

Mistakes, Mischiefs, and Mercy

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 July 2017

Preacher: Shawn Woo

[0 : 0 0] Jacob is very clear what he wants. And the reason is this. It says in verse 17, Leah had weak eyes, right? So in the inch near east, having sparkle in your eyes was prized as a sign of beauty. So the fact that she has weak eyes is really, it's basically saying that she's not, you know, very beautiful. She's not pretty. And you could see that from the contrast that is made with Rachel because he says, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. So by implication, Leah was not beautiful in form and appearance. And so for that reason, Jacob asked to marry Rachel, not Leah. Now, seven years of labor for her is actually a very handsome, you know, marriage present, a bright price, because Deuteronomy 22, 29 would later stipulate that a maximum marriage present given to a family's household should be 50 shekels, which is about four years worth of wages. But Jacob's offering to work for seven years. So he's almost doubling the price. That's how much he loves Rachel. He's infatuated with her. And given the generous offer and knowing that, knowing what we know about Laban, he's greedy and grasping. Of course, he agrees. And he says, it says in verse 20, Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. Remember, Rebecca, it said in Genesis 27, 14, told his son to go stay a few days. But now it turns out that he's staying for seven years. But even that seven years felt to him like a few days because of his... This is a very rosy picture of the two couples' romance. Now, at the end of the seven years, you can hear Jacob's impatience and presumption. In fact, Will came up earlier to ask me, is this really what it says here? Because he approaches in verse 21. He says to his potential father-in-law, give me my wife that I may go into her for my time is completed. Okay, it sounds really rude and it is.

It's meant to be rude. This is very rude and very abrupt. There's no pleas at all in this interaction. And notwithstanding his rudeness, Laban knows that he has to fulfill his obligation.

And so he gathers the people together for a wedding feast. But then it says this, verse 23, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob and he went into her. Now, you might be wondering, how in the world did Jacob miss that? Right? I mean, right? Seven years you've been working for her, how did you miss that? Right? I mean, that's the... So first, during the first day of the wedding celebration, the wife is veiled the whole time. Okay? So he will not be able to see her face.

And then secondly, it says that in the physical consummation at night, right, that would take place in the cover of darkness. And so that's why he says in verses 23 and 25, in the evening, Laban took Leah and brought her to Jacob. And then he says in verse 25, in the morning, Jacob discovered the deception. So it seems to be highlighting the fact that he couldn't really probably see what's going on. So whatever the case, we know that Jacob was completely duped because you could see it in his response. Verse 25, and in the morning, behold, it was Leah. The panic and the dismay that must have come over him, right, for the seven years that he has been, now lying next to him is his new wife, ugly Leah. Now he storms out to Laban's quarters and then he says, what is this you have done to me? Did I not serve you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me? And then Laban replies in verses 26 to 27. Read along with me. It is not done in our country to give the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years. We should be already indignant at Laban's exploitation of his nephew.

And he's asking for another seven years to work for a wife that he did not ask for and for a second wife that Genesis chapter 2 explicitly forbids and says you shouldn't have. So it says, notice the description, and obviously this leads to a tragic marriage. Verse 30, Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah and served Laban for another seven years. Notice how he does not say that these seven years seem to him like a few days. These are grueling, joyless, sad seven years that he labors. And note the great irony of Jacob being deceived by Laban because Jacob asks Laban, why have you deceived me? And this is really an indictment against himself because just a few chapters earlier in chapter 27 verse 35, Isaac had said to Esau, your brother Jacob came deceitfully and he has taken away your blessing. Right? So in doing so, Jacob, the younger son is basically, he stole the rights of the firstborn and here he is deceived by Laban and lectured by Laban saying, and by the rights of the firstborn. It's a poetic justice happening exactly what he did to his father, his brother. Now it's happening to him. Right? Jacob stole the rights of the firstborn by deceiving his father who had dim eyes. Now he is here, his rights, the firstborn is, is, is, he's stolen, right? Jacob himself is stolen here by the rights of the firstborn who had weak eyes. I mean, the parallels are very clear here to see. So it doesn't matter that God had promised that Jacob would rule over his older brother Esau. Jacob was still wrong, we find in this scene, that what wrong to presume upon that and to take advantage of his brother. So this, you see here in the beginning that justice, God's justice is coming to him. So God disciplines Jacob here because he loves him. Now we're not off to a great start in this marriage. I think, I hope, pray most of us have a better start. And not surprisingly, what ensues is a heartbreaking story of a broken marriage.

[5 : 47] And there's an unhappy tug of war between Leah and Rachel, you know, vying for supremacy and for the affection of, of their husband. So Leah, on the one hand, longs for Jacob's affection, but doesn't get it, even though she could have children. Rachel, on the other hand, has Jacob's affection, but she cannot have children. And first, so God intervenes and God sees, it says, first verse 31, Leah. He says, when the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. Whenever God sees, in Old Testament narratives, he's always intervening on behalf of the weak and the marginalized.

So here he sees that Leah is hated by his, by her own husband, and he intervenes on her behalf. He sees her plight. But it's really sad. I mean, as you're reading, if you get verses 31 to 35, when Leah's having these series of children and she's speaking to God, normally in Hebrew narratives, there's always two characters. It's dialogue between two characters. But in this, this is a soliloquy. Like, there's no one else, Leah, by herself, speaking, no one to listen to her except for God.

It's a really sad tale because she talks about it. It's a picture of her isolation and unrequited love. Now, in their struggle against each other, both Rachel and Leah take things into their own hands, presumptuously, and sin against the Lord and do things that are contrary to his will.

Verse 1, chapter 30, it says that when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, give me children or I shall die. That sounds a lot like what Jacob said to his father-in-law, right? And their romance has been integrated terribly by this point. And in fact, these are the very first words you hear from their marriage between Jacob and Rachel.

Give me children or I shall die. And not only is this extremely selfish and presumptuous because Rachel's here blaming Jacob for her infertility, it's also positively impious because the Bible teaches clearly that it's the Lord who gives children to bear a woman. So she, her posture should have been to pray to him and to seek him, but instead she blames him and her husband. This is, give me children or I shall die. So, so Jacob rightfully puts her back in her place in verse 2. Am I in the place of God who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb? But Rachel is unyielding and rather than repenting, she decides to take her maidservant Bilhah and give her to her husband, Jacob, as a surrogate wife so that she could have children through her. And this is not a good thing. We've seen this happen, we saw this happen earlier with Abraham and Sarah and Hagar and that was condemned in that narrative.

[8 : 32] So this is again, not a good thing that they are doing. And, and after Bilhah gives birth to two sons, Rachel, you know, kind of exalts and gloats and over, over them and over her sister and names them.

And last son, she names Natalie, which means divine struggle or struggle against God. So basically, she's saying, you know what? I wrestled against you. I wrestled against God and I have won. That's kind of, that's her name. That's the name that she gives her. And Leah is not to be outdone by her younger sister. It says in verse 9, when Leah saw that she had seized bearing children, she took her servant Zophah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. So Leah, likewise, takes things into her own hands and through her maidservant has two more sons. And notice how each of these paragraphs begin. This is really cool how this is set up because in 29, 31, it began with when the Lord saw, he intervened for Leah.

And then in 30, chapter 30, verse 1, it begins with when Rachel saw. And then chapter 30, verse 9, it says when Leah saw, right? So it's intentionally framed this way to show that when God sees, he intervenes and he makes things right. But when they, when Leah and Rachel see, rather they sin presumptuously and they make mistakes and they take things into their own hands rather than trusting God. Now, it's a very bad marriage. And all of this comes to, you know, a halting stop in chapter 30, verses 14 to 21. Leah's eldest son, Reuben, finds some mandrakes in the field and brings them in to Leah. And mandrakes are a Mediterranean perennial for their soul. You can still find them in the Mediterranean world and the region. And they were believed to be aphrodisiacs, to, to the aroused sexual desire. And they were also thought to actually help women who were infertile. So when Reuben finds them, this is a great boon, right? And of course, Rachel, who is still infertile, wants a piece of that mandrake, right? So she says to Leah in verse 14, please give me some of your son's mandrakes. But then Rachel, but, but Leah responds bitterly in verse 15.

Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also? So it appears that Jacob's, because of Jacob's preferential treatment of Rachel, he's been exclusively sleeping with Rachel and not with Leah. So Leah can't even have a night with her husband. So she says, you've stolen my husband from me. Would you steal my son's mandrakes also? And then Rachel says this, she knows that she has, she has a right, she has a grievance.

And she says, then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son's mandrakes. And then Leah consents to that offer. And she tells Jacob in verse 16, you must come into me for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes. Again, the word hire, wages, these are key words. It's the same words that that Laban used of Laban to describe her. They're his exploitation of Jacob. So even the relationship between the husband and wife here has been reduced to commercial bargaining. It's just the lowest of lows. And I hope you see how broken and messed up this family is right now. I mean, it's really, really bad. And they've made many mistakes and they've sinned in many ways. Now Jacob is not only alienated from his family and he's an outcast, he's also exploited by his uncle like a slave.

[11 : 51] And now he's stuck in a broken polygamous marriage. And then Leah and Rachel hurt one another and try to one-up one another, tit for tat. And just, it comes to this. Rachel's so desperate for children, she barter away the conjugal rights. And Leah is so desperate for Jacob's affections, she gives away that, that the mandrake, precious mandrake she found for one night, one night, not even several nights, one night to spend with her own husband.

Maybe you can relate to this. Maybe you have a broken marriage. A few nights go by without heated conflicts, blaming one another, hurting one another with harsh words. Maybe you have a broken family. Your children are not following you, obeying you. And you are at your wit's end. Maybe you sinned egregiously and you feel that God can never take you back or use you again. Maybe you feel stuck, trapped, and you're frantically seeking to regain control of your life like Rachel, Leah, and Jacob. But things seem to be spiraling down. Well then, that's you, there's hope for you in this passage. Because it tells us that we can entrust ourselves to God because God's mercy triumphs over our mistakes. Now look at verses 17 to 21. It says, and God listened to Leah and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. It says, God enables Leah to conceive from that one night she spends with Jacob. Not just that, it seems that he also restores her to

Jacob, the conjugal relations so that she's able to have two more kids after that, right? And then similarly in verses 22 to 24, it tells us, then God remembered Rachel and God listened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and said, God has taken away my reproach. And she called his name Joseph saying, may the Lord add to me another son. Finally, God listens to Rachel, gives her a son.

And she will listen to her prayer also and give her another son, Benjamin, later. So one passage after another, Leah and Rachel had sought to get their own way to no avail. But in these two passages, it begins, God listened to Leah. And then God listened to Rachel. And when God listens and acts and intervenes, he makes things right. He redeems broken situations. He acts on behalf of his people.

And if you recall in chapter 28 to the four, Isaac had sent Jacob away with the blessings of Abraham, the promise of progeny and a place for them to dwell, a place and a people. And here you see the promise of the people being fulfilled because now Jacob has eight sons through Leah and her maid, Zilpah, and three sons through Rachel and her maid, Bilhah, right? And that's 11 of the upcoming 12 tribes of Israel. Notwithstanding all the mistakes that they have made, all the ways in which they've sinned and presumptuously taken things into their own hands, God's mercy triumphs in their lives.

[14 : 51] And you see this. And just marvel at how God weaves sovereignly in the history in this passage because who gives birth to Joseph here, right? Rachel. And if you know, later in Genesis, there's a famine that threatens to wipe out the entire household of Jacob. And who delivers them? Joseph does. So God's already weaving that story together. And who gives birth to Judah here? It says Leah gives birth to Judah and praises God. Judah is the one later Jacob says of him. The scepter will not depart from Judah. Why?

Because it's from the line of Judah that the king, the Messiah will come, Jesus Christ. So here, God, through these broken relationships, people who really mucked it all up, and God raises redeemers, deliverers for his people for to temporarily deliver them from famine and to spiritually deliver them from eternal death, separation from God. God is amazing. God's mercy triumphs over our mistakes.

But not just our mistakes. God's mercy triumphs over others' mischiefs as well. To see this, let's return to the promise that God had made to Jacob. Because the promise of progeny is ostensibly fulfilled, is being fulfilled here, but the promise of a place is still yet to be fulfilled. And God had promised Jacob, you will return to this land, the land of Canaan. But he's not in land of Canaan. And so that's why as soon as Joseph is born, the narrative almost, it pivots, and Jacob's focus is exclusively on returning to his land, to the promised land.

Verses 25, 26. As soon as Rachel had born Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, send me away that I may go to my own home and country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, that I may go for you know the service that I have given you. But just as Laban sought to detain Abraham's servant when he tried to take Rebekah for Isaac, to marry Isaac, here he tries to detain Jacob when he tries to leave with his wives and children. And Laban is reluctant, not just because he's going to be, lose that closeness he has right now with his family, daughters and grandchildren, but it says explicitly in verse 27, he has learned by divination that the Lord has blessed him because of Jacob. In other words, Laban is saying to Jacob, I really can't afford to let you go. I mean, it's, you're the reason why I'm rich. And I know that because of this divination, I'm not letting you go. So he's again grasping and greedy. And so he offers Jacob, name your wages again, and I will give it. When he should be speaking of a parting gift, he speaks again of wages. And this, this puts Jacob in a difficult place because

Jacob has no choice now because he's already received the wages that he had agreed upon. He received his two wives. And so in order to receive any more wages, it's implying he has to work more for, for Laban. So he, Laban's again trying to reduce him to servitude. This is his mischief. He's trying to derail the fulfillment of God's promises to Jacob, whether knowingly or not.

[17 : 56] And Laban's intention is all the more wicked. If you compare this to the later commands in the, in the, in the Mosaic law, because according to Leviticus 25, 39 to 41, whenever a fellow Israelite was became impoverished, you were, the Israelites were commanded to take them in and to hire them, not as slaves, but as employees so that they could have a means of living. And then at the end of six years, on the seventh year, the year of Jubilee, they were supposed to let them go for free with their children, with their family members. And then a similar passage in Deuteronomy 15, 20, 12 to 14 specifies even further that when they are let go, they are not supposed to be sent off empty handed, but they were supposed to be furnished liberally out of your own flock. So Laban, notice what he's doing here. Not only did he work in for more than the six years, he worked in for seven years.

You're supposed to let him go for the seven years. Not only did he do that once, he did it twice. And now he's going to make him work for another six years. And even then he's not going to let Jacob go voluntarily, but make him work for the flock. And he's going to force Jacob to abscond without his permission. So Jacob knows all of this. He knows this is unfair. He protests to Laban.

And then Laban replies, okay, what shall I give you? Now in verse 31, but Jacob knows he's disingenuous because he doesn't even ask for a gift. He says, don't give me anything. If you do this for me, then I will keep working for you by tending your flock. That's basically what Jacob tells me.

And then Jacob names his wages in verses 32 to 33. Very curious. He says, let me pass through all your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb and the spotted and speckled among the goats and they shall be my wages. So my honesty will answer for me later when you come to look into my wages with you. Everyone that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen. So in order to understand what's going on, we need to know the typical colors of the sheep and the goats in this time, in this culture, right? Sheep are white mostly and goats are mostly black. They're dark colored, right? So what Jacob is saying is I'll take the black sheep, right? The known, I mean, they're deviants, right? So it's, and I'll take the white goats or the ones that have speckles in them.

So he's basically saying, you know what? You take all the flock. I'll take all the deviants, the rare, you know, genetic, the ones with the genetic deviants. So then basically this is a really cheap price because normally a shepherd who was put in charge of a flock was entitled to 20% of the young that they produced. So this would result in far less than 20%. So Jacob is giving Laban a discount and knowing, knowing Laban, of course, I mean, he's going to get to take the discounted offer, right? So he takes them up on it and then, but then Laban goes one step further because it says in verses 35 and 36, but that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it and every lamb that was black and put them in charge of his sons. And he said, a distance of three days journey between himself and Jacob and Jacob pastured the rest of Laban's flock, right? So Jacob asked for the multicolored animals and Laban takes them all aside and gives them to his sons and then gives

[21 : 13] Jacob only the rest of the flock with only the white sheep and black goats, right? So he's just robbing him of all his wages. And now Jacob, his only hope of acquiring flock is the few rare deviants that's going to come from maybe the recessive genes of these flocks. So that's really, really sad. And there's a word here too, Laban means white, the name, and striped, the word striped sounds very much like the name of Jacob. So all the white ones will go to Laban, the white one, and then the stripe will go to Jacob. So you can see what the bear is doing here. And of course, Jacob resorts to a ruse, right? He's going to make strict trees and have his goats made in front of those trees.

And then they're going to be, they turn out to be speckled. And then he puts his sheep so that they're always looking at the black goats in Laban's flock, and then they produce a black and spotted sheep. Now, of course, this is a questionable breeding technique. Literally, it's not something that you would expect to work. So what is actually happening here, right? And this is where we see God's mercy triumphing over Laban's mischief. Because Jacob reveals to his wives in chapter 31, verses 6 to 12, that God himself has shown him in a dream that the flock would bear spotted sheep and goats, speckled goats. So it's not because Jacob somehow mastered this brilliant technique that no one in the modern world knows about. It's that God intervened on his behalf, even with his questionable practices. God intervened because he's on Jacob's side.

And that's why the summary is so apt in verse 43. Thus, the man increased greatly and had large flocks, female servants and male servants and camels and donkeys. This description intentionally parallels the description of Abraham and Isaac's wealth in previous chapters. And he increased greatly is the exact word that God had used to make his promise to Jacob. So his promise is being fulfilled. Now, the fact that God himself is contending on behalf of Jacob and against Laban, we see that very clearly in chapter 31, verses 5 to 11. Because it says three times he contrasts Laban's oppression with God's intervention. So read this with me. I'm going to kind of skip to some parts where he says, I see that your father does not regard me with favor, but the God of my father has been with me. Your father has cheated me and changed my wages 10 times, but God did not permit him to harm me. If he said the spotted shall be your wages, then all the flock were spotted. Thus, God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me. So what the narrator is telling us is the main difference between Jacob and Laban is not that Jacob is better at making money and producing wealth.

No, it's that God's on Jacob's side. And we know this even more clearly in the ensuing narrative because we had already kind of had a hint of it because it said that Laban practiced divination, which is forbidden. But he also pursues them because Rachel had stolen his household gods, which are basically idols, the little figurines of the household gods that they worship. So he's devoted to the household gods. And you just see this finally when they're making the covenant, when Jacob swears and makes the covenant in verses 44, 54, he swears by the fear of Isaac, which is short form for the full name for the one God, the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac. But then Laban swears by a plurality of gods, right? Even though it's translated the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judged between us. That's what Laban says. But that should actually probably should be translated the gods of Abraham and the gods of Nahor and the gods of their father because the verb judge is plural. So Laban is a polytheist.

He's not just worshiping the true God. He acknowledges the true God, but he also is a syncretist. He's mixing that religion with other false religions. And because of that, right, so Jacob, God has blessed Jacob and he's advocating on his behalf. And so finally, he is sent off after 20 years of labor, right? 776, right? And he's with his wives and children, all his accumulated property.

[25 : 33] Maybe there's, for you, a Laban in your life, someone that really seems out to get you. Maybe someone that you think you feel like has messed up your life. Maybe it was your parents who neglected you or mistreated you. Maybe it was your ex-girlfriend or boyfriend who used you. Or your ex-wife or husband who cheated on you and abandoned you. Maybe it was your former best friend who betrayed you.

Maybe it was your relative who molested you and abused you. Maybe it was your boss or supervisor who sabotaged your career. As Christians, we can move on from these things and we can forgive and stop letting our unforgiveness, anger, and bitterness from holding us hostage. Why? How? Because we know that God's mercy triumphs over others' mischiefs. No human being, however sinister and unrepentant, can ever thwart God's mercy for you if you are one of his chosen people. Do you really believe that? Because that would give us an unshakable peace. It would give us a glimpse of that undeniable love of God.

Neither our mistakes nor others' mischiefs can thwart God's plans for us. Yes, mistakes are real. Yes, sin is real. Yes, mischiefs are real and there are real consequences for all those things. But in the end, over and through it, all God's mercy triumphs for the people of God. And we haven't even gotten to the ultimate proof of this truth that's hidden in this passage. Look at chapter 31, verse 42, one last time with me. It's an apt, satisfying summary of Jacob's entire career up to this point. Chapter 31, verse 42. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night. Jacob's statement will echo through the ages of Israel's history because the words that are used here will be used in the book of Exodus to refer to Israel's plight. Jacob increased and spread abroad, it says. And in the same words are used in Exodus 1.12 to say that Israel multiplied and they spread abroad in Egypt. Jacob here says, God saw my affliction. In Exodus 3.7, God says,

I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt. Jacob says that Laban sought to send him away empty-handed. And Moses says to Israel in Exodus 3.21 that they would not leave Egypt empty-handed.

The word send away that used here is also the same word that Pharaoh uses of letting Israel go. In Exodus 3.20 and other places. So then Jacob's release from Laban's slavery is a type. It prefigures and foreshadows Israel's delivery from their slavery in Egypt. And what does that in turn point to? The Exodus in turn points to the deliverance of God's people. Their exodus from their slavery to sin and death. And that deliverance comes through Jesus. And that's what all of these things, the history of Jacob and the history of Israel they're ultimately pointing to. And what is that good news? Why is Jesus good news? Because he's the exodus, his Passover lamb. He dies for the sins of the people.

[29 : 04] And this happens. So everyone that knew Jesus was expecting him to deliver them from the oppression of the Roman Empire. And this happens in Acts 2.23 to 24. He says, Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. You crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up losing the pangs of death because it was not possible for him to be held by it. The savior of the world, the son of God that came to save humanity. We killed him. Lawless men killed him, crucified him.

It's on the cross and it might as well be our own hands because he died thereof on behalf of our sins, for us, for sinners. So then on the cross we see the worst of the spiritual forces of evil collude with the worst and the basis of the human inclination towards sin, right? This is the greatest single human mistake in the history of the world and the greatest single human mischief in the history of the world. And we see what? Why did that happen? Because it says, right, Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. And it results in what? Not the death of the Messiah, but the death and resurrection of the Messiah so that through his death and resurrection, eternal life, communion with God, freedom and joy become our possession.

God's mercy triumphs over our mistakes and others' mischiefs. I plead with you, let that truth fortify your mind this morning because then you become impervious to fear and anxiety. Let that truth guard your heart so that you become immune to insecurity and doubts. We can entrust ourselves to God completely because God's mercy triumphs over mistakes and mischiefs. Let's pray together.

God, you are so good. You're wonderful. You're gracious. You're merciful. God, you're merciful. We cannot heap enough praises on you because of your mercy toward us.

Help us to live in the good of that truth. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.