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WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

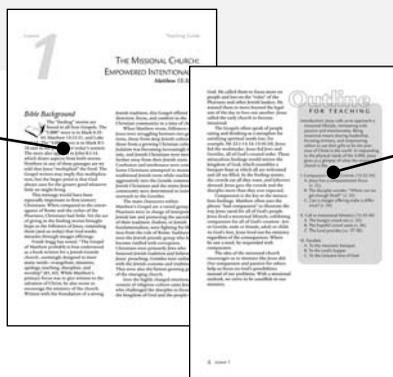
- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

Teacher Helps

Bible Background

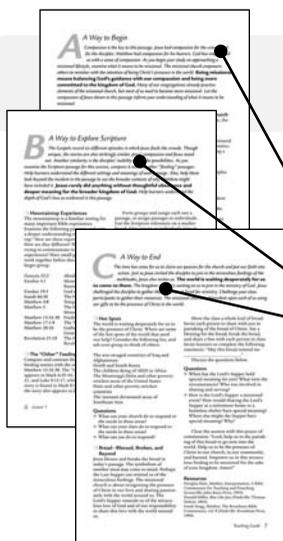
The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material. This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.



Teaching Outline

provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

Teacher Options



The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

Focus Paragraphs

are printed in italics at the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide. These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.

HAGAR: FOUND BY GOD

Genesis 16:1-6

Bible Background



Hagar's Affliction by Sarai and Abram

Hagar's story is inextricably linked with the account of Sarai and Abram's childlessness. She is introduced in conjunction with the announcement that Sarai had not given Abram children, and she is identified as an Egyptian handmaiden or slave (16:1).

Modern readers might feel uncomfortable with Sarai's claim that the Lord was the cause of her infertility (Gen 16:2). Nevertheless, this is in keeping with the Hebrew perspective that all things were caused by God (Job 2:10; Isa 45:7) and that God was the one who opened and closed wombs (Gen 20:18; 29:31; 30:2; 1 Sam 1:5, 6). A barren woman almost inevitably lost status in the household. Children were important because not only did they contribute to the family's agricultural subsistence and the care of elderly family members, they also ensured their father endured beyond his own death (Perdue, 189). If a man died without a descendant, his existence was utterly obliterated—a fate worse than death.

Sarai proposed to Abram that her barrenness could be alleviated by using her slave as a surrogate mother (Gen 16:2b). Surrogacy was common in the ancient Near East and was viewed as an acceptable option in Israel as well

(Blenkinsopp, 73). Sarai's intention was to be "built up" through her slave woman. Hagar would bear the child, but Sarai would consider the child her own, thereby regaining her status in the family. Abram heeded Sarai's suggestion unquestioningly.

Once Hagar conceived, she viewed Sarai differently (v. 4). Her attitude may seem haughty to us, but if we put ourselves in her sandals, we might better understand her disdain for Sarai. Before Hagar became pregnant, she held minimal status in the family. But once she became the wife of the patriarch and mother of his firstborn, Hagar suddenly had new standing. As the mother of the patriarch's firstborn, Hagar, perhaps for the first time in her life, had hope for a future. Her son would be Abram's favored child. As the firstborn he would carry on the family line and would receive a double portion of Abram's considerable inheritance. Hagar's child would be no slave.

Sarai accused Abram of being responsible for Hagar's contempt (v. 5), but why she did so is unclear. Surrogacy was, after all, her idea. Nevertheless, Sarai cursed Abram and called for divine judgment upon him. While Sarai's reaction is difficult to understand, Abram's response is cold and indifferent. With an air of nonchalance, Abram told Sarai she could do whatever she wished to her slave—the very woman holding his firstborn in her womb (v. 6). Neither Sarai nor Abram

viewed Hagar as worthy of consideration; indeed, neither ever called Hagar by name. She was simply a womb to be used for their purposes and then discarded.

Most English translations mask the severity with which Sarai dealt with Hagar (v. 6b). The NRSV, for example, states that Sarai “dealt harshly” with Hagar. The NIV says that Sarai “mistreated” Hagar. The Hebrew word *’anah*, however, indicates horrific abuse, affliction akin to what the Hebrew slaves endured under their Egyptian taskmasters (Exod 1:11). Most likely, Sarai physically abused Hagar, and Hagar fled to protect herself and her baby.

Hagar’s Encounter with God

The angel of the Lord found Hagar at a spring in the wilderness of Shur, a location that suggests that Hagar was attempting to go back to Egypt (Gen 16:7). The angel addressed Hagar as the “slave-girl of Sarai,” foreshadowing the command about to be given to her. But first, Hagar was asked two questions: “where have you come from?” and “where are you going?” (Gen 16:8). Hagar only answered the first question, “I am running away from my mistress, Sarai.” Then, the angel commanded Hagar to do the unthinkable: “Return to your mistress and submit to her” (v. 9). How could God ask someone to return to slavery and abuse? God never asked Israel to return to Egypt—though they volunteered several times! But God commanded a victimized, pregnant slave woman to return to her captors and endure her captivity.

This unspeakable command was not without hope, however, for the Lord offered Hagar three wonderful promises that would make her obedience sufferable. The first, given to no other woman in the OT, is a patriarchal gift bestowed on Abraham (Gen 15:5; 22:17), Isaac (26:24), and Jacob (28:14; 35:11). God promised to multiply Hagar’s offspring so much they would be innumerable (Gen 16:10).

Outline

FOR TEACHING

- I. Sarai’s “Gift” of Hagar (16:1-3)
 - A. Sarai’s Barrenness and Hagar’s Enslavement (v. 1)
 - B. Sarai’s Plan and Abram’s Response (v. 2)
 - C. Hagar Given to Abram as a Wife (v. 3)
- II. Hagar’s Contempt and Sarai’s Rampage (16:4-6)
 - A. Conception Breeds Contempt (v. 4)
 - B. Sarai’s Tirade against Abram (v. 5)
 - C. Abram’s Apathy (v. 6a)
 - D. Sarai’s Assault on Hagar (v. 6b)
- III. Hagar Found in the Wilderness (16:7-9)
 - A. The Lord’s Discovery (v. 7)
 - B. The Lord’s Question (v. 8)
 - C. The Lord’s Unspeakable Command (v. 9)
- IV. Patriarchal Promises for Hagar (16:10-12)
 - A. Innumerable Offspring (v. 10)
 - B. A Son Named Ishmael (v. 11)
 - C. Ishmael: Wild and Obstinate
- V. Hagar’s Unparalleled Response (16:13-14)
 - A. A New Name for God (v. 13)
 - B. The Shrine of Beer-lahai-roi (v. 14)
- VI. Hagar’s Gift of Ishmael (16:15-16)
 - A. The Birth of Ishmael (v. 15)
 - B. Abram’s Age at Ishmael’s Birth (v. 16)

The second promise confirmed and expanded upon what Hagar knew (v. 11). She is told that she is pregnant and that the child is a boy. She is to name him Ishmael (“God hears”) because God has given heed to her affliction. Whereas Abram and Sarai had abused and dehumanized Hagar, their God had taken note of this slave woman alone in the wilderness. She was significant to the Lord.

The third promise might not sound very assuring to modern ears. Who wants to be told that her child will be a “wild ass” and that he will always be at odds with others, even his own family? (v. 12). But listen to these words with Hagar’s ears and you will hear words of incredible hope. As a slave woman, wouldn’t you be thrilled to know that your son would not be a slave, but would be “wild”? Wouldn’t it be a joyous shock to hear that he would be stubborn and willful and would stand up to everyone around him? Unlike you, he will not be used by others for their own purposes. Rather, he will be independent, unconquerable, and free.

In response, Hagar gave God a name. While God often revealed divine names to humans (Gen 17:1; Exod 3:14) and humans named places after encountering God there (Gen 22:14; 28:19; 23:30), this is the only time in the Bible when a human bestows a name upon God. It is a unique name, pertinent to Hagar’s encounter with this Israelite God. She named the deity El-roi, which means “the God who sees.” Disregarded by her masters, Hagar was noticed by a deity who, instead of killing her on the spot, promised her a future. The place of Hagar’s incredible encounter became enshrined as Beer-lahai-roi, “the well of the living one who sees.”

A Way to Begin

*Why should we care about Hagar? We could answer with the typical historical-sociological response that this story explains how Abraham became the father of the Arabs as well as the Jews. But there are other reasons. This story answers the question, “Where is God when others mistreat and forget me?” It reminds us that God knows us by name and pursues us as we wander lost in our wildernesses. **Through Hagar, we discover that God sees, sustains, and creates hope in the midst of futility.** Her story highlights God’s concern for the abandoned, the rejected, the abused, the invisible, and the foreigner.*

○ What’s in a Name?

Ask the following questions:

Questions

- What are the names of your children? Why did you choose those particular names?
- What does your name mean? Why did your parents name you that?

Get the group thinking about the significance of names and how they become part of our identity. Being known by name is important. When people know us by name, we feel appreciated. When people don’t remember our names, we feel diminished.

Hagar isn’t one of the most familiar Old Testament characters. She was a “nobody” to Abram and Sarai, but she was significant to God, who not only knew her by name, but gave her the

promise of a son with a name. And then, in a most extraordinary act, Hagar even gave God a name.

○ My Wilderness Story

Ask class members to share an episode in which they felt abandoned or rejected by others. You might begin with a story from your own past. Or, you might come with a newspaper or magazine article about a contemporary woman who has prevailed over tragedy. Be prepared for some to share stories about how they’ve felt abandoned by the church in times of desperate need. Such stories shouldn’t be dismissed; this lesson affords an opportunity for healing.

Move from these shared stories into the story of Hagar. Note that Hagar often has been neglected in our study of the Bible. She was horribly mistreated and found herself in a wilderness alone and in dire circumstances.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

*Genesis 16 does not portray Abram and Sarai in a very positive light. They chose to use Hagar for their own purposes, abused her when she did not conform to expectations, and disposed of her when she became inconvenient for them. Neither of them pursued Hagar into the wilderness, but God did. In the wilderness, Hagar discovered One who knew her and who could release her from utter misery through the child in her womb. Trusting in the God who sees, Hagar found the strength to return to slavery. **The same God who met Hagar in her wilderness can meet us in ours.** Like Hagar, we can know that God will strengthen us to endure and provide us with hope for the future.*

○ Women, Children, and Slaves

Discuss barrenness in the Old Testament and how polygamy and surrogate motherhood were common solutions. Abram and Sarai's treatment of Hagar, though probably legal and maybe typical of slave masters in that day, seems repugnant to us. Point out that Sarai's mistreatment of Hagar most likely involved physical abuse.

Questions

- What about Abram and Sarai's behavior do you find disappointing, surprising, or wrong?
- If you were Hagar, how would you describe your treatment by Abram and Sarai?
- Why did Hagar begin to feel contempt for Sarai after becoming pregnant?

Discuss God's dialogue with Hagar in the wilderness. Have the class members list the promises God gave to Hagar and then discuss each in turn. Though God's promises to Hagar don't sound very encouraging in our ears, they gave Hagar hope. Explore why this is so.

Highlight the uniqueness of Hagar's giving God a name. Explain what the name means and how it is pertinent to Hagar's situation. Why do you think Hagar is the only biblical character to give God a name?

○ Compare and Contrast

Invite the class to compare Abram and Sarai to Hagar. If you wish, divide the class into two groups, one considering Abram and Sarai and the other Hagar. Identify areas of comparison and contrast and list them on the board.

○ Questions to Ponder

Read Genesis 16:1-16. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- Why did Sarai blame Abram for Hagar's haughty behavior?
- What purpose did God have for preserving Hagar's life and the life of her son?
- Why did God speak directly to Hagar but never address Sarai in a personal way?
- What does Hagar's story tell us about the character of God?
- Were God's promises enough to justify sending Hagar back to her masters?
- Why didn't God just lead Hagar to safety in Egypt?

C A Way to End

Hagar's story encourages us to look for God in our wildernesses and to expect to find our Lord pursuing us there. It calls us to discover hope in the knowledge that God sees us, cares for us, and enables us to endure our suffering. It invites us to call God by new names that reflect our experiences with the One Who Is. At the same time, it challenges us to renounce Abram and Sarai-like tendencies toward ignoring, abusing, and using others for our own gain.

○ Who Is God to You?

Distribute copies of page 28, titled "Names of God." Discuss the various names of God and their meaning.

Question

► If you could give God a name that is pertinent to your current circumstances, what would it be and why?

○ Where Is Your Wilderness?

Hagar's wilderness was on the road to Egypt. Reflect on whether current circumstances have created a wilderness in some class members' lives. If some are willing to share their situations allow them to do so, but this could also be a silent exercise.

Discuss ways God pursues us through the "wilderness." Does a faithful friend keep calling and offering help? Perhaps a Bible verse keeps coming to your mind, etc. Reassure the class that sometimes we remain unaware of God's presence until after we come through the wilderness. Sometimes we may not sense it at all.

Ask class members to think of at least one divine promise they can cling to in the wilderness.

○ How Do I Treat Others?

Ask class members to contemplate how they, like Abram and Sarai, may have mistreated others. How do we treat those under our authority? How do we treat the fast food worker, the janitor, the trash collector, or the toll booth employee? Have we ever abused power and belittled another person?

Pray for God to reveal ways we have mistreated others. Ask God to forgive and to open everyone's eyes to the invisible ones in society and the church.

Resources

Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Family in First Temple Israel" *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997).

Leo G. Perdue, "The Israelite and Early Jewish Family," *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997).

SARAH: BLESSED WITH LAUGHTER

Genesis 18:9-15; 21:1-7

Bible Background



The Promise

Laughter comes in all forms: giggles, snorts, guffaws, hiccups, roars, snickers, and even silent smirks. We laugh for all sorts of reasons—surprise, shock, distress, or relief. Laughter can come unbidden at the most inconvenient times or can result from the antics of comedians on TV. We sometimes even laugh at ourselves. But dare we ever laugh at God or because of things God is doing in our lives? Abraham and Sarah did, and they discovered that laughing at God can result in unusual surprises.

To understand Sarah's laughter, some context is necessary. After Abram was promised an heir (Gen 15:5) and Sarah gave him Hagar in an attempt to fulfill that promise, Abram was convinced that Ishmael, Hagar's son, was the promised child. Ishmael certainly seemed to fit God's promise of an heir of Abram's own flesh. Since God had not specifically mentioned Sarai as the mother of the heir, it stood to reason that Ishmael was the one. Genesis 17 clarifies that this was indeed Abram's conclusion, for after God announced to the newly renamed Abraham that Sarah was going to bear a child, Abraham fell on the ground and enjoyed a good, gut-wrenching belly laugh (17:17). Certain that God had to be joking, Abraham said, "Oh that Ishmael

might live in your sight" (v. 18). In other words, Abraham was content to have Ishmael as his heir; there was no need for Sarah to conceive. But God had a different plan. Though Ishmael would be blessed and become a great nation (v. 20), the child born through Sarah would be the recipient of God's covenant. Sarah would bear the child within a year (vv. 19, 21). God names the child "Isaac" (*yitschaq*), meaning "laughter," in response to *Abraham's* laughter and lack of faith (17:19), not Sarah's, as is often assumed.

One would think that, on hearing that Sarah would be a mother in her old age, Abraham would return home, tell her the good news, and begin the process of conceiving the child. But in chapter 18, every indication is that he did none of those things.

The Visitors

Three visitors (identified as angels by the narrator) arrived at Abraham and Sarah's tent. After providing a meal for them, Sarah went back into the tent and left Abraham to converse with the men (18:1-8). This conversation reveals Abraham's continued lack of faith. The spokes-angel (who is interchangeable with the Lord) asked Abraham where Sarah went, perhaps to ensure that the conversation would be between himself and Abraham (v. 9). Then, the angel restated the promise already given to Abraham in Genesis 17: this time next year Sarah will

have a child (v. 10). Sarah, who was listening nearby, overheard.

The narrator intervenes at this point to let the reader know how impossible such a promise is. Sarah was not just old; she was also past menopause and physically unable to conceive a child (v. 11).

Given that Sarah reacts with surprise (v. 12), it seems apparent that Abraham had failed to announce this joyful news when he first heard of it. In addition, two things should be noted about Sarah's laughter. First, the narrator tells us that she laughed within herself, not out loud and raucously as Abraham had. Hers was a gleeful inner giggle. Second, Sarah did not laugh (at least initially) about the impossibility of having a child. Her laughter originated from her delight that she would experience sexual pleasure again. (The Hebrew word clearly means sexual pleasure.) The fact that she is thrilled at this prospect suggests that Abraham had not approached her sexually for a long time, even after the original announcement in Genesis 17.

God does not address Sarah with the next question (v. 13). Rather, it is directed at Abraham, again suggesting that this story is about his lack of faith, not Sarah's. The Lord asked Abraham why Sarah had laughed and why she had questioned the possibility of having a child at her age. We might read between the lines and add to the query an unspoken, "Didn't you *tell* her?" The second question is also directed at Abraham: "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" (v. 14). Once again, the promise of Sarah's imminent motherhood is repeated.

At this point the focus turns back to Sarah, who denies laughing. Whether she did so out of fear for herself or perhaps for Abraham is unclear. The identity of the person who says, "Oh, but you did laugh," is ambiguous in the Hebrew since the pronoun in "but he said" could refer either to Abraham or to God. In Hebrew, pronouns referring to deity are spelled exactly like pronouns referring to

Outline

FOR TEACHING

- I. Sarah's Discovery (18:9-15)
 - A. What Sarah Overheard (18:9-10)
 1. The Angels' Question (v. 9)
 2. Reiteration of the Promise (v. 10)
 - B. Sarah's Laughter (18:11-12)
 1. Explanation for Sarah's Inability to Conceive (v. 11)
 2. Sarah's Gleeful Giggle (v. 12)
 - C. Abraham Rebuked by the Angel (18:13-14)
 1. First Question: "Why did Sarah laugh?" (v. 13)
 2. Second Question: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" (v. 14a)
 3. Reiteration of the Promise (v. 14b)
 - D. Sarah's Fear (18:15)
 1. Sarah denied laughing (v. 15a)
 2. Someone (Abraham? Angel?) said, "Yes you did!" (v. 15b)
- II. Sarah's Joy (21:1-7)
 - A. Fulfillment of God's Promise (21:1-5)
 1. The Lord's Faithfulness (v. 1)
 2. Birth of the Son (v. 2)
 3. The Boy Is Named Isaac (v. 3)
 4. Isaac Is Circumcised (v. 4)
 5. Abraham 100 Years Old at Isaac's Birth (v. 5)
 - B. Sarah's Laughter (21:6-7)
 1. Statement of Joy: "God Has Brought Laughter for Me!" (v. 6)
 2. Question of Joy: "Who Would Ever Have Said . . .?" (v. 7)

humans, so it is impossible to know who the speaker is. Unfortunately, some English translations remove that ambiguity by capitalizing "he."

The Joy

Genesis 21:1-7 focuses on the fulfillment of the promise of chapters 15, 17, and 18. The narrator highlights God's faithfulness in bringing the promise to fruition through Sarah, repeating her name several times: "The LORD dealt with *Sarah* as he had said, and the LORD did for *Sarah*

as he had promised. *Sarah* conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him” (Gen 21:1-2). After so much anticipation, this announcement of Isaac’s actual birth seems almost anticlimactic. The focus turns immediately to Abraham’s circumcision of the boy on the eighth day in accordance with God’s command (v. 4), but this quick transition is the narrator’s way of emphasizing that Isaac was indeed the covenant child sealed through the sign in his flesh.

This time Sarah laughed out loud in response to the joy of Isaac’s arrival (vv. 6-7). In a pun-fun play on Isaac’s name, Sarah said, “God has made laughter (*tsechoq*) for me! Everyone who sees will laugh (*yitschaq*) with me!” Announcing what must have been the joke of the century, Sarah gave words to the irony of her situation: “Who will say to Abraham that Sarah is actually nursing sons? But I have given birth to a son in his old age!” (writer’s translation). So, at the age of ninety, Sarah found herself blessed with laughter and surprised by joy.

A Way to Begin

A *When have you been pleasantly surprised by God? Perhaps you were drawn to God unexpectedly from a background of disbelief. Perhaps God surprised you by calling you to a vocation you never would have chosen for yourself. Perhaps you discovered God unexpectedly present in the midst of despair. Perhaps you received an answer to a prayer you once thought impossible.*

Sarah had resigned herself to the reality of her infertility. Many years had passed since God promised Abraham an heir of his own flesh, and, like Abraham, Sarah probably assumed that Ishmael fulfilled God’s plan. Sarah could not have imagined that God had another plan in mind. At age ninety, Sarah was about to receive the best surprise of her life.

○ Laughter

Begin the class with laughter:

- Tell some good jokes, or ask class members to tell some of their favorites.
- Ask class members to share an embarrassing or surprising story about themselves. (Begin by telling one on yourself!)
- Show a brief video segment of one of your favorite sitcoms.
- Share comic strips from the newspaper.

Laughter is our natural response to surprise, joy, embarrassment, and funny situations. Today, we are going to consider how Abraham and Sarah responded to what they thought was God’s funniest joke ever. Have you heard the one about how a hundred-year-old man and a ninety-year-old woman had a baby?

○ Surprises

This beginning can be as simple or as elaborate as you wish. If you have time and the inclination, put together a small gift basket or treat bag for your class members. You could include a refrigerator magnet with a Scripture verse, a package of gum, an herbal tea bag, a couple of chocolates, or other small, inexpensive items. Place the gifts on the chairs before class members arrive or hand them out at the beginning. If you prefer, you could bake a batch of muffins for the class, bring donuts, or bring a special blend of coffee to share: anything out of the ordinary that would pleasantly surprise your class.

After class members have enjoyed their surprise, ask them to share some stories of happy surprises in their lives. Discuss Abraham and Sarah’s reactions to the surprising announcement that they were going to be parents in their old age.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

God chose to do the unexpected by providing a child to a couple much too old to produce children. Surprising Abraham with the announcement in Genesis 17, God had to work around the old patriarch's obduracy by letting Sarah overhear the promise for herself. When the year passed, Sarah found herself holding laughter in her arms. When it comes to God, we should expect the unexpected.

○ Struggling to Believe

Summarize Genesis 15:4; 16:1-16; and 17:1-14. Remind the class of God's original promise to Abraham, noting that Sarah's role is unspecified (15:4). Discuss why God did not specifically tell Abram in this original promise that Sarai would be the mother.

Ask someone to read 17:15-21 to set the stage for the focal verses. Discuss why Abraham hoped God would consider Ishmael as his heir.

Have someone read 18:9-15. What elements in this story indicate that Abraham still did not believe in God's promise that Sarah would bear a child? List responses on the board. Conclude by reading Genesis 21:1-7, noting the narrator's emphasis on the fulfillment of the promise through Sarah.

Questions

- Does it bother you that the "father of faith" so often lacked faith in God's promises?
- Was God's command to name the child Isaac ("laughter") punishment for Abraham's lack of faith, a display of God's use of humor and irony, or something else?
- Why did God never speak to Sarah directly about her role in the covenant?

Abraham's lack of faith and trust in God is understandable considering that post-menopausal women do not typically conceive and bear children. Nevertheless, he was given the promise directly from God numerous times. His unwillingness to accept God's word caused him to withhold the promise from Sarah and delay its fulfillment. Most of us struggle with trusting God. Like Abraham, our lack of faith can lead to inaction and delay.

○ Joyful Surprises

Summarize Genesis 15:4; 16:1-16; and 17:1-21. Ask two volunteers to read the focal passages, then invite class members to look for details in the story that are surprising or humorous. List these on the board, elaborating each one as needed.

Sarah was clearly surprised by joy and certainly appreciated the humor of her situation, but she had waited many long years for the joy of Isaac's birth. These years were fraught with jealousy, bitterness, and perhaps even isolation. In the depths of our own despair, we may forget that joy is possible and our hope fails us. Not every situation ultimately becomes joyful or humor-filled, but sometimes we are pleasantly surprised by God's unexpected appearance in our lives.

Question

- Though the Bible records Sarah's joyful reaction to Isaac's birth, why is it silent about Abraham's?

C A Way to End

Our disbelief in the greatness of God’s plans can paralyze us into inaction. Like Abraham, sometimes we prefer security, and we ignore or push aside God’s voice within. Unable to take a chance on uncertainty, we deny ourselves (and possibly others) the opportunity to experience something extraordinary.

Sometimes God surprises us with plans that are different from our own. We often dream small, not daring to imagine what is possible with God and not caring to take any risks. Sometimes, however, God drops in unexpectedly, surprising us with a new vision for our future and inviting us to take an entirely different path. In such times, we—like Sarah—are surprised by joy.

○ Trusting God

Abraham’s difficulty accepting God’s promises provides a helpful paradigm for evaluating our own problems with trust. Distribute copies of page 29, titled “Trusting God.” Ask class members to fill it out. They may not have time to deal with more than one issue during class, so ask them to concentrate on just one or two. Encourage them to work on other areas during their private devotions this week.

After sufficient time, ask if some will share their responses.

○ How Have I Been Surprised by Joy?

The joyful end to Sarah’s barrenness is a wonderful reminder that God can do the impossible. Ask the class to share their stories of God intervening in a situation in a surprising or humorous way.

Since some class members may be in the midst of difficult circumstances, be careful to discuss the fact that not all situations end joyfully nor should their gravity be dismissed. Be especially mindful of any class members who are struggling with infertility or who have experienced miscarriage or the death of a child.

3

REBEKAH:
A SERVANT LEADER*Genesis 24:1-4, 10-21, 50-61**Bible Background***The Servant**

The story of how Isaac and Rebekah met is unusual, to say the least. First, Isaac did not choose his own bride. Second, Isaac and Rebekah were almost complete strangers when they wed. Theirs is certainly not a modern love story.

The account begins with Abraham old and well-blessed (Gen 24:1). Rather than calling Isaac to his side to give him a blessing, Abraham called a trusted servant to find Isaac a bride (v. 2). Perhaps after almost losing Isaac to the sacrifice in Genesis 22, Abraham had no stomach for sending his son away to find a bride for himself, but no reason is given in the text for why Abraham chose to send a servant instead.

The servant placed his hand under Abraham's thigh and swore a solemn oath (24:2b). In Hebrew, the thigh is sometimes a euphemism for the genitals (see Gen 46:26; Exod 1:5; Judg 8:30). It is possible, therefore, that the servant was required to swear on Abraham's genitals that he would find a proper wife for Isaac. Such an oath was a way of expressing one's absolute commitment to carry out what was promised, much like placing one's hand on the Bible in a court of law. However, the exact symbolic significance of the genitals is unclear. Possibly they represent the Abrahamic covenant signi-

fied in the circumcised flesh. Or they could be symbolic of progeny, a fitting symbol in this context since the servant was sent to find a wife through whom Abraham's descendants would be produced (Wenham, 141).

Swearing "by the LORD, the God of heaven and earth," the servant placed himself under divine judgment should he fail in the task with which he was commissioned (v. 3). His mission was straightforward: do not choose a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanites, but go instead to Abraham's "country" (probably Haran in northern Mesopotamia) and find a wife from among Abraham's relatives (vv. 3-4).

Abraham's concern derives from the practice of endogamy or marriage within the kinship group. Lineage was important to the Israelites. Material possessions and the family name were to be passed from father to son in unbroken succession, thus preserving the purity of the bloodline and the integrity of the property rights. This required not only that the sons be able to trace their lineage through the patriarchs, but also that their wives be members of the same clan or tribe. Although marriage within the immediate family was forbidden in the law codes (Lev 18; 20), marriage to first or second cousins was considered ideal because close kinship ties were thereby preserved (Perdue, 183; Meyers, 36). Therefore, Abraham sent the servant to find a wife

whose pedigree derived from the line of Terah, Abraham's father.

The Bride

The servant set off from Canaan accompanied by ten camels and all sorts of goods (v. 10). A prospective groom was required to pay a "bride price" (Hebrew, *mohar*) for his wife consisting of materials that would not only demonstrate the groom's competence as a provider, but also compensate the family for the loss of their daughter's labor (Perdue, 184). Once he arrived in Haran, the servant went to the well and allowed the camels to rest (v. 11). And there he uttered a prayer for God's guidance. In a Gideon-like test, the servant asked for the following sign: he would ask the girls who came to the well to give him a drink and the one who offered to water his camels also would be the wife for Isaac (vv. 12-14).

As strange as this sign may appear to us, the Lord honored the servant's request. Rebekah arrived at the well perfectly qualified to become Isaac's bride. Not only was she one of Abraham's relatives (the granddaughter of Nahor, Abraham's brother), but she was also beautiful and a virgin (vv. 15-16). When Abraham's servant asked for a drink, Rebekah complied and offered to draw water for the camels as well (vv. 17-20). As she sated the animals' thirst, the servant silently watched, attempting to discern whether she was, in fact, the one he had prayed for (v. 21).

In the intervening verses (vv. 22-49), the servant confirmed that Rebekah had all the qualifications to be Isaac's wife and bestowed gifts upon her (two bracelets for her wrists and a ring for her nose, v. 47). Rebekah ran to her house to report these things, and her brother, Laban, invited the servant to stay. At the meal, he recounted the events leading up to his arrival and discovery of Rebekah.

After hearing the servant's account, Laban and Bethuel agreed to give Rebekah as a wife for Isaac. In response, the servant paid a generous bride price,

Outline

FOR TEACHING

- I. The Servant's Commission (24:1-4)
 - A. Abraham Old and Well Blessed (v. 1)
 - B. The Servant's Oath (vv. 2-4)
- II. The Servant's Plan to Find a Bride for Isaac (24:10-14)
 - A. The Bridal Gifts (v. 10)
 - B. Arrival at the Well (v. 11)
 - C. Prayer for a Sign (vv. 12-14)
- III. Rebekah: The Answer to Prayer (24:15-21)
 - A. Rebekah's Arrival and Qualifications (vv. 15-16)
 - B. The Servant's Request for a Sign Fulfilled (vv. 17-21)
- IV. Marital Negotiations (24:50-53)
- V. A Daughter's Farewell (24:54-61)
 - A. The Servant's Request to Leave Immediately (vv. 54-56)
 - B. Rebekah's Decision (vv. 57-59)
 - C. A Blessing for Rebekah (v. 60)
 - D. Rebekah's Departure (v. 61)

with items of gold and silver given to Rebekah, her father, her brother, and her mother (vv. 50-53).

The servant demanded to leave with Rebekah the following morning, but Rebekah's parents wanted her to stay at least ten more days with them. The servant, however, was eager to return since his journey had been so successful (vv. 54-56). Rebekah's mother and brother decided to let Rebekah decide whether she would go with the man immediately (vv. 57-58). Although some think that Rebekah was being given a choice either to go with the man or to stay with her own people, that is not the case. The negotiations had already been completed: she was Isaac's bride. Her only choice in this situation was when she would go.

Rebekah bravely chose to go immediately to marry a man she had never met. With only her nurse, some slave women, and the gifts she had been given (v. 59), she mounted a camel and went to an unknown land—much as her new father-in-law, Abram, had done so long ago. Her family bestowed upon her a beautiful blessing as she departed:

May you, our sister, be
for thousands of ten thousands
and may your seed possess
the gate of those who hate him. (v. 60,
writer’s translation)

The blessing foreshadows Rebekah’s role as the mother of Jacob, and it echoes one of God’s statements to Abraham (Gen 22:17) in stating the assured victory of Rebekah’s descendants.

A Way to Begin

*Biblical love stories don’t read like Romeo and Juliet. There is no young love thwarted by feuds between rival families, no romantic soliloquies, no tragic death scenes. Instead, there are arranged marriages, proposals by proxy, lots of camels, and gifts of nose rings. Although a story like Rebekah’s may not cause goose bumps and heart-rending pathos, it can offer us insights into the fortitude and bravery of one young woman. Rebekah took the initiative to offer a drink to a thirsty stranger and his camels, and this one small act launched a series of events that made her the next matriarch of Israel. **With Rebekah, we are invited to ask ourselves, “What initiatives can I take on behalf of others?”***

○ Finding Mr. or Miss Right

Tailor this beginning to fit the makeup of your class.

For married couples (widows and widowers certainly can participate, but if someone has recently lost a spouse you’ll need to evaluate whether this beginning is suitable). Prior to Sunday, ask class members to bring a few wedding pictures to Sunday school. In class, pass the photographs around so everyone can enjoy them. Then ask several members to share how they met their spouses and how (and why) they decided to get married.

For singles. Clip the personal ads from the Sunday newspaper and bring them to class. Share several samples or enlist a few class members to read individual ads aloud. If you have time, do an informal survey by compiling a list of what men say they want in women and vice versa.

○ Water

Bring a bottle of water for every class member. Either place a bottle in each chair before students arrive or pass the bottles out as they enter.

As the class members enjoy their water, explain that water is easy for us to come by. We can pour ourselves a glass straight from the tap or buy it in bottles from the store. In biblical days, water was not so easily acquired. People (usually women) had to walk to local wells, draw the water by hand, and carry it back to their homes. The woman we are studying today had no idea that performing this task would result in a marriage proposal from a stranger in a foreign land.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

In patriarchal times, it was important to marry within the clan or tribe. Such concerns seem foreign to modern readers who do not choose their spouses based on the same criteria. It is important to bridge the gap between the ancient concerns of the writer and the modern concerns of your learners. Help them to understand the social structures of the characters and then let class discussion bring out points of commonality.

○ Probing Questions

Discuss the following questions after reading the appropriate sections in the text. You can discuss these together or assign each section to a small group within the class.

Genesis 24:1-4

Endogamy is the practice of marrying within the family group. Abraham and Sarah were half-siblings (Gen 20:12); Rebekah and Isaac were cousins; as were Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. Today, we would consider this incest.

- How can we reconcile biblical practices with modern morality—or should we?

Genesis 24:10-14

- What do you think of the servant's method for determining Isaac's bride?
- What are some legitimate means for discerning God's will today?

Genesis 24:15-21

- If we praise Rebekah's assertiveness in this story, do we condemn her as manipulative and immoral when she helps Jacob gain his father's blessing (Gen 27)?

Genesis 24:50-53

Paying a bride price sounds to our ears like a business transaction in which the woman is bought and sold. In fact, it was a test of the groom's financial stability.

- What rituals and laws do we impose on potential brides and grooms that someone in the future might find disconcerting?

Genesis 24:54-61

- How is Rebekah's situation similar to Abraham's (Gen 12:1-3)? How is it different?
- What does Rebekah's journey say about her character?

○ Point of View

The biblical account is told almost exclusively from Abraham's servant's perspective. After summarizing the story, divide into three discussion groups. Assign each group one of the following characters: Rebekah, Laban, Isaac.

Give each group a copy page 30, titled "Point of View," to use in completing their assignment. Ask them to retell the story from the perspective of their character, focusing on how that person might have perceived the events differently. Encourage them to have fun with their retelling, using as much imagination and humor as they can, but also taking seriously the perspective of their assigned character.

C A Way to End

Rebekah lived in a culture that afforded women little independence. Even within those social constraints, she took the initiative to serve water to a stranger. One day later, she set forth on a journey to marry another stranger, leaving her family and homeland behind. Most of us lead relatively independent lives. We choose whom we will marry, we aren't forced into particular gender roles, and we travel to distant lands—but usually not one-way. In our independence, we sometimes forget the needs of others. **With so many resources and opportunities available to us, when will we take initiative on behalf of others?**

○ Take Initiative

Most of us are fairly skilled at criticizing and complaining. It's easier to point out weaknesses and failures than to take the initiative to find solutions. Ask class members to list the needs and problems in the class or the church. (Try to keep the discussion from devolving into a gripe session.)

Next, brainstorm possible solutions for each of the problems or needs listed. Finally, challenge class members to take the initiative in implementing solutions to these problems. Encourage specific commitments to action rather than ambiguous assents.

For example, perhaps the carpet in one of the Sunday school rooms is worn and dirty. An obvious solution is that it should be replaced. If there is no money in the church budget for this project, your class members could volunteer to do the labor themselves using donated supplies. The carpet could be replaced with maintenance-friendly tile and washable rugs could be placed in the room for warmth. Some problems and needs might not be so easily solved, but at least the group can begin to focus on finding answers rather than lamenting over difficulties.

○ Give a Drink of Water

Rebekah took the initiative to provide water for Abraham's servant and his camels. Her willingness to serve the servant set her apart from the other women at the well and launched her on an incredible journey.

For most of us, a drink of clean water is easy to obtain, but this is not the case elsewhere. A charity called Living Water International (www.water.cc) is trying to make clean water a reality for the less fortunate. Ask your class members if they would be willing to make a group donation to this (or a similar) ministry.

Resources

Carol Meyers, "The Family in Early Israel," *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997).

Leo G. Perdue, "The Israelite and Early Jewish Family: Summary and Conclusions," *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997).

Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1994).

ESAU'S WIVES: FOREIGNERS IN GOD'S FAMILY

Genesis 26:34-35; 27:46-28:3; 36:1-8

Bible Background



The Ideal Spouse

On their own, the accounts of Esau's wives might seem odd and theologically insignificant compared with the other inspiring narratives of women in Genesis. After all, when Esau's wives are mentioned they are described in unflattering terms or lumped together with others in genealogical lists. Nevertheless, when one takes into account the context in which these notices appear, a subtle theological picture begins to emerge.

It is helpful to begin by comparing Genesis 26:34 with Genesis 25:20. These two verses reveal that, like his father, Esau married at the age of forty. Unlike his father, however, Esau chose to marry not one woman, but two, and—more importantly—two women from outside the clan. In Israel, it was not enough for a man to be descended from a patriarch to receive the inheritance and pass on the family name. Men were also expected to marry women from the same extended family in order to preserve the integrity of the family line. This practice, called endogamy, explains why Abraham went out of his way to ensure that Isaac married within the clan (Gen 24). Esau's decision to marry Hittite women seems glaringly contemptuous (Steinberg, 56; Wenham, 204-5).

Religious and Family Frictions

The Hittites were the descendants of Canaan, Noah's grandson (Gen 10:15). They are mentioned numerous times in the Bible, usually in lists of nations Israel was to avoid or destroy (see Gen 15:18-21), though several individual Hittites are portrayed positively (Gen 23:10-11; 2 Sam 11:11; 23:39). The Israelites were forbidden to intermarry with the Hittites (or other foreigners) because such nations posed a religious threat to Israel (Exod 34:11-16; Deut 7:1-4). Intermarriage with foreigners was tantamount to religious depravity since those who did not worship Yahweh would inevitably draw Israel into worship of other gods. The biblical concern is not with the race or ethnicity of such peoples; rather, the concern is religious. Foreigners (including women) who worshiped Yahweh were welcomed into the community of Israel (Josh 6:25; Ruth 4:13-17), and people of other races intermarried with and became a part of Israel's lineage (Gen 41:50; Exod 2:21; Num 12:1). Nevertheless, considering the multiple commands not to intermarry with the people within Canaan, the fact that Esau does so immediately casts him and his wives in a negative light.

Judith and Basemath are introduced in Genesis 26:34 as wives of Esau. Unfortunately, this is all we know of Judith because she is mentioned nowhere else in the biblical material. Basemath

Outline

FOR TEACHING

appears again in Esau's genealogy in Genesis 36. Esau's marriage to these women created in Isaac and Rebekah a "bitterness of spirit" (Gen 26:35): an expression unique to this verse signifying extreme resentment. Esau's marriage outside the clan was seen as an affront to his parents and an assault on the purity of Abraham's line. More importantly, Esau's blatant disregard for his parents' wishes (see Gen 28:6-9) and careless indifference toward his own birthright (Gen 25:34) indicate that he was not the best candidate for carrying on the Abrahamic line. In this light, Rebekah and Jacob's deception of Isaac (Gen 27:1-29) could be seen as heroic inter-vention, preventing a serious oversight by the blind patriarch.

After discovering Esau's murderous intentions following the deception (Gen 27:41-42), Rebekah employed another ruse to protect Jacob. Delicately avoiding the real issue (that Esau wanted to murder Jacob), Rebekah declared that she loathed her life because of Esau's Hittite wives and would have no reason to live should Jacob marry such a woman (27:46). Since Esau's wives were a source of bitterness for both Rebekah and Isaac, Rebekah was able to instill in Isaac's mind a compelling reason to send Jacob away. Perhaps remembering his own father's insistence upon a wife from within the family, Isaac forbade Jacob to marry a Hittite woman and commanded him to marry one of Laban's daughters. Ironically, Jacob was sent off this time with an unsolicited blessing from his father (28:1-3). Like Esau, Jacob eventually married two women who were also his first cousins. The fact that Leah and Rachel were close relatives made them ideal choices for Jacob.

Esau's Legacy

The final passage focuses on Esau's genealogy through three foreign women: Adah, a Hittite; Oholibamah, a Hivite (the Hivites, like the Hittites, were descendants of Canaan); and Basemath, an Ishmaelite. The astute reader will notice

- I. Esau's Wives (26:34-35)
 - A. Marriages to Hittite Women (v. 34)
 - B. Isaac and Rebekah's Bitterness of Spirit (v. 35)
- II. Rebekah's Ruse (27:46-28:3)
 - A. A Pretext for Jacob to Leave (27:46)
 - B. Isaac Sends Jacob to Find a Wife (28:1-3)
 - 1. Jacob is forbidden to marry a Hittite (v. 1)
 - 2. Jacob is commanded to marry a daughter of Laban (v. 2)
 - 3. Jacob receives a blessing (v. 3)
- III. Esau's Family and Land (36:1-8; [see also 36:9-19])
 - A. Introductory statement: Esau is Edom (v. 1)
 - B. Esau's Wives (vv. 2-3)
 - C. Esau's Sons (vv. 4-5)
 - 1. Eliphaz (by Adah) (v. 4a)
 - 2. Reuel (by Basemath) (v. 4b)
 - 3. Jeush, Jalam, Korah (by Oholibamah) (v. 5a)
 - 4. Summary statement (v. 5b)
 - D. Esau's Land (vv. 6-8)
 - 1. The Move (v. 6)
 - 2. The Reason for the Move (v. 7)
 - 3. The Settlement in Seir (v. 8a)
 - 4. Concluding Statement: Esau is Edom (v. 8b)

some tensions here between Genesis 26:34, in which Basemath is the daughter of Elon (a Hittite) and Genesis 36:1, in which she is Ishmael's daughter (see Gen 28:9) and Adah is Elon's daughter. Unfortunately, no simple resolution for these differences exists, and it is quite possible that the passages reflect distinct traditions (Wenham, 205).

The repeated statement (vv. 1, 8) that Esau is Edom is a clue to the thrust of this passage. Theologically, the genealogy is intended to explain the origins of Edom, a land whose inhabitants stood in almost

constant opposition to Israel. The narrator is interested in establishing the differences between the chosen line of Abraham and lineages related to but outside the Abrahamic covenant. So, he describes Esau's wives as "daughters of Canaan" (v. 2) to emphasize their foreignness and establish that Esau's decision to marry such women placed him outside the covenant. Then the narrator devotes detailed attention to Esau's move away from Jacob (vv. 6-8) to demonstrate that Esau chose a home outside the land of the covenant. Esau took a path that separated him first from his parents and eventually from his people. Like the wives he married, Esau became a foreigner.

A Way to Begin

Who in the world are Judith, Basemath, Oholibamah, and Adah, and what are they doing in my Bible? This was probably your first question when you began to read this lesson, and your students will likely ask the same thing. Esau's wives are not exactly famous Bible characters, and we know relatively little about them. Nevertheless, the accounts about them provide an unusual entree into a very serious and relevant question: What is my attitude toward outsiders? In addition, Esau's negativity toward his family and subsequent rebellious actions can be instructive as we consider our feelings about our own families.

○ Family Tree

Many people are taking up genealogy as a hobby. Discuss what your class members know about their family histories. Ask them if they have any "black sheep" in the family. If so, would they care to explain what made that person an outsider? (This may be a touchy subject; don't probe any deeper than participants are willing to go.)

Ask class members if there have been any major family rifts. If so, what were the basic issues involved?

Families are complex and filled with paradoxes. They bring great joy and sometimes terrible pain. Today we're going to consider a family that was torn apart by revenge, deceit, and hatred. Central to the conflict were the foreign women who became Esau's wives.

○ Looking in from the Outside

Have class members reflect on a time when they felt excluded or uncomfortably "foreign." For example, when they didn't get chosen for the team, were rejected by a close friend, were traveling in a foreign country, were made to feel unwelcome in church, etc. Ask volunteers to share their stories. Let them describe the situation, how it made them feel, and whether the situation was ever resolved comfortably.

Today we are going to study foreign women who may be completely unfamiliar. They were outsiders whose marriages to Esau brought them into conflict with Isaac and Rebekah and precipitated Esau's separation from the Abrahamic covenant.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

Isaac, Rebekah, and Esau all come across badly in these accounts. Isaac and Rebekah considered Esau's wives a threat to the patriarchal line. Esau was not innocent, for he clearly derived satisfaction from disobeying his parents and driving a wedge between himself and his family. While it is easy to identify the flaws of others, are we willing to see them in ourselves?

○ Family Feud

Divide the class into three groups. Assign one group to study Isaac and Rebekah, one to study Jacob, and one to study Esau. Distribute copies of page 31, titled "Family Feud."

Have each group consider the grievances of its assigned character(s) as they discuss the questions raised in their portion of page 31.

Bring the three groups together. Have each group read or summarize their passages and discuss their findings.

○ Strangers in a Strange Family

Based on the "Bible Background" section, explain the biblical emphasis on endogamy (the custom of marrying only within the limits of a local community or clan) and provide some background on the Hittites. Ask volunteers to read the three focal passages.

Genesis 26:34-35

Note the contrast between Isaac and Esau's marriages (Gen 25:20; 26:34). Explain that "bitterness of spirit" refers to a deep resentment toward another.

- Why were Esau's marriages to Hittite women so repugnant to Isaac and Rebekah?
- How do we reflect similar attitudes today?

Genesis 27:46-28:3

Summarize Jacob's deception of Isaac earlier in the chapter. Rebekah's real reason for wanting Isaac to send Jacob away was to protect him from Esau. Even so, her words reflect the animosity both she and Isaac felt toward Esau's wives.

- What do you think about Rebekah's use of Esau's wives to get Isaac to do her bidding?
- Why did Esau choose to provoke his parents by marrying foreign women (see Gen 28:6-9)? What does this say about his character? His parents' character?

Genesis 36:1-8

Focus on the theological purpose of this genealogy, especially in its repeated emphasis that Esau is Edom. If you have a map of the biblical world, point out where Esau decided to move.

- How did Esau's decisions to marry foreign women and move to Seir take him outside of the Abrahamic promises? (If the class seems to struggle with this question, you might ask someone to read Gen 15:7, 18-21).

C A Way to End

Esau had reasons to be angry at his parents and his brother, but as he lived out his grudge, he exiled himself from his family—truly despising his birthright. His story challenges us to examine our own attitudes toward our families. Bitter feelings can run deep in families, and the wounds we receive can be heart-rending. How we respond to those hurts, however, is up to us. Rebekah and Isaac’s rejection of Esau’s wives may have been motivated by the cultural perspectives of the day, but their attitudes are not exemplary. The overall message of the Bible is compassion toward outsiders. Today’s text invites us to examine our own attitudes toward others.

○ Family Dynamics

Ask the class to silently consider the following questions:

Questions

- How is my relationship with my family?
- Am I holding grudges against anyone in my family?
- Have I done anything vengeful to someone in my family?
- How willing am I to work toward reconciliation within my family?
- How have I cut myself off from my family?

Pray for God to help us deal with our family conflicts in a Christian way. Suggest that the students pray this week for family rifts that need mending and “black sheep” who need restoration.

○ Hospitality

Ask volunteers to look up some of the following passages: Exodus 22:21; Leviticus 19:10, 34; Deuteronomy 23:7; 24:19-22; Isaiah 56:3-8; Luke 4:24-27; John 4:1-29; Ephesians 2:11-22.

The story of Esau’s wives reflects the human tendency to reject the outsider. While the ancient Israelites often viewed foreigners with suspicion, the primary message of the Bible is inclusion and acceptance.

Question

- What steps can we take to develop a more biblical view of foreigners?

Resources

Naomi Steinberg, “Basemath 1/Bashemath,” *Women in Scripture*, ed. Carol Meyers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1994).

5

LEAH AND RACHEL:
SISTERS AND RIVALS*Genesis 29:15-30***Bible Background****A Crafty Suitor**

Sibling rivalry is something most of us experience if we grow up with brothers or sisters. Generally speaking, such rivalry disappears—or at least lessens—once we move away and begin our adult lives. Unfortunately, two Hebrew sisters did not have that luxury. Victims of a ruse perpetrated by their greedy father, Leah and Rachel married the same man and lived in constant rivalry with one another. Leah was desperate for her husband’s love, and Rachel was desperate for a child of her own.

Jacob had tricked his father, Isaac, into giving him the patriarchal blessing that was meant for his older brother, Esau. Fearing Esau’s revenge, Jacob soon left his home and family behind, eventually arriving in Haran in northern Mesopotamia, the land of his ancestors. Upon arriving at the local well, Jacob inquired about his uncle Laban and discovered that his daughter Rachel was on her way to water the sheep. Jacob rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well for Rachel and, after introducing himself, was invited by Laban to stay at his house (Gen 29:1-14).

A Devious Father-in-law

Laban (who, as it turns out, was a ruthless, wheedling businessman, Gen

30:25-34; 31:32-42), offered to pay Jacob wages for serving as one of his shepherds. To prepare us for Jacob’s response, the narrator interjects a brief description of Laban’s two daughters. The eldest is Leah, and she is described as having *rakkot* eyes. The Hebrew word can be translated several different ways, as demonstrated by the variances in English translations: “weak” (NIV, NASB, ESV, RSV); “delicate” (NKJV, HCSB); or “lovely” (NRSV), amongst others. Because the word can have positive or negative connotations, it is unclear whether the narrator’s description of Leah’s eyes is meant to imply beauty or ugliness. Many translations assume the latter, perhaps hoping to offer some justification for Jacob’s hatred of Leah and love for Rachel. It is equally plausible, however, that Leah is described positively, with pretty eyes. By contrast, Rachel is depicted as “beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance” (writer’s translation). While both women may have been beautiful, the Hebrew syntax seems to indicate a contrast between them: Rachel is the more beautiful of the two.

Because Jacob loved Rachel, he declared that he would serve Laban seven years for the right to marry her. Jacob had fled from Canaan with nothing; his labor would stand in the place of the bride price he could not pay. In fact, he was apparently offering an impressive gift. According to Deuteronomy 22:29, the maximum bride price (Hebrew, *mohar*)

was fifty shekels. Considering that a man’s monthly labor would have earned him around one shekel per month, Jacob was offering well over the maximum amount (Wenham, 235). In a rare and poignant expression of emotion, the narrator declares that the seven years seemed like a few days because of Jacob’s love for Rachel. At the completion of the seven years, Jacob rightfully demanded his bride, and the wedding arrangements were made.

Antagonistic Sisters

Unfortunately, the Bible does not offer any detailed descriptions of marriage ceremonies or rituals. What we do know is reconstructed from a small number of passages. Hebrew weddings were typically week-long affairs, permeated with feasting, drinking, and joyous celebration (Gen 29:27-28; Judg 14:10, 15; see John 2:1-11). The bride was adorned with jewelry (Isa 49:18; Jer 2:32), and the groom wore a garland (Isa 61:10). There was likely a wedding procession (Song 3:6-11). Central to the ceremony was the wedding tent, into which the bride and groom entered to consummate their union (Ps 19:5; Joel 2:16). At Jacob’s wedding everything seemed perfectly in order. Laban gathered the men, prepared a feast, and brought Jacob his bride. But the morning light exposed a shocking betrayal expressed succinctly in the original Hebrew: “Look! It’s Leah!” Exactly how Laban successfully executed this wife swap is unclear. Perhaps it was so dark Jacob could not see the bride’s face—and one must wonder whether Jacob was the one with weak eyes! Perhaps Leah was veiled. Perhaps Jacob had drunk himself into oblivion. The narrator only tells us that Laban brought Leah to Jacob in the evening and that Jacob had sex with her, discovering the truth the next morning.

Being on the receiving end of deceit did not suit Jacob. Angry, he demanded to know how Laban could do such a thing. With an air of contrived innocence, Laban replied that it was not customary in their

place to marry the younger daughter off before the older—a detail he neglected to tell Jacob earlier. True or not, Laban’s explanation may also have been a loosely veiled taunt at Jacob who had usurped his older brother’s place (Wenham, 236-37). Laban then pacified Jacob’s anger by offering Rachel as well, for a price. “Complete the week of this one,” he offers, “and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years” (29:27). With no other recourse, Jacob complied.

Outline FOR TEACHING

- I. Jacob’s Wages (29:15-19)
 - A. Laban’s Offer: What Shall Your Wages Be? (v. 15)
 - B. Interlude: Laban’s Daughters (vv. 16-17)
 1. Leah, the Elder; Rachel, the Younger (v. 16)
 2. Description of Leah (v. 17a)
 3. Description of Rachel (v. 17b)
 - C. Jacob’s Offer: Serve Seven Years for Rachel (v. 18)
 - D. Laban’s Agreement (v. 19)
- II. Jacob’s Labor of Love (29:20-21)
 - A. Seven Years Are Like a Few Days (v. 20)
 - B. Jacob’s Demand (v. 21)
- III. My Big Fat Hebrew Wedding: Part I (29:22-27)
 - A. Preparations (v. 22)
 - B. Laban’s Ruse (vv. 23-24)
 - C. Jacob’s Shock and Rebuke of Laban (v. 25)
 - D. Laban’s Explanation and Offer (vv. 26-27)
- IV. My Big Fat Hebrew Wedding: Part II (29:28-30)
 - A. Rachel Given as a Wife (vv. 28-29)
 - B. Jacob’s Love and Labor (v. 30)
 1. Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah (v. 30a)
 2. Jacob labored another seven years for Laban (v. 30b)

The narrative concludes with a heart-rending revelation: Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. Jacob's favoritism of Rachel over Leah engendered intense rivalry between the two sisters. Leah, who was aware of her husband's hatred toward her (29:32), fruitlessly sought Jacob's favor by producing children for him (29:32-34; 30:20). Rachel, who enjoyed Jacob's love, was cursed with infertility (29:31). Desperation led both women to give Jacob concubines (30:3, 9) and to fight over Jacob's nighttime visits (30:14-16). In the ensuing baby wars, as the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel were conceived, Leah remained unloved. Her sons and only daughter were ostracized and neglected by Jacob (see Gen 34). And though Rachel eventually gave birth to Joseph (30:23-24), she was not satisfied. In the very act of naming Joseph, whose name means "he adds," Rachel expressed her wish for another child, "May the Lord add to me another son" (Frymer-Kensky, 140). Rachel got her wish, but her heart's desire resulted in her death as she gave birth to Benjamin (35:17).

A Way to Begin

The story of Rachel and Leah's marriage to Jacob is romantic, humorous, and tragic at the same time. Hearing that Jacob loved Rachel so much that seven years seemed like a day warms our hearts. Watching Jacob have the tables turned on him is satisfyingly funny. Witnessing Leah's fruitless struggle to gain Jacob's approval and Rachel's deadly desire for more children is tragic. This passage calls us to ask, "What am I willing to do for approval?"

○ Desperate Housewives

Select a brief segment (a relatively tame one!) from the show *Desperate Housewives* (or a similar show) to view in class. Or, go to the web site (<http://abc.go.com/prime-time/desperate/recaps/>) or a television program guide and pick an episode synopsis to read to your class.

Rachel and Leah could be described as desperate housewives. Married to the same man, they lived in constant rivalry with one another, competing for the love of their mutual husband.

○ Sisters

In the classic movie *White Christmas*, two sisters, played by Rosemary Clooney and Vera-Ellen, sing about being sisters. They describe their love for one another and swear their undying loyalty. They also warn one another, "Sister, don't come between me and my man!" Show a clip of this scene, play a recording of the song, or print out the lyrics for the class to read.

While the song "Sisters" depicts a good-natured sibling rivalry, the sisters we're considering today battled on a much more serious level. Both sisters could claim that the other had "come between me and my man." They engaged in a life-long struggle for approval that cost both of them greatly.

○ My Big Fat Hebrew Wedding

Decorate the classroom as you might for a wedding reception. Purchase an inexpensive round frosted cake and put a cake topper on it, fix punch, buy some inexpensive flowers, etc. Enlist other class members to help with the preparations. Someone adept with computers will be able to prepare mock wedding invitations to the wedding of Jacob to Rachel (perhaps with Rachel's name crossed out and Leah's inserted!).

B A Way to Explore Scripture

How horrible it must have been for Leah and Rachel to be married to the same man! They were sisters turned into rivals by their father's trickery. Their weddings were spoiled by Laban's deceptions, and they found themselves fighting over whose womb was better. The account depicts broken relationships, wounded spirits, and desperate ploys for attention. As you study this passage, focus on the elements in the story that will speak most to the life situation of your members.

○ The Wedding Party

Summarize the story leading up to today's passage. Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 29:15-30. Discuss each member of the "wedding party" (Laban, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel) in turn.

Say, "The brides and groom wanted to have wedding portraits done. Unfortunately, there were no photographers in biblical times, so they have asked us to paint their portraits with words."

List characteristics defining each character on the board. Discuss as many of the following questions as appropriate.

Questions

- Did Laban have ulterior motives when he offered to pay Jacob wages? If so, what were they? Did he already know of Jacob's love for Rachel?
- How do you imagine Leah and Rachel's physical appearance? Have you always thought of Leah as the ugly one and Rachel as the pretty one? Why (or why not)?
- What was Laban's purpose in the wife-swap? How did giving Leah instead of Rachel to Jacob benefit Laban?
- Why was Jacob unable to recognize Leah until morning?
- Where was Rachel on Jacob and Leah's wedding night?
- Why didn't Laban tell Jacob about the custom of marrying the eldest daughter first?
- Put yourself in Leah's place. How would all these events make you feel?
- Put yourself in Rachel's place. How would you respond to the events?

○ The Approval Game

Read Genesis 29:15-30, then play the "Approval Game": Assign someone as scorekeeper, asking him or her to make two columns on the board, one for Leah and one for Rachel. Have the class to read through the passage again and then continue through the end of chapter 30, one verse at a time. Assign points to Leah or Rachel using the following values:

- 2 points for each child she bears
- 1 point for each child her slave woman bears for her
- 10-point "love bonus" each time the text says Jacob loved her

Evaluate the "score." Observe that Leah was unable to win Jacob's love, no matter how many babies she had. The lesson through Leah is that approval cannot be bought. Rachel already had Jacob's love, but spent her life wanting more babies. The lesson through Rachel is that the desire for approval can never be fully satisfied.

C A Way to End

Even after giving birth to six sons and a daughter, Leah never won Jacob's love. She experienced rejection from the day she married him to the day she died. Jacob also neglected her sons in favor of Rachel's firstborn, Joseph. Rachel fared better in the sense that at least she had the love of her husband—but she still had to share him. She spent her days seeking the one thing that eluded her: a child. When one came she was not satisfied and immediately wanted another. Her wish led to her death. **We can discover something about our own failing relationships by observing Jacob, Leah, and Rachel's.** We can also evaluate our tendency to strive for the elusive approval of others.

○ The Honeymoon Is Over

From the first wedding day on, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel's lives were filled with jealousy and strife. Fighting over their mutual husband, Leah and Rachel tried to compensate for their unhappiness by striking out at each other and competing for his attention.

Ask class members to think about one of their more stressful relationships. Suggest they silently consider the following questions:

Questions

- What makes this relationship stressful?
- How do I contribute to the tensions in the relationship? How does the other person?
- Am I compensating for my unhappiness in the relationship in some way? If so, how?
- Am I seeking the approval of the other person and diminishing myself in the process?
- What do I need to do to make this relationship healthier?

Encourage class members to commit themselves to taking a first step toward healing this week.

○ Peer Pressure Monitor

Even as adults, we face peer pressure. Discuss the things adults do to gain the approval of our peers.

Distribute copies of page 32, titled "Peer Pressure Monitor." Have the class fill out the questionnaire for their own insight, not for sharing with others. True acceptance cannot be found in human institutions or relationships. The One whose approval we should be seeking has already accepted us through Jesus Christ. We can do nothing, say nothing, or think nothing that will cause God to love us or accept us more. We are already fully loved.

Resources

Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Rachel," *Women in Scripture*, ed. Carol Meyers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1994).

NAMES OF GOD

El

Translation: “God”

The most basic name for God used in many ancient cultures.

Elohim

Translation: “God”

The form in Hebrew is plural, and thus is sometimes to be translated “gods,” but in reference to the God of Israel the term is usually considered to be a plural of majesty emphasizing the greatness or majesty of God. When Elohim is used of God, the verb forms are always in the singular.

YHWH (Yahweh)

Translation: Usually rendered “LORD” in English translations

The translation of the name is based on Exodus 3:14, where God says, “I am who I am.” Thus, YHWH (thought to be a form of the verb *hayah*, “to be”) could be translated “I am.” However, the tenses of the verb “to be” in Exodus 3:14 can be translated in a variety of ways. No one really knows with certainty how the name should be translated or its exact relationship with the verb “to be.”

YHWH is considered God’s personal name and, as such, the Jews view it as the most sacred name of God. For centuries, religious Jews have refused to pronounce the name out loud, since mispronouncing it would desecrate it. Thus, they substitute “Adonai” for “YHWH” when reading the Hebrew text aloud.

Adonai

Translation: “Lord”

The Hebrew term is used also of human beings and is translated “lord” or “master.”

El-roi (Gen. 16:13)

Translation: “The God who sees” or “the God who sees me”

The name is only used once in the Hebrew Bible, but it is interesting because it was bestowed by Hagar. After her encounter with the angel in the wilderness, Hagar called God “El-roi” because God

saw her needs and because she had a face-to-face encounter with God and yet did not die.

El Shaddai (Gen. 17:1)

Translation: Popularly translated “God Almighty.” Other possibilities include: “God of the mountain,” “Sufficient God,” or “Destroyer God”
God reveals this name in Genesis 17 while instituting circumcision as a sign of the covenant. Here and elsewhere in Genesis, the name appears to be associated with promises of fertility and increase.

El Elyon (Gen. 14:18, 19-20)

Translation: “God most high”
Melchizedek is referred to as a priest of El Elyon, and when he blessed Abram, he called God by this name.

El Olam (Gen. 21:33)

Translation: “Eternal God”
After Abraham and Abimelech made a treaty with one another after a dispute over a well, Abraham planted a tree at Beersheba and called upon YHWH as Eternal God.

YHWH Yireh (Gen. 22:14)

Translation: “Yahweh will provide”
Abraham called the mountain where he went to sacrifice Isaac “Yahweh Yireh” because God provided a ram as a substitute sacrifice.

El Rachum we-Chanun (Exod 34:6)

Translation: “God of compassion and mercy”
In Exodus 34:6-7, God is revealed to Moses as a God of compassion, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness—but at the same time a God of justice. This name appears in numerous passages throughout the Old Testament (Num 14:18, Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2; Pss 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Neh 9:17).

YHWH Sabaoth (1 Sam 1:3)

Translation: “YHWH of hosts” or “YHWH of armies”
Refers to YHWH as the commander of heaven’s angelic armies.

TRUSTING GOD

<p>Things I Am Afraid to Trust God With</p> <p><i>Example: My fear of failure.</i></p>	<p>How I Am Paralyzed into Inaction Joys I May</p> <p><i>I tend to avoid new situations and I don't take risks.</i></p>	<p>Be Denying Myself What First Step Can I</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Experiencing new things I might really like</i> • <i>The possibility of success</i> • <i>New experiences from which I can learn even if I don't succeed.</i> 	<p>Take to Action?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Choose one of my lesser fears, such as learning a foreign language, and enroll in a community college course.</i> • <i>Then choose one of my greater fears, such as speaking to my boss about a raise, and schedule an appointment to talk with him/her.</i>



POINT OF VIEW

Rebekah

As you retell the story from Rebekah's perspective, use the following questions to help you in your formulation. Remember to think in the first person.

How old are you? What were your first impressions of the stranger at the well? Why did you offer to water his camels? Are you an animal lover? How long did it take you to draw water for ten thirsty camels? How did you react when the servant put a ring on your nose (v. 47)? Did your father ever tell you about Abraham? If so, what did he say about his uncle who left Haran at the command of God? Are you excited about marrying a man from a distant land? Scared? Glad to get away from your family? How do you feel about your brother and father deciding your future? Will you miss your mother?

Laban

As you retell the story from Laban's perspective, use the following questions to help you in your formulation. Remember to think in the first person. For additional insight, see Genesis 24:29-32.

What do you think of your sister, Rebekah? When she told you about the stranger at the well, what was your first reaction? How impressed were you by all his fine gifts? What did you think about the stranger's account? Why did you get involved in the marital negotiations? Is it because Bethuel is elderly and unable to barter well? Or is it customary for brothers to assist in making such decisions? Are you concerned about your sister's well being as you send her to live in Canaan? Why did you and your mother try to convince the servant to let Rebekah stay ten more days? Did you find it hard to say goodbye? Were you hoping if you delayed him, the servant would offer more presents? Was Rebekah hesitant to go? After Rebekah left, did your mother grieve? Did you comfort her?

Isaac

As you retell the story from Isaac's perspective, use the following questions to help you in your formulation. Remember to think in the first person. For additional insight, see Genesis 24:62-67.

You're forty years old now. Why have you waited so long to get married? Did you ever ask your father if you could marry a Canaanite woman? How do you feel about the fact that your father won't let you go to Haran to find your own wife? Why do you think he's unwilling to let you go? Did you try to convince him to let you go? Why (why not)? Do you trust the servant to find you a good woman? What would you have done if he had returned with a woman you couldn't stand? When you first laid eyes on Rebekah, what did you think? What was your impression of the servant's account of how he found her? How did Rebekah's arrival in your life give you comfort after your mother's death? Considering how Rebekah helped deceive you into giving Jacob your blessing (Gen 27), do you still think the servant made the right choice? Why (why not)?



FAMILY FEUD



Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 26:34-35; 27:46–28:3; 28:6-9)

Read the assigned texts and identify the issues Isaac and Rebekah are upset about. Look for how Isaac and Rebekah addressed their problems and the results of their “solution.” Evaluate the validity of Isaac and Rebekah’s grievances and suggest ways they could have addressed their problems in a kinder way.

- Our Grievances:
- How We Addressed Our Grievances:
- The Validity of Our Grievances:
- How We Could Have Resolved Our Problem More Amicably:

Jacob (Gen 27:1-29; 27:41; 28:1-5)

(Note that Isaac had planned to bless only Esau. Fathers typically gave a blessing to all their sons [see Gen 49].)

Read the assigned texts and identify the issues Jacob was upset about. Look for how Jacob addressed his problems and the results of his “solution.” Evaluate the validity of Jacob’s grievances and suggest ways he could have addressed his problems in a kinder way.

- My Grievances:
- How I Addressed My Grievances:
- The Validity of My Grievances:
- How I Could Have Resolved My Problem More Amicably:

Esau (Gen 27:30-41; 28:6-9; 36:1-8)

Read the assigned texts and identify the issues Esau was upset about. Look for how Esau addressed his problems and the results of his “solution.” Evaluate the validity of Esau’s grievances and suggest ways he could have addressed his problems in a kinder way.

- My Grievances:
 - How I Addressed My Grievances:
 - The Validity of My Grievances:
 - How I Could Have Resolved My Problem More Amicably:
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PEER PRESSURE MONITOR

Read the following statements and circle the appropriate number indicating your agreement or disagreement. Write this number in the far right column. Total the numbers to determine your "peer pressure." The higher the number, the higher your need for others' approval.

There is no remedy for high peer pressure except for resting in God's unconditional love for you.

	Disagree			Agree			Strongly Agree			Score	
I care what other people think about me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I am easily hurt by others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I have difficulty saying "no" to others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I am easily swayed by others' opinions.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I take criticism personally.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I feel insecure about my abilities.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I need others' praise to feel good about my work.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I am very concerned about my appearance.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I tend to compare myself with other people.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
People tell me I'm too hard on myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I am a perfectionist.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I put things off because I never feel I can do a good enough job.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I tend to be highly critical of others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I don't speak my mind because I'm afraid I'll offend somebody.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I am afraid to try new things, especially things I don't think I'll be good at.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total			
								8	9	10	