

# Children of Promise

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Date: 13 October 2024

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Lord's Word, please do keep that passage open in front of you if you can. Let us ask the Lord for his help with it before we come to it together. Let us pray. Father, we thank you for your words, which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

May we eagerly receive it that we might honor and praise you because of what you have revealed to us. May your Spirit plant these truths deep in our hearts that we might praise Jesus, our Lord and our Redeemer.

It is in his name we pray. Amen. Family reunions. I wonder if the thought fills you maybe with joy? Maybe with dread? Perhaps with longing? Maybe you wish your family would get together. Maybe your family does get together and you wish they wouldn't.

Sometimes we get on with our families wonderfully well, don't we? And that is a great thing. But we all know, don't we, that is not always the case.

[ 1 : 1 7 ] Whether from our own experience or from the stories of somebody else, we know, don't we, that just because someone is family doesn't always mean someone is a friend.

Sometimes families are where we find the most broken relationships of all. And the family we've been following from Genesis chapter 12 is little different.

We're picking up this morning in the book of Genesis from where we paused at the end of August. It's been a few weeks. Some of you wouldn't have even been with us then.

Many of the rest of us will at least need our memories refreshed. So let me just begin by briefly recapping the story so far, at least in this little section of Genesis, from where we began in chapter 25 a few months ago.

The last few chapters of Genesis have focused on a man called Jacob, who is the son of Isaac, and so the grandson of Abraham.

[ 2 : 2 2 ] Jacob had a twin brother called Esau, and again, twins they might well have been, but friends they definitely were not. In no small part because Jacob had first of all taken Esau's birthright off him and then robbed him of his blessing through outright deception.

When Esau had found out what had happened, he resolved to go and kill his brother when he had the opportunity. But Jacob learns of Esau's plot through his mother, and so Jacob, right, he legs it. He is off. He is out of here. He runs away from the land of promise to find safety with the family of his uncle Laban. And while he is there, Jacob falls in love with Laban's younger daughter, Rachel. So Jacob strikes a deal with Laban. He says, I'll work for you for seven years in exchange for Rachel. The years seem few to Jacob because of the love he had for Rachel, but little does he know that Laban is no stranger to the deception game.

That Jacob is so familiar with himself. The deceiver is deceived. And on his wedding night, finds that he has been married not to Rachel, but to Leah, Rachel's elder sister as a wife instead.

[ 4 : 0 1 ] I bet we're glad there was no such antics yesterday. That would have been a really memorable day, wouldn't it? So now Jacob has a wife he doesn't love and loves a woman who's not his wife.

But instead of accepting his lot and loving the wife he has been given, Jacob serves another seven years, 14 years in total, that he might also have Rachel as his wife too.

That is where we pick up the story here at the end of chapter 29. A man on the run from his murderous brother who he deceitfully robbed with two wives, one of whom he does not love. If that's all new to you, it might well seem a bit of a blur. But even if you've not quite followed all the details, one thing should be clear here.

This is not, is it? This is not a model family full of great biblical heroes that we should try and emulate. This family is a mess, isn't it?

[ 5 : 24 ] There is favoritism, there is polygamy, there is deception, there is murderous intent. This is not a family of happy heroes. It is confusing, it is messy, it is full of sin and sadness and sorrow.

And so the aim, right, we need to be clear, don't we? The aim is not to go and be a Jacob. Otherwise we would go out here with the aim of being deceptive and cunning and polygamist. Please don't do that. These chapters are describing history, not telling us to follow in their footsteps. So if being a Jacob or Rachel or Aaliyah is not kind of the purpose of these chapters, then what is? What are we to be learning as we go through these chapters of the Bible? Well, we do, through these stories, we do, don't we? We learn something about us, not so much about what we should do, but who we are.

But more than that, or perhaps through what we learn about God's people, we learn something wonderful about God. The focus of these chapters, the focus of this section of Genesis, is really about God's constant faithfulness in spite of his people's constant failings.

[ 6 : 56 ] God has made a promise to this family. God has made a promise to this family, and he will keep his promise, no matter how much they mess up.

We're going to see more of that this morning. God's constant faithfulness in spite of his people's constant failings.

And we'll do so by looking at two points. First, we're going to see a bitterly broken family. And then secondly, we'll see a graciously growing family.

This first point, we're going to focus primarily on the failings of this family before, in our second point, looking at the faithfulness of God. We're going to spend most of our time in this first point, not because it's more important, but simply because through this first point, we're going to trace back through the story just to make sure we've got our heads around it.

So let's turn to our first point this morning, a bitterly broken family, seeing first its brokenness, and then its bitterness. Up until at this point in the story, Leah and Rachel, the two wives of Jacob, have been sort of secondary characters, but now they take center stage.

[ 8 : 17 ] And we find out very quickly, don't we, that each of these women is carrying a burden that is incredibly painful to bear. Just look there with me at verse 31 of chapter 29.

When the Lord saw that Leah was hated. Leah was hated. She wasn't just second best. She was actively disliked. Now being disliked is never fun, is it? In any circumstance, in any setting. Even if it's someone whose relationship to us is fairly sort of distant, maybe a work colleague who we just don't really get on with for whatever reason, a neighbor who's been, we accidentally stole once.

That is unpleasant, isn't it? When you know people don't like you, you don't look forward to seeing them, do you? Leah is hated, but not just by a colleague she has to pass in the corridor a couple of times a week.

[ 9 : 31 ] Leah is hated by her own husband. Not being loved is never fun.

But when we are hated by those who should be nearest to us, the pain increases exponentially, doesn't it? That was Leah's lot in life.

Maybe it is uncomfortably close to home for you this morning. Hated by those who should love you. Hated by those whose love you long for.

Broken, right? Sometimes in life we suffer because of our own sin, but sometimes we suffer simply because we live in a sinful world.

Leah's lot here at this point is not the consequence of her own failing. But that made it no less painful. In fact, sometimes it makes it more painful, doesn't it?

[ 10 : 44 ] When you know the grief you bear is completely outside your control. It's not because of what you've done, it's just the way things are.

Leah knew that pain. And you can hear the anguish it caused her in the names she goes on to give each of her children.

Her first child she calls Reuben because she thinks, she thinks, now my husband will love me. Luke Jacob, a son.

Won't you love me now? Nothing changes. She bears another child and calls him Simeon.

Why? Because the one thing she can't get her mind off in life is that she is hated. She bears a third son and calls him Levi, which means attached, saying this time, surely this time, my husband will be attached to me.

[ 11 : 54 ] Can you hear the pain in her voice as she names each of these children? crying out for the love and affection of a husband who gives her nothing.

But Leah is not the only broken member of this family. Just come back with me to verse 31. Leah was hated, but Rachel was barren.

One is unloved. The other is childless, both deprived of what they so desperately long for.

And we hear, don't we, Rachel's pain in her cry to Jacob in verse 1 of chapter 30. Give me children or I shall die.

In Rachel's mind, this is a matter of life and death. Two very broken women who long for what they do not have.

[ 13 : 13 ] What do you do, I wonder, when the one thing you most long for is the one thing you cannot seem to get? It's easy, isn't it, to be completely consumed by it.

Maybe you long for the love of someone who should love you but does not. Maybe you long for children of your own. Maybe you long for somebody to love, whatever it might be.

When we long for something we do not have, it can become kind of all we ever think about. It is right that we lament the brokenness of this world when it causes genuine grief and sorrow.

But whatever our circumstance, we can also I think turn and do what Leah does when her fourth child is born.

Leah bears a fourth son and she calls him Judah saying, this time, this time I will praise the Lord.

[ 14 : 36 ] This time I will praise the Lord. Leah was, as we shall see, not perfect. She was not guiltless. but it is nevertheless I think a commendable act of spiritual maturity for a woman who for years had been deprived of what she most longed for and was still at this point deprived of what she most longed for.

The love of her husband to turn and praise the Lord for what he had blessed her with rather than be consumed with bitterness because of what she lacked.

It is good to give thanks to the Lord. It will not relieve us of every burden we bear. It won't resolve every issue in our life. It is not a remedy to every ill.

But it is good and right to praise God for what he has blessed us with while while we lament for what we have been left without.

I am not saying that we should not be broken hurt by the brokenness of this world. Only that we should not let our brokenness blind us to God's blessing even if those blessings are not what we initially hoped they would be.

[ 15 : 59 ] Leah longed for the love of her husband but still managed to praise the Lord for the children he had given her.

And maybe when we do that we will restrain ourselves from sliding down the slippery slope of bitterness that this family finds itself on in the rest of this chapter.

This is a broken family and it soon turns into a bitter family. we get a hint of things going wrong don't we in verse 1 there.

When Rachel saw that she bore no children she envied her sister. Rachel wanted children but worse than not having children herself was seeing what Leah did have and that seed of jealousy gives way to a rather tragic series of events.

And Rachel desperation not to be outdone by her sister she hatches a plan. She takes her servant Bilhah and hands her over to Jacob her husband and says here sleep with her that I might have children through her.

[ 17 : 19 ] Jacob for his part doesn't raise any objections and sure enough Bilhah gets pregnant. She gives birth nine months later and there is Rachel waiting to catch the little fella.

I'll take him thank you very much. Luke one of my own. I'll call him Dan because God's given me a son. It worked so well the first time Rachel goes for round two and this time we get a clear view don't we of what is going on in Rachel's heart.

Bilhah bears a second son. again Rachel's on hand to take him as her own and this time she calls him Naphtali. Look there at verse eight. Why?

Because with mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and prevailed. Rachel is here to try and one up Leah.

she is being driven not by desperation for a child but by envy of her sister and sin spreads.

[ 18 : 32 ] Because Leah gets in on the action too in verse nine. She takes her servant Zilpah and says to Jacob here you go another servant for you. Again Jacob asks no questions but takes a

fourth woman and bears children through her as well.

Gad and Asher. It's been sort of a relentless flow of children up to this point hasn't it? But then the narrative slows down for a moment in verse 14.

There's a bit of a breather. A change of pace. But sadly not a change of tune. Reuben the eldest of Leah's children comes back from the fields one day with some mandrakes.

I don't know if you have any idea what mandrakes are. I think they make a brief appearance in Harry Potter. If that's what you've got in your mind right now it's of no use whatsoever. But at least you've heard the word before. Mandrakes are herbs.

And all we really need to know about them is that in the ancient Near East they were thought to boost fertility. So if you wanted children mandrakes might be a good thing to try and get your hands on.

[ 19 : 50 ] But Rachel at this point is so desperate for children that she trades her husband for some herbs. Jacob himself returns from the field that evening and out goes Leah to announce the deal the sisters have made.

You must come into me for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes. I have hired you my own husband with my son's mandrakes.

We're not meant to read this and think oh wow they really did things a bit differently back then didn't they? We're mentally going to think what on earth is going on here?

Rachel is so desperate for children she is willing to trade her husband for some herbs. Leah is so desperate for the affection of her husband.

She finds herself having to buy his attention off her desperate sister. daughter. The end result is that Leah bears two more sons.

[ 21 : 11 ] It's not quite what Rachel thought would have happened is it? Leah bears two more sons and then a daughter as well Issachar, Zebulun and Dinah.

Dinah will become an important character in a few chapters time. And then finally, right at the end of it all, verse 22, Rachel gets what she longed for along.

Then God remembered Rachel and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and she called him Joseph, saying, what she said at the end of verse 24, may the Lord add to me another son.

When she finally got what she longed for, she immediately asked for another. If you think something in this world were all for you lasting satisfaction, when you finally get it, you'll just find yourself wanting more.

This is a bitterly broken family, isn't it? A deceptive husband, one unloved wife, one embittered wife, two servants forced to be surrogates, eleven sons and a daughter from four mothers.

[ 22 : 47 ] And who is happy at the end of it? Rachel longs for more children. Leah is still unloved by her husband.

Bilhah and Zilpah have been forced to be surrogates. Jacob has not been present at all, has he? Other than to sleep with whoever he happens to find in his tent on any given evening.

Welcome to the heroes of the Old Testament. the family. They're not heroes, are they? But welcome to the beginning of the nation of Israel.

Welcome to God's people. This family is full of brokenness and bitterness. But God made a promise.

grace. And God is faithful. Let us turn briefly but crucially to our second point this morning. A graciously growing family.

[ 23 : 57 ] We were thinking a little earlier when we were with the children about grace. God giving an undeserved gift out of his goodness. And there are two ways I think we see God's grace at work in this chapter.

First of all we see it. this, don't we? In his tender, father-like care of both the sorrowful and the sinful. We began this sermon thinking about how Leah was hated but those were not the opening words of our reading, were they?

Where did we actually begin in verse 29? When the Lord saw. The burdens, these two women were bearing were grievously heavy.

Not being loved by her husband. Not being able to bear children. Maybe you know that pain yourself. Maybe you know a pain like it.

the Lord sees you. The Lord sees you and he knows your pain and he is caring for you in the midst of it.

[ 25 : 15 ] gifts. I wonder if you've ever gotten a gift that's come without a name on it. I remember a church I previously worked for, I once opened the fridge and in the middle of it there was a pork pie with a post-it note that just said for Donald.

Now that wasn't everything I needed. That wasn't my deepest longing. But it made my day. I have no idea where it came from.

But it still brought me joy. That, in much greater ways, I think is often how God's grace appears in our lives.

He saw Leah was hated and he opened her womb. He didn't send her a card, he didn't write his name in the sky saying Leah look here I am looking after you.

He just silently cared for her. Not by giving her all that she longed for but caring for her in the midst of her sorrow and sadness.

[ 26 : 32 ] Maybe that is how God is caring for you right now. Helping you along day by day. Even if not every burden you bear is being taken away. The Lord always sees our pain.

The Lord always cares for his people. Even if it's not in the ways we might long for it to be. There is not one of his people he will not watch over even if and when we go astray.

God not only does the Lord see Leah the Lord remembers and hears Rachel. Verse 22 God remembered Rachel and God listened to her.

But what has Rachel done so far? she's envied her sister she gave her servant to her own husband to bear children on her behalf she put her trust in mandrakes instead of the Lord to give her children what does she deserve for her good behavior but the Lord remembered Rachel the Lord still listens to Rachel God did give Rachel what she longed for not because of what she had done but because of his promise to bless this family God shows grace to us in our sorrow and he shows grace to us in our sin but the big the big overarching picture here in this chapter is God's gracious growth of this family

God made a promise to Abraham and reiterated it to Jacob himself just a couple of chapters ago he said this is back in chapter 28 verse 14 he said to Jacob Jacob your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed that was God's promise to Jacob and when God makes a promise God is faithful to his promise this was his promise to Jacob as he was all alone on the run from his own brother fleeing for his life and then some years later Reuben was born and then Simeon was born and then Levi was born and then Judah was born and then Dan was born and then Naphtali was born and then Gad and Asher and Issachar and Zebulun and Dinah and Joseph through no good of his own

[ 29 : 47 ] Jacob is looking isn't he at God's promise begin to be fulfilled before his very eyes again definitely not is it definitely not because of his own wisdom definitely not because of his own righteousness but because of God's faithfulness and because of God's grace these are children of the promise gifts of God's grace but this this is just the very beginning isn't it just the very beginning of God's family on earth your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth that was God's promise to Abraham and to Jacob this family was growing but it had a lot more growing to do and it still has more growing to do we learn later in the Bible that the true children of Abraham are not those born of his flesh and blood but those who have the same faith he did in his promised seed brothers and sisters that means we are children of this promise those of us who put our faith in God's promise

God's promise to bless all the nations of the earth through the seed of the Abraham who we know who we know don't we is Jesus Christ those who put their faith and trust in Jesus are children of this promise that is why that passage Isabel read from us earlier in the service Jesus turns doesn't he he turns to his disciples to those who have chosen to follow him and says you are my mother and my brothers and my sisters we are this same growing family and praise the Lord we are aren't we a growing family the Lord is faithful to his promises it's an amazing thing as we see people turn and put their trust in the Lord and submit their lives to him but why are we a growing family not because we're suddenly getting things right not because we're particularly righteous not because of our great wisdom but because of

God's great grace we are broken our brokenness might not look the same as it did for Leah and Rachel but broken we are and perhaps bitterly broken too but God is faithful and God is gracious he

was graciously growing this family he will continue forever to graciously grow this family in spite of the failing of this family in Genesis in spite of the failings of this family in Aberdeen he keeps growing his family so that all peoples of the earth all the peoples of the earth will be blessed in the promised seed of Abraham Jesus Christ our Lord so let us praise God for his faithfulness in spite of our failings he was a gracious God then he is a gracious God now and he will forever be a gracious God worthy of all our praise let us pray together before we sing of his amazing grace father we thank you and praise you that in spite of the broken bitterness of your people long ago you were faithful to your promise to grow this family and bless all the nations of the earth through the promised seeds of Abraham father we thank you that we put our trust and faith in that promised seed Jesus Christ and that through him you are continuing to grow your family despite our brokenness and bitterness because of your great grace you are and will continue to draw people in to know you and love you that you might bless them now and forever in the name of Jesus we pray amen