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A FAMILY AT WAR

Genesis 29:31-30:24

by

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February 16, 1997

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Genesis Lesson 55

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Genesis 29:31-30:24

A substitute teacher had been instructed by the school officials not to let students leave the classroom except in the most dire emergencies. One morning the substitute heard a seventh-grader shriek, "Oh, no!" She ran up to the desk, pleading, "I have to run down to Room 102 and tell my brother to eat peanut butter when he goes home for lunch today." The sub replied, "Surely what your brother eats for lunch is not *that* important."

The girl persisted, "Tommy has the first lunch and I have the last. If I don't tell him before he gets home to eat peanut butter, he'll have the roast beef that Mom is saving for Dad's dinner. Then when Dad gets home he'll say that Mom has to quit her new job because she didn't have time to get his dinner ready again and Mom will call him a chauvinist pig and tell him to eat out again. Then he'll come home really late and Mom will say she wants a divorce and she'll sleep at Grandma's again...." The sub let her go. (*Reader's Digest*, 2/82.)

We may chuckle at the story, but family strife is no laughing matter. Sadly, even many Christian families are war zones. The Christian home should be *the* place, above all others, where God's love and kindness are put into practice on a daily basis. Yet all too often, selfishness, bickering, anger, abusive speech, and even physical violence mark even Christian homes. We must obey the principles of God's Word if we want families where there is peace, not war.

Family conflict is not a recent phenomenon. It has been with the human race since the fall. Our text shows us a portrait of a family at war. It's startling when we realize that this was the family which God promised to bless and to use to bless all nations, the family

from which the Savior would come. And yet a battle was raging. The story reads like a tennis match, with the advantage moving from court to court as the opponents desperately try to defeat one another.

While it's a bleak picture, the theme of God's grace runs through it as a strong undercurrent. Jacob wasn't living in submission to the Lord at this time. His wives were thoroughly self-centered. And yet God blessed Jacob with eleven sons and one daughter (the twelfth son is born later), forming the basis for the nation which numbered over two million in Moses' day. Perhaps Moses included this story to humble the nation by showing them that God's blessing on them was totally due to His grace, not to anything in them or their forefathers.

The story is a case study of a family at war. It is a powerful commentary on the problems of polygamy. While God tolerated polygamy, it was not His original intent, nor is it ever presented favorably in the Bible. While most Americans are not polygamous (we have our wives consecutively, not all at once), the story reveals family members violating God's principles and paying the consequences.

If we violate God's principles
for the family, we will have strife.

To apply this story, I'm going to bring Jacob forward in time. If he came to me for counsel, I would ask, "Jacob, what's the problem?" He would answer, "The problem, Steve, is my wives. They're constantly bickering. All I want is some peace and quiet when I get home after a hard day's work. I don't want to listen to, 'She said this to me,' and 'I said this to her.' I just want some peace. And Rachel is always upset when her monthly cycle starts and she's not pregnant. She blames me for it--can you believe that? As if I'm God or something! And Leah's always complaining that I don't love her like I love Rachel. Give me a break: We've had six sons and a daughter together. What does she want, anyway?" Here's

what I would say to Jacob, in condensed form:

1. The husband should lovingly take responsibility for the direction of his family under God.

The Bible clearly teaches that the husband is the head of the wife (Eph. 5:23), which means that he is given authority under God in the family. This concept is under attack in our day. But biblical authority does not mean barking orders like a sergeant. In biblical authority, the one in authority is always under the authority of Christ, accountable to Him. God grants authority for one main reason: the blessing and protection of those under authority. To use authority for personal advantage is to abuse it. Thus the main concept of authority is not power, but responsibility. God holds the husband accountable for lovingly taking the responsibility of leading his family under God's authority.

I'm going to shoot straight, Jacob: You are passive. You're blaming your wives for the problems for which God holds you accountable. You're just taking the path of least resistance, doing whatever your wives want, to buy a moment's peace.

Take Rachel's inability to conceive. Why didn't you take the initiative to pray for her, as your father Isaac did when your mother had that problem? When Rachel gave you Bilhah, her maid, you passively went along with the plan. Why didn't you say, "That plan got my grandfather Abraham into a lot of trouble. We shouldn't do it"? You did the same when Leah offered her maid, Zilpah. When Leah hired you for the night, why didn't you call a family meeting and deal with the conflict? As your wives named each son to chalk up a memorial for her victory over the other, why didn't you put a stop to it? You just let things drift as you were tossed from wife to wife at their bidding. I know you wanted peace. But,

- A. A husband's passivity buys instant peace at the price of long-range problems.

I know, you're thinking, "What could I do? I was caught in the middle." I understand that every man wants some peace and quiet when he comes home from a hard day's work. But part of the job of a leader is to help resolve problems. You can't hide out at work and hope that the problems at home will go away. You come home late to an angry, frustrated wife, who has been dealing with the problems herself. She unloads on you. You either try to pacify her to get her off your back or you get angry and fight back. Either way, you're not facing your responsibility to help solve the problems God's way.

When Rachel saw her sister having children, she grew jealous. She was afraid she might lose your love. So she blamed you by saying, "Give me children, or else I die" (30:1). Rather than being understanding and gently leading her to seek the Lord and confront her sin, you responded in anger and blamed her: "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (30:2).

But you need to see why Rachel was barren. God gave Leah children and withheld them from Rachel because you wrongfully neglected Leah (29:31)! You've been blaming others for problems which stem from your own passivity. You're saying, "It's not my fault! It's Rachel's fault or God's fault, but I don't have anything to do with it!" But Jacob, if there's a problem in your family, it's *your* problem! You're responsible to deal with it, and you'd better not shrug it off by blaming your wife. Your anger and blame are just a cover for your passivity.

I know, Jacob, you had no way of knowing that the reason for Rachel's barrenness was your poor treatment

of Leah. I also realize that you can't undo the past, where you were tricked into marrying two wives. But your entering into a polygamous marriage without ever seeking God's will reflects your pattern of spiritual passivity. Your passivity got you into this mess, and your continuing passivity has only bought you momentary peace at the price of long-range problems. But, before you rush off and start barking orders at your family, you need to understand that the opposite of being passive is not being aggressive. Rather, it is active, biblical love:

- B. A husband's job description is to love his wife even as Christ sacrificially loved the church.

It's obvious that Leah desperately wants your love. She tried to gain it by giving you sons (29:32, 33, 34), but it didn't work. But a wife should not need to earn or deserve her husband's love any more than the church has to earn Christ's love. I know, Leah's not as beautiful as Rachel, and you feel like you were trapped into marrying her. But the fact is, you are married to her, and the command is clear: "Husbands, love your wives even as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her." The church isn't always lovely, but thank God, He loves her anyway. Your job is to love your wife with a view to her becoming all that God wants her to be. God's grace toward us should be the model for how we treat one another in our families. Being the head of your home means that you should be first in demonstrating Christlike love toward each family member.

- C. A husband should set the spiritual climate in the family by taking the initiative in seeking God's solution to problems.

Isn't it significant, Jacob, that "the Lord saw that Leah was unloved" (29:31), but you didn't! The Lord sees

every family and every problem in every family. As the head of the family, it's your responsibility to seek the Lord for wisdom for His solutions to your family's problems. It's not just an interesting coincidence that both your grandfather, Abraham, and your father, Isaac, had barren wives, just as you did. God allows these kinds of problems to teach us to depend on Him and to seek Him.

As the spiritual leader, you need to take the initiative in helping your family depend on the Lord and gain His perspective on problems. You do that, in part, by leading them in prayer for whatever problems they're facing. Prayer helps your family learn that we are dependent on the Lord. It helps them look to the Lord when problems hit. So you must often pray with them and for them.

But, also, you must instruct your family in the ways of the Lord and correct them when necessary. When Rachel blamed you for her barrenness, you could have helped her see her need to deal with her jealousy toward Leah and to seek the Lord who is the giver of life. Your anger prevented her from learning that. When she suggested that you take her maid, Bilhah, you should have told her about how your grandfather got into all sorts of problems by taking his wife's maid, Hagar, and helped her to wait on the Lord for a child.

When your wives argued over the mandrakes and worked out a deal for you to sleep with Leah, you should have confronted their jealous quarrels. You should have corrected their silly notion that a plant could produce fertility. You should have confessed your wrong in favoring Rachel and neglecting Leah, and sought Leah's forgiveness. But instead, you passively went along with their deal, without a word of instruction or correction. A husband is responsible to set the spiritual climate in his

family and to lead the family to seek God's solution to problems.

That's a condensed version of what I would have told Jacob. But let's suppose his wives came to me. When I ask them what the problem is, they say, "The problem is that passive excuse for a husband that we have. The man just won't deal with problems. He goes to work early, comes home late, and wants dinner, peace and quiet, and to make lots of babies. He won't listen when we try to tell him how we feel. He just gets angry and defensive. We don't feel loved. If any problems are going to get solved, we have to deal with it ourselves; he won't do anything." Here, again in condensed form, is what I would tell Jacob's wives:

2. The wife should submit to her husband as to the Lord, winning him (if need be) by her godly behavior.

Both of you are trying to manipulate Jacob into doing what you think he ought to be doing. But neither of you is facing up to your responsibility to submit to him and to model godliness before him. As long as you're manipulating, you're not submitting to him or to the Lord.

- A. A wife's manipulation buys short-term results and long-term frustration.

Leah, you joined in your father's scheme to deceive Jacob. I realize that you loved Jacob and wanted to be married to him. I know that you were obeying your father and going along with the cultural custom. But you were being manipulative. You got what you wanted--you're married to Jacob--but, it's not what you hoped for, so you're frustrated. You don't have the love and intimacy you thought your manipulation would bring.

You're like a lot of wives in our culture who are starved for the love they want from their husbands. Some of them manipulated their husbands into marriage by going to bed with them before the wedding. They thought that the intimacy of sex before marriage would secure them a husband. It did, but he's not the man they bargained for. He's wrapped up with his job and emotionally distant from her. She thought having children might help the marriage, but he just lets her take care of the work of raising the kids and can't understand it when she is too tired for sex. She feels like getting a job herself and dumping the kids in day care.

And Rachel, you used manipulation in giving your maid, Bilhah, to Jacob to bear children on your behalf. You thought you won a great victory over your sister (30:6, 8), but as you know, it was a hollow victory. It didn't get you what you wanted, even though it got short-term results. Both of you need to stop the manipulation and submit to your husband as to the Lord.

I know what you're thinking: "What about my needs? I need to feel loved. How will my needs be met?"

- B. A wife must focus on pleasing God, not on having her needs met by marriage or children.

If you focus on meeting your needs, even by the good things God gives, such as marriage and children, you'll come up empty, because your focus is wrong. In seeking to gain your life, you'll lose it. But if, instead, you will focus on living in a manner pleasing to God, beginning on the thought level, moving outward to your words and deeds, God Himself will meet your deepest needs. If anything will change your husband, it will be when he sees your quiet spirit of contentment in God (1 Pet. 3:1-

6). Your desperate attempts to get your needs met through your husband's love are counter-productive. Focus on pleasing God.

As sisters, you've got to deal with your rivalry for what it is: sin. God's command is clear: You must love one another, not compete with one another. You're not loving your children when you use them to try to gain your husband's love. If you'll both learn to focus on pleasing God, you won't have to use manipulation to gain your husband's love and you won't have to use your kids to try to fulfill your own needs. Instead, you can love them for who they are.

That's what I would tell Jacob's wives. Then I would call both parties together and tell them something like this (again, I'm condensing things and being more blunt than I would be in person):

3. The husband and wife must both submit to the practical Lordship of Christ in daily life.

Your family has a smattering of spirituality, but no one is living practically under the Lordship of Christ on a daily basis. Leah, at first you seemed to be seeking the Lord, as seen in the naming of your sons, especially Judah ("Praise"). But your rivalry with your sister took its toll on your walk with God, so that when you gave Jacob your maid, you left God out of the picture. You named her sons, "Lucky," and "Happy" (30:11, 13). While you later acknowledged God in things (30:18, 20), you were just using Him for your own ends, not submitting to Him.

And Rachel, you mistakenly thought that God was on your side in your wrestling match with your sister (30:8). You both invoke God to help you in your battle against each other. But God is far from such petty selfishness and rivalry. Rachel,

when God didn't seem to be answering your prayers, you resorted to magical mandrakes, thinking that they could do for you what God wasn't doing. You're giving the Lord lip service, but you're not bowing to His Lordship in your daily life.

And Jacob, you say you had a spiritual experience at Bethel a few years ago. But an experience with God is worthless if you don't develop a daily walk with Him. You can't drift for years and expect that experience to carry you. You need to be seeking God's wisdom about the problems on your job and in your family. You need to be actively trusting Him concerning all these practical matters you face each day. You need to obey Him, not just talk about Him. You've got to quit being spiritually passive. Walk with God yourself and take the responsibility to help your family members walk with God. Each of you needs personally to submit to the Lord in these matters of daily life.

CONCLUSION

You've been eavesdropping on how I would counsel Jacob's family. Even though you're not in a polygamous marriage, maybe, here and there, you've picked up some parallels which you can apply to your situation. I conclude with a story and a Scripture.

A boy once asked, "Dad, how do wars begin?" "Well, take World War I," said his father. "That got started when Germany invaded Belgium." Immediately his wife interrupted: "Tell the boy the truth. It began because somebody was murdered." The husband snapped back, "Are you answering the question, or am I?" Turning her back upon him in a huff, the wife stomped out of the room and slammed the door. When the dishes stopped rattling in the cupboard, an uneasy silence followed, broken at length by the boy. "Daddy, you don't have to tell me any more; I know now."

The Scripture comes from James 4:1-3 (Living Bible): "What is

causing the quarrels and fights among you? Isn't it because there is a whole army of evil desires within you? You want what you don't have, so you kill to get it. You long for what others have, and can't afford it, so you start a fight to take it away from them. And yet the reason you don't have what you want is that you don't ask God for it. And even when you do ask you don't get it because your whole aim is wrong--you want only what will give *you* pleasure."

If your family is at war, don't apply this message to the other members of your family. Ask God to help you apply it to yourself!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can a passive man change? Where would you counsel him to start?
2. What is the significance of the fact that a husband is never commanded to be the head of his wife, but only to love her?
3. What should a godly wife do when her husband abuses his authority by mistreating her and the children?
4. When does a wife's attempt to influence her husband spiritually cross the line into manipulation?
5. Can a wife confront her husband when he is wrong and still be submissive? How?

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