

## A LESS THAN PERFECT CHRISTIAN FAMILY

*29 Then Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east. 2As he looked around he saw a well in the field, and there were three flocks of sheep lying near it, because they watered the flocks from that well. Now the stone that was over the mouth of the well was very large. 3When all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone away from the well's mouth and water the sheep, afterward they would put the stone back in place over the mouth of the well. 4Jacob said to them, My brothers, from where do you come? And they said, We come from Haran. 5Then he said to them, Do you know Laban the son of Nahor? They replied, We know him. 6Then he said to them, Is it well with him? And they said, It is well. His daughter Rachel comes here with the sheep. 7And he said, Look, the sun is still high, it is not yet time for the flocks to be gathered together. Water the sheep and take them to pasture. 8And they said, We must wait until all the flocks are gathered together and they roll the stone away from the mouth of the well, then we water the sheep.*

*9While he was yet speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, because she was in charge of keeping them. 10When Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and Laban's sheep, he went over and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well, then he watered his uncle's flock 11Jacob greeted Rachel with a kiss and began to weep aloud. 12Jacob told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and that he was Rebekah's son. Then she ran and told her father.*

*13When Laban heard the good news of the arrival of his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him. He embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all about his family. 14And Laban said to him, Surely you are my bone and my flesh. So Jacob stayed with him for a month.*

*15Then Laban said to Jacob, Because you are my brother, is it right that you should serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be? 16Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older girl was Leah and the name of the younger was Rachel. 17Leah's eyes were poor; but Rachel had a beautiful face and figure. 18Jacob loved Rachel, so he said to Laban, I will serve you seven years for Rachel your younger daughter. 19And Laban said, It is better that I should give her to you than that I should give her to some other man. Stay here with me. 20So Jacob served seven years for Rachel. Those years seemed to him to be only a few days, because of the love he had for her.*

*21Then Jacob said to Laban, Give me my wife so that I may lie with her, for I have fulfilled my time of service. 22So Laban gathered together all the men of that place and made a feast. 23In the evening, Laban took Leah his older daughter and brought her to Jacob. Then Jacob went in and lay with her. 24And Laban gave his maidservant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maidservant.*

*25In the morning, to his surprise, Jacob discovered that it was Leah. Then he said to Laban, What is this that you have done to me? Did I not serve you for Rachel? Why then have you tricked me? 26Then Laban said, It is not our custom to give the younger woman in marriage before the firstborn. 27Fulfill the week of service for this older daughter, and we will give you the younger one also for the service which you shall render to me for another seven years.*

*<sup>28</sup>And Jacob did so; he fulfilled Leah's week of service. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. <sup>29</sup>Laban gave his daughter Rachel his maidservant Bilhah to be her maidservant. <sup>30</sup>And so Jacob also slept with Rachel. Now he loved Rachel more than Leah. After this Jacob served Laban for another seven years. (Gen. 29:1-30)*

## **Introduction**

We hear a lot these days about dysfunctional families. In such homes the family is not functioning as it should because one or more of the members are not fulfilling their roles: there may be abuse, or addiction, or absence. When one member of the family fails to carry out their role it has a negative effect on the rest of the household, other roles are altered and begin to malfunction. The result is the tearing down, rather than the building up, of the family, and the whole household can be endangered.

When we meet Jacob's family as they are presented to us in Genesis 29-31, we find ourselves in the midst of a dysfunctional family. Even in the lives of God's redeemed there still exists much sin that can have a detrimental effect on interpersonal relationships, and hinders their relationship with the LORD. Let us meet the different members of Jacob's family and see if we find some reflection of ourselves in them. Being aware of our own sin and its negative effect on others, let us ask the LORD to apply His transforming grace to our lives.

### **I. Like Laban, Do You Find Yourself Using People for Your Own Advantage? If so, Ask the LORD for His Transforming Grace**

Although he acknowledges Jacob to be a blood relative, Laban treats him as a hired servant (Gen. 29:15.) After having benefited from Jacob's services for a full month without any remuneration (Gen. 29:14b,) and finding that Jacob is a useful worker, Laban constructs a relationship with Jacob that will be most beneficial to himself.

Laban tricks Jacob by substituting Leah in the place of Rachel (Gen. 29:23-26.) Not only has he deceived Jacob, but Laban has also taken advantage of the situation to marry off a daughter who was not a prime candidate for marriage.

In exchange for seven more years of labor, Laban is willing to give Jacob Rachel as a second wife (Gen. 29:27.) His willingness to give both his daughters to the same man shows that Laban had little concern for his daughters' happiness and their inter-personal relationship, note Leviticus 18:18, an ordinance that will prohibit such conduct on the part of a father: *"Do not take your wife's sister as a rival wife and have sexual relations with her while your wife is living."*

Laban does not want to have Jacob depart because he has enjoyed the LORD's blessing of prosperity through Jacob's presence (Gen. 30:25-30.) Jacob is concerned to provide for his own family and return to his own home, but Laban wants to detain him for his own personal and selfish benefit.

When they agree upon another business contract, once again Laban resorts to cunning trickery to take advantage of Jacob (Gen. 30:31-36.) Jacob is willing to continue working for Laban on the one condition that he be allowed to keep all the speckled sheep and speckled goats as his wages—he proposes to Laban that he be allowed to remove all such animals from Laban's herds and flocks (vs. 31-32.) But before turning the flocks and herds over to Jacob's care, Laban himself first removes all the speckled sheep and speckled goats, giving them to his sons and having them remove them from the main flocks and herds by a space of three days (vs. 34-36.) By so doing it seems that Laban was seeking to insure a longer term of service from Jacob, since now Jacob would be starting with no sheep or goats at all and would have to wait until the animals produced more of the off-color variety in order to build up a flock and herd of his own.

When Jacob prospers with ever increasing flocks and servants, Laban's demeanor towards him changes (Gen. 30:43-31:2.) As long as Laban could use Jacob to his own personal advantage all was well, but now he becomes cold and distant towards Jacob.

When you look at Laban you see a man who makes a practice of using people for his own advantage, a man who places his personal interests and wealth ahead of his own family. When you honestly look at yourself, do you see the same kind of life? If so, ask the LORD for His transforming grace.

## **II. Like Rachel, Do You Find Yourself Playing the Role of the Spoiled Child? If so, Ask the LORD for His Transforming Grace**

Rachel was physically beautiful in every way—in face and in figure (Gen.29:17.) No doubt, because of her physical attractiveness, she was everybody's favorite girl—the star attraction, “the high school homecoming queen.”

But Rachel was also very self-centered and hard to live with when things did not go her way (Gen.30:1.) Instead of being grateful for all that she has and being happy for her sister, Rachel envied her sister because she could bear children and Rachel could not. Rachel **demands** that Jacob give her children, or she will die—her envy, her pre-occupation with what she does not have, is killing her.

Although she possessed a great deal of outward beauty, there was little inner beauty and little spiritual depth to Rachel's life (Gen. 30:1-8.) Rather than learn from the example of Isaac and Rebekah, as recorded in Genesis 25:21, (*“Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD*

*answered his prayer, and Rebekah his wife became pregnant”*), Rachel demands Jacob to give her children (Gen.30:1.)

When her maidservant bears Jacob a son, Rachel exclaims, *“God has vindicated me—[He has rendered a verdict on her behalf]—and has listened to my plea”*—i.e.; her complaint (Gen. 30:6.) Rather than thanking God for His graciousness towards her, her attitude is: God has finally given me my rights; He has finally given me what I deserve. When her maidservant bears Jacob another son, Rachel exclaims, *“I have wrestled with my sister [for Jacob’s affection] and have prevailed”* (Gen. 30:8.) Her jealousy expresses itself, she could not bear to endure Jacob’s undivided attention, especially if he is lured away by what she could not provide him.

Even when the LORD is gracious to Rachel and gives her her heart’s desire, she is still not satisfied (Gen. 30:22-24.) When God grants Rachel a son of her own she names him *“Joseph,”* (from the Hebrew *יִסְרָאֵל* meaning “to add,”) and says, *“May the LORD add to me another son.”*

Rachel has a hard time letting go of the idols of this world (Gen. 31:19.) When the family departs for Canaan, it is Rachel who steals her father’s teraphim and takes them along. The teraphim were little household idols revered as the givers of earthly prosperity (Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentaries on the Old Testament, The Pentateuch*, Vol.1, p.296.) Material prosperity is a high priority in Rachel’s life, something she does not want to lose, even if it means compromising her commitment to Christ.

When you look at Rachel you see a woman who plays the role of the spoiled child, a woman who always got everything she wanted and cannot bear life to be lived in any other way. When you honestly look at yourself, do you see the same kind of life? If so, ask the LORD for His transforming grace.

### **III. Like Leah, Do You Find Yourself Battling Resentment and Frustrated Dreams?**

#### **If so, Ask the LORD for His Transforming Grace**

From early on, Leah had a hard time in life, and life continued to be hard on her (Gen.29:17,30.) She lacked in physical beauty, and consequently was passed over in favor of her younger sister. Even in marriage she was not the primary object of her husband’s attraction and affection.

For a long time Leah seeks to win Jacob’s heart, but her hopes and dreams continue to be frustrated (Gen. 29:31-35.) The LORD sees that Leah is hated—that is to say, neglected by Jacob who has no affection for her—and grants her a son (vs. 31.) The birth of the son gives Leah hope that now at last Jacob will love her and her affliction (her rejection) will be removed (vs. 32.) With the birth of

a second son her unfulfilled dreams of love are still being pursued; she names him "*Simeon*," (from the Hebrew שִׁמְעוֹן meaning "to hear,") "*because the LORD has heard that I am [still] hated*" (vs. 33.) With the birth of her third son her expectations that Jacob will at last be joined to her are rekindled (vs. 34.)

She praises the LORD for the birth of her fourth son, and perhaps she is beginning to re-focus her life. Leah declares, "*this time I will praise the LORD*"—she now is making praise to the LORD her priority, rather than the effort to win her husband's favor (vs. 35.) However, Leah may be expecting that this time, after bearing Jacob four sons, he will finally love her and for this she will praise the LORD. If this is her meaning, then her attitude has not changed.

Leah struggled with her frustrations and an attitude of bitterness towards her sister, Rachel (Gen. 30:9-15.) When she no longer bears any more children, she does what Rachel had done: she offers Jacob her maidservant (vs. 9-13.) When Rachel requests some of Reuben's mandrakes—a fruit thought to promote fertility—Leah's bitterness becomes evident: "*[Leah] said to [Rachel], Is it an insignificant thing that you have taken away my husband? Will you now take away my son's mandrakes also?*" (Gen.30:15a)

Far from having her hopes fulfilled, Leah finds her relationship with Jacob has deteriorated (Gen.30:16.) Leah informs Jacob that he must sleep with her because she has hired him with her son's mandrakes. Her relationship with her husband has become reduced to a prostitute-like transaction, far removed from the affection she so deeply desired.

Leah continued to hold on to the hope that she might still gain Jacob's favor and realize the longing of her heart (Gen. 30:19-20.) When she bears Jacob a sixth son she expresses the hope that "*now my husband will live with me, because I have borne him six sons*" (vs. 20.) Her expectations are reduced to the hope of having Jacob's companionship, if not his affection—"*live with me*," as opposed to "*be joined to me*" (Gen. 29:34)—and that for the sake of her sons, if not for her own attractiveness.

When you look at Leah you see a woman who waged a personal battle against resentment and frustrated hopes, a woman who may never have been granted the desire of her heart—although maybe, at long last, after the death of Rachel, when she was Jacob's only wife, she did finally realize something of that for which she so longed.

When you honestly look at yourself, do you see the same kind of life? If so, ask the LORD for His transforming grace.

#### **IV. Like Jacob, Do You Find Yourself Dismissing Your Own Shortcomings? If so, Ask the LORD for His Transforming Grace**

Jacob is very much aware of the wrongs he has suffered (Gen. 31:7,12.) Speaking to his wives, he accuses Laban of having deceived him and altering the conditions of their contract “*ten times*” (vs. 7.) He reports to his wives that even the Angel of God testified, “*I have seen all that Laban does to you*” (vs. 12.)

Jacob angrily confronts Laban with his wrongful conduct (Gen. 31:36-42.) He protests his own innocence, and challenges Laban to point out his sin (vs. 36.) He maintains that in exchange for his hard work and faithful commitment, Laban has treated him with deceit and callousness (vs. 38-42.)

But Jacob is less than honest with his family or with himself: he does not face up to his own misdeeds. Jacob took advantage of Laban (Gen. 30:37-43.) When the stronger animals came to the water troughs, Jacob set speckled rods before them and they conceived speckled offspring—thus, over the years his flocks became superior in quality to Laban’s and Jacob prospered. As the commentators Keil & Delitzsch point out, “a fact frequently noticed, particularly in the case of sheep, is that whatever fixes their attention in copulation is marked upon the young” (Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentaries on the Old Testament, The Pentateuch*, Vol.1, p.293.)

Jacob did not fulfill his obligation to his wife, Leah (Gen. 30:15.) The fact that Leah “hires” him with her son’s mandrakes shows that he had totally disregarded her and did not fulfill his marital obligations to her; note Exodus 21:10, which codifies a prohibition against such treatment by a husband: “*If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first of her food, her clothing, and her duty of marriage* [i.e., his sexual obligation to her].”

When you look at Jacob you see a man who was prone to dismiss his own shortcomings, a man who recognized the wrongs done to him but was blind or tolerant of his own misdeeds.

When you honestly look at yourself, do you see the same kind of life? If so, ask the LORD for His transforming grace.

## **Conclusion**

The reason Scripture contains a detailed account of Jacob’s family is to remind us of the fact that we are saved by grace, and we are in need of God’s transforming grace.

In this present life every Christian and every Christian family is far less than perfect.

Even in the lives of God’s redeemed there still exists much sin that can have a detrimental effect on interpersonal relationships—and on our relationship with God. Being aware of our own sin and its negative effect on others, let us ask the LORD to apply His transforming grace to our lives.