

Love is all you need  
Gen 29:14b-35  
*Tim Anderson 24/7/22*

I wonder if you could take me back 25 years  
and I was standing before my future father in law, Les,  
and I wanted to marry Cherida,  
and he told me I had to work for him,  
how long would I agree to work for him,  
in exchange for the hand of his daughter in marriage?  
Would I work for a year?  
Yes she's worth that, isn't she?  
Would I work for two years?  
It seems like a long time to work without pay.  
But if you think about it,  
Jacob was living with Laban.  
He had a roof over his head, they fed him.  
Maybe two years is not an outrageous request.  
What do you think?  
Is Cherida's hand in marriage worth two years?  
Surely, it must be.  
But what about seven years?  
Seven years seems like a long time.  
But did you notice when we read the story,  
who suggested seven years?  
It wasn't Laban.  
It was Jacob himself.  
Jacob had gone to live with his uncle Laban  
to escape from the wrath of his brother Esau  
because he'd tricked him.  
He swindled Esau out of his birthright and his father's blessing.  
Esau wanted him dead.  
And Jacob needed to leave the country.  
Uncle Laban's seemed like a safe place to stay out of harm's way.  
And so he just fell into a job there.  
He needed a home.

They put him up.  
He worked on the family farm to earn his keep.  
And it was Laban who suggested they ought to pay him for his services.  
What will I pay you?  
It was Jacob's idea to say,  
"I'll work for your younger daughter for seven years."  
Wow. He volunteered for the rather generous bride price.  
If you wandered into a shop,  
and instead of price tags,  
they said to you,  
"How much would you like to pay?"  
You would try to bargain them down to the lowest possible price,  
wouldn't you?  
But Jacob doesn't do that.  
I think he's concerned to demonstrate  
just how precious the lovely Rachel is in his eyes.  
And so he names a price that is extravagant  
to demonstrate how overwhelmingly desirable she is in his eyes.  
And Jacob was besotted.  
He was like someone out of a fairy tale.  
If Laban had said  
he needed to pull the sword Excalibur out of the stone,  
he would have tried to do it.  
If Laban had told him to climb Mt Everest,  
he would have tried to do that.

What was it that made Rachel so attractive to Jacob?  
Well there are two clues in our passage.  
29:17 "Leah had weak eyes,  
but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful."  
It seems that Leah had a problem with her eyes.  
It was likely not a problem with being short sighted or something.  
Because her weak eyes are contrasted with Rachel's lovely figure,  
she might have had a squint or some other problem with her eyes  
that made her less attractive to look at.  
She couldn't help it.

It didn't change her character.  
But by the conventional notions of beauty,  
it make her less attractive.  
But Rachel on the other hand was very attractive.  
She had a lovely figure.  
And she had well and truly caught Jacob's eye.

That doesn't strike us as particularly surprising.  
It's pretty normal in our society  
for the initial attraction between a young couple  
to be because they find one another attractive to look at.  
And older people can say as many wise things as they like  
about basing your relationship  
on something more substantial than looks.  
You know, she won't look 17 years old in forty years time.  
You need to think about someone  
who will be a good partner for you for the long haul.  
Her character is going to matter more to you than her looks.  
All that kind of wise advise is great to give and ought to be listened to.  
But young people are going to be attracted  
to someone they like the look of.  
That is the world we live in.  
But it wasn't really the world that Jacob lived in.  
They married to cement relationships between families.  
Things were often arranged by the parents.  
So Jacob is a bit unusual in adopting the 21 century idolatry of beauty.  
And yet there's no question  
that there was something a bit out of wack in Jacob's search for a wife.  
I already spoke about how Jacob named a very high price for his bride.  
That suggests he was making Rachel a bit of an idol.  
But the evidence becomes stronger.  
The seven years of working for Laban  
only seemed like a few days to him.  
In other words this wasn't just a surge of testosterone  
making him obsessed with Rachel for a short period of time.  
This was a long lasting obsession.

He was so utterly focused on obtaining the prize of the beautiful Rachel, that nothing else even registered for him.  
That's serious idolatry territory.  
And it becomes even more striking.  
What does he say to his father in law when he's completed the seven years?  
29:21 "Give me my wife.  
My time is completed,  
and I want to make love to her."  
And let's not be fooled by the subdued translation.  
This was no 'I want to express the undying love of my heart to her.'  
This was "Future Father in Law,  
I've paid the price and I want to have sex with your daughter.  
So don't delay.  
I want her now."  
I'm not sure Les would have reacted too positively if I'd said that to him.  
It really shows that Jacob's mind was pretty obsessed with having sex with Rachel.  
Now you might think,  
"That's pretty normal for a red blooded young man, particularly one who has been made to wait seven years."  
But the only reason it seems normal to us is that we've made it so normal for sex to become an idol.  
Is sex a good gift from God to be enjoyed without shame?  
Yes it is.  
Is Jacob wanting to enjoy it as God intended it?  
Yes, he's wanting to enjoy sex within marriage.  
That's what the creator intended.  
But even good gifts used the right way can become idols.  
If you become obsessive about good gifts then you won't be putting God first.

Well that's the blokes half of the sermon.  
And helpfully in this story there is also a ladies half.  
It's all fair.  
So Laban plays a dirty trick on Joseph.

He was in somewhat of a cultural dilemma.  
He wasn't meant to marry off his younger daughter  
before he'd found a husband of his older daughter.  
His older daughter had an eye problem that made her unsightly.  
Finding her a husband was always going to be difficult,  
despite the fact that she may have been able to do an excellent job  
of the most important task expected of wives back then -  
that is bearing sons for their husband.  
More of that later.  
So Laban put on a big party for the wedding.  
And he made sure Jacob had too much to drink.  
He probably didn't have to try very hard there.  
Jacob was celebrating that the prize he had obsessed about  
was now finally his.  
Perfect excuse for drinking way too much.  
And then Laban dressed his older daughter up as a bride  
complete with veil.  
By the time they jump in the sack,  
it's dark, Jacob is drunk and he doesn't know the difference.  
It sort of bursts the bubble of making an idol of beauty, doesn't it?  
Turn the light off and you can't tell the difference.  
And let's think about the practicalities of this for a minute.  
Laban's dirty trick could not have been accomplished  
without the full cooperation of Rachel.  
At any point she could have said,  
"Jacob, my dad is playing an awful trick on you.  
I know you are in love with me not my sister.  
Let's elope."  
Rachel was prepared to share her husband with her sister  
so that her sister wouldn't be shamed.  
It seems totally weird to us.  
Bigamy has not yet been normalised in Western culture.  
Though the way we are going,  
no doubt it won't be too far off.  
And look, when the pagans want to normalise bigamy,  
they will have a Bible passage they can use to justify themselves.

But not before God.

The New Testament makes it pretty clear  
that God's standard for Christians is one wife, not two,  
or hundreds like King Solomon.

But I digress.

Everyone is cooperating  
to make sure Jacob is tricked into marrying Leah.

And marry Leah he does.

Laban is not a complete bad bloke.

Though he makes Jacob work another seven years for Rachel,  
he gives him Rachel as his second wife after a week.

He'd got what he wanted.

And so we turn to Leah,  
who shows us the female version of love idolatry.

Women rarely turn sex into an idol.

It's the love and affection of their husband that they want.

And that too is a good gift of God  
that can become an idol.

Well Jacob loved Rachel more than he loved Leah.

Not unsurprising

given that he'd worked 14 years for Rachel's hand in marriage.

You tend to value what you have to work hard for.

But it wasn't an easy situation for Leah.

Not easy being the second favourite wife.

And God took compassion on her.

He enabled her to have children.

Now infertility is a great grief in our culture.

I was talking with someone just this week

whose sister's marriage had broken down

after unsuccessful IVF treatments.

But in the ancient world a woman's value was strongly linked  
to her ability to produce sons.

They had no idea that genetically

whether your children are male or female

depends on the father not the mother.  
Are you a good son producer?  
That was the yard stick for a successful woman.  
And Leah is desperate to be loved.  
And she really hopes that being a successful woman  
will turn her husband's heart towards her.  
The names she gave her sons are pleas for some love.  
Her firstborn was Reuben.  
It sounds like 'He has seen my misery'.  
Not sure how Reuben went at school  
being called 'he has seen my misery'.  
But in Leah's heart,  
29:32 "It was because Yahweh has seen my misery.  
Surely my husband will love me now."  
Sorry Leah.  
If one son doesn't work, maybe two will do the trick?  
Her second son was Simeon.  
Simeon means 'one who hears'.  
29:33 she said "Because Yahweh heard that I am not loved,  
he gave me this one too."  
It's hard not to feel pity for Leah.  
Poor lady.  
It's clear that she's not missing out on sex.  
Otherwise she wouldn't be producing these sons.  
But it's tenderness and affection that she's longing for.  
But it's all going to Rachel.  
It's not a good advertisement for being a Mormon or a Muslim ladies,  
is it?  
When she gets pregnant with her third son,  
her hopes get up again.  
I think that's a sign of how desperate for love she is.  
It didn't work the first two times,  
I'm not holding out much hope the third time myself.  
But Leah so desperately wants it to be true  
that she convinces herself that this time maybe it will work.  
They say that the definition of insanity

is doing the same thing and expecting a different result.  
But of course that phrase had not been coined yet in Genesis.  
Her third son was Levi.  
Levi sounds like the Hebrew for attached.  
29:33 she said "Now at last my husband will become attached to me,  
because I have borne him three sons."  
I am so dreadfully sorry Leah.  
It's not going to work.  
It must be awful to want desperately to be loved  
and to do everything you think will make your husband love you,  
and he still loves the other wife.  
She's the one he kisses goodbye when he leaves in the morning.  
She's the one he cuddles when he comes in from work in the fields.  
Your cooking is just as nice as hers.  
You've born him sons.  
It's not your fault that your eye is a bit funny.  
It's just not fair.

Well yes that's true.  
But it's also true that the love of her husband  
had almost certainly become an idol for Leah.  
When she's naming her sons  
to give a permanent reminder of her desperate longing,  
I think we can say she has an unhealthy obsession.  
Well at least that's what a psychologist would say.  
A Christian would say that she's building an idol in her heart.  
The love of a husband has become more important to her  
than the love of God.  
Which is not to say that it's not right and fair  
that her husband should love her.  
That he ought to make every effort to love his wives equally.  
But at some point you have to say,  
"Yes. It's not fair.  
My husband doesn't love me and he ought to.  
But God does love me.  
His messiah is going to be descended from my son, no less.



If I can't have the love of a husband,  
then I will praise God that I do have the love of a heavenly Father."  
At a psychological level,  
when you stop being desperate and emotionally needy  
then your husband is more likely to love you.  
Being desperate is never particularly attractive.  
But that's not why we stop making an idol of the love of a husband.  
We don't get rid of our idols just so life will work better for us.  
Though it's a rather nice side effect that it does.  
We get rid of our idols because God is worthy of our highest love.  
If we become obsessive about the love of another person  
then God has been displaced from our highest love.

So what's the bottom line from this passage?  
It really doesn't matter whether you're a bloke  
and you make an idol out of sex,  
or a woman and you make an idol out of love,  
they are both a bad idea.  
In fact you could get more creative.  
You could be a woman  
and make an idol out of using sex to control your husband.  
Or you could be a bloke and use affection  
as a way of rewarding your wife when she does as she's told.  
Those have both been done before.  
There are plenty of permutations and combinations.  
The devil has lots of tricks up his sleeve.  
You could be a single person.  
And I do apologise to the single people at church today.  
This subject is very skewed to those with partners.  
But a single person could look to their friends for affirmation.  
Nothing wrong with that.  
But it too could become an idol.  
You'd notice that  
if you were becoming unreasonably demanding  
of your friends' attention.  
The bottom line is,

the love of God needs to be our number one desire.

Well there's some good news at the end of our passage.

I always like a bit of good news.

It's easy to feel a bit starved of good news at the moment.

Leah got herself sorted out with God.

She dethroned the idol of her husband's love.

Leah got pregnant for the fourth time.

And this time when her son was born,  
she named him Judah.

Judah sounds like the Hebrew word for praise.

29:35 she said, "This time I will praise Yahweh".

No longer is there this desperate obsession with the love of her husband.  
She's handed that over to the Lord.

This time I will praise Yahweh.

This time in contrast to the first three times  
when I was a desperate housewife,  
before the TV show had even been invented.

This time I will praise Yahweh  
because I've final got to the point  
where I can be content and fully satisfied in his love.

Is it a coincidence that the Messiah was descended from Judah?

That God would choose the son for the most important role  
who was born to a mother who put God first.

It might not be a coincidence.

Yes I know that there are other reasons in later chapters  
that Judah is chosen for the role of being the ancestor of Jesus.

But it just might have started here.

Who knows?

Well isn't it great the Leah got rid of her idol and learned to praise God?  
So encouraging.

Are you encouraged?

Let's follow her example.