

Love for the Unlovely: The Story of Grace in the Life of Jacob

The Idol of Love (Genesis 29:1-35)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC English Service on March 2, 2025

Introduction

- ❖ Over the past month, we've jumped back into the book of Genesis, looking at the life of Jacob starting in chapter 25. His story spans all the way to chapter 36, and we'll get there eventually. But, for the next seven Sundays, we're going to jump out of Genesis again and into a series called *The Dead Shall Rise*. We're going to explore key moments in Scripture where the dead are raised, leading up to Easter Sunday and our celebration of the Resurrection. And that series coincides with a city-wide prayer and fasting movement called *Awaken Houston*. I'll tell you more about it at the end of service today.
- ❖ But, this morning, we're still in Genesis, in chapter 29. **Last week, we saw Jacob on the run.** The cover story was that he was on the search for a wife – looking for one among his mother's people back in the country of Paddan-aram. But really, he was on the run from the mess he made. He had deceived his father. He had stolen from his brother. And now he was running away from Esau's wrath.
 - But it's still fair to say that Jacob was on a search. **In fact, he's been on a search all his life. He has been searching to fill a void.** To fill an emptiness that has been gnawing at him all his life. It should come at no surprise, considering what we've learned up to this point about his home life.
- ❖ **Like many people today, Jacob grew up in a broken home.** His parents were still together, and I'm sure they still cared for each other. But they also worked against each other. And we know they played favorites among the two boys. **Jacob knew he had his mother's love, but he was never quite sure about his father's.** He knew he could never please Isaac like his older brother could. Which led him to resort to deception to get his father's blessing. And while Isaac finally did come around to support Jacob as the rightful heir, it was always a reluctant support. **I'm not surprised if all of that left a gaping wound.** An inner emptiness that Jacob was always trying to fill.
 - **And this morning, in chapter 29, we see Jacob's attempt to fill that emptiness with the love of a beautiful woman.** He goes looking for love, hoping that romantic love will do the trick. That it will fill the void and satisfy the hunger. **It's a perfect illustration of what so many people are trying to do today. Looking for love – of a wife or a husband or a significant other – thinking that that's what they're missing.** That a relationship will complete them.
- ❖ **But what Jacob has to realize – what all of us today have to realize – is that we're often looking for love to do, for us, what only God can do.** We're substituting romantic love for the divine love of God. It happens all the time in Scripture. It's called idolatry.
 - Let's be clear. The Bible celebrates romantic love as a good gift from God. **But God's gifts are to be enjoyed in proper proportion.** The enjoyment found in a romantic relationship is derivative of our enjoyment in God. He's our Creator, and we're made in his image. Which means our ultimate joy and satisfaction is to be found in him.

- ❖ The problem is when we get things out of proportion. That's when we veer into idolatry. **That's when we turn a good created thing into an ultimate thing. And, it becomes – not just a good thing – but a god thing.** It becomes an idol. Trying to fill that inner emptiness with the love of another created being only leaves you dissatisfied and enslaved to idolatry.
 - **But the good news of the gospel is all about how God has sent his Son to free us from the grips of idolatry and to fill our emptiness with himself.** Thereby, putting romantic love in its proper place and restoring our pursuit of relationships in proportion to our ultimate pursuit of God.
- ❖ My goal, in this morning's text, is to show you how the gospel does that. As Jacob's story unfolds, we see three movements. In the first movement, we'll consider the nagging emptiness that drives so many of our decisions. Second, we'll address the startling limits of romantic love. How it simply can't be your all in all. And thirdly, we'll glory in the satisfaction to be found when you're the undeserving recipient of an otherworldly love.

The Nagging Emptiness That Drives Us

- ❖ Let's begin by exposing that nagging emptiness that drives us. Jacob is not the only one in the story who demonstrates this longing (as we'll see). But he is the clearest example. **Jacob is presented as a man on a quest to fill an inner emptiness.** As mentioned earlier, his older brother was his father's favorite. Isaac loved Esau more than Jacob and didn't try to hide it. Imagine what that must have done to Jacob. To grow up craving fatherly love.
 - To be constantly compared to your sibling. To always be told that your brother is such a good hunter. He's such a good cook. He knows how to prepare delicious food that your dad loves. But, come to think of it, that's probably not hard for some of you to imagine. **You, likewise, grew up in a household where comparisons were constantly being made.** Where you grew up feeling inadequate. Where you knew your parents "loved you" in that they were going to take care of you. But you wondered if they really liked you. Because it seemed as if they liked your siblings far better. Those questions gnawed at Jacob his entire childhood.
- ❖ **Just think about the manner in which Isaac sent Jacob on this journey to find a bride.** When his father Abraham sought a wife for Isaac (back in Genesis 24), he sent off his servant with ten camel loads of choice gifts to serve as a dowry. Isaac saw how it was done. **But when it was his turn to find Jacob a wife, he sends him off empty-handed.** Jacob has nothing to offer as a dowry, which is why he ends up working for his future father-in-law. So Isaac reluctantly gave Jacob his blessing in word, but he didn't back it up in deed.
 - **The point is that the picture of Jacob that we're given is of a son with a deep father wound.** He grew up with this gnawing sense that something is missing. That the love he longed for was never there in his father's eyes.
 - **But, then, the first time he saw Rachel's eyes, it was love at first sight.** His search for love immediately shifted from his father to this beautiful woman standing before him. He was going to try to fill that void with romantic love.

- ❖ We're told, in the first twelve verses, that Jacob finally arrived to his destination, to his mother's hometown of Haran, but without realizing it. **He just so happens to run into three shepherds with their flocks when he arrives at a water well.** We're told that this well was covered by a large stone (vv2-3). So large that the three shepherds explain that they're waiting on more shepherds to arrive, so that, working together, they can roll away that large, heavy stone and water their sheep.
 - But then, in v9, we're told that, while speaking to these shepherds, one of uncle Laban's daughters, Rachel, arrives. And, being a shepherdess, she leads her father's flocks to the same well. Jacob takes one look at her. **And like a dude trying to impress a beautiful woman, Jacob rolls up his sleeves; flexes his muscles; and, in an awesome feat of strength, rolls away that stone all by himself.** Look at v10, *"¹⁰Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother."*
- ❖ Now according to v17, Rachel was good looking. *"Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance."* Her *"form"* refers to her body, and *"appearance"* is referring to her face. She has a good body and a pretty face. She had the whole package.
 - **And we see that Jacob is head-over-heels in love with her because he's the one who suggests, in v18, to work seven years to win her hand in marriage.** That's excessive. In those days, the typical dowry was 30-40 shekels, and the average annual wage of a shepherd was 10 shekels. So serving three – maybe four years – would've sufficed. But Jacob is so desperate for her hand that he overbids, in a sense.
- ❖ But we're told, in v20, that those seven years just flew by for Jacob. *"They seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her."* That sounds so sweet. So romantic. But what he says next in v21 just ruins it. *"Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife that I may go in to her; for my time is completed.'"* Yeah, that's about as straightforward (and as unromantic) as you can get. He means what you think. And that's the point.
 - **Jacob is portrayed as a man who tries to fill that nagging emptiness – that's been driving him all his life – to fill it with love and intimacy.** He thinks if he can just get Rachel – if he can have her as his wife – then all will be well. That emptiness will be filled. That void will be gone. That's what's been driving Jacob.
- ❖ **But he's not the only character in this story driven by an inner emptiness. Rachel's older sister, Leah, also feels that void.** Look back at v17. *"Leah's eyes were weak."* Now translators have had a tough time with this Hebrew word. It literally refers to delicate or fragile eyes. But the narrator is not really commenting on her vision. **He's contrasting Leah with Rachel, who was already described as a knock-out beauty.**
 - **So by saying that Leah had weak eyes, it was a way of saying she's unattractive.** Leah was the older sister who had to grow up in the shadow of her younger sister's beauty. And apparently, her father's biggest dilemma was figuring out how, if ever, he would find a man to marry his unattractive, eldest daughter.

- ❖ So Leah was wrestling with an emptiness as well. **And how does she try to fill it? With a man.** She thinks if a man would just love her, then she would find that sense of significance that she longed for. She would finally feel beautiful and loved.
 - And we're not just psychoanalyzing here. **She tips her hand in the way she names her sons.** Let's jump ahead in the story for a minute. As the story goes, Laban deceives Jacob and instead of sending in Rachel to the marriage tent, he sends in Leah. **So even her own father simply uses her as a cog in his wheel of deception.** That's how unloved she is. And even after she marries Jacob, the narrator plainly tells us, in v30, that Jacob "*loved Rachel more than Leah.*"
- ❖ Now to this unloved woman, God opens her womb and blesses her with sons. **But the names that she gives to her sons reveal her deep longing to be loved by her husband.** Look at vv31-32, "*³¹When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. ³²And 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.'*"
 - Reuben comes from the Hebrew word that means "to see." **Leah is hoping that, because of this son, her husband will finally "see" her for who she is.** That he'll finally appreciate her and love her.
- ❖ Look at v33. "*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." Simeon comes from the word that means "to hear." **She's thinking now that God's heard me maybe my husband will hear me as well.**
 - And then we read in v34, "*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.*" Levi comes from the word that means "to attach." **Leah believes the only way to fill that inner emptiness is for her husband to be attached to her.** But the tragic irony is that the man she relies on to fill her emptiness is in love with the very sister who makes her feel so empty. It's so sad.
- ❖ And what makes it even sadder is the fact that Leah's plight – and Jacob's struggle – is so prevalent among us. **So many people look to love and relationships to fill that nagging emptiness that drives them.** Jacob typifies the man the who believes that intimacy with a beautiful woman will fill his emptiness. Leah represents the woman who believes that a relationship with the right man will fill her emptiness.
 - Love and relationships are good things created by God. **But when we turn them into ultimate things, they become god things. And that's a bad thing.** That's when it turns into idolatry. When we try to fill our emptiness with anything other than God.
- ❖ And, again, I want to be clear. It's not idolatry in itself to pursue romantic love. **It's not idolatry to desire to one day be married. But it becomes an idol when you make romantic love and being in a relationship the very thing you live for.** That driving force in your life. That thing that consumes you.

- ❖ **How do you know if this good thing has become a god thing?** *You know that romantic love has become an idol* – when you find yourself envious at others who have it and bitter at God for not giving it to you. *You know it's become an idol* – when you feel like life is not worth living if you're not romantically involved with someone. *You know it's become an idol* – if you're willing to compromise your biblical convictions regarding the kind of person God wants you to marry because you desperately want the experience of romantic love.
 - **That good desire becomes an idol when you *have* to have it in order to have meaning in life – to feel significant and secure.** You know you've crossed a line if you're willing to transgress God's Word to experience romantic love.

The Startling Limits of Romantic Love

- ❖ It's such a strong desire that it's no surprise that we tend to idolize it. But the thing about idols is that they always fail to live up to the hype. They never keep their promises. The idol of romantic love promises to complete you. It promises to fill you. But it's all a lie. **Romantic love has very real limits. Which will, more than likely, disappoint you in life.** In fact, it might startle you, surprise you, at how much it won't live up to your expectations. Let's consider our second point – the startling limits of romantic love.
 - Let's look closer at Laban's plot to foil Jacob. Start in v22, “²²So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. ²³But 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.) ²⁵And 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?””
- ❖ The irony is thick in this passage. **Jacob the deceiver meets his match and is himself deceived.** Remember how he used the darkness of his father's blindness to trick him – to pass off as his sibling. And now Laban uses the darkness of night to deceive the deceiver – to pass off Leah as her sibling. Jacob's father reached into the darkness thinking he was touching Esau. And now Jacob reaches into the darkness thinking he's touching Rachel.
 - And the irony is thickest in Laban's response to Jacob in v26. There he explains that, “*It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.*” But that's exactly what Jacob did earlier. He put himself before the firstborn in his family – before Esau. So now the tables have been turned on him. We reap what we sow.
- ❖ But here's the point when it comes to idolizing romantic love. **Jacob figured that if he could just have Rachel – if he had this beautiful woman and they shared this beautiful love – he would be happy.** He would be satisfied. He would be complete. “*And in the morning, behold, it was Leah!*”
 - Tim Keller, in his book *Counterfeit Gods*, makes a great point here. He writes, “*With all due respect to this woman [referring to Leah], it means that no matter what we put our hopes in, in the morning, it is always Leah, never Rachel.*” Idols always promise to fill your nagging emptiness. **They always promise to be Rachel. But we always wake up in the morning with Leah.** We always end up startled and disappointed.

- ❖ **All the romantic relationships I've pursued in my life all seemed promising in the beginning.** They all started out feeling like this could be it. I put so much expectation into each one. If this works out, I'll be fulfilled. I'll be complete.
 - And yes, one of them did work out. I married her. My wife is wonderful. Our marriage is fulfilling. **But my wife (as great as she is) cannot, in and of herself, fill that inner emptiness in me.** And to expect her to do so would be cruel and unfair. I would be imposing god-like expectations on a fellow human being.
 - **My wife is good but she's not God.** But if I treat her like a god – like she's capable of completing me – she'll be crushed under those expectations. And I'll be left with deep disappointment. That's how marriages fail. **Husbands and wives expecting each other to be gods and have god-like abilities.**
- ❖ Now once you come to this realization – when you're finally confronted with the startling limits of romantic love – Keller says you have four options. **The first option is to blame your partner for disappointing you.** Then you move on to another – to fill that emptiness with another romantic relationship. This is the path of continued idolatry and enslavement.
 - **The second option is to blame yourself.** To assume it's all your fault. To conclude that you're worthless and unloveable. And that's why relationships never work out for you. This is the path of shame and self-loathing. **A third option is to simply blame the opposite sex.** All men are idiots. They're brutes. All women are too emotional, too needy. It's their fault. This is the path of cynicism and perpetual loneliness.

The Satisfaction of an Otherworldly Love

- ❖ But there's another way. There's a path of liberation. There's a way to be freed from the bondage of idolatry. **The fourth option is to look out of this world – looking to God to fill that nagging inner emptiness.** This leads to our final point. Let's consider the satisfaction of an otherworldly love.
 - In his book, *Mere Christianity*, in his chapter on Hope, **C.S. Lewis** says, "*Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise.*" He goes on to give examples of such desires – including the desire to fall in love and be married. And he illustrates how they never quite live up to their promises.
- ❖ Then he goes on to write, "*The Christian says, 'Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction of those desires exist. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.'*"
 - **In other words, those desires – including the desire to fall in love and be married – are intended to point us outside of the created world to the Creator himself.** Those desires are meant to be satisfied by an otherworldly love – a divine love.

- ❖ **If you look back at our story, Leah is the only one who experiences this.** She finally realizes the limits of romantic love and turns her attention to the LORD. Recall how the names of her first three sons all reveal that she was looking to her husband to play God.
 - **But there's a breakthrough with her fourth child.** Look at the name she gives him. Look at v35, "*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.*"
 - **The name Judah comes from the Hebrew for "praise."** Notice how there's no mention of her husband this time. She's not even thinking about him. God is in her sights. She's praising him. Her heart is satisfied in the LORD.
- ❖ She uses God's proper name, Yahweh. **This time she is going to praise the Covenant-Keeping God of her fathers.** Leah must have learned about how the God of heaven and earth had revealed himself to her great uncle Abraham. And how Yahweh promised to be *with* them and *for* them. And how he would bring salvation to the world through their offspring. Through *her* offspring!
 - **By her fourth son, Leah came to the liberating realization that her husband's love will never be able to fill that inner emptiness.** That's the job of Yahweh, the Covenant-Keeping God. His steadfast love is what freed her heart from the grip of idolatry – from treating romantic love as an idol.
- ❖ **Friends, the main point is that what happened for Leah can happen for you.** The freedom and fulfillment she experienced can be yours. No experience of love seems capable of satisfying that deep desire that drives us. At least no experience of love *in this world*. **Which means we have to look beyond – to an otherworldly love.**
 - And that's what Leah's fourth son points to. In Genesis 49, it's prophesied that, through Judah, God would bring forth the Messiah. **That through Judah's line, the Son of God would come and capture the hearts of his people with true love.**
- ❖ And in the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son. **Like Leah, Jesus was unattractive.** "*He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.*" (Isa 53:2) **Like Leah, Jesus was despised and rejected by men** (Isa 53:3).
 - But Jesus loved us still – as a Groom loves his Bride. And he paid the ultimate price, the ultimate dowry. **On the cross, he bore all our sin, all our ugliness, all our idolatry.** In Christ, we are made beautiful before God. In Christ, we know that the God of heaven and earth is *with* us and *for* us.
- ❖ **Leah's story is a beautiful illustration of grace.** The "unlovely" sister ends up the mother of six of Jacob's twelve sons. Include her daughter Dinah and Leah's children add up to seven, the perfect biblical number. **It's amazing how the "wrong" wife ends up the mother of Judah, of David, and of our Lord Jesus Christ.** That's the surprising nature of God's grace.

- ❖ **The point I've been trying to make is that that deep desire you have to love and to be loved will only be satisfied by the love of God in the person of Christ.** Or as St. Augustine would put it, your heart will always be restless until it finds its rest in Jesus. Then and only then will you be ready to give your heart to someone else – to give it to a romantic partner or to give it to a spouse in marriage.
- ❖ So make it a priority: Prioritize your relationship with God. Be satisfied, first and foremost, by his otherworldly love. **To be filled with the love of God is to be freed from the bondage of needing to be in a romantic relationship.**
 - One big reason your relationships fail is that you go into them too needy. You *need* that person. You need their love and affirmation. You can't live without them. But do you realize how suffocating that is? The weight of those god-like expectations are crushing them. **Your relationship will be doomed from the start if you go into it with a nagging emptiness and deep desire to be loved.**
- ❖ The romantic relationships that last – the marriages that are the healthiest – are those where both partners – are not looking for love to fill a void – but sharing love through the overflow of hearts that have already been filled with the love of God in the person of Christ.