

Jacob: The Deceiver Reaps Deception

Genesis 29

Focus Verse

“When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, ‘What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn’t I? Why have you deceived me?’ ” – Genesis 29:25

- Jacob’s Arrival in Harran – Genesis 29:1-14
- Jacob’s Betrayal by Laban – Genesis 29:15-30
- Jacob’s Sons by Leah – Genesis 29:31-35

Engage

Have you ever had to learn a lesson “the hard way”? Are you surprised when something that should be easy turns out to be difficult? Learning to tie our shoes, solve algebra problems, navigate relationships and many things that matter often bring unanticipated challenges. Sometimes when we fail to learn things “the easy way,” the lessons come harder. Sometimes our choices cause unintended consequences. Sometimes others make our lives harder than necessary. Sometimes God allows suffering that exposes our weakness and draws us to Himself. We prefer for things to go our way and life to come easy. We usually recoil when obstacles stop up or slow our path. **Lasting life lessons and character development often involve hardship.**

Jacob resumed his travel to Paddan Aram to find a wife from his mother’s family. He set out with new awareness of God’s promises and presence. However, Jacob had a few lessons he needed to learn “the hard way.” God loved Jacob too much to leave him where he was. God allowed the “deceiver” to be deceived, tricked and delayed. God molded Jacob’s character through years of mistreatment and disappointment. God values character development more than quick and painless solutions. Your suffering will not be wasted when you recognize God’s deeper work through it. God will not spare His child necessary pain when that pain provides the greatest opportunity to grow. **God’s love, presence and power can bring purpose to our pain.**

Jacob’s Arrival in Harran – Genesis 29:1-14

Jacob’s Stop at the Well – 29:1-3

Jacob left Bethel to travel about 500 miles (895 km) to Paddan Aram as the heir of God’s covenant. He went in faith toward his grandfather Bethuel’s house to find a woman to marry among his uncle Laban’s daughters. Paddan Aram was “the land of the eastern peoples,” a reference related to the Euphrates River and the people living in Mesopotamia.

Jacob’s journey returned him to the land his grandparents left behind more than a century earlier. The following facts recount the history of Jacob’s family in this area:

- Jacob’s grandparents Abraham and Sarah left this area when called by God.
- They had lived in Harran with Abraham’s father, Terah, and Abraham’s nephew Lot.
- Abraham’s brother Nahor; Nahor’s wife, Milkah; and their son Bethuel stayed in this land.

- Abraham sent his servant to Harran, and he found Bethuel’s daughter, Rebekah, as a wife for Isaac.
- Rebekah married Isaac and bore Jacob and Esau.

Jacob arrived and approached a well surrounded by three flocks and some shepherds. Perhaps Abraham’s servant met Rebekah at this same well. A large stone covered the opening of the well. Several people were required to lift the stone, preventing theft of water by single individuals.

Jacob Meets Rachel and Other Shepherds – 29:4-12

Jacob started a conversation and signaled his peaceful intentions by greeting the shepherds as “my brothers.” Jacob quickly discovered they were from Harran and knew his uncle Laban. Jacob honored the family by connecting Laban to Nahor, Laban’s grandfather and Abraham’s brother. **In God’s**

providence, Laban's daughter, the shepherd Rachel, approached the well with her family's flock.

Jacob asked the shepherds why they were not watering their sheep and taking them back to pasture. "We can't" was the reason offered for loitering at the well. Either removing the stone required teamwork or tradition required they wait until all the shepherds arrived before removing the stone. **Assessing the situation and likely aware of Rachel's presence, Jacob sprang to action.** He single-handedly removed the stone and watered his uncle's sheep for Rachel. Was she impressed?

The actions of Jacob here and those of his mother in Genesis 24 present an interesting comparison. When Abraham's servant arrived in Haran, he prayed for a confirming sign at the well. He prayed for the woman providentially chosen as Isaac's bride to respond to his request for a drink with an offer to water his camels also. The servant watched as Rebekah quickly carried out this

enormous task. Now, Jacob, her son, shows a similar compassionate and helpful nature. **Jacob witnessed Rachel's need and acted quickly to water her flock.**

Jacob's strength to remove the covering and ability to tend the flock reflected his intense emotion and affection. Overcome, Jacob introduced himself and kissed Rachel. In the same way that Rebekah had responded to the servant, Rachel also ran home with the great news.

Jacob Meets Laban and Family – 29:13-14

Years before, Laban had gone out to a well to meet Abraham's servant. He now went to meet Jacob. Both times, Laban warmly welcomed the men as his own family.¹ For the second time, Laban listened to his guest's story. Laban had heard Abraham's servant report God's promises and provisions for his journey.² Now he heard "all these things" from Jacob.

Jacob's Betrayal by Laban – Genesis 29:15-30

Laban's Bargains and Jacob's Love – 29:15-20

Jacob's mother, Rebekah, sent him to Haran under instructions. She would notify him "when your brother is no longer angry with you and forgets what you did to him."³ More than 20 years would pass before Jacob would return. And then he would return by direction from the Lord, not his mother.

Jacob did not rest as a guest under Laban's hospitality but worked around the homestead or in the fields. Jacob had been raised in a wealthy household as his mother's favored son. Scripture reports he preferred to remain among the tents instead of in the country hunting game like his brother.⁴ But Jacob was not weak, lazy or lacking in ambition. He displayed his character in Haran by his choice to work hard at tasks usually done by servants.

After a month, Laban told Jacob he should not work as a servant for him for nothing. Laban's approach makes him seem generous, though the rest of the story reveals his shrewdness. Jacob had worked hard for a month without pay. Now, Laban wanted to bargain for Jacob's continued labor. Laban surely would have noticed Jacob's affection for Rachel. Laban presented his purpose as sincere. Jacob had no money as his swift departure from Beersheba did not allow him to bring a dowry for his bride's family as Abraham's servant had previously. He obviously wanted to marry Rachel, the woman he loved. Instead of treasures, Jacob offered his loyalty to Laban. Jacob would work seven years in return for Rachel.

The record of Jacob's request to marry Rachel includes a rather abrupt mention of Laban's older

daughter, Leah. The passage contains a physical comparison of the two sisters. "Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful." The meaning of "weak eyes" is debated and could refer to color, reflection of her attitude or ability to see, among other things. Rachel's aunt Rebekah (Jacob's mother) was so beautiful that Isaac had once lied about their marriage to protect himself.⁵ Therefore, it is inferred that Rachel bore similarities to Jacob's mother unlike Leah, the older sister.

This outright comparison based on superficial physical qualities bothers some people. Ancient culture prioritized a woman's marriage. This description may explain why Leah, the older sister, was not already married. There is no record of the women's words, characters or other qualities at this point. Perhaps this mention reflects more about Laban's questionable character than anything else. **Laban viewed his daughters as objects to be bargained over, exchanged and controlled.** Perhaps Laban thought once he gave Rachel to Jacob in this bargain that other suitors would take an interest in Leah. But at the end of the seven years, Leah was still unwed.

Laban's manipulation of circumstances to his own advantage also impacted Jacob. **Laban took advantage of Jacob's desires.** The dowry equivalent of Jacob's wages for seven years was far beyond the ordinary. Laban would reap the reward of Jacob's labor at no expense to himself. What Jacob offered in honor, Laban seized as a good bargain.

The seven years of labor "seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her." Jacob clearly loved Rachel deeply, likely from the moment he saw her at the well. His love for her was a patient

love, demonstrated over a long period of hard service. Though complicated, Jacob and Rachel have a great love story. Love that honors God and others is selfless and sacrificial. **Though we cannot fully know all that Jacob and Rachel felt and experienced, Jacob's willingness to work and wait for her is admirable.**

Laban's Deceit With His Daughters – 29:21-30

Laban was in no hurry to lose his worker or his daughter. Once married, Jacob could return to Canaan (and take Rachel with him) at any time his mother sent word. Laban's bargain ensured Jacob would stay for at least seven years. Jacob thought the years went quickly, but he kept a careful record of his service. He had to urge Laban to keep his word saying, "Give me my wife." Jacob did not want to wait another day to marry and make love to Rachel. Laban should have fulfilled their agreement, but he had other plans.

The original audience understood these verses in the context of Eastern wedding customs. Laban prepared a feast attended by many friends and neighbors. The heavily veiled bride remained separated from her husband until after the feasting. **Late in the evening, Laban "took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob."**

The morning light revealed the true identity of the disguised Leah. Jacob, the deceiver, had been deceived! The comparison of Laban's sin to Jacob's sin cannot be avoided. Jacob, at his mother's doing, disguised himself as his brother to deceive his father. Now, Leah, at her father's doing, disguised herself as her sister to deceive Jacob. God was molding Jacob, as he learned lessons "the hard way."⁶

The pain inflicted on Leah must be acknowledged. **Leah must have suffered greatly from humiliation and rejection, that morning and later.** Her father, who should have protected her, subjected her to deep hurt and a hard life. Laban brought terrible conflict into his family. The comfort here is to know that God saw Leah and her pain. God was kind to her, even when the people closest to her were not.

Jacob placed the fault on Laban, where it belonged. Laban offered no apology but justified his actions as "our custom here." Often those who impose pain on others fail to take responsibility and instead defend their behavior. **Laban wanted both his daughters married and schemed to accomplish his will at the expense of all involved.** He dishonored Jacob, Leah and Rachel. Laban knew Jacob would agree to any terms to have Rachel as his wife. The customary wedding celebration included the bridal week following the wedding. Laban bargained for Jacob to finish Leah's bridal week, then receive Rachel in exchange for another seven years of work. Jacob, Leah and Rachel had to pretend all was well while the celebrations continued. The pain of the humiliation, manipulation and deception continued to multiply.

Scripture remains silent about the thoughts, words and reactions of Leah and Rachel. **Laban gravely mistreated both daughters.** How did they respond when Laban took Leah to Jacob on the wedding night and kept Rachel away? How did they treat one another during the bridal week? Certainly, they both remained under their father's control. After the week, Jacob was given Rachel. How painful to read the words, "his love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah." Patiently and faithfully, despite the injustice, Jacob served Laban seven more years without wages.

Jacob's Sons by Leah – Genesis 29:31-35

The passage clearly states Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. He did not, however, neglect Leah's welfare. **God showed compassion toward Leah's undeserved suffering.** God enabled her to conceive a son when her daily life as a daughter and wife revealed she was unloved. God saw Leah and took up her cause when others did not.

In this time and culture, childbearing represented God's favor. The husband had to provide his wife the opportunity to bear children and claim her position, protection, security and social acceptance. Jacob upheld this aspect of the marital covenant. God promised descendants to bless the world through the Abrahamic blessing. **Leah received a great honor among women in bearing descendants for this family.** These descendants would lead to the incarnation of the Lord

Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. God orchestrated the timing and order of these births.

In God's providence and plans, He comforted the lonely Leah by giving her Jacob's first four sons.⁷ Leah's pregnancies prove Jacob fulfilled his responsibility as her husband in this difficult situation. Leah's developing faith in God and her longing for the personal love of her husband, Jacob, are seen in the names she gave these four sons and her own response at each birth.

- **Reuben** means "see, a son." – "It is because the LORD has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now."
- **Simeon** means "one who hears." – "Because the LORD heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too."

- **Levi** means “attached.” – “Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.”
- **Judah** means “praise.” – “This time I will praise the LORD.”

Leah did not waste her suffering. She matured in faith as she bore sons to Jacob. The unloved Leah, who longed for Jacob’s love, found love from and for the Lord.⁸ Can the Lord’s love be enough? Leah may not have found love packaged the way this world applauds. Instead, she learned to surrender what she lacked and gain what this world could not give. **Leah learned to praise the Lord, not for her pain, but through her pain.** God gave Leah everlasting riches. Leah’s third-born, Levi, was appointed by God to form the line of priests called Levites. They blessed Israel until Christ

came.⁹ Best of all, Leah’s fourth son, Judah, was the great ancestor of the Jews, including King David and Jesus, the promised Messiah.

This chapter in Jacob’s story reveals a hard-hearted father-in-law, but more importantly, a faithful God. He had future plans for Jacob and orchestrated his life so he would grow. Jacob experienced firsthand the deception and scheming he had thoughtlessly imposed on others. God did not withhold hard things that promoted good things within Jacob. Instead of grabbing what he wanted, Jacob was forced into hard, long labor to obtain what had been promised to him. We can trust God’s good purposes, even when we do not understand what He is doing. We can trust God when life is harder than we expected. **God’s love, presence and power can bring purpose to our pain.**

The Doctrine of Suffering

This passage throbs with pain and suffering. Laban’s self-serving plot imposed lifelong anguish on the people he should have celebrated and protected. Wounds inflicted by those who should love us bring intense pain. **Life in this fallen world includes human suffering, in many forms.** Spiritual, physical, mental and emotional pain entered the world through the fall of humanity with Adam and Eve. Though all suffering is the indirect result of sin, not all suffering is the direct result of personal sin.¹⁰

There are many sources of suffering and many reasons God allows suffering.¹¹ Our own sin and the sins of others bring painful consequences, even God’s judgment. Life in a broken world brings natural disasters, sickness, aging bodies, injustice and difficult relationships. Christians are persecuted for their faith. Some suffering is God’s loving discipline, designed to grow faith. But sometimes, the reasons for suffering remains entirely mysterious, known only to God.¹² Therefore, we should be cautious about explaining the cause of our own suffering or the suffering of others.

The universal presence and personal experience of suffering raises challenging questions. Some hard questions must be trusted to God, who understands what we cannot. No suffering takes place outside God’s sovereign rule (Genesis 18:25; Job 1:8-12; 2:3-6; Isaiah 45:7). God can use suffering, even suffering caused by sin, for our good and His glory.¹³ Hard times create deeper dependence on and intimacy with God. And we know that Jesus, the Suffering Servant, understands our suffering.¹⁴ **The suffering God allows never diminishes His love for us.** God so loved the world, that He poured out suffering on His Son on the cross (Isaiah 53:4-5; John 3:16).

Without a focus on God, pain seems pointless. No one likes to suffer. Our natural response to suffering is to seek relief as quickly as possible. Attempts to ignore or numb pain will not provide lasting relief or healing. The cycle of pain repeats itself as hurting people hurt others. Without hope that God will one day overcome suffering, hopelessness and bitterness take root.

But for the Christian, suffering is not just something to be endured ... it is an opportunity to seek God more passionately and know Him more deeply. Faith grows when we lean into God and trust Him for needed strength when times are hard. Suffering can increase our spiritual sensitivity and tenderize our hearts toward God. Suffering removes the pretense that we have things figured out or that we can control what we cannot. Suffering strips away dependence on people or things that cannot satisfy our deepest longings. Suffering in this world makes us yearn for eternity, where there will be no more pain and where sin’s damage will be stopped. But even for Christians, held secure by the promises of God for today and eternity, suffering is hard. We must not minimize the anguish of human suffering, even as we embrace God’s higher ways.

Jesus suffered to overcome suffering. What an amazing truth! God did not sit on a throne in heaven and watch people suffer. He took action. He sent His Son. His Son suffered like no human has ever suffered. Sin, death, pain and suffering will one day stop when Jesus says so. When we believe Jesus Christ bore our sorrows because He loved us, we do not endure this world’s inevitable pain without hope. Suffering still hurts, but we can endure hardship and even death with eternal hope.

Hold Fast

Jacob learned important lessons “the hard way” as God’s discipline developed his character.

God values people and has unique plans for their lives. God develops the faith of His children in ways similar to parents helping their children mature. Trials in life test our faith and require choices. God holds us responsible for our actions and the consequences that follow. God directs circumstances to accomplish His will and bring about good, ultimately. God always acts for good. God never deserves blame for people’s evil actions. He always deserves our praise.

God demonstrates His grace and accomplishes His purposes despite human

failures. Jacob started out as a young man eager for God’s blessings. However, he was unprepared to wait patiently on God to receive them. God always finishes what He starts. He begins His good work of salvation by grace through faith. He never rejects His children because of their negligence, ignorance or dishonor. On the contrary, He promises to continue His good work.¹⁵ God disciplines His own using circumstances or other people. Through such hardships, God reveals to His children the deceptions within their own hearts. God’s purpose is to lead us to confession, repentance, forgiveness, growth and dependence on Him.

Apply It

God is more committed to your spiritual growth than you are. **While we prefer shortcuts, God will invest whatever is needed, even allowing suffering to accomplish His higher purposes.** Like a surgeon who willingly inflicts pain to bring healing, God allows us to hurt for our good. Jacob’s needed character development did not happen quickly, easily or without pain. What if you viewed your current hardship as a loving investment by your faithful God for your greater good? If you are currently in a long and tough battle, what is God doing in you? How are your spiritual sensitivities being awakened? Don’t waste your suffering; look for every opportunity to grow and experience God’s faithfulness.

What do you do with a “Laban” in your life? How should you respond to someone who has done you wrong and inflicted pain? What does God expect of us in dealing with a cruel or evil person? **You cannot**

control the behavior, responses or consequences of someone else; in every toxic relationship, you are responsible only for you. Certainly, God may offer opportunities to speak truth and to stand for what is right. Sometimes you are left without a voice and know that speaking up would only make things worse. There are times when you must escape for your own safety or well-being. While revenge tempts us, ultimate peace comes from knowing that your pain and someone else’s wrongs are known by God. Matthew 5:44 says, “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ...” There are no easy answers. God can be trusted with what you cannot figure out. He will show you what it means to “love your enemies.”

Leah’s lifelong story of rejection is painful to read. She lived with a physical attribute that made her feel unaccepted. Her own father discounted her value and feelings and put her

in a position that caused further hurt. Her husband was tricked into marrying her and gave her children but not love. Within her story of pain, Leah’s hope in God grew. **Like desert flowers that bloom without water or a mountain tree that sinks roots in the cracks in the rock, Leah found a way to survive and even thrive.** The names she gave her sons show she acknowledged her pain but turned to her God. She found hope in God’s steadfast love – the greatest love of all. You may live entrenched in a hurtful situation that escapes simple answers. Have you expressed the reality of your suffering to the God who loves you best? Can you trust God for step-by-step wisdom? Can you ask God to give you a song “in the night,” a song of praise that rises from a deep and painful place in your heart? Can you find rest and hope in the steadfast love of God?

Check out these footnoted references for further study of God's Word in this week's lesson.

- 1: **Laban's hospitality:** Genesis 24:28-31; 29:13-14
- 2: **Abraham's servant:** Genesis 24:34-50
- 3: **Esau's anger:** Genesis 27:45
- 4: **Jacob and Esau work:** Genesis 25:27
- 5: **Rebekah's beauty:** Genesis 26:6-7
- 6: **Sowing and reaping:** Galatians 6:7-9
- 7: **Blessing of children:** Psalm 113:9
- 8: **God's sustaining love:** Psalm 27:10
- 9: **Levites:** Deuteronomy 10:8-9

- 10: **Not all suffering is direct result of sin:** John 9:1-3
- 11: **Reasons for suffering and our response:** Job 1:9-12; Proverbs 3:12; Joel 2:12-14; Amos 3:6; Luke 9:38-42; Romans 1:18-32; 5:1-5; 8:17-18; Philippians 3:7-10
- 12: **Mysteries remain:** Deuteronomy 29:29; Romans 11:33-34
- 13: **Good from suffering:** Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 8:28; James 1:2-4
- 14: **Jesus understands:** Isaiah 53:4-5; Hebrews 2:18; 12:2-3
- 15: **God's good work:** Philippians 1:6

Jacob's Journeys With the Lord

In Jacob's dream, the Lord promised to watch over Jacob in his journeys. The Lord would later bring him back to his father's household in the promised land. In response, Jacob vowed his fidelity to God. Genesis tells Jacob's story through a series of 14 locations. God faithfully provided and protected Jacob in his journey through life. In every place, God wisely led Jacob through trials and unexpected events to grow him into the faithful patriarch who fathered the 12 tribes of Israel.

Beersheba – bought the birthright and deceived his father (25:28-34; 27)

Bethel – arrived here after he fled from Esau toward Harran to find a wife; the Lord appeared to him in a dream (28:11-22)

Harran – married Leah and Rachel, fathered children and worked for Laban (29-30)

Mizpah – confronted by Laban, achieved peace and left for home (31)

Mahanaim – ministered to by angels and prepared to meet Esau (32:1-5)

Peniel – prepared to meet Esau, wrestled with God who renamed him Israel, met with Esau (32:6-33:16)

Sukkoth – stopped with family and enjoyed a place of rest (33:17)

Shechem – purchased land but moved after sons' disastrous sins (33:18-34:31)

Bethel – returned with family to place of dream to renew vow to the Lord (35:1-15)

Bethlehem – Rachel bore Benjamin, died and was buried (35:16-20)

Hebron – reunited with Isaac, later jealous sons sold Jacob's favored son Joseph (35:27-37:36)

Beersheba – stopped to call on the name of the Lord on his way to Egypt (46:1-5)

Egypt – reunited family with Joseph and lived in Goshen (46:5-47:12)

Hebron – at death, his body was returned and buried in the cave of Machpelah (50:1-13)