

“The Divine Dozen”
Genesis 29:31-30:24
January 15th, 2017

After the baptism of his baby brother in church, little Johnny sobbed all the way home in the back seat of the car. His father asked him three times what was wrong.

Finally the boy replied, “The pastor said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home, and I want to stay with you guys!”

I come from a home with four children. Often, I thought that was more than enough children in our house. But, as I was growing up there were many bigger families portrayed on television.

1 - There was *The Brady Bunch* with 6 children. (*Do you remember their names?* Greg, Marsha, Peter, Jan, Bobby, and Cindy).

2 - There was the Bradford family on *Eight is Enough* starring Dick Van Patton;

3 - And there were *The Waltons*, also with 8 kids - “John-Boy,” Jason, Mary Ellen, Erin, Ben, “Jim-Bob,” his stillborn twin brother Joseph, and Elizabeth.

There were 12 kids featured in the 2003 movie, *Cheaper by the Dozen* starring Steve Martin and Bonnie Hunt (I’ve not viewed it), nor did I watch the more recent television show that featured the Duggar family of some 19 or 20 children.

I thought of big families as I pondered the passage of Scripture before us this morning. In the course of the last 5 verses of Genesis chapter 29 and the first 24 verses of chapter 30, we see no less than **12 children** born to Jacob, his two wives, and their two handmaidens. And, that wasn’t all of the children born to Jacob, either! There is more to come; tune in at 10!

These verses serve to impress upon us that God delivered on His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (**Genesis 28:14**) that their offspring would be like the dust of the earth, and they would spread in all directions and be a blessing to the families of earth. God increases Jacob in the text before us today with a fruitful bounty of arrows in his quiver! The 11 sons included in today’s text (there was just one girl among the first 12 children born) and another son yet to be born would make up the 12 tribes of Israel, God’s people.

Genesis 29:31-30:24:

³¹ When the LORD saw that Leah *was* unloved, He opened her womb; but Rachel *was* barren. ³² So Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben; for she said, “The LORD has surely looked on my affliction. Now therefore, my husband will love me.” ³³ Then she conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because the LORD has heard that I *am* unloved, He has therefore given me this *son* also.” And she called his name Simeon. ³⁴ She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.” Therefore his name was called Levi. ³⁵ And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Now I will praise the LORD.” Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she stopped bearing.

30 Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister, and said to Jacob, “Give me children, or else I die!”

² And Jacob’s anger was aroused against Rachel, and he said, “*Am* I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?”

³ So she said, “Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, and she will bear *a child* on my knees, that I also may have children by her.” ⁴ Then she gave him Bilhah her maid as wife, and Jacob went in to her. ⁵ And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. ⁶ Then Rachel said, “God has judged my case; and He has also heard my voice and given me a son.” Therefore she called his name Dan. ⁷ And Rachel’s maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. ⁸ Then Rachel said, “With great wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, *and* indeed I have prevailed.” So she called his name Naphtali. ⁹ When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took Zilpah her maid and gave her to Jacob as wife. ¹⁰ And Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. ¹¹ Then Leah said, “A troop comes!” So she called his name Gad. ¹² And Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. ¹³ Then Leah said, “I am happy, for the daughters will call me blessed.” So she called his name Asher. ¹⁴ Now Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, “Please give me *some* of your son’s mandrakes.” ¹⁵ But she said to her, “*Is it* a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son’s mandrakes also?” And Rachel said, “Therefore he will lie with you tonight for your son’s mandrakes.” ¹⁶ When Jacob came out of the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, “You must come in to me, for I have surely hired you with my son’s mandrakes.” And he lay with her that night. ¹⁷ And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. ¹⁸ Leah said, “God has given me my wages, because I have given my maid to my husband.” So she called his name Issachar. ¹⁹ Then Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son. ²⁰ And Leah said, “God has endowed me *with* a good endowment; now my husband will dwell with me, because I have borne him six sons.” So she called his name Zebulun. ²¹ Afterward she bore a daughter, and called her name Dinah. ²² Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. ²³ And she conceived and bore a son, and said, “God has taken away my reproach.” ²⁴ So she called his name Joseph, and said, “The LORD shall add to me another son.”

The 12 children are grouped in three 4’s:

MP 1 – Four sons born to Leah (29:31-35);

MP 2 – Four sons born to the handmaidens of Leah and Rachel (30:1-13);

MP 3 – Four children born to Leah and Rachel (30:14-24)

We can’t help but notice the difficulties throughout this passage. There is conflict between sisters (Leah and Rachel), there is conflict between Jacob and his two wives (Leah and Rachel), there is the inability of Rachel to bear children for a long time, and there is the reality that the 12 children have one father and four mothers!

We know God’s design for marriage from the first marriage, and that between Adam and Eve. God created only one wife for Adam, and that is His standard for all who would follow them that any man who takes an extra wife is going beyond what God intended. The famous creation ordinance is implicitly monogamous – **Genesis 2:24** – “Therefore a (**singular**) man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife (**singular**), and they shall become one flesh.”

This standard has been routinely violated by God’s people as we’ve worked through these first 30 chapters of Genesis, so much so that one might conclude that polygamy (many wives) is to be the norm for God’s people! Abraham listened to his wife Sarah and took Hagar, her handmaid, as his wife (**Genesis 16:2ff**). We saw the problems that caused! Then, there are the three wives that ungodly Esau took (**Gen 26:34 and 28:6-8**). Then, in Genesis 29, Jacob was duped into polygamy by taking two sisters as his wives.

The first group of 4 children born to Jacob are four sons through Leah (29:31-35). With verse 31 of chapter 29, a tone of difficulty is struck right off, “When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, He opened her womb; but Rachel *was* barren.” Both sisters suffered affliction; one was not cherished by her husband; the other was unable to bear children.

This verse reveals Leah as “unloved” by Jacob. It appears that not only did Jacob love Leah less than he loved Rachel, but he did not love Leah at all. Leah was the wife Jacob didn’t want. She was frustrated. She is “an accurate portrait of many frustrated women. Many wives are neglected and even despised by their husbands. Sometimes they are innocent of wrongdoing. More often, like Leah, they have acted wrongly (she was complicit in Laban’s deceiving Jacob, who thought he was receiving Rachel after he had served Laban 7 years for her). And in acting wrongly, frustrated wives can bear a cruel burden of guilt. They may have slept with their husbands before marrying them, thinking that this was the only way to get a husband.” (Boice, 788)

If this might describe you, may you be led to do what Leah’s misery did for her. It seems to have driven her to depend on the Lord. **Psalm 27:10** teaches, “When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take care of me.” Leah could have testified, “Though my husband neglects me, though he loves Rachel and only tolerates me, yet the Lord will take me up.”

Indeed, God blessed Leah with four sons – Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah. With the birth of her fourth son, Judah, whose name means “Praise,” Leah resigned herself to give praise to God. It certainly appeared hopeless that she and Jacob would have anything close to a marriage that sang. Yet, God honored Leah, and we see later in the Old Testament, that comes primarily through Leah’s third and fourth sons – Levi and Judah - who would become the *priestly* and *kingly* tribes of the people of God.

The second group of 4 children born to Jacob are four sons through Bilhah and Zilpah. (30:1-13) It must’ve been torture for Rachel to see the four little boys Leah bore running around playing with each other. She was likely despairing that she would never know the joy of bearing a child, and thus being used of God to further the Seed of God’s people. She takes out her bitter frustration, first on Jacob, as we read in verse 1 of chapter 30, “Give me children, or else I die!” Though he responded in anger, Jacob rightly pointed Rachel to God who had kept her from bearing children.

Rachel was beautiful, honored, and favored by Jacob. But she could not produce children, and although she had Jacob’s love, she was jealous of her sister’s fruitfulness and complained bitterly to her husband. Rachel was unhappy and she was envious of Leah.

So, Rachel, like Sarah before her, took things into her own hands, and gave her handmaiden Bilhah to Jacob. There’s no indication that she, nor Jacob, had taken Rachel’s inability to have children to God in prayer. No, Rachel was more concerned with getting even with Leah, after all Leah was ahead of Rachel, 4 kids to 0.

Bilhah conceives and delivers a son that Rachel named Dan, which means “vindicated.” Rachel gained a measure of satisfaction knowing that she had somehow gotten back at her older

sister, Leah. Bilhah again conceives and delivers a second son, Naphtali, which means, “struggle, or wrestlings” pointing to the conflict between Rachel and Leah.

Leah evidently was no longer intimate with Jacob, so she wasn’t above turning the tables back on Rachel, and Leah also gave her handmaiden, Zilpah, to Jacob. *After all, two people can play that game, right?!* Like Bilhah before her, Zilpah delivered two sons – Gad and Asher. Notably, Asher’s name means, “happy,” which Leah must’ve have been, though in a sinister way, because of the war she continued to wage with her sister. Now, Leah was leading Rachel 6 sons to 2! Rachel was losing the war, and she knew it. That takes us to our last point.

The third group of 4 children born to Jacob are a son and a daughter through Leah and, finally, a son to Rachel with another yet to come. (30:14-24) This last section begins with a curious circumstance. Reuben, a young, inquisitive boy, as such boys are prone, brought something peculiar to show his mother. Mandrakes, known as “love apples,” were understood, in ancient times, to be a love potion that would arouse sexual desire and help barren women conceive.

We see yet another desperate attempt by Rachel to conceive, and she bargains with her sister, asking for the mandrakes for her own use, and in return, Leah would have another night of intimacy with Jacob. Clearly, Rachel isn’t thinking clearly, and she is grasping at straws! But, the deal is consummated, and so is the conception and birth of two more sons for Leah (who didn’t need the mandrakes!), Isaachar and Zebulun. She also bore the first female child to Jacob, Dinah, who we will get to know better in Genesis 34.

Oh, how Rachel must’ve been beside herself! Everything she tried to accomplish kept resulting in further blessing for others! She was the one who wanted a child, but everyone else seemed to be having them except her!

God allows us a peek into something else – something very important – that Rachel was also doing. She was praying to God for a child. She was likely storming heaven’s gates with her prayers, pleading with God to open up her womb so that she could mother a child. As we come to verse 22, God’s Word teaches, “Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb.” At long last, God had relented and answered Rachel’s prayers – He “listened to her” and gave her the ability to conceive and carry a child. She gave birth to her first-born, Joseph, and she even then looked forward to having another.

Rachel had come to the end of herself. And, when we, too, get to that low point, we can also find that we have come to the beginning of Jesus. That is His way. Consider:

* When Mary heard Elizabeth confirm that her womb bore the Messiah, Mary sang:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.” (Luke 1:46b-48)

* Upon the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the angels appeared to lowly shepherds. (Luke 2:8-20)

* When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple, Simeon, who had been humbly waiting for the Messiah, swept the baby into his arms, declaring:

“Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace,
According to Your word;
For my eyes have seen Your salvation.” **(Luke 2:29-30)**

A young girl was asked how many children there were in her family. She answered there were 10 of them in her family. The questioner was surprised to learn there were so many, and suggested that 10 children must cost a lot of money.

“Oh no, “the girl answered, “We don’t buy children. We raise them!”

It is our great privilege as the family of God to raise our children to know truth and hope in a messy world where nothing seems to go as it should. We will have that impressed upon us again next Sunday, when another of our babies receives the waters of baptism and the promise of God that accompanies it. God has charged us with passing on the life transforming message of the gospel of Jesus Christ to our children, both as families, and as a congregation. Further, God has promised to be with us in every endeavor, to the very end of the age.