

“THE ORIGIN OF ISRAEL’S TWELVE TRIBES”

In the previous passage, we saw how Jacob was tricked into marrying both Rachel and Leah by his deceptive uncle Laban. In our study of that passage, we noted how the Lord was using that painful experience to discipline Jacob for his own deceptive tactics. God was humbling Jacob for his sinfulness, in order to further the work of salvation in his life. This continues in the passage we are studying tonight. The story that unfolds here is quite sad, but it is at the same time the story of the origin of the twelve tribes of Israel. (You will notice that Benjamin, Jacob’s last son, is not mentioned by name in this account because he is born later. But he is alluded to by Rachel’s prayer in verse 24: “May the LORD add to me another son!” The Lord answered that prayer with the birth of Benjamin.) So here we have the origin of the nation of Israel, and it is not a very glamorous origin. There is nothing here to commend the people of Israel to us. This is a very sad and tragic story. It is a veritable encyclopedia of family disfunction; a story of neglect and rivalry and favoritism and pragmatism and scheming, all within one household. And that is the point that is being made by this passage. The Lord is laying emphasis upon the fact that if anything good comes out of this family, it is not going to be something for which Jacob, or anyone else, can take credit. It is the Lord who builds a people for himself, and the raw materials that he uses are not very promising.

The first thing to which I want to call your attention in this passage is that it is a good example of the doctrine of divine concurrence, which is a sub-category of the doctrine of divine providence. Concurrence is the theological term that is used to describe the fact

that God's providential control over all things concurs, or cooperates, with the actions of his creatures and with other secondary causes in the world. God is the ultimate and primary cause of all things, but this does not negate the fact that he brings about his purposes through secondary causes. Theologian Louis Berkhof defines concurrence as follows:

“the cooperation of the divine power with all subordinate powers, according to the pre-established laws of their operation, causing them to act and to act precisely as they do.” [*Systematic Theology*, 171]

In other words, God is operative in every act of his creatures and in everything that happens in this world. He is in true control of everything. Yet, at the same time, the things that take place in this world take place through real secondary causes, causes for which human being's are held fully responsible for the choices they make. One of the Bible's most concise statements of this doctrine comes later on in the book of Genesis, where Joseph says to his brothers, “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” [Gen. 50:20] Joseph's brothers wanted to do away with him, but God worked through their actions to preserve the lives of many people, including the covenant people. Concurrence says that even the sinful acts of men are under God's control, yet he does not cause people to sin.

We see concurrences in our passage. It was Jacob's sin that got him into this situation in the first place. It was Laban's sin that led to the fact that Jacob had more than one wife. And it was the sinful actions of Jacob, Rachel and Leah that produced such anguish and disharmony in Jacob's household. Yet it was precisely through all of this that the Lord was fulfilling his promise to make Abraham into a great nation.

The next point that I want to bring out is what this passage shows us about marriage. While there is no explicit condemnation of polygamy here, only a fool would conclude that this arrangement was good for Jacob, Leah, Rachel and the two maidservants. All of the polygamous marriages in the book of Genesis turn out to be disasters. And the reason why is found at the very beginning of Genesis. Marriage is founded upon the norm that God established at creation: one man and one woman for life. Now as you know, this is something that people in our culture find increasingly offensive, but that does not make it any less true. Listen to the following excerpt from a recent essay posted on the weblog *The Front Porch Republic* [www.frontporchrepublic.com]:

“Those who deny that the traditional family is in any way normative argue that people are first and foremost individuals who have needs and desires and the capacity to choose...Traditional roles are merely social conventions that should be overturned...As long as there is love and no one is being coerced, then the family that emerges is just fine.

But are things really that simple? Can individuals call the tune and expect nature to caper forth ready to dance? Or are there limits imposed by the structure of reality that constrain the ways that we arrange ourselves socially? Of course, we can choose to ignore limits and let our imaginations run unfettered, but ignoring or even denying natural norms is not the same as making them disappear. One can, presumably, dance on the edge of a precipice, but sooner or later gravity is going to demonstrate some very old-fashioned truths.” [Mark T. Mitchell, “Family Matters,” posted 7/27/09]

And isn't this what we see in our text? Of course Jacob and his wives did not choose this situation for themselves. But their experience certainly demonstrated some very old-fashioned truths about the nature of marital love. As we read in the Song of Songs, “love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave.” [8:6] Leah desperately wanted the love of her husband. Rachel was insanely jealous of the fact that her sister was having children with Jacob while she was not. Why? Because it was never God's intention for the marital relationship to involve more than one man and one woman. This is abundantly clear. But here is the really amazing thing: the Lord worked through this absolutely horrific family situation in order to bring the nation of Israel into existence. We talk a lot in our church about the importance of the Christian nurture of children in the home, and it is right that we do so. Aside from cultivating their love for one another as husband and wife, Christian parents should make the discipling of their children their

highest human priority. Yet we must never forget that it is ultimately the Lord, and not us, who is building his church.

Now let's look specifically at what takes place in the main sections of this passage. First we have Leah. She is Jacob's unloved wife; the wife he never wanted to marry in the first place; the wife he was tricked into marrying by Laban. Notice what it says about Leah in 29:31: "When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb." Of course, the Lord sees everything, but when the Bible says that God "saw" something it often does so in order to introduce how God is going to act on behalf of those who are in need of his help. The LORD saw Leah's miserable condition and he took pity upon her. Leah did not have the thing she wanted more than anything else. She did not have her husband's love, but God granted her the one other thing that a married woman in that culture desperately wanted: he gave her children. And how did Leah respond to this? She gave thanks to God. We can see this by looking at the names that she gave her children: "Reuben" testifies to how God *saw* her condition and responded graciously; "Simeon" affirms that God had *heard* of how she was not loved; "Levi" expresses her desire that God's opening up of her womb would cause Jacob to *love* her; and "Judah" shows that she gave *praise* to the Lord for what he had done for her. God provided Leah with the encouragement that she needed in her sad situation as Jacob's unloved wife.

The next thing that we see in this passage is Rachel's response to her barrenness. Rachel was the wife that Jacob loved. This probably made her prideful, and it definitely made her envious when her sister, and rival, started having children. But instead of

crying out to the Lord, Rachel takes matters into her own hands. First she blames Jacob, and then she does what Jacob's grandmother Sarah did many years before: she gave her maidservant to her husband to be a surrogate mother in her place. Once again, we see the people of God responding to their circumstances with their own pragmatic solutions instead of calling upon the Lord and waiting upon him in faith.

After seeing that Rachel's strategy resulted in the births of two sons by Bilhah, Leah was distressed. She had stopped bearing children, either because she had become infertile or because Jacob was neglecting her, and she was afraid that Rachel's success in producing children through her servant would cause Jacob to esteem her even less. So she decided to follow her sister's pragmatic example, giving her maidservant to Jacob as well.

While that resulted in more children, it obviously did not have the effect that Leah had hoped for. Jacob was now neglecting her more than ever. So Leah took advantage of Rachel's request for her mandrakes to ensure that Jacob would have to sleep with her for one night. The mandrake, by the way, was a plant that was believed to be able to increase fertility. This explains why Rachel wanted them. Yet notice what happens. Leah gives up the mandrakes, she gives up the fertility drug, and she is the one who conceives more children. The Lord used this episode to show, once again, that he is the one who opens and closes wombs.

In the last section of the passage, we see that Rachel is finally granted a child. She had waited and waited and waited, and at last the Lord took away her reproach. God

showed mercy to this woman who had had to endure barrenness for so many years. And how does she respond? By giving glory to God. Here is a picture of a woman who has grown in grace. We can see this by looking at the name that Rachel uses for God here. All throughout this passage, Leah calls God by his covenant name, the name “the LORD” or Yahweh in the Hebrew. But it is not until the very last verse in the passage that Rachel does so. She has learned to place her trust in the covenant promises of God.

When the people of Israel looked back on their heritage; when they read about the origin of the twelve tribes as it is recorded in this passage, they did not have anything to be proud of. The entire episode was marked by disgrace. Yet the Lord worked through these very circumstances to bring the nation of Israel into existence. And isn't it the same for every one of those who have been brought into the household of faith? When you and I look back on our past, and even on our very recent past, we too see many things for which we are now ashamed. Yet the amazing thing is that God uses these very things to work out his saving purposes in our lives. We do not make it easy for God to save us, but he does it anyways. As Samuel Rutherford once wrote,

“Oh, what pains and charges it costeth Christ ere He get us! and when all is done, we are not worth the having. It is a wonder that He should seek the like of us.” [*Letters*, 291]

That is the inevitable conclusion that any believer should come to if he takes an honest look at his origins. He can do nothing else but conclude,

Amazing love! How can it be

That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?