

"Jacob's Family Relationships"
 Genesis 27:1-30:43
 Ellen Wong

On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your relationships with your family? That could include extended family like aunts, uncles, cousins, and in-laws. A "1" would mean you're estranged from your family. A "10" could mean you love and get along with everybody. A "5" may mean you're estranged from some family members, or there's some conflict but it's not serious. With the show of your fingers, what number would you rate your relationship? I would rate my family a "7." There is no turmoil. Everyone gets along with each other. So why wouldn't I rate my family relationship a "10?" Though we have peace in the family, we lack intimacy.

From the time we're born, relationships play an important part of our lives as we learn to deal with family, friends, coworkers, and our community. It's initially in our family unit where we learn about feelings, problem solving, love, intimacy, and how to communicate and negotiate. As we grow up and go through life, we often rely on experiences, and skills modeled for us in that family life to develop our attitudes and values, and explore our spiritual beliefs.

I remember when I was a teenager, I'd come home late at night many times to a locked chained door. To break into the house, I'd remove the window screen, quietly slide the kitchen window, press my foot against the edge of a brick on the wall, and hoist myself up and over the kitchen sink ever so gently, to avoid making any noise. The next morning, my parents never said a word, but I could feel their disapproval. Things were left unspoken in the household, and real issues were often not addressed. I wonder why there's no intimacy in my family.

Today we'll focus on Jacob's relationships with his parents, his brother, his uncle Laban, and his wives and concubines. As we go through this lesson, see if you can relate by evaluating your relationship with your family.

JACOB's RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS PARENTS AND BROTHER

Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah, and was 60 when twin sons, Esau and Jacob, were born. There seems to have been a natural competitiveness between the boys as they grew up. I can relate to that. I have four kids and they often ask me, "Who's your favorite?" each claiming they are.

Growing up, my mother made strange dishes like fugs and bitter melon. None of my siblings would eat it. I, on the other hand, would at least try it. When my siblings rejected her cooking, it wasn't uncommon for my mother to say, "Ellen will try it." I'm dating myself, but I felt like Mikey in the Life cereal commercial, "Did you try it?" "I'm not going to try it. Let's get Mikey." "Let's get Ellen." Mom was pleased, but that didn't fare too well with my siblings.

Scripture makes it clear that there was favoritism in this family: Isaac favored Esau and Rebekah favored Jacob. We saw that play out in this lesson. Near blind Isaac felt he was dying and told Esau to "hunt some wild game" and "prepare me the kind of tasty food I like...so that I may give you my blessing before I die."

Rebekah, overhearing the request, prompted Jacob to get two goats from the flock that she would prepare as some tasty food so he would get the blessing. Isn't it just like a woman to worry and take things into her own hands? Philippians 4:6 says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Rebekah didn't do that and didn't claim God's promise of a blessing to Jacob; otherwise, she wouldn't have felt the need to intervene. Have you done that? I know I have. I've acted without praying about it first and things backfired. Rebekah's action snowballed into the threat on Jacob's life; him fleeing from home; and Rebekah never seeing her favorite son again.

Esau was described as a skillful hunter, a man of the open country implying he was wild, unrefined and rugged. Jacob, on the other hand, was content to stay among the tents (Genesis 25:27) implying he was quieter and domesticated. It appears Esau could physically overpower Jacob; however, don't let younger siblings fool you. What they lack in physical strength, they make up with clever deceit, inventive strategies, and passive aggressive behaviors.

When I was young, my cruel sister, Cruella (no, that wasn't her real name), was older, bigger, and stronger than I was. In wanting to get back at her, I did some - not so nice things. I took her hairbrush and brushed our cat. One day I was in the bathroom, saw her toothbrush, and decided to do some cleaning with it...in the toilet. Watch out for those younger siblings.

Jacob had practiced deceit by taking advantage of Esau when he came in from the open country, famished. He convinced Esau to sell his birthright for a measly bowl of stew. This was clever on Jacob's part, and not a noble decision by Esau. He basically counted his birthright as worth no more than a meal, taking no thought of the future, whether it be blessings or consequences. Hebrews 12:16,17 says, "See that no one...is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold inheritance rights as a son. Afterwards, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears." This had a long-lasting effect.

In Rebekah's quest to get the blessing for her favorite son, Jacob, she prompted him to cover his smooth skin with goatskin to deceive his father when presenting the meal. He further deceived his father by claiming to be Esau when Isaac didn't recognize the voice. The ruse was complete. Isaac gave Jacob this blessing: "May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's richness – an abundance of grain and new wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you...May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed." [Genesis 27:28,29]

When Esau returned from the hunt and heard the news, he exclaimed, "He took my birthright, and now he has taken my blessing!" All Isaac had left to say to Esau was this: "Your dwelling will be away from the earth's richness, away from the dew of heaven above. You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck." [Genesis 27:39,40]

Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob." This brotherly relationship was broken. Have you been deceived or hurt by a family member and are now estranged?

Rebekah and Isaac's relationship also seemed strained. Rebekah said to Isaac, "I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from women like these, my life will not be worth living." [Genesis 27:46]

Canaanite people were a mixed breed, incorporated with different groups into their society through treaties and marriage. They were known to be heathens, godless people who worshipped idols and engaged in other practices that were offensive to God. Intermarriage with them would not only "destroy the purity of the line, but more importantly it would destroy the purity of the Israelites' faith." (John Walvoord/Roy Zuck)

So, Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him and commanded him: "Do not marry a Canaanite woman. Go at once to Paddan Aram...Take a wife for yourself there, from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother." [28:1-2]

When Esau learned that Isaac had blessed Jacob to take a wife from Paddan Aram, he realized how displeasing the Canaanite women (his wives) were to his father Isaac. Then he did the unthinkable – he married two more wives! I guess his life wasn't complicated enough.

What I found puzzling was that Esau didn't realize earlier that his marriages had displeased his parents. There seemed to be a lack of communication between the parents and the two brothers. The breakdown of communication, or the lack of it, can tear families apart. That's what led me to move out of my house when I was 18 years old.

The foundation of how we communicate comes from the family unit. If we don't acquire good communication skills, how can we effectively communicate with others outside of the family? Verbal communication is a key component in building healthy relationships and vital in feeling loved and having a sense of belonging. Feeling loved and belonging is an important steppingstone to finding our full potential to live a healthy and purposeful life. "Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister." [1 John 4:21] You can't have one without the other. There's a direct connection between the relationship we have with people and the relationship we have with God.

JACOB'S RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

As Jacob traveled to Haran, the sun had set and he took a stone as a pillow to go to sleep. In chapter 28:10-22 we see Jacob's relationship with God. "He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." [Genesis 28:12]

In the dream, God identified Himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac and repeated the promise of land inheritance and many descendants, and that all peoples on earth would be blessed through his offspring. There would be divine protection and presence.

Jacob awoke feeling, "This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." [Genesis 28:17] This vision, often referred to as Jacob's ladder, is referred to in John 1:51. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." It was in this encounter when Jacob developed a more personal relationship with God. In Genesis 27:20 Jacob had stated to Isaac, "The Lord

YOUR God gave me success" referring to how quickly the meal was prepared when he sought the blessing. Now his statement in Genesis 28:20-21 was, "If God will be with me...then the Lord shall be MY God."

God speaks to us in different ways. It could be through a dream, another person, or unfortunate circumstances like an illness, death, or divorce. Tribulations tend to get my attention. That's when I lean on God the most and feel the closest to Him.

Jacob showed his appreciation by taking the stone he had used for his head and poured oil on it, calling the place Bethel meaning "House of God." He made a vow that this place would be God's house and he would give a tenth of all that God gave him. Vows like this were, and are, commonly made by people in distress. Vows are not necessarily bargaining with God; rather they can express our dependence on him (IVP Commentary). God initiated this relationship and Jacob knew it was personal.

Chapters 29 and 30 tell us about Uncle Laban, his daughters and the family Jacob built in Haran. There were many intermingled relationships in this narrative: Jacob with Laban; Jacob with Rachel and Leah; Jacob with the handmaids; and Jacob's desire to return home.

JACOB'S RELATIONSHIP WITH LABAN

Let's start with Jacob and Laban. From the time Laban invited Jacob into his home after the meeting at the well, Laban knew that he could use this relationship to his advantage. He had two daughters eligible for marriage and a prospective groom who was willing to work for one of them. The contract was set for seven years of labor in exchange for beautiful Rachel. However, why not try to marry off both girls – and get another seven years of work?

For Jacob, it was love at first sight when he saw Rachel coming to water her father's sheep at the well and he wasted no time! He up and kissed her right then and there. That was kind of bold. Love is a wonderful relationship. He wanted to marry her so much that the seven years of labor for her father seemed to pass quickly.

At last, the magical day had come, the feast enjoyed, and the veiled bride met her husband. What a shock! It wasn't the beautiful white swan, Rachel, in his bed, but the ugly duckling sister, Leah. I can only imagine what that scene may have looked like, as if Jacob woke up from a one-night stand. I wouldn't know what that's like, but I've seen it in a lot of movies. How could this have happened? Traditionally, the bride was heavily veiled, wrapped up in fabric like a present to symbolize her purity and innocence.

Jacob confronted Laban. Isn't it just like a deceiver/jokester, whatever you want to call them, to downplay something they did wrong? And then they would say something like, "Can't you take a joke?" Or in this case, "Well, you know. It's customary for the older daughter to get married first, right?" Laban could have said this from the very beginning, but that's not how a conniver works. They do the "crime" and then justify it.

This behavior may frustrate you, for good reason, because it's unethical. Friction tends to occur more frequently with people who are different from us or have a different way of doing things. In other words, we get along better with like-minded people. But if we only surround

ourselves with people who are like us, we can stifle our personal growth and emotional maturity because we are not being challenged. Furthermore, affective communication is vital. Without it, conflict can arise when each party is left to interpret a situation which may or may not be accurate. Communication can bring clarity.

Laban further proposed if Jacob would complete his bridal week with Leah, then he could marry Rachel for an additional seven years of service. Jacob agreed. How ironic. One who had deceived others was now the one deceived.

To complete our look at the relationship between Jacob and Laban, we see that Laban's scheme worked and everything was going well for Laban until Jacob announced that he wanted to go home.

Now, Laban was an astute businessman. His livestock and wealth flourished under Jacob's management. So, after pleading with Jacob to stay, Jacob struck a bargain with Laban. It had to do with separating out the speckled or spotted sheep, every dark colored lamb and every speckled or spotted goat. I'm no expert in animal husbandry, so just how this specialized breeding was accomplished, I have no idea. But the end result was that the weak animals went to Laban and the strong animals went to Jacob and he grew exceedingly prosperous. We're going to learn more about this strained relationship in next week's lesson.

JACOB's MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS

Speaking of conflict, we can imagine the relationship drama between the two sisters, and the conflict of emotions between Jacob and his wives. Add to that turmoil, the two handmaids that came with the package. Zilpah, Leah's handmaid and Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid. Perhaps it was wise of Jacob to be out of the tent tending flocks for the next seven years.

Remember the Kissing nursery rhyme? K-I-S-S-I-N-G; First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in a baby carriage?

Genesis 29:32 "When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren." Polygamy is dangerous business. The Bible says man cannot serve two masters, for he'll love one and hate the other. [Matthew 6:24] Notice, God gave Adam only one wife. Two would be trouble.

One of the struggles married couples face is naming a baby. We name children after loved ones, flowers (Rose, Daisy), or even calendars (April, May, June). Leah, as well as Rachel, named their children to reflect the family situation. When Leah gave birth to a son, she named him Reuben which means, "see a son" indicating God saw her misery. "Surely my husband will love me now." [Genesis 29:31] She bore a second son and named him Simeon meaning, "God heard." "The Lord saw I was not loved and gave me this son too." [Genesis 29:33] Once again, she conceived and Levi was born, meaning "join." "Now at last my husband will become attached to me because I've borne him three sons." [Genesis 29:34] And then she gave birth to Judah meaning, "let him be praised" and stopped having children. Leah praised the Lord. The anguish of being an unloved wife was fading with the joy of having produced four sons/male

heirs. But does adding children to a difficult marriage make a relationship better? It didn't prove so in Leah's case. In many cases, children can compound the problem.

Rachel, on the other hand, was jealous of her sister. She said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!" Barrenness was considered a curse in that culture. Just as Sarah had given her handmaid, Hagar, to Abraham to bear a child for her; so, Rachel decided to help God by giving her handmaid, Bilhah, to Jacob to start her family. Bilhah had a son named Dan, or "judge." "God has seen my situation and has ruled in my favor," [Genesis 30:6] and then another named Naphtali, "my wrestling" as if she was wrestling or catching up to her sister in the child-bearing competition.

Still trying to woo her husband's affection, Leah thought, "Two can play that game." So, "let the games begin" or what Michael Buffer, the professional announcer would say, "Let's Get Ready to Rumble." She offered her handmaid Zilpah to Jacob, and they were blessed with a son named Gad meaning "troop" as if there was reinforcement. Then followed another son named Asher meaning "happy" indicating her joy with many children – a cultural sign of blessings.

Were you curious as I was about the incident with the mandrake plants? Mandrake plants have a forked root that resemble a pair of human legs. They were used as an aphrodisiac and fertility aid. Rachel was still barren and willing to try anything to conceive. When Reuben brought some home to his mother, Leah, Rachel bargained with Leah that she could take Rachel's turn with Jacob in exchange for the plants. I found that interesting. Her exchange for Jacob wasn't necessary since he already loved her, but she was fixated on this competition with her sister.

That didn't solve Rachel's barrenness as Leah conceived two more sons, Issachar and Zebulun, and then a daughter, Dinah. With every birth, Leah was seeking love and honor from Jacob.

At last, and in His timing, God opened the womb of Rachel. She had a son named Joseph, "may God add." Her immediate prayer was to have another child. That would come sometime later. For now, Jacob's quiver was full – eleven sons and a daughter.

Jacob's thoughts turned homeward. Were his parents still alive? Was his brother still angry enough to kill him? How would Laban take his leaving? Jacob had a large family and many possessions, but he knew God had promised him protection, so now maybe it was time to return to home.

RELATIONSHIP CONCLUSIONS

There are many reasons why there may be strife in a family. Did a sibling steal something from you like Jacob did to Esau? I've seen this a lot with inheritance after the passing of a parent. Did someone deceive you like Laban did by replacing Rachel with Leah? Or were you taken advantage of something similar to Laban tricking Jacob to an additional seven years of labor?

We may not understand why our conflicts are ongoing; just as there is no understanding of evil or wickedness. Satan lurks among us waiting to kill, steal, and destroy. [John 10:10] Satan would love for us to be hurt, angry, and bitter. But God wants love, peace, and joy in our

lives. [Galatians 5:22] Ignoring conflict or avoiding it is not going to make it go away. We need to face it in one form or another. Often that means direct confrontation. And if the mending efforts prove to be fruitless, the person may be in a stage of transition.

The Life Application Bible Study book beautifully quotes, "Just as the time in Haran was a transition period for Abram, so God may give us transition periods and times of waiting to help us depend on him and trust his timing. If we patiently do his will during the transition times, we will be better prepared to serve him as we should when he calls us."

So, one thing we can do is to forgive. "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." [Ephesians 4:31-32]

We've all heard the expression, "Home is where your heart is." It's not a physical place, but a place where you feel you belong. Perhaps God was tugging at Jacob's heart to return to a place that God had chosen for his inheritance; to a place where he and his descendants would chart the course of history; to a place where his relationship with God would flourish.

You may have struggled with relationships in this world that make you long for that place of peace and safety nestled in the bosom of God. "Unresolved conflict blocks our relationship with God." (Pastor Jake Baker) "Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." [John 14:22] God has given you the roadmap. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." [John 14:6] That personal relationship with Jesus is the most satisfying of all.

Let's pray.

Father God, relationships are hard. But without them there is no life. We ask for healing for those who are hurting from a broken relationship. And for those relationships that are good, make them even better. Help us not to rely on our feelings or our own understanding, but to do as You have commanded – to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving whether it's directly with our loved ones or within our hearts. We want to live in the heart of Your home in peace, love, and forgiveness. Thank You for this important lesson on relationships. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Let's stand as we sing the Doxology.