

LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: GENESIS 29:31-30:24

To understand the lineage of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Broken Beginnings

I love the local church because it's where I most see the redemptive work of Christ in the lives of His people. I love seeing people who have come out of broken families riddled with sin and destruction be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. God has a way of using people for His glory in spite of undesirable families of



origin. In Genesis 29 and 30, we find out where the twelve sons of Jacob who later come to be known as the twelve tribes of Israel originate from. As it turns out, they have Jacob as their father but four separate mothers, and yet God still blesses them, develops them, and uses them. Studying their origins is a great reminder to us as Christians of God's faithfulness to us in spite of sin. Grace truly is amazing.

Jacob's Offspring

Chapters 29 and 30 detail the births of all twelve sons that will eventually make up the twelve tribes of Israel. Rather than detailing each of the births chronologically, this study will organize them by the mother that bore them.

Leah

While Leah is not favored by Jacob, she is certainly favored by God. Verse 31 reads, “When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb.” Was Leah actually hated? This is actually better understood as, “rejected for another.” It is because she is unloved that God favors her to begin childbearing first. Childbearing was an honorable thing; if Leah wouldn’t be loved by her husband she would at least earn his respect. We shouldn’t be surprised by Yahweh’s actions here, as they are consistent with what He has been doing in the lives of the Abrahamic people thus far. God chooses to bless the unlikely. It is the second-born Isaac that receives the blessing of the firstborn Ishmael. It is the second-born Jacob that receives the blessing over the firstborn Esau. These are unlikely individuals for God to choose, and yet this is the pattern He is establishing. The same is being done with Leah. She is the unlikely wife, the one not chosen by Jacob, that God chooses to carry on Jacob’s seed.

REUBEN

Leah’s first son comes and is named Reuben. Reuben’s name has some wordplay to it. The Hebrew construction here forms an r-b-n pattern, one that would have sounded like Reuben if the appropriate vowels were supplied. Beyond that, there is perhaps a subtle connection to Hagar as well. Both Leah and Hagar were the unloved wives/concubines, and yet God hears their distress (Gen. 16:11; 29:32). Reuben is the oldest of the twelve tribes and stays committed to his mother. He is the one that finds the mandrakes (an ancient aphrodisiac) that allows her an extra night in Jacob’s tent which leads to more offspring (Gen. 30:12). Later, after Rachel dies, he sleeps with her handmaid Bilhah, thus making it improper for Jacob to have sexual relations with her. This act eventually leads to him losing his birthright (to Judah and Joseph). He is presented as the older, wiser, and nicer brothers to Joseph in Joseph’s narrative in Genesis 37.

SIMEON AND LEVI

Leah’s second and third sons are named Simeon and Levi. Once again, we see another named connected to a negative experience (being unloved). First, in Reuben’s conception, Yahweh sees that she is hated. Now, He sees she is unloved in Simeon’s conception. Both are essentially prying into the same concept but with slightly different emphasis. Simeon and Levi are perhaps best known for their roles in the massacring of the men of Shechem because of the sexual violation of their sister Dinah (Gen. 34). In Jacob’s blessing, they are both rebuked because of their violence, and scattered from the land. Simeon is established as a powerful tribe that is skilled at fighting and is central in several important disputes in the Old Testament. Levi becomes the priestly people.

JUDAH

Judah is the fourth son, and for the first time the name of her offspring is not linked to her negative circumstances and her lack of love from her husband Jacob. Judah is a positive name which means simply, “This time I will praise the Lord.” Judah’s future significance cannot be understated. After Solomon’s sin and subsequent discipline, Israel is split into two kingdoms: the northern Kingdom of Israel (including 10 of the tribes and the lands of Shechem and Samaria) and the southern Kingdom of Judah (which included the tribe of Benjamin as well as Jerusalem). Judah ends up being, of the two Kingdoms, the more righteous one. While both of them were eventually exiled due to disobedience, the northern Kingdom had no righteous kings, whereas Judah had a handful. Judah’s ultimate significance in the overarching Biblical narrative is, of course, that Jesus the Messiah descends from this tribe. Jesus is, “the lion of the tribe of Judah” (Rev. 5:5). Matthew’s genealogy confirms Jesus’ place in Judah’s lineage (Matt. 1:2).

ISSACHAR

Leah’s fifth son (and Jacob’s 9th son) is named Issachar, which means something like, “man of hire,” or, “man who is my reward.” Leah names him due to her conviction that God rewarded her a fifth son because she

“hired” Jacob with Reuben’s mandrakes. Rachel desired them, and so Leah bargained for an additional night with Jacob and the sexual encounter led to a fifth son for her. Issachar had a positive legacy and the tribe was second only to Judah in the size of offering they brought for the dedication of the Tabernacle (Num. 7:18-23). Jewish history often pairs Issachar with Zebulun because of both Jacob’s last testament (Gen. 49:13-15) as well as Moses last testament (Deut. 33:18-19). One of the Judges, a man named Tola, was from the tribe of Issachar (Jg. 10:1).

ZEBULUN

The sixth and final son for Leah (and Jacob’s 10th son) is named Zebulun, and he is named because of how great an endowment God had given Leah in six sons (Gen. 30:20). Zebulun occupied a much larger portion of land than his brothers, but likely because much of the land was undeveloped and no major cities existed there. He is seen often paired in Jewish literature with his brother Issachar. The prophet Jonah was from the tribe of Zebulun (2 Ki. 14:25).

DINAH

The last offspring of Leah is a daughter named Dinah. No other information is given about her including the meaning of her name, indicating the lesser value of daughters to sons. Dinah does, however, play a role in future events in the book Genesis. In Genesis 34, a man named Shechem (the son of Hamor the Hivite) rapes Dinah. He then asks his father to get Jacob to agree to let him marry her, because he loves her. Simeon and Levi eventually take brutal and unjust revenge to the dismay of Jacob.

Bilhah

Bilhah was the handmaiden of Rachel, and was given to Jacob as a concubine to bear children on her behalf, and Jacob takes no exception to this proposal. The hurts continue to add up for Rachel. Everyone can bear children, sons no less, except her. Below is a brief sketch of her two sons.

DAN

Dan is Bilhah’s firstborn son (and Jacob’s 5th son). It is Rachel, not Bilhah, who names the son Dan, as Bilhah simply served as a surrogate mother to Rachel. Dan means something like, “justice for an individual.” Because of Rachel’s jealousy, the child served as vindication to her that though she herself couldn’t conceive, she nonetheless has been given a son. While in the wilderness, God gave Moses instructions about the construction of the tabernacle, and the extraordinarily skilled craftsman named Oholiab was from the tribe of Dan (Ex. 31:6).

NAPHTALI

Naphtali is the second-born child of Bilhah (and Jacob’s 6th son), and his name means, “with mighty wrestling I have wrestled with my sister” (Gen. 30:8). Not much is recorded about Naphtali, but the tribe did enjoy blessing from both Jacob and Moses. Jacob likened Naphtali to, “a doe set free that bears beautiful fawns,” and Moses said he is, “abounding with the favor of the LORD, and is full of his blessing” (Gen. 49:21; Deut. 33:23). David’s chief officer, Jeremoth, was from the tribe of Naphtali (1 Ch. 27:19). During His earthly ministry, Jesus spent a majority of his time in the regions of Naphtali.

Zilpah

One would expect that Leah gave her handmaiden Zilpah as a concubine in an effort to, “get back” at her sister, but that isn’t the case. She is motivated by the fact that she has stopped bearing children (Gen. 30:9). Below are details of her two sons.

GAD

The first of Zilpah's sons (and Jacob's 7th son). Gad is a name that means, "fortune," and reflects God's continued blessing on Leah. That even Leah's handmaiden is conceiving and bearing children is a sign that God has been faithful to them. The descendants of Jacob have been promised (Gen. 28:14), and so childbearing (and sons no less) are a big deal. Gad ends up having seven sons before they reach Egypt (in Joseph's narrative), and thus the Tribe of Gad has seven clans named as well (Num. 26:15-18). Despite the number of clans, Gad's was comparably smaller than most of the other tribes (Num. 1:24-25). In spite of its small size, Gad was seen as a warrior tribe (1 Chr. 12:8). The Gadites are referenced in the historical *Mesha Stele* by King Mesha (sometimes referred to as the Moabite Stone).

ASHER

The second-born son of Zilpah (and Jacob's 8th son) is Asher. Asher, like Gad, was a warrior. Jacob's final blessing is difficult to interpret regarding Asher (Gen. 49:20). It could be a positive blessing, and it could also be read sarcastically. Asher was, however, promised a great deal of blessing in Moses' last will and testament (Deut. 33:24-25). Asher provided warriors for David in 1 Chronicles 12:36, and was part of the administrative district of Solomon in 1 Kings 4:16 as well. They are also known for responding to Hezekiah's revival of the Passover at Jerusalem after the fall of the northern Kingdom. Anna, the prophetess recorded in Luke's Gospel who rejoiced to see the infant Jesus was from the tribe of Asher (Lk. 2:36).

Rachel

Rachel, the chosen and loved wife of Jacob, was barren while Leah and both handmaidens produced 10 sons. She did not do well with this reality during this time. She lashed out at Jacob, only to be told that it was God, not he, who was preventing her from conceiving (Gen. 30:2). Eventually, "God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb" (Gen. 30:22). Below are the details of her two sons.

JOSEPH

Rachel's firstborn son (and Jacob's 11th son) is Joseph, perhaps the most well-known of Jacob's sons (at least from the Genesis perspective). Like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Joseph's story is highlighted through several chapters of the book of Genesis, and his story uncovers how the Israelites ended up in Egypt, which sets up the events in the book of Exodus. We will cover his details more in depth when we get to chapter 37.

BENJAMIN

Rachel's second-born son (and Jacob's 12th son) is Benjamin. Benjamin is not born until after Jacob and his family have departed from Laban's home in chapter 35, but given this study's focus on the 12 sons of Jacob, it seemed fitting to include him here too. Rachel's labor during Benjamin's birth ultimately is fatal for her. Benjamin was favored by Jacob after Joseph's disappearance. Jacob's love for Joseph and Benjamin is to be expected, given his love for their mother Rachel, and it is the source of contention that leads to Joseph's demise and ultimate ascension to power in Egypt. Benjamin's tribe is described in Genesis 46:21, however only three of the clans are named in 1 Chronicles 7:6. They were a tribe known for bravery and skill in war, specifically for being left-handed (Jdg. 3:15; 20:16; 1 Ch. 8:40). Notable people from the tribe of Benjamin are Israel's first king, Saul (1 Sa. 9:1), Queen Esther (Est. 2:5), and none other than the Apostle Paul (Rom. 11:1).

Clarifying the Timeline

After working for seven years for Laban to (mistakenly) marry Leah, Jacob turns around and marries Rachel a week later for an additional seven years of work. When verse 31 begins and Leah conceives, a question must be answered: Does Leah conceive after the seven years mentioned in verse 30 are completed, or does this process begin shortly after Jacob marries Rachel? The likely reading of this passage is that it takes place

shortly after Jacob's marriage to Rachel. Rachel is highlighted as being barren for an amount of time while Leah is conceiving. If we read this passage in a way that positions Leah giving birth after the seven additional years, it would mean that Leah was also barren, and yet that's never mentioned. We are not told how much time passes between each child, but we can be fairly certain that the births began *during* the additional seven years, not after.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Genesis 29:31-35. Why did the LORD open Leah's womb? What was the name of her first son, and why did she name him that? What was the name of her second son, and why did she name him that? What was the name of her third son, and why did she name him that? What was the name of her fourth son, and why did she name him that? Who descends from the tribe of Judah (Hint: See Revelation 5:5)?

2. Read Genesis 30:1-2. How did Rachel respond to the birth of Leah's children? What did she say to Jacob, and what was his response?

Day Two

1. Read Genesis 30:3-8. What did Rachel do in order to procure children of her own? What were the names of Bilhah's sons, and why did she give them their names?

2. Read Genesis 30:9-13. What moved Leah to give her servant to Jacob for more children? What were the names of Zilpah's sons, and why did she give them their names?

Day Three

1. Read Genesis 30:14-18. What did Reuben harvest for his mother? What did Leah use them to barter for? What was the name of her fifth son, and why did she name him that?

2. Read Genesis 30:19-21. What was the name of her sixth son, and why did she name him that? What was the name of her daughter?

Day Four

1. Read Genesis 30:22-24. What did God do for Rachel when He remembered her? What was the name of her first son, and why did she name him that?
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2. Read Genesis 35:16-18. Describe the birth of Benjamin. What notable thing took place during his labor and delivery? Read Romans 11:1, 1 Samuel 9:1, and Esther 2:5. What three people in those passages are from the tribe of Benjamin?
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Week 24 Discussion: Family of Origin

Chapters 29 and 30 give us an origin story for what eventually becomes the twelve tribes of Israel. However, the story is not as clean and neat as we might like it to be. Jacob has twelve sons with four different women, two of which are sisters who are jealous of one another! One can only imagine the dysfunction in the home that the children were exposed to, and yet this did not stop God from using and blessing them and making them into a great nation with profound impact on the world (especially Joseph with Pharaoh). It's important to acknowledge a destructive family of origin, but it's also important to remember that it doesn't disqualify you from God's service. Talk as a group about your family of origin, and the effects (good and bad) it has had on your ability to minister to other people in your life.

1. Icebreaker: Did you have a positive or negative upbringing? Share with the group a little about your childhood home.
2. Did you trust your parents growing up? Why or why not?
3. Did you have someone you could talk openly with about your feelings? Do you have someone now in your life that you can talk openly with about your feelings? How important is it to share what you feel?
4. How has your upbringing helped you relate to other people with similar backgrounds? Do you believe God can use you and your experience to reach other people?
5. Do you think your past disqualifies you from being used by God to minister to others? Why or why not?
6. How can the church, practically speaking, be a safe place for people who do not have a family that is a safe place? In other words, what is our role to people who have come out of dysfunctional families?

Takeaways:

1. Jacob has twelve sons with four different women, two of which are sisters.
2. These twelve sons eventually have their own children, and become what are known as the twelve tribes of Israel.

PRAYER REQUESTS: