

Fair Is the Rose

Bible Study Guide

“On the human plane the story demonstrates the craving of human beings for love and recognition, and the price of thwarting it; on the divine level it shows once again the grace of God choosing difficult and unpromising material.”

Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*

Read Genesis 30:1a *Girl with the Green Eyes*

1. Rachel had Jacob, but she did not have children; her sister, Leah, in comparison, gave birth to four of Jacob's sons in quick succession. According to this verse what effect did Rachel's barrenness have on her feelings toward Leah? Note what the following verses teach us about that particular response: Proverbs 14:30; James 3:14-16; 1 Peter 2:1.
2. Just as “perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18, niv), envy and jealousy can be driven out of our hearts and lives when we embrace the love of God. Read Titus 3:3-7. What other sins are lumped in with envy? And what is the antidote for those sins? According to verses 5-7, what promise is extended to those who experience “rebirth and renewal”? If envy or jealousy is a stumbling block for you, how does this passage guide you toward making some positive changes in your life?

Read Genesis 30:1b *A Deadly Demand*

3. Robert Alter, in *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, explained, “It is a general principle of biblical narrative that a character's first recorded speech has particular defining force as characterization.” What might Rachel's first recorded words indicate about her character? Note that Rachel did not turn to her sister—or to God—to complain about her barrenness. Why not, do you suppose? From whom did Rachel demand satisfaction? Yet how does Genesis 29:31 explain Rachel's barren state? What similarities, if any, do you see between Rachel's reaction and your own response when life seems unfair?
4. Rachel wanted not just one child, but *children*. The original Hebrew specifically indicates *sons*. Why might this distinction have been important to Rachel? Would you describe the second part of her statement as a promise? a threat? an inevitability? We've heard similar “high drama” from another person in Jacob's life. Look up Genesis 25:32. Who was speaking, who was listening, and what was said? What do these two encounters reveal about Esau and Rachel's response to difficult times? And what hope does Psalm 23:4 offer us when we face hardships?

Read Genesis 30:2 *Hot Under the Collar*

5. What emotional reaction did Rachel provoke in her husband? What other course of action might she have chosen? See Proverbs 15:1 for insight. With whom do you sympathize most in this brief exchange—Rachel or Jacob—and why? Consider a situation in your own life that is particularly trying. What do the following verses teach us on this subject: Psalm 4:4; Psalm 37:8; Proverbs 29:11?
6. Various translators render the second half of Genesis 30:2 differently. If you are in a group setting, compare the different versions of Jacob's brief speech. Who did Jacob say was responsible for Rachel's barrenness? What might the heated nature of his response to Rachel tell us about their marital relationship? And about their relationship with God?

Read Genesis 30:3 *A Poor Substitute*

7. In her book *Running on Empty*, Jill Briscoe wrote, “Rachel resorted to Plan B. She would have children one way or another—whatever the cost.” List all the “expenses” you can think of, all the “losses” Rachel incurred in sending her husband to her maidservant's bed. Was God in any way honored or acknowledged in her “Plan B”? Now look at the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:1-20. She, too, faced the disappointment of a barren womb. Note all the ways in which her response differed from Rachel's.
8. Rachel was not the first woman in Scripture to demand her husband sleep with her maidservant to provide her

with offspring. Genesis 16:1-6 describes a similar situation. Consider the two accounts. In what ways are they the same, and how do they differ? How might Proverbs 14:1 aptly describe both Sarah and Rachel?

Read Genesis 30:4-6 *Vindicated...or Vindictive?*

9. The union of Bilhah and Jacob served its intended purpose: a son was born. We have no recorded reaction from either the birth mother or the father of the child. Rachel, on the other hand, had quite a bit to say about the birth of the boy. How would you interpret her words? Was she glorifying God...or seizing an opportunity to further her own cause? In John Calvin's *Genesis*, he declared, "Rachel...did not celebrate God's goodness but congratulated herself." Is that how you see it? The name *Dan* means "judged or vindicated." What insights might that offer about Rachel's attitude here?

10. In light of Rachel's response, read Psalm 127:3. How do you reconcile that truth with this scene from Genesis? Now read Psalm 105:5-6. How are the sons of Jacob described? What might that tell us about the nature of this family's unusual history? What does Genesis 50:20 reveal about God's ability to redeem even our self-serving actions for his own good purposes?

Read Genesis 30:7-8 *Take Two*

11. Since Rachel wanted children—plural—Bilhah's services were needed once more, and Jacob complied as well. Again, Rachel's response is the only one recorded in Scripture. Instead of referring to God, whom did Rachel mention this time? And how did she describe her relationship with this person? Various translations describe Rachel's actions as "a great struggle" (niv), "a fine trick" (neb), or "an all-out fight" (msg). What evidence, if any, have we seen so far that indicates her opponent was equally engaged in this "battle"? Rachel obviously feels justified in her actions, but what wisdom is offered in the following verses for those times when we're tempted to strike out at others: Psalm 34:14; Romans 12:18; Romans 14:19; Hebrews 12:14?

12. The name *Naphtali* means "my wrestling." Colossians 4:12 describes one kind of "wrestling," and Psalm 13:2 another. Yet Clyde Francisco, in *Genesis: The Broadman Bible Commentary*, suggested, "The reference is certainly not to the wrestlings of prayer, for she had been wrestling with her sister, not with God." What might have been Rachel's motivation for choosing such a quarrelsome name?

Read Genesis 30:9 *Turnabout Is Foul Play*

13. Leah, silent for some time, still did not speak ...but she certainly did act. What did she do and why? Since she already had four sons, what do you suppose prompted her to pursue this course of action? How might this scene alter your opinion of Leah's character? And what do her actions tell us about human nature?

14. Romans 8:5 describes the struggle between human—that is, sinful—nature and God's nature. How do you see that tension at work in our Genesis story? Though Leah and Rachel were indeed rivals in love, marriage, and childbirth, the Lord offers a different remedy for his followers in Luke 6:27-28. Rather than "wrestling" with our rivals, what does Jesus command us to do?

Read Genesis 30:10-11 *Fortune Hunter*

15. Leah's maid was every bit as fruitful as Rachel's servant. According to your translation, what was Leah's response at the birth of this surrogate son? The name *Gad* means "good fortune." For women in that time and place, sons were worth more than gold; sons assured them a place of honor in their community and in their household. In the following verses from Psalms what do we learn is even more valuable than sons or gold: Psalm 96:4; 119:14; 119:72; 139:17?

Read Genesis 30:12-13 *Cheaper by the Half-Dozen*

16. With the birth of a second son by her maidservant, Zilpah, Leah's scorecard boasted a total of six sons. Her response pointed to her own feelings, as well as to how others perceived her. The name *Asher* simply means "happy." What elements of this birth might have made Leah truly happy? And in what ways was she courting unhappiness?

17. Perhaps more revealing is what Leah did *not* say. Compare the names of Rachel's two surrogate sons with Leah's chosen names. What do those names suggest about the priorities of the mothers who selected them?

Read Genesis 30:14 *Fertility Right*

18. Mandrakes are a tuberous plant with yellow fruit that ripens in May, also the season for harvesting wheat. How are the plants described in Song of Solomon 7:13, the only other place mandrakes appear in Scripture? Since Leah already had four birth sons plus two adopted ones, what might have prompted her oldest child to

bring her a fertility plant? Psalm 128:3—often sung in a Scottish wedding ceremony—helps us understand the expectations that Leah and her sister lived under. Do women today face the same kind of pressure to produce offspring? If so, what are the modern “mandrakes” we might turn to, rather than seeking God’s will?

19. It was Rachel, however, who wanted the mandrakes, for she had yet to bear a son of her own womb. How would you describe her request of Leah? Was Rachel polite? petulant? desperate? demanding? Did she have the right to ask this of her sister? How would you respond if a rival made a similar request of you?

Read Genesis 30:15a *At Last, the Truth*

20. This is the first time in the Genesis story we see the sisters speaking directly to each other, though many years—and many tears—have passed in these few verses. Leah’s reply provides an honest look at the state of her heart after all she’d been through. What emotion do you hear behind her words? Was Leah hurt? angry? exasperated? disgusted? Are her comments justifiable? Why or why not?

21. Leah accused Rachel of taking away her husband. Was that in fact true? Review Genesis 29:21-28. Perhaps Leah was referring to a more recent occurrence of “husband stealing”; after Rachel provided Jacob with two sons by Bilhah, he may have settled in Rachel’s tent exclusively. With whom do you sympathize at this point—Leah or Rachel—and why?

Read Genesis 30:15b *A Brazen Bargain*

22. Rachel wanted mandrakes; Leah wanted Jacob. Commentator Derek Kidner considered this scene “a further example, in this family, of trading in things that should be above trade.” Genesis 25:29-34 tells of one instance when Jacob bartered food for something of much greater value. A second example of trading food for a more valuable commodity comes later in Jacob’s life, fully described in Genesis 27:1-36. What similarities do you see in these exchanges—first between the brothers, and then between the sisters—and what differences do you find?

23. At any point in this story does it appear that Jacob’s wishes were taken into account? Consider the attributes of a godly wife described in the following verses: Proverbs 31:11-12; Proverbs 31:29; Ephesians 5:23-24; 1 Peter 3:5-6. Do any of those verses describe Rachel, based on what you’ve read in Genesis? If you are married, in what ways do your daily choices mirror Rachel’s attitude? Married or single, in what ways are you striving to be like the godly woman described in Scripture? Is there a woman in the Bible who is a role model for you?

Read Genesis 30:16 *Bought for a Price*

24. When Leah sought out Jacob that evening, did she request his company—or demand it? Look carefully at the language she used to address him. In the niv translation, words like “must” and “hired” suggest that these wives of Jacob’s were more assertive than submissive! We often think of the women in ancient times being treated like livestock, and indeed they often were bought, sold, and traded—*Leah* means “cow,” and *Rachel* means “ewe.” But Jacob was bought for a price here as well. Including all that has come before this scene, what conclusion might you draw about the character of Jacob? of Leah? of Rachel?

25. Now a more important question: What conclusion might you draw about the character of God, the Holy One who endured such “unholy” behavior among his chosen people? Consider the following verses from Psalms as we conclude our study of this brief portion of Genesis: Psalm 47:4; 77:15; 100:5; 130:7; 135:4; 145:8-9. Pick a favorite verse from among these to write out and/or memorize as a reminder that, even when man is faithless to God, God remains faithful to those whom he loves.