



Sermon Notes: Rod Harding,

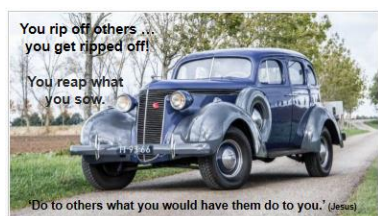
26 May 2024

‘The Deceiver is Deceived’

Readings: Genesis 29:1-30, Luke 1:46-55, Romans 28:28-30



A classic car lover was looking for a particular model of Studebaker. Scanning newspaper ads, he saw one that seemed impossible to believe. Exactly the car he wanted – for just \$100. Knowing the car should have been worth thousands, he concluded that either the car was in very poor condition, or it was a misprint. However, he phoned the number, and the woman who answered assured him that the car was in excellent shape and that there was no mistake about the price.



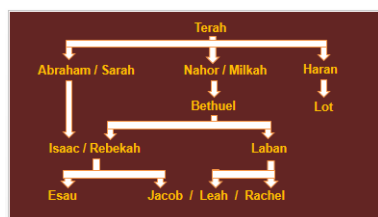
The car connoisseur hurried to the address, and to his delight the car proved to be everything the woman reported it to be. It was beautiful. Of course he told her he would take it – for \$100. Twinges of conscience then became so strong, the man had to confess. ‘I have to tell you this car is worth far more than \$100 – you could get so much more than that!’ ‘Oh, I know that,’ she replied, ‘but you see, my husband left me to run off with his secretary. He sent me the rego papers for the car, asking me to sell it and send him the money. So that’s what I’m doing with the \$100!’

There it is! The one who rips off others gets ripped off – and we smile and feel that justice has been served. The biblical expression of this almost natural justice is found multiple times in Paul’s letters – for example,

‘Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.’ (Gal 6:7).

Jesus phrased the same principle a little more positively in the Sermon on the Mount *‘So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.’ (Matt 7:12).*

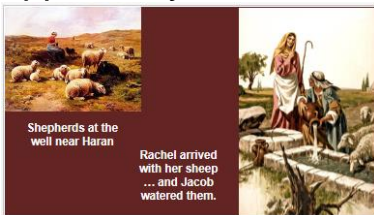
History, circumstances, relationships, life – all have a habit of coming back to either reward you or bite you, depending on how you engage with others – you reap what you sow – and that’s certainly how it seems to work in the passage from Genesis before us today.



As we know, although Jacob was Esau’s twin brother, he was the second-born, an important distinction in the world of the Ancient Near East, where the firstborn son held all the rights of inheritance – known as the birthright. However, Jacob, whose name meant ‘deceiver’, tricked his brother out of the birthright, setting the stage for the much more important deception to follow, when he deceived his father, Isaac, into

receiving the blessing intended for the firstborn son. Esau was understandably angry and swore that he would exact revenge by killing Jacob – so Rebekah, his mother, manipulated Isaac into sending Jacob back to the land of their ancestral family, where he would be safe from his vengeful brother until it was OK for him to return home. While on the journey, Jacob had his own encounter with God, which we heard about last week, bringing a whole new perspective into his life and relationships – though not necessarily changing his character completely, as we will see.

At the beginning of chapter 29 we read, *‘Then Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the eastern peoples.’* (v.1). I’m guessing he didn’t have Google Maps, or even a Gregory’s, to help him know where he was, so when he came upon a few shepherds herding their flocks of sheep around a covered well, he took the opportunity to ask about his whereabouts and his Uncle Laban, scoring big wins



with both questions – *“We’re from Harran,”* (v.4 – Bewdy, I must be close!) and *‘Yes, we know Laban, Nahor’s grandson ... and here comes his daughter Rachel with the sheep.’* (vs 5-6 – Wow! That couldn’t have worked out better!!).

After a brief conversation with the shepherds, Rachel arrived with her sheep, and Jacob sprang into action. He removed the heavy stone covering the well, and brought her sheep, described in the text as *‘his uncle’s sheep’*, to drink from it. He introduced himself to Rachel, declaring himself *‘a relative of her father and a son of Rebekah,’* (v.12) – which also meant, of course, that he and she were cousins – he



kissed her (presumably a kiss of familial greeting, not passion) and burst into loud tears.

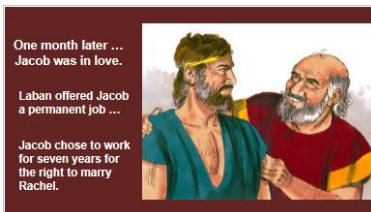
He is on this journey as a result of his father’s instructions – *‘Go at once to Paddan Aram, to the house of your mother’s father Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there, from among the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother.’* (28:1-2). And here he is, with the daughter of Laban, caught up in the high emotion of the encounter. Because the author of the narrative is primarily concerned with Jacob’s story, the remaining sheep and shepherds, even Rachel’s sheep, are quickly forgotten, as the focus now surrounds Jacob, Rachel and the family Jacob is about to meet. This moment of high drama concludes succinctly with, *‘So she ran and told her father.’* (v.12).



I can’t help but smile at the next words of the narrative. *‘As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister’s son, he hurried to meet him.’* (v.13). Back in chapter 24 and many years earlier, when Abraham’s servant came to another well also close to Laban’s home, he had come bearing significant gifts – *‘ten of his master’s camels loaded with all kinds of good things from his master.’* (24:10). When they had arrived at the house on that occasion, *‘the servant brought out gold and silver*

jewellery and articles of clothing and gave them to Rebekah; he also gave costly gifts to her brother and to her mother.' (24:53). And now, a member of the next generation of the family has arrived – the same family who brought all the good things to share last time – why wouldn't he hurry to meet him?

'He embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his home, and there Jacob told him all these things.' (v.13). Once he'd heard the back-story, it's as if Laban shrugs, realising that this family member is on the run, and has come with nothing but the clothes he's wearing, so he says something like, 'In spite of the fact that you come with nothing, because *'you are my own flesh and blood'* (v.14), you probably should stay with us, and we'll do our best to make the most of it.'



So Jacob settles in for a month during which two things happen – first, he falls in love with Rachel; and second, Laban is impressed with the quality of Jacob's work, because he offers him a permanent job. These two things combine when Jacob suggests that instead of wages, he would be willing to work for seven years in order to marry

Rachel, to which Laban quickly agrees. A reasonable bride price at the time might have been as high as two years' wages, but seven was an offer too good to refuse!

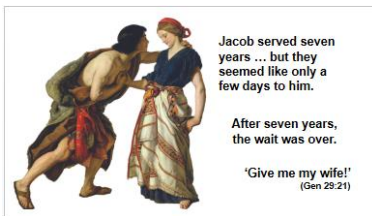
At this point in the narrative, we are introduced to the fact that Laban had two daughters – Leah (the older) and Rachel. They are described in this way, *'Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful.'* (v.17). As we read those words, we easily form an opinion that Leah (whose name means 'cow') had some kind of physical disability, leaving her relatively unattractive, at least by comparison with Rachel (whose name means 'ewe'). However, this is not at all



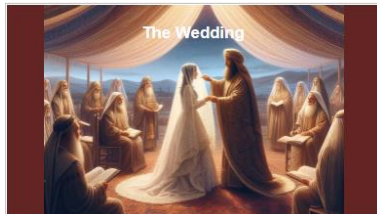
what it seems. The Hebrew word translated here as 'weak' is *rak* (you don't need to remember that!), and while the word is used elsewhere in the Torah (the Bible's first five books) it is never used in a demeaning way. For example, we read, *'he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender (*rak*) calf ...'* (Gen 18:7), where the meaning seems to be

'sweet, gentle'; and again, *'My lord knows that the children are tender (*rak*) ...'* (Gen 33:13), where you could read 'delicate, perhaps even frail'.

At the same time, the reference to Leah's eyes might not be meant literally, but understood more as a description of her character or demeanour. For example, in Deuteronomy 7:16, the phrase translated *'Do not look on them with pity,'* in the NIV is written in many English translations more literally as *'your eye shall not pity them.'* The eye is like the window to the soul, emotion, or character. If we combine these ideas, we could conclude that far from describing a defect or disability, this description of Leah is more likely explaining her disposition as gentle, delicate, tender – probably in contrast to Rachel's more fiery and aggressive temperament. We may have cause to reflect more on this as the sermon series continues.



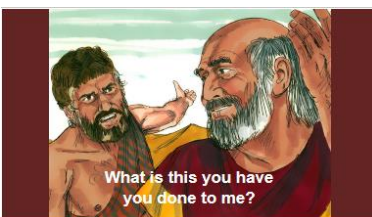
But for now, Jacob only has eyes (physical eyes, though probably also true for his emotional state) for the beauty of Rachel, and the seven years pass for him as if they were just a few days. When they had expired, Jacob quickly called for his due – ‘*Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her.”*’ (v.21). Of course, Laban agrees, and makes the appropriate arrangements, inviting everyone to the feast. And then comes the great deception – as we all know. ‘*But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her.*’ (v.23).



All kinds of guesses are made at how Laban, Leah and Rachel (who must also have been a participant in the subterfuge, even if unwilling) managed this deception –



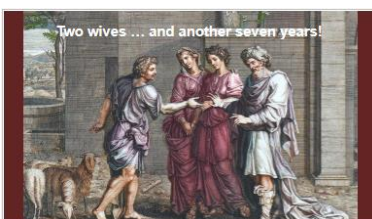
Jacob was probably fairly tipsy, the room was dark (no electric lights), Leah was most likely wearing a veil, etc, etc – but however they did it, it was not until the morning light broke through the window that Jacob realised it was Leah, not Rachel, with whom he had shared the bed.



‘*What is this you have done to me?*’ Jacob demands of Laban. ‘*I served you for Rachel, didn’t I? Why have you deceived me?*’ (v.25). His cry reflects that of the Egyptian Pharaoh to Abraham in chapter 12 (v.18) and that of Abimelech, king of the Philistines to Isaac in chapter 26 (v.10), when both had been deceived in relation to the

others’ wives – and could also have been (but it’s not recorded) the cry of Isaac to Jacob (or to Rebekah) when he had been deceived into providing the blessing for Jacob instead of Esau – ‘*What is this you have done?*’

Deception clearly runs in this family, and we now see the similarities of behaviour in both Laban and his sister. Jacob is usually blamed for deceiving his father (and there is no doubt he was a willing participant and the lead actor in the ploy), but it was really all his mother’s idea. It was Rebekah who suggested it, she planned and cooked the meal she knew would please her husband, she chose Esau’s clothes which Jacob wore, and she completed the disguise by using the skin from the goats she had cooked to make Jacob’s smooth skin feel like the hairy arms and neck of



Esau. And now it has all come back to bite them both – Jacob will have to work another seven years to pay for the right to marry his true love (though he is able to marry her immediately after the ‘bridal week’ has passed for Leah), and Rebekah will have to wait for even more years before her favoured son will be able to return home.

What a mess some families get themselves into! Don’t you think it is interesting that God has chosen to use families like that to achieve his purposes, even down

to the most significant task of all – being the bearers of the unfolding narrative of his faithfulness and covenant love towards his broken and faithless world?



God’s purpose will not be thwarted – and he continues to use less than perfect people like Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Laban, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, and (dare I say it?) you and me to achieve his purpose in his world. But this is not a licence for us to say, well who cares then?

What does it matter if I’m not the person I should be? God will do his work anyway – and he’ll work through all those he calls into his service, even the likes of the less competent, the uncertain, the sometimes ignorant, and perhaps even those who, in their weakness and essential humanness, feel the need, from time to time, to be less than honest in their dealings with others.



But remember, there is another principle embedded in this story – you reap what you sow, or ‘do to others what you would have them do to you.’ The responsibility for how we go about fulfilling God’s purpose rests with us. The nature of our engagement with others, the way we develop and maintain relationships with both our Christian family and those in the non-Christian communities around us, the consistency of our love and service, the integrity of our words and actions, and the grace we show towards the broken people we are part of – it all matters in God’s economy. As we reflect on this part of the Genesis account today, the question for each of us is, what kind of person do you choose to be?