect the true love of Christ in a world that has twisted and perverted love. We are to be the ones who reach out to the unloved to show them what God originally intended for humanity: to be in a relationship of love and intimacy with the Creator. We do so not because we are commanded, but because of the great love God showed us while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8). We love others because God has first loved us. And we love others not with our love, but with the love God has given us in Christ.