

When Envy Rages – *Genesis 29:31-30:24*

Introduction – One commentator titled this section “Birth Wars.” After the deception of Laban (and whatever complicit roles of Leah and Rachel), Jacob finds himself married to two sisters, one he deeply longed to marry and one whom he never wanted to marry. Each sister has deep longings, one for the love and affection of her husband, and one for her own children. Neither is set upon the chief end of marriage: to glorify God. Selfishness, competition, discontentment, and envy riddle this section with the sin of following our heart/feelings and not the Lord.

This is the nasty history of the founding of the twelve tribes of Israel. It is not a story one would want to tell to describe the origins of a great nation. Why does Moses tell this story? One reason is to see the ongoing struggle between the seeds (Gen 3:15). And certainly, another is to see the destruction wrought when envy rages. Like the warning labels on tobacco products, there ought to be a warning label on every Disney flick and Rom-com: “*He who trusts in his own heart is a fool*” (Prov 28:26, also 3:5-6).

Overview – The Lord opens and closes wombs. He opened Leah’s but Rachel was barren (v31). Leah had four sons and the first three are named with her longing that they would cause Laban to love her (vv31-34). Her fourth son, named Judah, was a name of praise to Yahweh, a sign of some faith in the Lord (v35). Leah stopped bearing and it may have been because of what Rachel said to Jacob (30:1-2). Rachel envied her sister which led her to give her maid, Bilhah, to Jacob to conceive on her behalf (vv3-4). Bilhah bore two sons, but Rachel named them. In her mind, she was vindicated (Dan) and was catching up in the wrestling match for children (Naphtali – vv5-8). Leah was no longer bearing so she did the same and Zilpah bore two sons for her, Gad (Lucky) and Asher (Happy). She was happy and winning the birth wars (vv9-13).

But it seemed Jacob’s affections still lay with Rachel. One day, Reuben came home with mandrakes (a plant that flowered with a heavy odor and believed to be useful as an aphrodisiac and for increasing fertility). It makes sense then that Rachel would ask Leah for those mandrakes (v14). Leah still saw Jacob as her husband, being married first to her, but the two bargain for the use of this man, one longing for affection, the other for children (vv15-16). But it is Leah who conceived and not Rachel even with the mandrakes. Two more sons are given to Leah, Issachar and Zebulun, names reflecting her hope that God was going to turn Jacob’s affections to her still (vv17-20). A side note is mentioned, a daughter, Dinah, is also born – and the terrible story surrounding her is still to come. But God remembered Rachel, listened to her, and opened her womb (v22). Joseph was the name she gave her son – she was hoping for another to add as well (vv23-24). The irony of her words, “*give me children or I shall die*” and “*The LORD shall add to me another son*” was that many years later He did, and it cost her her life. Verse 25 gives us an interesting timeline for all 12 children born in just 7 years. At several times, one or more of these four women were pregnant with Jacob’s children. Twelve children under seven years old with two wives bitter at one another, envying what the other had, all in one household.

Two Seeds at War – This battle shows again the theme of the antithesis, the war between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. Leah is the firstborn and the firstborn is regularly set aside in these stories as God weaves His plan of redemption. She represents the first woman, Eve, fallen. Her children will try to kill Joseph, son of the second born, son of the promise. Pre-resurrection, the children of the firstborn and of the slaves must be cast out (remember Hagar/Ishmael). But they will not be cast out. They are all redeemed by Joseph, who is the resurrection seed. Joseph will go through a death and resurrection experience and, in doing so, save his brothers. They all become the Israel of God through the one son dying for the rest. (HT – James Jordan).

Envy, Marriage, and Kids – Presently, our culture isn’t dealing with the problems of polygamy (hah – not yet), but that doesn’t keep envy away. We can be guilty of envying others because their marriage is so full of blessing. We can be guilty of envying others because God has blessed them with children. We can be guilty of envying others because of homes purchased, promotions won, vacations taken, reputations and friends far more than ours. Sidelong glances produce envy. And out of envy we can make some really stupid decisions.

Envy is being upset or angry when something good happens to someone else. Envy is discontentment with jagged edges; it is covetousness with a knife in your hand. You don’t want that person to have that. Rachel saw the mercy of the Lord fall upon Leah and she hated it – and her. Fallen man is amazing at turning blessings into bitterness. Envy brought the first murder (Gen 4). Envy destroys families, communities, even nations. Our culture is currently sick with envy, an undercover envy wearing the mask of virtue. It is called critical theory, and it demonizes the blessings of others as unfair privileges given to some that must be taken and distributed to others – in the name of compassion. Envy is the opposite of love; it is the opposite of Christ who suffered for our good and rejoiced over our good.

Killing Envy with Contentment – Both women used the lives around them (including the babies they created) in pursuit of their own happiness. Now it isn't wrong to seek the affection of your spouse, and it isn't wrong to desire children. But our loves must be ordered. And when we ever say, "*I will not happy unless I have.....*" we have identified our idol. And idols are cruel gods. They promise happiness but actually destroy life, liberty, relationships, bodies and souls.

In this sad, fallen world, where life is anything but fair on the face of it, we are told that we can and must be a content people – content in Christ. The verses abound, but they must be internalized by faith and the work of the Spirit (Prov 16:8, Rom 5:3, Luke 3:14, Phil 4:12-13, 2 Cor 12:10, Heb 13:5, James 1:2, Matt 6:25, Hab 3:17-18). The brokenness of this world is reality, but our contentment is with Christ and what He has given, promised, and is at work completing.

Heart Issues – And this is why we must not follow our heart (Jer 17:9). Your heart is a better liar than the world and the devil. Jesus said, "*Let not your heart be troubled*" (John 14:1) which should also be taken "*Do not let your heart trouble you!*" Psalm 42:5 commands us to preach to our soul/heart rather than listening to it. Our generation gets this completely backwards. We are to teach our hearts, we are to train our hearts, we are to preach to them, we are not to listen to them. Mold and shape your heart, disciple of Jesus, to order your loves according to the One who is Love.

Conclusion – "*God has taken away my reproach*" (30:23). We are all a piece of work aren't we? Calvin said our hearts are idol factories. We stumble and fall in as many ways as there are individuals. But our God does not see our envies and sins and hold them over our heads like a long list of accusations, hammer in Hand. He is merciful, longsuffering, slow to anger, and overwhelmingly gracious and compassionate. He takes away your reproach, your shame, your guilt, your silly and petty sins and envies and all the stupid things you have said, done, not said, not done, because of your selfish heart. He has done so in Christ. He has done so for the New Israel. God draws straight with crooked lines – as He did with Israel – and as He does with and for you. This story of two wives, filled with bitter envy, is the story of the salvation of the world.

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