

# THE THINGS WE DO FOR LOVE

*SERIES: THE JACOB NARRATIVE*

By Scott Grant

## Marketing the product

Our ways of looking for love are becoming more inventive. Some of them air weekly on reality television shows. Others of them are on display at local bookstores. A recently published book advises women who want a husband to take a marketing approach. The author's steps for finding a husband include packaging (create your best look), market expansion (cast a wider net), branding (identify what makes you different), advertising (promote your personal brand), guerrilla marketing (do something different), niche marketing (go out with female friends), telemarketing (bring out your Rolodex), mass marketing (pump up the volume), a quarterly performance review (evaluate your results) and an exit strategy ("man"agement).(1)

We are all, it seems, desperate for love. For many of us, marriage doesn't even scratch the itch as much as we'd like it to. Jacob, an exile from his family, was desperate for love. His ways were less than exemplary. The Lord, in his love, disciplined Jacob. He disciplines us in our wayward ways as well, enlarging our hearts to receive his love.

In Genesis 29:14, Laban sounded as if he were doing Jacob a favor, calling him "my bone and flesh" and opening his home to him. Verse 14 ends with a cryptic reference to the duration of Jacob's stay: "And he stayed with him a month." We're left to wonder: What happened in that month? We don't know, because the narrator doesn't tell us. But in verse 15, he lets us in on what didn't happen. Unlike Genesis 24, where arrangements were quickly made for a marriage between Isaac and Rebekah, no arrangements are made for Jacob and Rachel.

## Working for Rachel

**Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. And Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful of form and face. Now Jacob loved Rachel, so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than to give her to another man; stay with me." So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her. (Genesis 29:15-20)**

Laban, having acknowledged Jacob as "my bone and my flesh," now calls him, literally, "my brother." But he doesn't treat Jacob as a relative. In using the words "serve" and "wages," Laban reveals his true perception of Jacob. He views him not as a relative but as a potential slave. As such, in the absence of any such agreement between the two men, Laban has provided Jacob with nothing more than lodging. Unlike Abraham, who sent his servant to this land with provisions and gifts, Isaac sent Jacob there with nothing (Genesis 24:10), so Jacob's bargaining position is weak.

Laban knows that Jacob is at his mercy. He waits a month before approaching Jacob about provisions beyond lodging, because he knows that his victim's need—and desire for Rachel—will be more acute. Apparently, Jacob has been serving Laban all along, but without pay. Now Laban, no doubt observing Jacob's desire for Rachel, asks him to name his wages. Life in Haran, in the world that Laban inhabits, is all about earning one's "wages" (Genesis 30:18, 28, 32, 33; 31:7, 8, 41). In his world, family relationships are equated with economic arrangements. This outlook is seen in the names of his daughters: Leah, meaning "cow," and Rachel, which

means “ewe.” Laban is a herder. He sees his daughters as nothing more than livestock. As such, they are commodities to be traded away for the right price. His daughters understood this (Genesis 31:14-15).

The narrator’s description of one as older and the other as younger is information that will be vital to understanding the story as it unfolds. In verses 16 and 17, the narrator gives us background information that will help us understand Jacob’s answer, in verse 18, to Laban’s questions. Rachel was the beautiful one. Perhaps Jacob thinks Rachel’s beauty will decorate his ugly life. “Now Jacob loved Rachel...” Sound familiar? We heard in Genesis 25:28, “Now Isaac loved Esau.” We’re not given the immediate impression that Jacob’s preference poses any problem, because he intends to marry Rachel and Rachel alone. But in the years to come, Jacob, who was wounded by the favoritism of his father, will wound Leah with his preference for Rachel.

So Jacob names his wages: Rachel. And, he offers to work seven years for her. He’s familiar with working for love. He cooked stew like his brother and dressed up like his brother in the hope that his father would love him as he loved his brother. Jacob’s offer must have been an exceptional one, for Laban, a shrewd bargainer, accepts it on the spot without making a counter offer. Laban’s response, however, leaves him with plenty of wiggle room. He says, “It is better that I give her to you than to give her to another man.” He doesn’t actually say that he will give Rachel to Jacob. And his use of a pronoun instead of a name could enable him to later say that he wasn’t speaking specifically of Rachel.

Jacob had “stayed” with Laban for a month; now Laban invites Jacob to “stay” with him for seven years under the terms of their agreement. The “few days” that Jacob thought he would be gone from the promised land look as if they’re turning into several years (Genesis 27:44). He is now in the clutches of Laban. But, Jacob fulfills his end of the bargain. Because of his love for Rachel, seven years of labor seemed like only “a few days.” The narrator, representing Jacob’s assessment of those years, skips over them as if they never happened. Jacob, although he expected to return to the promised land much sooner, still thinks everything is on schedule. In the end, seven years seems like only a few days when the prize is Rachel.

In fact, we are told that literally, the seven years seemed “in his eyes” but a few days. Because Isaac’s “eyes were too dim to see,” Jacob was able to take advantage of him (Genesis 27:1). Jacob’s eyes for Rachel, on the other hand, enabled Laban to take advantage of *him*. And, as we read on, we learn that Jacob will end up with a woman whose “eyes were [also] weak.”

## Sleeping with Leah

**Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife, for my time is completed, that I may go in to her.” Laban gathered all the men of the place and made a feast. Now in the evening he took his daughter Leah, and brought her to him; and Jacob went in to her. Laban also gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah as a maid. So it came about in the morning that, behold, it was Leah! And he said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you deceived me?” But Laban said, “It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the firstborn. “Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also for the service which you shall serve with me for another seven years.” Jacob did so and completed her week, and he gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife. Laban also gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maid. So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and indeed he loved Rachel more than Leah, and he served with Laban for another seven years.** (Genesis 29:21-30)

After Jacob has fulfilled his end of the bargain, Laban apparently is none too eager to pay up as Jacob has to come to him. Having been reduced to a slave who has to beg for his wages, Jacob speaks briskly and coarsely of Rachel as payment for services rendered. He says to Laban, “Give me my wife, for my time is completed, that I may go in to her.” He sounds very much like his brother Esau, who came to him with the words, “Please, let me have a swallow that red stuff there, for I am famished” (Genesis 25:30). Jacob loved Rachel, but where is love

in this scene? Laban offers up his daughter as a steer at the fair, and Jacob enters the bidding.

Notice that Jacob, who took advantage of his brother's need and bargained for the family birthright, now finds himself in the role of Esau. Laban will take advantage of Jacob's desire for Rachel, just as Esau's passions made him easy prey for Jacob. Jacob was a cold and calculating man until he saw Rachel (Genesis 29:10-11), and now his passion for Rachel makes him easy prey for Laban.

Laban responds to Jacob by gathering the men of the place and making a feast. This was likely a weeklong wedding feast (Judges 14:12-18). The narrator used identical phrasing in Genesis 26, where Isaac, having arrived at Gerar, feared the "men of the place" but later "made them a feast" and blessed them (Genesis 26:7, 30). The men of that place turned out to be peaceful, and Isaac entered into a covenant with them, which was consummated by a feast. In this story, before arriving in Haran, Jacob came to a "place" that was dark and difficult, but God revealed himself to Jacob so that he could later say, "How awesome is this place!" (Genesis 28:10-17).

On the one hand, by repetition of such language, the narrator lets us know that it would be natural to expect something good to come of this feast with the men of this place. It looks as if Laban wants to bless Jacob. On the other hand, the narrator has already shown us enough of Laban to make us think that all is not as it seems. When Isaac made a feast, the Lord was at the center of it (Genesis 26:29), but in this scene, however, the Lord is nowhere to be found.

True to form, Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel. It was dark, and Leah was veiled. Jacob, who probably had filled up on food and wine during the feast, may be feeling no pain. That is Laban's hope, anyway. Jacob unknowingly consummates the marriage with the wrong woman. In this act of "love," Jacob doesn't even know whom he's with. If he cared for this woman's heart, he would know who she is, but he cares only for relieving his pent-up passion. Earlier, in Genesis 27, Jacob's father didn't know him. Isaac's ignorance was such that Jacob was able to masquerade as his brother and get away with it. In similar fashion, Jacob, the son who was unknown by his father, now becomes the lover who doesn't even know his supposed beloved.

It is at this point that the narrator brings Zilpah, a maid of Laban, on stage for a cameo appearance so that we'll know who she is when she reappears, in a more significant way, in Genesis 30:9-13. He does the same thing in verse 29 with Bilhah, who will reappear in Genesis 30:3-7. By granting his maids as dowries to his daughters, Laban seeks to appear generous.

In the morning, Jacob wakes up with Leah, not Rachel, and asks Laban, "What is this you have done to me?" His words echo those of the Lord, Pharaoh and Abimelech when they confronted injustice (Genesis 3:13, 12:18, 26:10). This is a nightmare! As the shepherds before him, who told Jacob the way things are done in this part of the world, Laban informs the newcomer of the "practice in our place" (Genesis 29:8). This "place," like the "certain place" Jacob came to in Genesis 28:11, is also turning out to be hard. Laban does not say that it is not the custom to marry off the younger before the older; he says it is not the custom to marry off the younger before the "firstborn."

With that word, Jacob's past crashes in on him. Jacob wants to know: Why did Laban deceive him? The narrator would have us believe that divine—and poetic—justice is being served. Jacob came to his father Isaac "deceitfully" by pretending he was the "firstborn" and stealing the patriarchal blessing (Genesis 27:19, 35). Laban switches sisters the way Jacob switched brothers. Isaac, whose eyes were dim, was blind to Jacob's identity. Now Jacob is blind to Leah's identity. Laban takes advantage of Jacob's "blindness" the way Jacob took advantage of Isaac's blindness, and Laban did to Jacob in this place what Jacob did to Isaac in another place. Laban is saying to Jacob, "You may get away with the old switcheroo in your place, but not here."

Laban's defense, of course, is groundless and hypocritical. If such was the practice of this place, he should have informed Jacob about it. And if it is not the custom to marry off the younger before the older, does custom dictate the practice of deceiving a relative? But Laban, ever the bargainer, makes Jacob another offer. He

proposes to give Rachel to Jacob after the weeklong wedding celebration involving Leah. However, Jacob will have to work for him for seven more years. Notice that Laban doesn't even use his daughters' names; he calls Leah "this one" and Rachel "the other." Jacob knows that Laban holds all the cards and agrees to the terms.

He consummates his marriage with Rachel. We were told that Rachel was beautiful and that Jacob loved her, in contrast to what we were told about Leah's eyes being weak, a description of her less-than-exciting appearance. Up to this point, we have not been told of Jacob's feelings toward Leah, although the narrator has dropped us enough clues along the way to make us think that they are less than inspired. Now, he tells us that "indeed" Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah." Jacob, the victim of parental favoritism, has somehow ended up like his father—favoring one over the other. The Lord, however, has plans for Leah (Genesis 29:31).

Again, Jacob serves Laban for another seven years, but this time there is no comment that they "seemed to him but a few days." It will be a long time before he sees home again. Jacob and his descendants were destined to be rulers, but in Haran he's nothing more than a slave (Genesis 25:23, 27:29, 37, and 40). Jacob the negotiator has met his match. Laban has beaten him at his own game.

Interestingly, the passage begins and ends with the verb "to serve" (Genesis 29:15, 30). Jacob is serving Laban in Haran, away from the promised land, just as his descendants, the Israelites, would serve Pharaoh in Egypt. And, in doing so, Jacob ends up with two wives. In the following passage, he has sex with two maids. From the beginning, the scriptures define marriage as a lifelong commitment between one man and one woman. Yet, stories abound, of course, of multiple wives, not to mention multiple concubines, but they usually include regrettable consequences. In this way, the biblical narrators frown on such arrangements. The story of Jacob, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah, also includes regrettable consequences.

### **Waiting for love**

Jacob waits before he's married to have sex. The scriptures, of course, are absolutely wild about sex, leaving no doubt that it was indeed God's idea. They also leave no doubt that God's idea is that non-marital sex is a bad idea. Such a notion seems laughably quaint by today's standards—or lack of standards. In fact, sexual experience today is considered essential to human growth and fulfillment. Sex has come to be treated as a need. Clearly, however, whereas food, clothing and shelter are needs, sex is not. Contrary to conventional thought, it is not like food. If people are hungry, they eat. But today, if they want sex, they get it. And if they can't get it, they get something like it.

Again, sex is God's gift to give in his perfect timing. What, then, do the scriptures say to those who haven't received the gift, or to those who have received the gift only to have it taken away? What do they say to those who have no spouse? To those in a season of marriage when sex, for whatever reason, is not possible? They say this: Wait. And they say that waiting, in all kinds of spheres, is an integral part of spiritual formation: "Yet those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength" (Isaiah 40:31). Waiting on the Lord stretches our hearts. And then it dawns on us one day: "Lord, you've been enlarging my heart that you might make yourself at home there." Waiting, if we will let it, enlarges our capacity to appreciate the Lord.

The scriptures don't say how long we must wait. We may have to wait until the whole idea of sex is fulfilled in the new heavens and the new earth, when men and women "neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Luke 20:35). The scriptures treat gaining new strength—a deeper relationship with the Lord—as infinitely better than sex on demand.

And what are we to do with this tremendous desire for emotional intimacy? The scriptures speak different things to different people. For some, it means getting married after waiting for an indeterminate period. For others, it means learning to live with this desire without getting married. For some, it means learning to live with a less-than-satisfying marriage while doing all you can to make it better. For others, it means learning to live with the loss of a marriage. But the desire can lead to disastrous choices if we don't submit it to the scriptures and actively involve ourselves with a faith community that keeps the scriptures in circulation. Jacob,

without a spiritual center, found himself at the mercy of his desires. We, too, come to the instant—and false—conclusion that we must have a certain relationship in order to be happy.

Our passions, if unchecked by truth, can cause us to disconnect from reality only to wake up one day, perhaps seven years later, realizing that we made a terrible mistake. We've become addicted to pornography. We gave something away to someone. We used someone. We entered into a relationship in which all that really mattered was how the other person makes us feel. We married someone we shouldn't have. We sacrificed our faith in Christ. We don't really know the person we married. These desires lead us to believe that something good will happen, but we end up like Jacob, feeling as if we've been tricked—or even that we tricked ourselves.

You won't learn about such consequences from watching television. In today's situation comedies, the characters get to sleep with whomever they want, and change partners every week, and the viewers get to enjoy it. At the worst, as in "Friends," a baby might result from an encounter, but the baby never inhibits anyone's lifestyle.

### **Working for love**

We want something that feels like love so desperately that we're willing to do almost anything for it. We make desperate, over-the-top pleas, all but turning ourselves into slaves in order to fill our hearts. Our world, which knows little of love, conditions us to work for love, just as it conditioned Jacob. Love is something we think we have to earn, through looking and acting in rigidly defined ways. And, like Jacob, many of us feel that our "bargaining position" is weak—that we don't have the looks, the charm and the resources necessary to compete for love. At a party many years ago, I was talking to a friend, who was observing someone who was moving effortlessly among the partygoers. My friend turned to me and said, "Look at that guy. Why can't I be like that guy? He oozes charm."

Single people: Connect with Christ, make some friends, both male and female, and look for someone who responds to you. That's not to say that the person who responds to you is the right one. Neither is it to say that the right person will respond readily and immediately. However, many years have been forfeited by men and women who won't let go of lost causes. If you end up in a relationship in which someone responds to you, one of your biggest challenges may be to stop working for love and simply accept the love that the other person has for you. The challenge to accept love from someone else often continues well into marriage.

Consider this: If we're always working for love, and if we do find someone who wants to commit to us, is that person committing to us because he or she wants to be with us, or with the person we are trying to be? If you work for love, even if you win love, in the end you lose it, because you can't be sure whether the person loves you for who you are, or for who you are trying to be. And, if our outlook is to work for love, then love becomes our wage. When we don't get it, we feel as if some contract has been violated. Many of us feel as if we've done our part. We worked hard to make ourselves worth loving. Or, we simply think we're a good person who therefore deserves to be paid with a good relationship.

If something like a good relationship ever develops, we then treat it—and the other person—not as a gift but as payment for services rendered. The other person becomes more like a possession—or an obsession—than a partner. Further, when we turn love into an obsession, as Jacob did, and the person of our obsession ever submits to our will, then we find out that the person is much different from what we expected. Jacob, obviously, didn't even end up with Rachel at first, but when he finally did, he was disappointed with her (Genesis 30:2).

### **The Lord's discipline**

There is, however, good news for those of us who find ourselves in Jacob's shoes. It's also hard news. This area of our life becomes a place in which God forms us. Jacob sees so much of his past in this episode. In marriage, and even in our hope for marriage, we reap what we have sowed, and we sow what we have reaped. On the one hand, what we have done to others is now done to us. On the other hand, we do to others what has been done to

us.

People who have been mistreated, as Jacob was, are more likely to mistreat others, as Jacob did. One of the first things I do in premarital counseling is to have both people talk about their childhood years and their relationships with their parents. One reason for this is to find out if they were mistreated as children and may therefore be more inclined to treat their spouse in a similar manner.

When we reap what we have sowed, we feel something of the pain that we have inflicted on others. When we sow what we have reaped, we connect the pain that we are currently inflicting on someone with the pain that we ourselves have had inflicted on us. We begin to see who we are, what we have become and what we are doing. In this way, the Lord forms us for himself and, according to the writer of Hebrews, disciplines us, loves us and heals us: “For those whom the Lord loves he disciplines, and he scourges every son whom he receives... All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed” (Hebrews 12:6, 11-13).

Conventional wisdom would have us throw marriage away if affections grow cold, looks fade or the relationship becomes too difficult. If we were to throw it away for such reasons, we’d be throwing away the Lord’s discipline, love and healing. If you throw it away, you are throwing away that which would bring you closer to God.

Some think that marriage is a prison, and some marriages, to be sure, feel like prisons to those who are in them. We want so much more for ourselves, but we feel trapped. Jacob wanted more for himself, and he felt trapped. The Lord wanted more for him, and in order to give him more, he had to prepare Jacob for more. It was *in marriage* that the Lord prepared Jacob for more—to receive the Lord into deeper parts of his being—and to take his place as a ruler who would beget rulers. In marriage, and in our desire for marriage, the Lord is preparing us as well. He’s showing us that he can work in any place, even in the darkest prison. He’s preparing us for himself—to receive his love—and for our place in his kingdom.

### **Marriage Supper of the Lamb**

This story features a wedding feast that ends in heartbreak: A man unknowingly consummates a marriage with a woman other than the one he worked and waited for, and the two of them become trapped in a loveless relationship. Many of our dreams gather around marriage, but sometimes those dreams turn into nightmares.

The Jacob-Leah episode is not that different from some of the nightmares I had for 20 years prior to getting married. In my dreams, I was engaged to be married, but as the wedding day approached, I concluded that this was all a big mistake, but I couldn’t get out it. I always awoke just before the wedding ceremony, as one awakes before one dies in a dream. Not that I had any fear of marriage, of course! Thankfully, I can say that God has shown me through the wife he has given me that my fears were unfounded. The nightmares have ceased.

This morning, my 15-month-old daughter motioned to the CD player. She wanted to hear music. When we turned on the music, she began to sway. She wanted to dance so my wife picked her up and began dancing with her. I joined them, and we danced around our living room in a three-person embrace. As I reflected on that moment while driving to church this morning, this thought occurred to me: Not only have the nightmares ceased, but God has turned my nightmares into a dream. Many of us have never partaken of the marriage feast, though we would like to. Many others of us have partaken of marriage but would hardly call it a feast. Even those who have feasted in marriage want something more than what the best human relationship gives. All of us, then, can look forward to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, when Jesus returns for his followers, who constitute his bride (Revelation 19:6-10). He won’t be veiled or hiding in the darkness, as Leah was. We won’t be drunk and oblivious, as Jacob was. The apostle John tells us that we will see Jesus “just as he is” and that we will “see his face” (1 John 3:2, Revelation 22:4). What will we see in his face? What we have heretofore only

glimpsed but have longed to behold since the day we first opened our eyes: approval, affirmation and delight.

All our indiscretions, all our missteps, all our sins—sexual and otherwise—won't matter on that day. They'll be swallowed up in joy by the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. On that day, none of us will feel that he's getting less than he bargained for. All of us will know we're getting more than we deserve.

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(1) Rachel Greenwald, "Find a Husband After 35 Using What I Learned at Harvard Business School, Ballantine Books, New York, N.Y. Quoted by John Boudreau, "How to Get a Mrs. Degree," *San Jose Mercury News*, Jan. 30, 2004. P. 1G.

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Genesis 29:15-30  
Seventh Message  
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