

*The Bachelor*

Why don't we begin with a catalogue of everything about this story that is *messed up*?

It is not right for us to treat the Bible so gingerly that we cannot acknowledge when the stories, the words, the attitudes, perplex us as modern listeners. That is when we need to dig around in the subterranean strata to see what is really going on, knowing the Word of God is durable enough to stand up to our scrutiny. If not, what are we doing here?

My hunch is that as you listened to it, one or two things, perhaps three, jumped out at you as being *wrong* with this story.

Now to me, the most obvious problem is that Leah and Rachel are treated as goods to be bartered.

"You shouldn't work for me for free, what do you want in return? Oh... my daughter? The younger one? Well, I reckon she's worth seven years."

We have absolutely no idea what Leah and Rachel's feelings about the matter were – if we read the whole story, we are led to believe that Leah is hopelessly homely and destined for a life of solitude and sheep, and that Rachel and Jacob are bundles of pulsating hormones. Honestly, it reads like bad fan-fiction:

Rachel shows up to water the sheep, and the saxophone music is practically playing in the background. "Why, whatever will I do? If only a big strong man would help me out."

It seems one could catch a cold from the force ten gale being generated by fluttering eyelashes.

And then there's Jacob, "Well, hey there little lady, how can I help."

I amazed he could still breathe, what with puffing his chest up.

*This story was clearly written by a man.*

And then, of course, there's Leah, poor ole Leah.

Poor ole Leah, my foot. Why do we assume she's worried about being left on the shelf? For all we know Poor ole Leah had her lovely eyes on a shepherd(ess) in the next field.

There is absolutely nothing in this text to suggest that Leah gave a rip for Jacob.

And there is also nothing to suggest that "lovely eyes" was code language for homely as a mud fence.

Do you see what's going on here?

When a character is a cipher, a blank slate, we can write anything on it that we want, easy-breezy – and what we see reflected in Rachel and Leah tells us more about ourselves than it does about either of them. The only thing we know from the text is that Laban saw his love-sick nephew as a money-saving scheme to pad his own pocket, which is unusual in itself – by most accounts, Laban *should* have provided for the future of his two daughters, and presumably their maids as well.

Jacob was the dupe he could use for a significant reduction in force in his household.

By the way, if what you saw wrong with this story was the polygamy aspect, let me be clear that this simply wouldn't have offended our forebears. Their notions of marriage were very different from our own, which is why it is great fun to have that little chestnut in your back pocket for the next time you hear someone foaming at the mouth about "Biblical marriage."

Oh, and Jacob and Rachel and Leah were first cousins. I'm just going to set that right there.

Then there's the double-crossing aspect.

If you remember Jacob's story, you'll remember that he has already cheated his brother Esau out of just about everything important. (Truly there is nothing more satisfying than seeing a cheater get cheated. It's like seeing the car that sped past you on the Kelly Drive pulled off on the side of the road with a cop car behind them. It is perversely enjoyable.)

If ever there were someone who deserved what he got, it was Jacob. He has had it coming his whole life.

So, why is this interlude even in the Bible?

It reads like it is an early prototype of *The Bachelor*. Will Laban help Leah to snatch the rose from Rachel's grasp?

I would say it's not a family show, except that, ironically enough, that's exactly what it is. It's not quite the most sexually twisted story of Genesis – you'll need to turn to chapter 38 for that – but it runs a close second or third.

But, even with its NSFW rating, it is a family show – in fact, it's *the* family show.

Back in the beginning of Genesis, when God called Jacob's grandparents, Abraham and Sarah, commanding them to strike out into the unknown with only God as their companion, what God promised was *family*. God promised descendants. God promised that Abraham and Sarah's offspring would be more numerous than the stars.

What we need to keep in mind about these Old Testament stories – mild or wild – is that they aren't independent. They are all part of a great, sweeping narrative arc that twists and turns, and gets muddy at times, but nevertheless, still points to God's covenants. From time to time the covenant seems to get submerged in the stormy waters of personal and familial

double-crossing and intrigue. Sometimes violence threatens to derail the covenant, sometimes sex.

But no matter what, God remains in charge of the covenant – God remains in charge of human history. I remember I stepped on few theological toes last fall when I said that this is not the same as saying that God fore-ordains our parking spaces, or more seriously, that if something bad happens to us, God caused it.

No. Instead, these stories of the covenant say that God has a purpose for creation, that purpose being *shalom*: God's peaceable well-being for everything God has made.

*That is what God is promising.*

Through the stories of Leah and Rachel, God is advancing a narrative of a promise *made* and *kept* – through Leah and Rachel, God is establishing the family, the people, whom God is going to use as the crucible of salvation history.

Between them and their maids, they have twelve sons, and those twelve sons, with all their foibles, will move the story of the covenant even further down the line.

As we track through the Pentateuch, also known as the Torah, we see that happening over and over and over again. God is constantly shaping the narrative. Just as things threaten to spin out of control completely, God brings the story back to the covenant. God reasserts that while history may, at times, read like a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, that despite all outward appearances, the fullness of human history continues unfolding in the providence of God.

I suppose that's not really all that different from our lives, is it?

The promises we cling to seem to twist and turn, get submerged, even buried in the mud, and just when we think God isn't around, God's promises resurface.

Sometimes *we* get double-crossed, and sometimes we are the ones who are treated like property, objects to be swapped and treated as commodities.

In our worst moments, we're the ones doing the objectifying and swapping around.

And yet, neither our worst moments, nor the moments when we are treated the worst, are determinative of our value in God's eyes, or our ultimate potential for humanity.

It is *so* easy to objectify people, even when we try to do just the opposite.

That is what Jacob did to Esau and what Laban did to Jacob. Both wound up patsies for what each con-man wanted to accomplish.

Yes, it's so easy to objectify people.

I would go so far as to say we just about *have* to objectify others to justify ourselves if we're going to do somebody wrong, if there is a scrap of humanity in us.

And even though this is all true – God knows who we are and loves us anyhow.

We're not objects, we're *people*.

We're God's people.

That means you're not a lawyer-object, or a stay-at-home-parent object. You're not a doctor-object, and I'm not a minister-object. You are not a social worker-object or a student-object. You and I are flesh and blood human beings for whom Christ died, and on whom God's grace is poured out lavishly.

And because God's grace is poured out on us like the waters of baptism, we are called to abandon the objectification of people into commodity and political capital and negotiations, and to refuse the efforts of others to turn others and ourselves back into objects.

At root, this idea that God has called and established people to be a blessing to the world is hardly confined to the stories of Genesis. When we turn to the stories of Jesus, we see again God's calling to people to be a blessing to others. Jesus comes to the people of Israel with a reassertion of the covenant.

Jesus is *himself* the embodiment of all of God's promises.

Paul said as much also. It is easy to dump on Paul, because God knows enough of what he said has been misinterpreted and twisted to reduce people to objects that it's easy to want to dismiss Paul.

But we would miss this soaring passage from Romans, where we learn what God's promises mean for us – that nothing – nothing, nothing, nothing, – can separate us from the love of God.

What can separate us from the love of God?

Nothing.

Not famine, nakedness, peril, sword, death, things present nor things to come, height, depth – it's a pretty exhaustive list, no?

What can separate us from the love of God?

Nothing.

Do you believe that? Really, do you believe that?

Because believing that might cost you something. It might come at the cost of your money – we go through life, and money seems to be so all-fired important some of the time, doesn't it? Well, if money's so all-fired important, it can probably give us a pretty good barometer of our commitment back to God.

Or perhaps it may to cost you some friends. I'm fairly convinced that all of us need, at least some of the time, to be the people your friends have to tolerate – because we are living into

God's call to be the voice for those silenced. Some folks don't take kindly to having the voiceless represented. It might cost you a friend or two.

It might cost you your politics. If your politics don't line up with those of Jesus, you'll have to decide who is Lord, because God is jealous. God doesn't tolerate rival claims for our loyalty.

I do not think I can lay God's grace out any more clearly than Paul does in Romans. But – and this is key – we are not allowed, nor should we even want – to spend our faith lives *wallowing* in the grace that is evident in Romans 8.

Nor does Paul intend us to. If we proof-text the grace from Paul's letter, then we excise the expectation of a Christian life. Yes, Romans 8, for sure, but also Romans 12, where Paul lays out the characteristics of a life lived in Christ.

Paul is thoroughly clear that a mature faith means that some of the time, at least, we have to get up off of our blessed assurances and do something about something for someone.

That's bringing our story back to the covenant.

Being part of the covenant can be costly.

But if God is *in fact* in charge of human history, if God is *in fact* upholding all of creation in covenant love stronger than death, if *in fact* we are being upheld in promises so profound they can outfox even clever swindlers and experienced liars...

Then, I know whose side I want to be on.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.