

This passage illustrates why polygamy is a bad idea. Even though they were sisters, being married to the same man caused bickering between Leah and Rachel as they competed for their husband's affections. Despite the turmoil in the home God kept His promise to be with Jacob, a fact that his father-in-law Laban recognized because he also benefited from God's blessings on Jacob.

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### Genesis 30

<sup>1</sup> And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. <sup>2</sup> And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?

**“And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister”** – By this time her sister Leah had already given birth to four sons (Gen. 29:31-35) but Rachel still had no children. In the culture of the day a woman who could not bear children was considered a failure as a wife and therefore Rachel had become jealous of Leah's ability to have children.

**“and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel”** – Rachel's desire to have children was so strong that she felt like she would die or her life was not worth living if she could not bear a child. In the midst of her desperation she blames Jacob for the fact that she could not become pregnant. Of course, it was not Jacob's fault since he had been able to get Leah pregnant four times already and so the accusation makes him angry.

**“and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?”** - Jacob points out that it is God Who has prevented Rachel from conceiving a child and so there is nothing that he as a human being could do to change that.

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<sup>3</sup> And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. <sup>4</sup> And she gave him Bilhah her handmaid to wife: and Jacob went in unto her. <sup>5</sup> And Bilhah conceived, and bare Jacob a son. <sup>6</sup> And Rachel said, God hath judged me, and hath also heard my voice, and hath given me a son: therefore called she his name Dan.

Like Sarah before her, Rachel proposes a solution sometimes used in that culture. She would use her handmaid as a surrogate mother and if Bilhah gave birth while sitting on Rachel's knees then it would symbolize Rachel giving birth and then she could claim the child. Jacob cooperates and Bilhah has a son. Rachel names the child “Dan” (meaning “judge”), because she believes that God has judged (in the sense of vindication) her situation of childlessness and has answered her prayers for a son.

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<sup>7</sup> And Bilhah Rachel's maid conceived again, and bare Jacob a second son. <sup>8</sup> And Rachel said, With great wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed: and she called his name Naphtali.

We can see the competition continue between Rachel and Leah here since Rachel allows Jacob to impregnate Bilhah once again to provide another son for Jacob. The strife Rachel felt between her sister and herself is illustrated by the name she gives this new son: Naphtali (meaning “wrestling”). She apparently feels she has been “wrestling” with her sister to be the better wife to Jacob and has succeeded with these two sons.

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<sup>9</sup> When Leah saw that she had left bearing, she took Zilpah her maid, and gave her Jacob to wife. <sup>10</sup> And Zilpah Leah's maid bare Jacob a son. <sup>11</sup> And Leah said, A troop cometh: and she called his name Gad.

The competition continues as Leah recognizes that she cannot seem to bear any more children. She saw that Rachel had given Jacob sons using her handmaid Bilhah, so Leah does likewise and allows Jacob conceive a child with Zilpah, Leah's handmaid. The Hebrew word translated “a troop” actually means “good fortune” and so Leah's statement should probably be rendered as “good fortune cometh.” Thus she names this son “Gad” (“good fortune”) because she believes that her fortunes have changed now that she has found another source for getting children.

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<sup>12</sup> And Zilpah Leah's maid bare Jacob a second son. <sup>13</sup> And Leah said, Happy am I, for the daughters will call me blessed: and she called his name Asher.

Zilpah gets pregnant again and gives birth to another son for Jacob. Leah names this son “Asher” (meaning “happiness”) because she believes that other women will see the number of sons she has given to Jacob and consider her to be a blessed woman, which makes her happy.

**Verses 14-24:** The strife between two sisters married to the same man continues as Leah's son Reuben finds mandrakes in the field and brings them to his mother. Mandrakes were superstitiously viewed as “love-apples” that could help with fertility and sex drive. Rachel asks for some of the mandrakes (for obvious reasons) but that just causes more bickering between the sisters. Leah finally agrees when Rachel offers to give her romantic time with Jacob in return for the mandrakes. As a result Leah bears two more sons and a daughter. After this the LORD answers Rachel's prayers also and gives her a son, whom she names Joseph (meaning “he will add”). The name indicates her faith that God will give her another son.

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<sup>25</sup> And it came to pass, when Rachel had born Joseph, that Jacob said unto Laban, Send me away, that I may go unto mine own place, and to my country. <sup>26</sup> Give me my wives and my children, for whom I have served thee, and let me go: for thou knowest my service which I have done thee.

Jacob's original reason for coming to Laban was to get a wife. He now had two wives and had given Laban 14 years of service in return for them. Jacob now wants to go back home and so he makes the case that Laban should allow him to leave because he is no longer in debt to Laban because of the quality of work he has done.

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<sup>27</sup> And Laban said unto him, I pray thee, if I have found favour in thine eyes, *tarry: for* I have learned by experience that the LORD hath blessed me for thy sake.

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Laban admits that his relationship with Jacob benefits him more than it benefits Jacob. He is obviously not as concerned for Jacob's welfare as he is for his own. He begs Jacob to stay and continue working for him because he's come to realize that his own prosperity has increased as a side-effect of God blessing Jacob. The Hebrew word for "experience" means "divination" (occultic practices) and could mean that Laban had learned by consulting with his false gods that Jacob was the reason for his prosperity. Most likely it is simply an expression meaning that by observation over the past 14 years Laban had concluded that God had blessed Jacob's work and that Laban had benefited from it.

Laban's admission illustrates the principle that God's people are a benefit to those around them. If God is blessing us and our work then those for whom we work will also benefit from the blessing. Not all employers will recognize God's hand in the situation as Laban did, however. They may believe that it is their leadership skills that has produced the benefits. Even so, we should never underestimate the power of God blessing our faithfulness to Him.

**Genesis 30:28-43:** Laban offers Jacob whatever wages it will take for him to stay. Jacob says that he will work for Laban if he allows him to take all the speckled and spotted livestock in Laban's flocks and herds for his own, leaving the more desirable solid colored animals for Laban. Laban quickly agrees to this for he believes he will benefit from this arrangement. Over the course of time God blesses Jacob's use of selective breeding to cause Jacob's flocks and herds of spotted and speckled livestock to grow faster and healthier than the solid colored livestock of Laban.

**Genesis 31:** Jacob has become more wealthy than Laban at this time and Laban's sons have become angry and believe that Jacob has cheated and acquired his wealth at their father's expense. Even Laban has changed his attitude toward Jacob and so when the LORD speaks to Jacob and tells him that it is time to return to Canaan, Jacob is ready to leave. However, knowing that Laban has deceived him before, Jacob doesn't trust that he will be allowed to leave with all his belongings and so he sneaks away while Laban is away shearing his sheep. Laban finds out and chases Jacob down but the night before he catches up to Jacob the LORD warns Laban against causing trouble for Jacob. After a confrontation the next day, Jacob and Laban form a covenant of peace and part ways.

**Genesis 32:1-26:** Jacob continues his journey back to his homeland but he knows his next task is to face Esau and make peace with him. Jacob sends gifts of livestock ahead of him in the hopes of appeasing Esau but when he hears that Esau is coming to meet him with a band of 400 men he also takes the precaution of splitting his company into two parts in case Esau is planning to attack. When they reach a stream called Jabbok, he sends the two companies across but that night he remained behind by himself, presumably to pray. Jacob finds himself wrestling with a "man" until the breaking of day, a man whom Hosea 12:3-4 describes as the angel of the LORD. When this man saw he was not able to subdue Jacob, he supernaturally causes Jacob's hip to go out of joint and then tells Jacob to let him go because the daylight was coming. Jacob realizes that this is no ordinary man that he has been wrestling with and refuses to let the man go until he blesses Jacob.

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## Genesis 32

<sup>27</sup> And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob.

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Did the LORD not already know Jacob's name? Of course He did. In that culture names meant something and were a reflection of your character. Jacob's name means "supplanter" (someone who trips up others or lays a snare for them). The LORD wanted Jacob to admit what he was and by speaking his name Jacob was confessing to his nature. Likewise, we have to confess our own sinful nature when we come to Jesus Christ for salvation and thus recognize our need for Him to be our Savior.

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<sup>28</sup> And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.

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**"And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel"** – Commentators are divided as to the meaning of this new name that the LORD gave Jacob. Some look to the literal meaning of "to struggle with God" while others subscribe to a figurative meaning of "a prince of God." Considering the explanation given in the second half of this verse, the meaning may be a hybrid of the two: "he who struggled with God and prevailed (as a prince)."

**"for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed"** – The phrase translated "as a prince hast thou power" comes from a single Hebrew word meaning "to persevere through struggle" and is translated "power" in Hosea 12:3, which speaks of Jacob's wrestling match. The name seems to come from the fact that Jacob would not give up in his struggle with the LORD but clung to Him ("*...And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me*" Gen. 32:26b). This should serve as a lesson to us that we should never give up when our faith is tested but hold more closely to the LORD. The LORD said that Jacob struggled with God and with men and prevailed. It would be easy for us to give up in our struggle against sin and the world but we must persevere and trust that God will eventually bless our faithfulness.