

***Intro: Psalm 133***

I lost count long ago of the times I've heard Psalm 133 mentioned in Christian gatherings over the years: **"Behold, how good & pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity! It is like precious oil on the head, running down on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded his blessing, life forevermore."** Often in this world, even among God's people, it feels we are a long way from this ideal. Strangely when I sat down to write this sermon based on a passage about the unpleasant rivalry between two sisters this Psalm about brothers dwelling together in unity came to mind. Up until this point in our walk through the life of Jacob the ideas of rivalry & conflict have been almost constant. Yet in the midst of it all God is still answering prayer, blessing people & furthering his purpose even when brothers or sisters aren't dwelling together in unity. As one commentator puts it; *"Through all the troubled relationships God continued to work his sovereign purposes & to keep his covenant promises"* (Eveson).

When we faithfully & rightly set our eyes on the heavenly ideal of Psalm 133 we can become discouraged when this is not our experience & this can cause us to doubt God's blessing & involvement in our lives, relationships & the church. However the truth is Psalm 133 does not express the reality of everyday life just as it does not express the reality of every page of Scripture. Yet even when it's not the reality, in Scripture & in life, God is still at work in the midst of relational disharmony & many other difficulties. God's Word has the power to both envision us with heavenly ideals & to encourage us that he is still at work in present dysfunction. So don't let go of the ideal & don't get discouraged.

This passage zooms in on the personal struggles & rivalry between Leah & Rachel. Both Leah & Rachel had their own stuff to wrestle through & it was at least partly because they were wrestling with their own stuff that they had this unpleasant rivalry with each other. Sometimes, or perhaps often, the reason there is relationship disharmony with others is because we are all personally wrestling with our own stuff. I've divided this message under these three headings: 1. Leah's Personal Wrestle. 2. Rachel's Personal Wrestle. 3. Leah & Rachel's Wrestle With Each Other.

***1. Leah's Personal Wrestle (31-35)***

In these verses we learn Leah was hated & afflicted. We know this was because she was unwanted. Her dad had tricked Jacob into marrying her... Her sister Rachel was the head turner but Leah was the unnoticed, unwanted & unvalued one. This would have undoubtedly affected her self-worth which had now become rooted in gaining the love of her husband. This was Leah's personal wrestle. However we also see in these verses evidence that God has joined her in the wrestling ring. This is seen in the naming of

her children. Reuben, means 'see' & so Leah declared **"the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me."** God is now in her struggle yet at the same time we also see her value is still in hoping for her husband's love.

Leah then has Simeon which sounds like the Hebrew word for 'heard' & so she declares **"the LORD has heard I am hated."** Then she has a third son, Levi, which in Hebrew rhymes with the word attached, revealing her hope is still in earning her husband's love; **"Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons."** Then in verse 35 she has Judah & on this occasion she simply declares; **"This time I will praise the LORD."** Notably there is no mention of being unloved, no mention of earning Jacob's love, no hint of self-pity; only praise for the LORD indicating that she may have learned her true value was not found in her husband but in her God. This didn't instantly fix everything around her but it would have brought much needed worth & perspective.

At the end of this section she is found praising & thanking the LORD. This reminds me of Paul's words in Colossians 2:6-7; **"Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."** Let your identity & worth to be rooted & built up by God in Christ & it won't get knocked down by anything & anyone else. It is when we are rooted & built up in the right source that we are able to abound in thanksgiving. With the birth of Judah Leah's self-pity gives way to praise & I believe this is because she learned who the source of her real value was. We need to learn the same. The person who knows who they are in Christ has no room for self-pity. In their life self-pity gives way to praise.

Leah had also been favoured by God in a way she didn't know – sometimes that's the best way to be favoured... In giving birth she had given birth to the promised seed. For the Messiah of course would come from the line of Judah. In the story it is the woman despised by man who is actually favoured by God. The forgotten one is the favoured one. Isn't there something of the gospel in this? The One who was rejected by men became the chief cornerstone! Let such truth encourage you today if you feel unloved, forgotten or overlooked by others for you actually might be the one favoured by heaven. This also brings encouragement to Christians in contexts where the Christian faith is despised, unvalued or hated by society.

## **2. Rachel's Personal Wrestle (30:1-8, 22-24)**

If Leah's wrestle was around self-worth, Rachel's was in the area of shame – specifically the shame of barrenness. Leah was unloved yet fertile. Rachel was loved yet barren. This of course didn't help the rivalry between the sisters. They each had something the other desperately wanted. It was of course very shameful for a woman to be barren in her culture & so this was Rachel's wrestle. So much so that she said to Jacob in 30:1 **"Give me children, or I shall die."** The shame was killing her so she decided to go the

surrogate route & gave her servant Bilhah to give birth on her behalf (Leah of course did the same with her servant). Even though the rest of the account shows this didn't satisfy Rachel's longing she still saw this as an answer to prayer. So both these ladies acknowledge God in their personal struggle. The text doesn't go into rights & wrongs it simply highlight the real struggles of these sisters & that their wrestle was one in which God was involved. So in verse 8 Rachel declares; **"With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and prevailed."** This is where the title for my sermon, 'Divine Wrestlings', comes from. Rachel literally sees her wrestle with her sister as divinely organised. God is in this – God is working, God is teaching, God is revealing, God is dealing with the heart issues of these two women as they wrestle with their personal issues & as they wrestle with each other.

Philip Eveson writes of the phrase **'mighty wrestlings'**; *"It may be an indication that Rachel was beginning to see this struggle with her sister as one in which God was involved. The phrase could be legitimately translated 'divine wrestlings'. She has come to see that God was the one who had shut her womb and opened that of her sister. When she says, 'I have prevailed' her words [also] anticipate the reference to Jacob's struggles with God in which he also prevailed (32:28)."* So as all these characters are wrestling with each other they are also wrestling with themselves & the good news is God is in the ring with them working out his purposes. This is the family of promise remember. So we learn here God is not only with his family in the nice Psalm 133 dwelling together in unity times he is also present & powerfully at work in his family even when it feels more like the royal rumble... Jacob, Leah & Rachel all had their own 'divine wrestlings' & so God's purpose is being worked out as these complex characters wrestle with themselves, each other & God.

For Rachel God eventually takes away her shame of barrenness in **verses 22-24** when she gives birth to Joseph! I'm reminded that just as we find true identity & worth from God in Christ so it is he who takes away our reproach – our shame – in his one & only begotten Son. Christ is our identity giver & shame remover. Just as the birth of her son removed Rachel's shame so has the Son of God removed ours! So whether you feel more like a Leah or a Rachel today the bigger story of Scripture holds up Christ as your answer! Ultimately Jesus is the One who gives us eternal value & who takes away our shame forever.

### **3. Leah & Rachel's Wrestle With Each Other (14-18)**

The incident with mandrakes highlights the rivalry of the sisters over the affection of their husband. While polygamy was part of life in the OT it is never painted in good light. In the rivalry between his wives in these verses Jacob surely gets flashbacks of his rivalry with his brother Esau. Again we see the grace of severe mercy at work. His own wives are bartering & scheming for his affection just as he had once done to obtain the coveted birthright. The incident also shows how desperate Rachel was to have her own child, & how attached Jacob & Rachel were & therefore how ignored Leah was. Mandrakes were believed to arose

sexual desire & remedy infertility. So that's the big deal with them here. To this day they are known as 'love apples'. Rachel was prepared to lose Jacob for a night in the hope these mandrakes would help her conceive. However Leah is the one who conceives in verses 19-21 highlighting that it is God & not the mandrakes who is to be ultimately trusted. With this lesson learned Rachel does finally conceive because as the text says; **"God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb."** In this we're encouraged to trust God above all else – God remembered, God listened to her & opened her womb!

### ***Conclusion:***

There is so much dysfunction in this story but in the midst of the dysfunction note how God is functioning in the lives of the individuals & in terms of the bigger redemptive picture. Our God is a God who can still function in the midst of dysfunction & that should give us faith & hope for our lives, relationships & church! You see Psalm 133 is ultimately a picture of heaven – a picture of life forevermore. We can certainly have glorious glimpses & foretastes of it in the here & now but more often than not life, relationships & church is a bit more like this family story: 'Divine westlings' which God is actually using to prepare us for 'life forevermore'.

### ***Sources used for this sermon***

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