

GENESIS—WEEK 25

COMPETITION



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Jacob and Laban's Daughters by Raphael (1483–1520)
On display at Albertina in Vienna*

Almost everyone in this family seems to want to get ahead by clawing over their relatives. Only Leah is happy to be just happy. Everyone else wants to outscore their opponents—and everyone is an opponent.

This hyper-competitive attitude will make for some tough lessons.

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Thank you.

Genesis 30:1–43 — Competition
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1 Genesis 30:1–8 (NKJV)

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!” 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?”

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.” Then she gave him Bilhah her maid as wife, and Jacob went in to her. And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. 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. And Rachel's maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, “With great wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and indeed have prevailed.” So she called his name Naphtali.

Rachel sees Leah's gain as her loss. The pretty one isn't used to being on the same level as her sister. Rachel's petulant line, “Give me children, or I shall die!” is reminiscent of Esau's silly claim that he was about to starve to death when he sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew. Jacob is right to be angry; Rachel is being a spoiled brat.

Jacob still loves Rachel more than Leah; he just doesn't hate Leah any more. If Rachel was being rational, she would realize that her four nephews are almost like sons to her. Bilhah's sons are much less related to her than Leah's; the only thing special she gets with them is the right to pick the names.

And she plays that to the max. Dan means “judge” and Naphtali means “my wrestling.” That's ridiculous. No one's being judged here, and it's not a wrestling match. It's a good thing that Jacob is growing because Rachel sure isn't.

Rachel is being sinfully competitive. Conversely, Leah just wants to be loved. She may not be pretty, but all these sons make her a star among women. Check out how much higher birth-related mortality rates were just a few decades ago.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Neonatal_Death.png

Imagine what they were hundreds of decades ago.

Praise God for modern medicine. Science has made many wondrous advances. Still, many of us have ongoing battles with illness.

We pray for those who are ill (as we should) but what about the researchers? Lately, a lot of the most amazing answers to my prayers have come through new technologies. People are actually getting cured of cancer. Immunotherapy has changed everything.

God works through His servants. While God can and does heal miraculously, He also heals through the hands of others. Don't forget to pray for them too.

2 Genesis 30:9–13 (ESV)

When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Then Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. And Leah said, "Good fortune has come!" so she called his name Gad. Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. And Leah said, "Happy am I! For women have called me happy." So she called his name Asher.

Wow. Leah is one of the real greats of the Bible. Her humble upbringing has given her a magnificent heart. There's no hint here of resentment or competitiveness. She's just happy to be happy. These two sons' names mean "good fortune" and "happy." That's in stark contrast to how Rachel named her two surrogate sons.

"Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." That's catchy and close to the truth but not the whole story. Success is just as corrupting, especially any kind of popularity. Politicians, movie stars, sports stars and famous musicians struggle with the corrupting influence of popularity. Even popular schoolgirls display this. Their cutthroat attitude can be chilling.

But Leah's "Mother of the Year" status never goes to her head. She's happy—and she lets everyone know—but there's nothing wrong with that. Where Rachel sees competition and judgement, Leah sees only good fortune and joy. She doesn't see her gain as Rachel's loss.

But with only one Jacob, who must divide his time between the two (or four!) women, there is an unavoidable competitive aspect to this.

Leah will get hurt again.

Power doesn't actually corrupt; it just brings out the corruption that's already there. The same holds for popularity. The real problem is our sin. You don't have to be a star to struggle with that.

Competitiveness is poison. Christians need to avoid it like the plague. This is harder than it sounds. Competition pervades our culture, and anyone raised in this country is infected with it. Some of us are better than others at resisting being competitive, but it's always a challenge. Besides, resisting it doesn't attack the root problem. We need help.

Big sanctification issues are the purview of the Holy Spirit. Serious prayer is the best way to change your heart. You have to ask God to open your eyes to your competitive spirit.

An accountability partner helps too. Our own eyes are terrible at seeing our faults. A real friend, one who will call you out, can be invaluable.

Too many of us aren't in serious, ongoing accountability relationships. If you have one but you haven't been called out in a long time (i.e., in months), you need to turn this up a notch.

No one goes months without needing to be called out.

3 Genesis 30:14–24 (NKJV)

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.”

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.”

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.

And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Leah said, “God has given me my wages, because I have given my maid to my husband.” So she called his name Issachar. Then Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son. 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. Afterward she bore a daughter, and called her name Dinah.

Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. And she conceived and bore a son, and said, “God has taken away my reproach.” So she called his name Joseph, and said, “The LORD shall add to me another son.”

Rachel and Leah think mandrakes cure infertility. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandrake>

Reuben’s mandrakes are a major find for momma. Maybe now she’ll start bearing again. This plays perfectly into Rachel’s fertility rivalry with Leah.

Not surprisingly, when Rachel asks for some of the mandrakes, Leah gets upset. Apparently, Jacob is now sleeping with Rachel every night. That’s not surprising given that Leah has stopped bearing while the younger Rachel never started. Rachel longs to get pregnant, and Jacob is still head over heels in love with her. So, yet again, Leah’s heart gets hammered.

Rachel offers to trade a night with Jacob for some mandrakes. Leah accepts the deal and orders Jacob to her bed. That’s right; Leah and Rachel can dictate who Jacob sleeps with. Think about that one.

This all works out perfectly for Leah. She bears another son, and this causes her access to Jacob to be restored. So, the mandrakes help her fertility after all—just not in the way she expected. The text clearly gives God all the credit. The mandrakes don’t do squat.

Thank God our marriages don’t have the drama this one has. Marriage is tricky enough without two wives bargaining for their husband’s affections.

Marriage takes work. Pray for the young couples in your church. Ask them how you can pray for them.

4 Genesis 30:25-36 (NKJV)

And it came to pass, when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, “Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me go; for you know my service which I have done for you.”

And Laban said to him, “Please stay, if I have found favor in your eyes, for I have learned by experience that the LORD has blessed me for your sake.” Then he said, “Name me your wages, and I will give it.”

So Jacob said to him, “You know how I have served you and how your livestock has been with me. For what you had before I came was little, and it has increased to a great amount; the LORD has blessed you since my coming. And now, when shall I also provide for my own house?”

So he said, “What shall I give you?”

And Jacob said, “You shall not give me anything. If you will do this thing for me, I will again feed and keep your flocks: Let me pass through all your flock today, removing from there all the speckled and spotted sheep, and all the brown ones among the lambs, and the spotted and speckled among the goats, and these shall be my wages. So my righteousness will answer for me in time to come, when subject of my wages comes before you: every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and brown among the lambs, will be considered stolen if it is with me.”

And Laban said, “Oh that it were according to your word!” So he removed that day the male goats that were striped and spotted, all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had some white on it, and all the brown ones among the lambs, and gave them into the hand of his sons. Then he put three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob fed the rest of Laban's flocks.

The Hebrew idioms here are tricky and there are two views on the structure of this deal. The ESV study Bible takes the view that Laban deceived Jacob when he removed the spotted goats and black sheep. Others see that as part of the deal and Jacob only intended to claim those born later.

Jacob surely must notice when all the spotted and speckled animals disappear and he's now tending all white flocks. Yet he doesn't complain. Also, his terms were, “*You shall not give me anything.*” This all makes if Laban is supposed to keep all his existing sheep. So, I think Laban didn't cheat Jacob.

While wool is not the only use for many goat breeds, uniformly white wool is more valuable because it can be dyed any color. This is a great deal for Laban. He should jump at it.

Instead of jumping at great deals, Christ calls us to sacrifice for His glory. That's why volunteering is such a big deal in Christianity.

But there's a key to volunteering that many Christians seem to miss—why we do it. It isn't about “giving back” or “thankfulness to God;” it's about getting things done. We feed the hungry so that they won't be hungry, not to fulfill something. It's not about us at all.

5 Genesis 30:37–43 (NKJV)

Now Jacob took for himself rods of green poplar and of almond and chestnut trees, peeled white strips in them, and exposed the white which was in the rods. And the rods which he had peeled, he set before the flocks in the gutters, in the watering troughs where the flocks came to drink, so that they should conceive when they came to drink. So the flocks conceived before the rods, and the flocks brought forth streaked, speckled, and spotted. Then Jacob separated the lambs, and made the flocks face toward the streaked and all the brown in the flock of Laban; but he put his own flocks by themselves and did not put them with Laban's flock.

And it came to pass, whenever the stronger of the livestock conceived, that Jacob placed the rods before the eyes of the livestock in the gutters, that they might conceive among the rods. But when the flocks were feeble of the flock, he did not put them in; so the feebler were Laban's and the stronger Jacob's. Thus the man became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks, female servants and male servants, and camels and donkeys.

Jacob believes that the color of animals can be affected by what they see while they're breeding. This is nonsense, yet at first glance, Jacob's plan seems to be working.

But it isn't. The rods are just as useless as the mandrakes. Instead, God is teaching Jacob. He will explain what's really going on soon enough, but in the meantime, He's working a curious wonder. Despite the fact that Jacob's attempt to game the breeding process is totally wrong and unethical, God is "letting him win." Why?

The answer is that Jacob isn't winning anything. God will show Jacob that his livestock gains are a miracle. Thus, they could have been had at any time. But the way Jacob timed them, these gains cause all kinds of trouble.

This family is nothing if not dramatic, and Jacob's livestock gains will trigger major family drama. Laban is Jacob's uncle and Laban's sons are his cousins. His relationship with all of them will be threatened by his breeding success. Also, his beloved Rachel will have a near death experience.

The whole thing turns into a great lesson in how sinful schemes and tricks are prescriptions for disaster (and also how a loving God sometimes bails us out). This will unfold in stages over the next few chapters.

Jacob will get schooled—and so will we as we witness his trials.

This is going to be a long and complex lesson. Genesis seems to be full of them—lessons so deep that they can be learned over and over, with new levels of understanding each time. C.S. Lewis explains God blessing injustices in Letter V of *The Screwtape Letters*. (Note: this is from a demon's point of view.)

“He often makes prizes of humans who have given their lives for causes He thinks bad on the monstrously sophisticated ground that the humans thought them good and were doing the best they knew.”

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Do you see God’s hand in any of the modern technological advances?
2. Do you have someone who pushes you to grow in Christ and holds you accountable?
3. What kills marriages?
4. We have a standard for giving money—tithing. Should we have a standard for giving our time?
5. Has God ever “let you win” in something ridiculous?