

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Rachel The beautiful bride**

#### **Lesson 1: Rachel – Jacob watered her flocks**

##### **Reading: Genesis 29:1-20**

Days, months and years can drag when you live out on a sheep station. Especially when it is a long way from the nearest town and situated in a hot climate. Yes, there is always plenty to do to care for the flock and make sure they are well watered, however, life can become a bit of a monotonous routine.

Both of Laban's daughters had left childhood and adolescence behind and were, by now, coming into their prime childbearing years. Neither was married and the pressure to secure a suitable marriage was a constant sub-conscious burden. Both girls knew all the local shepherds, but none of them seemed to have taken sufficient interest in either of the girls. Friendly acquaintances they may be, but nothing more.

No doubt, Rachel had taken her flock to the well on many occasions and, apart from some friendly banter and news swapping, it became little more than a tedious necessity.

All that changed suddenly with the arrival of a handsome stranger. Well, Rachel probably deduced he was a stranger as soon as she cast her eyes upon him. However, it transpired that although he had not been brought up in the vicinity, he was in fact a distant relative.

Jacob had arrived at the well before Rachel and was having a conversation with the other shepherds gathered there. Jacob was a well trained and experienced shepherd and so suggested to the guys that they should water their sheep and get them back to pasture for the rest of the feeding day. They countered by saying that they always waited for all the local shepherds to arrive, as the stone over the well was very heavy.

When Rachel eventually arrived with her sheep, Jacob went across and rolled the stone away on his own, and watered his uncle's sheep. We aren't told what the locals thought of this demonstration of physical strength.

Nevertheless, once Jacob had completed watering Rachel's sheep, he went to her and introduced himself. It was a very emotional greeting. Jacob kissed Rachel and was overcome with tears. Then he explained to her that he was her father's sister Rebekah's son. On learning this, Rachel, full of excitement, ran off to tell her father the wonderful news.

Laban was ecstatic when he learned that Jacob was his nephew. He invited Jacob to stay with him, and welcomed him as a member of the family. Jacob worked for Laban in the fields. After a month Laban suggested that Jacob be given wages for the work he had been putting into the family business, and asked Jacob to name his price.

You can just imagine how Rachel felt when, without hesitation, Jacob replied that he would work for seven years in return for Rachel becoming his bride, as he was deeply in love with her. I'm quite sure Rachel would have been thrilled with joy, and would have danced and screamed at the top of

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her voice had she been permitted to.

However, I'm not sure Laban was as happy about the deal, because he responded by saying that he would rather Jacob marry Rachel than anyone else. Doesn't sound too flattering to us, does it?

We read that, for Jacob, those years passed by very quickly. His love for Rachel was so great that he felt it seemed just like a few days had passed when the time was completed. Wow, his love for Rachel was amazing. It makes a delightful love story, doesn't it?

### **Rachel would say to us today...**

I could not believe my good fortune when that wonderful young man, Jacob, came and expressed his love for me in such a strong way that he would be willing to work seven years for my hand in marriage, and that it would seem to him like just a few days. I was shown such wonderful love.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You for the lovely love stories included in the Scriptures. Thank You for reminding us that You are a God of love and that You invented marriage. You also invented sex and intimacy to be enjoyed in a life-long marriage relationship. Thank You that this is also a picture of the love Jesus Christ has for His Bride, the Church. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Song of songs 4:1-15
- John 4:1-24
- Ephesians 5:25-32

### **Questions**

1. Did God intend for physical attraction to be a significant part in determining the choice of our marriage partner?
2. What are the dangers of allowing physical attraction to determine our choices for a marriage relationship?
3. How should we show love to our spouse?

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### **Lesson 2: Rachel the displaced fiancée**

#### **Reading: Genesis 29:21-30**

This story reminds me of another marriage where the wife had expressed her concern that there were three in the marriage from day one – Princess Diana and Prince Charles. One's heart went out to her.

Rachel's situation was, if anything, even worse. The third person, Leah, became Jacob's first wife. How would you like that to happen to you? Indeed, how did the exchange take place? The western mind, at least, boggles.

Nevertheless, the situation transpired, and the outcome was catastrophic for all three of them. Laban's intent was undoubtedly to rid himself of a problem: an unmarried daughter living at home with little likelihood of finding a husband. Laban grasped at the only straw he could see. However, his self-centredness deeply wounded three lovely people and sowed the seeds of disharmony, disillusion and separation.

Rachel had been looking forward to her nuptials. She had waited seven long years, no doubt counting off the years, months, weeks and days to the time when she would be free at last to be Jacob's wife and the mother of his children. She would ultimately be released from the shackles of home and the dominance of Laban. She would finally be able to exchange enforced servanthood with the privilege of becoming the mistress of her own home and family.

The long wait was over and the preparations made for the celebration. Yet, at the climax, instead of triumphant joy, came devastating disappointment and shame. Somehow, she was detained and forbidden to enjoy her wedding night. We cannot fathom the hurt, the pain, frustration and despair Rachel must have endured that night. Her dream had turned into a living nightmare, which would haunt her for the rest of her life.

Not only did Rachel miss out on her own bliss but she would have had to serve Jacob and Leah as 'king' and 'queen' in the following week. At the end of that week, Rachel was given to Jacob as his wife. The tone of the comment is not one of rejoicing but more a statement of the fact that the wonder, joy and celebration were gone. All that was left was the consummation of the union.

How do you think Jacob and Rachel have felt? It's difficult to give yourself fully when you are harbouring rage, disappointment, frustration, fear and guilt. On top of all that, Jacob and Rachel were expected to go through the motions of respectability. And in the background, Leah would have been watching. She would have been the haunting in their mind. How would Jacob and Rachel's love and relationship last under all that pressure?

Rachel would forever know that she was not Jacob's first wife. That wonderful act of sexual discovery with the man she loved was robbed of her. The thought of being Jacob's second wife when she could have rightfully been his first, as she was the one he loved first, would have left her with emotional scars.

The fact that Rachel went through with her marriage to Jacob was a miracle. I think she could have fled home and ridden off into the desert to find hope and happiness. But no, she waited around the settlement and graciously and demurely acquiesced, without murmur or rebellion.

How much she must have loved Jacob! How forgiving she must have been to Laban. How accepting she was of Leah's position. It seems there was a lot more to Rachel than just her

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stunning beauty.

### **Rachel would say to us today...**

That was an awful day. It was supposed to be the most precious and wonderful day of my life. The everlasting seal of a covenant between my husband and I turned out to be the beginning of one of the most distressful periods of my life. Life was never the same after that. I loved Jacob so much and I knew he loved me, but it would never be the fairy-tale life we dreamed it could be.

### **Prayer**

*Father, in the world we know today, what happened to Jacob and Rachel is virtually unacceptable and beyond understanding. However, thank You for recording the facts for us. May we never forget that their love for each other conquered the circumstances. Please help me to be equally committed to my spouse. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Genesis 16:1-16
- Romans 11:1-24
- 1 Peter 2:4-10

### **Questions**

1. Is it justifiable to be resentful and jealous of others who are affecting our marriage relationship?
2. What are the boundaries we need to establish in marriage relationships?
3. How would you have coped with the situation if you were Rachel?

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### **Lesson 3: Rachel the barren wife**

**Reading: Genesis 29:31 – 30:8**

If it is true in the modern world that when two people get married, there is a natural expectation that children will be born and a new family established, how much more so in ancient times.

God said at creation, “*Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth.*” Not only was there a huge expectation to have children, children were also seen as proof of God’s blessing. Conversely, barrenness would suggest that one was humanly deficient or possibly under God’s curse.

God expected every married couple to produce children, so if you failed to do so you must be failing both your parents and God. You must also be failing in your responsibilities to the community, for you would be without children to work and maintain their land. In ancient Hebrew culture, if a married man died without leaving an heir, his unmarried brother would be expected to marry his widow and complete the deed by producing an heir. This would ensure the continuity of the family heritage and, in particular, their land.

We don’t know how long Jacob and Rachel had tried for a family but we can assume that during the seven extra years that Jacob had to work for Laban, having children must be high on their agenda. Nevertheless, they were unsuccessful.

To make matters worse, Leah produced a son. Being Jacob’s firstborn, there would undoubtedly have been much rejoicing and celebration. Jacob and Leah would have naturally felt very proud. Worse still, Leah and Jacob continued to have children. One, two, three and then four boys. Leah was on a roll and rejoicing in her motherhood; however, Rachel remained barren.

I find it interesting that it was not until after Judah was born and a considerable time had lapsed after Judah’s birth that we read Rachel lost her composure and let rip at Jacob, complaining that he had not given her children.

This suggests to me that Rachel had been exercising amazing self-control. There is no hint of jealousy or mistreatment of Leah during those early childbearing years. It seems Rachel saw the boys as Jacob’s sons and so accepted them as a natural part of the family. Rachel loved Jacob as much as Jacob loved Rachel. She must have been delighted that Jacob now had sons and a family had been established. It wasn’t until Leah stopped having children that we read Rachel finally lost control of her pent-up emotions.

I wonder if she felt that since Leah was no longer having children, it was her turn to get pregnant. And yet, that still didn’t happen. What was going wrong? What had Rachel done to deserve this curse and rejection of God? Had she demanded for Jacob to fall in love with her? Had she deliberately wrested Jacob’s attention from Leah so he would ask for her hand in marriage instead?

Surely not? Rachel met Jacob first, and he seemed to have fallen in love with her immediately and saw no possible rivalry. Leah didn’t feature in his calculations – only in Laban’s. So why should Rachel suffer so much at the hand of God? As Jacob pointed out to Rachel, Jacob could not heal her barrenness, only God could. And yet, God seemed to have refused to do so.

Like Sarai did with Abram, in desperation, Rachel suggested that Jacob take her maid as a wife too. Bilhah became the mother of Jacob’s next two sons. Although Rachel’s name had been

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'pencilled' in to receive offspring, she has had to wait much longer for that to happen.

### **Rachel would say to us today...**

There are few things in life harder to endure than being a barren wife. For me, it was even more painful because it seemed so easy for the woman who had usurped my marriage to have children, and to know that her children became a tremendous source of joy to her.

I only obtained some self-esteem when my servant Bilhah had a couple of children for me. But I kept hoping and didn't stop crying out to God so I can have children of my own.

### **Prayer**

*Father, Your ways are often beyond our understanding. Thank You that You still miraculously answer our prayers and enable barren women to have children. For those women whose prayers have not been realised, please grant them Your comfort, love, and grace, and the strength to trust in You through their disappointment. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- 1 Samuel 1:1-20
- 2 Kings 4:8-17
- Luke 1:5-25

### **Questions**

1. Why did God appear to condone surrogate motherhood for both Leah and Rachel and yet found Sarai's unacceptable?
2. Why was it that Bilhah's and Zilpah's children were accepted as Israel's patriarchs and yet Hagar's son, Ishmael, was rejected and excluded?
3. How do you think Rachel felt when Dan and Naphtali were born?

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### **Lesson 4: Rachel becomes a mother at last**

#### **Reading: Genesis 30:14-23**

In all Rachel's dealings with Leah, never once do we read of bitterness, discourtesy or revenge. Rachel was to be Jacob's first wife but Leah agreed to Laban's duplicity and usurped Rachel's position. Leah would always be Laban's elder daughter. Nevertheless, even in her marriage to Jacob, Rachel still found herself playing second fiddle to Leah.

The dream she had of getting out from under Leah's shadow and dominance was lost forever when Laban made the switch and Leah became Jacob's first wife. I imagine Leah would want to remind Rachel of her position.

Even in our reading, we find Rachel dealing with her elder sister with respect. She politely asked if she could have some of the mandrakes Reuben brought in from the field.

How unkind, completely unjustified and unnecessary was Leah's reply. *"Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes as well?"* Worse still, it was untrue. Leah was the one who had stolen Rachel's husband. It was Leah who had usurped Rachel's position. Even now, Rachel was the one who was barren, and Leah the one with four sons.

How cruel Leah's comments were. Nevertheless, Rachel submitted to Leah's bargaining and, for the sake of peace and the mandrakes, allowed Leah to sleep with Jacob yet again.

Rachel and Jacob continued to try for a family of their own but nothing happened. God still did not open Rachel's womb. What pain Rachel must have suffered when Leah conceived once more and another boy was born. Leah conceived yet again and had another boy. How many years had passed by now and Rachel remained barren? Then almost as a throw-away comment we read Leah had a daughter.

What love Rachel must have had for Jacob. What determination she must have had to carry on trying, hoping and believing that her God would eventually allow her to realise her dream. Yes, Rachel never gave up believing that, one day, God would answer her prayer. There must be some deep-rooted love, a huge release of forgiveness and gentle faith in a just God that kept Rachel sane and calm in the midst of pain, ridicule and jealousy.

Every name Leah gave to her children must have seemed like daggers piercing into Rachel's heart; yet, she endured it all because of her love for Jacob and her belief that, one day, she would also be permitted to be the mother of Jacob's children.

Then at last we read it happened. *"God remembered Rachel; He listened to her and opened her womb."* Rachel conceived and gave birth to her son. Just imagine the release of joy and relief as Rachel exclaimed, *"God has taken away my disgrace."*

We need to remember that no matter what we may think, God is still the One who creates babies. He is the One who permits us to have children. He is the One who opens wombs and every child is a miracle of God. Children are all special. They all have a destiny written down in Heaven. God has a plan and purpose for each child.

Rachel named her firstborn, Joseph, as she hoped he would be the first son, and not her last child.

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Yes, Rachel's disgrace was taken away. We can only guess at what Joseph's birth meant to both Jacob and Rachel. Their union was conclusively consummated for all to see. God had finally honoured their marriage, sealed their family and ongoing inheritance. God's curse had been removed and their future secured. No wonder we read that after the birth of Joseph, Jacob decided it was time to move on and leave Laban behind.

### **Rachel would say to us today...**

Wow, finally God gave me a son of my own. What a moment. Yes, every child is a gift from God and a miracle. However, I can tell you that for Jacob and me, Joseph was the answer to many of my heartaches and desperate prayers – and what joy he was to us.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank you for the miracle of every baby's birth. Help us to remember that every child has been created by You and You have an awesome destiny for each one. Help us to help them reach their destiny through Your love, grace and wisdom. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Genesis 21:1-8
- Ruth 4:13-22
- Luke 1:57-79

### **Questions**

1. How do you think Rachel felt when finally Joseph was born?
2. How do you think Jacob felt when Joseph was born?
3. Do you think that may have contributed to why Joseph became Jacob's favourite son? What other reasons might there be?



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### **Lesson 5: Rachel left her father's home**

#### **Reading: Genesis 31:1-21**

Years and seasons passed by from the time Joseph was born and Jacob concentrated on his prime role as the shepherd of Laban's flocks. It is quite obvious that Jacob was a hard worker. He was one of those people who put everything into whatever he did. He was completely focused on the job in hand and did it with all his strength. He was a self-motivated person and didn't need anyone supervising him or continually watching over him in order to get the work done. Jacob looked after Laban's flocks as if they were his own.

God blessed Jacob in many ways while he stayed with Laban. Laban's character, however, didn't change. Having tricked Jacob into marrying Leah, Laban continued to trick Jacob over his wages. The seven years for Rachel turned into fourteen, and even when Jacob entered an agreement with Laban over the offspring of the flocks, Laban still kept changing the rules. Whilst Jacob was annoyed and frustrated by Laban's attitude and the way Laban had treated him, nevertheless, he continued to work with diligence and integrity.

The final straw was when Laban's sons began to express their jealousy and hatred of Jacob. They criticised Jacob and complained to Laban that Jacob was defrauding Laban and them out of their inheritance. Consequently, Laban's attitude hardened towards Jacob. It was then that Jacob realised he had definitely outlasted his welcome.

Eventually, Jacob called both Rachel and Leah out to meet him in the fields and confided in them that he thought the time was right for them all to leave. He reminded them about how badly Laban had treated him and how Laban had kept changing the rules regarding his wages. He explained to them how God had met with him and encouraged him to return to his father Isaac's land.

Both wives were in agreement, expressing their heartfelt view that they were no longer welcome, and were being treated like strangers in their own home. They were also disappointed and frustrated that Laban had wasted and exhausted the value of the bride price Jacob had paid. They both told Jacob that they were ready to leave and that he should follow the Lord's instructions to him.

So Jacob put Rachel and Leah on notice that, at the appropriate moment, they would leave secretly and in haste. Then Jacob waited until Laban had gone far out to his fields in order to shear his sheep.

Once Laban, his sons and servants were all well out of sight and heavily engaged in the day's shearing, Jacob set to work and put his plan into effect. He loaded his wives and children on camels and then, with all his servants, drove his, by now, vast flocks of sheep before him into the far distance as quickly as he could. He didn't alert Laban as he didn't like or want any confrontations. So the deceiver was deceived.

Once Jacob and his whole entourage had crossed the Euphrates, they continued to head up into the hill country, in the direction of Canaan, in order to get as far away from Laban as they could before Laban stumbled on the fact that they had gone away with a view to leaving him permanently.

Why Rachel would steal the family household gods is a mystery, but it certainly put Laban on notice that he had been deceived and made him even more angry and determined to catch up with

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Jacob and confront him for his actions.

### **Rachel would say to us today...**

I was so pleased when Jacob finally decided to leave my ancestral home. It had become almost a prison for me. Once Joseph arrived I just wanted to start a new life. We all need to leave our parents and start a new life without their daily interference or hands on influence. That is what leaving and cleaving is all about.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You that You never leave us nor forsake us. Thank You that You not only go with us wherever we go but You always go before us, preparing the way to ultimately bless us in incredible ways, whenever we are obedient to Your promptings. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Genesis 12:1-9
- Exodus 3:1-22
- Matthew 4:18-22

### **Questions**

1. Why does God call people to leave their ancestral home?
2. Have you ever had to leave something very special in order to receive something even bigger?
3. Have you ever had to make a decision, knowing later that it had eternal consequences?

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### **Lesson 6: Rachel died in childbirth**

#### **Reading: Genesis 35:16-26**

Jacob and Rachel's love for each other is legendary. It remained strong and vibrant through all the challenges they had to endure together. Through frustration, disappointment, barrenness and family pressures, their love for each other never waned. Undoubtedly, the reason why Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his brothers was that he was Jacob and Rachel's firstborn son. Joseph represented the life and the dream that was theirs from the day Jacob chose Rachel as his wife.

It adds significant poignancy to the betrayal and deception of Joseph's brothers when they regaled Jacob with the fabricated story that they had found Joseph's special coat stained in blood, when in fact they had sold him as a slave to the Ishmaelites, who took him far away and into Egypt.

After leaving Laban, Jacob had another meeting with God, prior to his potential confrontation with Esau. This time Jacob wrestled with God's angel and ended up with a limp for the rest of his life. Nevertheless, during that encounter God changed Jacob's name to Israel and Jacob named the site, Peniel, or 'face of God'.

When Jacob went to meet Esau, he decided to send gifts ahead of him in order to try and pacify Esau. He also wanted to guard his family from any potential tribal warfare. Jacob divided his children and put them with their respective mother. Then he put Zilpah with Gad and Asher in the front, followed by Bilhah, Dan and Naphtali, then Leah, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun, with Rachel and Joseph in the safest place of all, bringing up the rear. Jacob placed himself in front of all his family and behind the various droves of animals he had sent on ahead as a peace offering.

Jacob left Esau and went and camped at Shechem, after buying the land off the local tribesmen. It was at Shechem that Dinah was raped. Jacob decided to move on again but, before doing so, commanded all those with him to get rid of all their household gods, including presumably the ones Rachel took from Laban. These he buried under the oak tree at Shechem.

Then he set out for Bethel, the place God had first met with Jacob when he fled from his home after deceiving Isaac and robbing Esau of his birthright. God met with Jacob once more, and confirmed His covenant with him that God would make Israel into a great nation and future kings would come from his lineage.

Rachel would have witnessed these tremendous events and, I'm sure, loved Jacob even more because of them. It is little wonder that Rachel became pregnant once more. However, during her pregnancy, the whole family moved on again towards Bethlehem. It was during that time and just before reaching Bethlehem that Rachel went into labour and her second son was born.

The labour was obviously very difficult, painful and exhausting for Rachel. When the baby finally arrived, Rachel was so overwhelmed with anguish she named him Ben-Oni (son of my trouble) just before she died. However, Jacob immediately changed his name to Benjamin, meaning 'the son of my right hand'.

No doubt Jacob was distraught when his beloved Rachel died, especially in such a sad way and time. A time for the celebration of a new life, a new son and brother for Joseph, was overshadowed by the tragic death of his favourite and most devoted wife.

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It appears Jacob never stopped loving Rachel or the memories they had together. Rachel's beauty would appear to have been both outward and inward – a rare combination but one that is admired throughout history and throughout the world.

### **Rachel would say to us today...**

Because of the grace of God my life was worthwhile. Yes, I suffered hardship, misunderstanding, rejection, jealousy and derision. Nevertheless, both of my sons went on to be great in God. We also had some great men of God coming through their lineage. Most of us take a short-term view based upon the present. God, however, takes a long-term view based upon eternity. And yes, I've been reunited with my husband and sons forever.

### **Prayer**

*Father, I don't pretend to understand why You would allow Rachel to die in childbirth. I just know that You are a good God and have an eternal perspective that is far beyond my understanding. Please help me to somehow comfort those who go through similar challenges. May we all hold onto our faith in You and Your ultimate triumph over death. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

*1 Samuel 4: 12 – 22; Luke 4: 25 – 35; Philippians 3: 1 – 11*

### **Questions**

1. How do you think Jacob felt when Rachel died?
2. Why does God allow some women to die in childbirth?
3. How do you think Joseph felt at his mother's death?