The sermon

Intro

A story about a man who was duped into marrying the wrong woman. A story about a man who finds himself married to two women. One he loves. One he doesn't.

What does this have to say to Christians in the 21st century? Great question. Let's see what treasures we can uncover in God's word.

Body

Passage Focus

We'll work through the passage in three points. I'll highlight some topics that pop up.

READ 29:1-14

Point 1: Family found (29:1-14)

Large stone

Jacob has traveled from Bethel to Haran (29:1). There he encounters flocks of sheep and a well covered by a large stone (29:2-3).

Jacob asks some questions and discovers he's in Haran and these people know Laban (29:4-5). The shepherds note Laban's daughter Rachel is approaching (29:6). Jacob speaks his mind and urges the shepherds to water the sheep now (29:7). The newcomer is giving the locals instructions! There's plenty of day left and the sheep should be grazing he thinks.

But two things need to happen before the sheep are watered. The rest of the flocks need to arrive and the stone needs to be rolled (29:8).

Suggestions for the delay include lazy shepherds or they need more manpower to move the stone or they need to wait for the rest of the shepherds to arrive to ensure equal distribution of water.

The shepherdess Rachel arrives (29:9). Then Jacob rolls the stone and waters Laban's flock (29:10). Some commentators suggest immense strength on the part of Jacob, even supernatural empowerment by the Holy Spirit. In any event, Jacob takes the initiative to water Laban's flock upon seeing Rachel. Perhaps an immediate desire to impress or a servant nature/strong work ethic or a combination of both?

Jacob proceeds to kiss Rachel (29:11), a familial greeting, not romantic. Then he weeps and identifies himself to Rachel, who proceeds to run and tell her father Laban (29:11-12).

Laban runs and celebrates the arrival of his flesh and blood, Jacob (29:13-14). Jacob's welcome to stay. We're told he stayed for a month (29:14).

Main characters

Let's identify the key players. Laban is Rebekah's brother, Jacob's uncle, Rachel's father, Abraham's great-nephew. Rachel is Rebekah's niece, Jacob's first cousin, Laban's daughter. In other words, they're family. Jacob has found Laban, the man whom Jacob was instructed to take a wife from (Gen 28:2).

Application

Previously, the blessing of Abraham was transferred to Jacob (Gen 28:4). Previously, God promised Jacob offspring, promised that he would be with Jacob wherever he goes, and that he would bring Jacob back to Canaan (Gen 28:13-15).

God's keeping his word. Jacob's made it safely to the man who's supposed to provide a wife. That's protection and God directing his steps. Before there's offspring, there needs to be a wife.

Notably absent is any praise and thanksgiving to God like Abraham's servant offered when God directed him to Rebekah.

READ 29:15-30

Point 2: Two wives (29:15-30)

After a month the question of wages come up (29:15). Laban says name your price.

Two daughters

Now we're introduced to Laban's other daughter, Leah (29:16). So there's Leah and Rachel, two daughters. Two wife options.

Leah was the older daughter, but Rachel captured Jacob's heart. ***"Leah's eyes were weak,*** (= tender, soft, delicate) ***but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance"*** (28:17). Rachel's shape was impressive. Rachel's appearance was pleasing to the eyes. The idea is Rachel was more attractive. So Jacob was drawn to Rachel.

What about beauty?

Beauty exists. Men take note of a woman's beauty. Which explains Abraham and Isaac's lies about Sarah and Rebekah being their sister. We also find that women care about their appearance. In 1 Timothy 2:9-11, women in the church are counseled towards modesty, good works, and submissiveness rather than braids, jewelry, and costly clothes. In 1 Peter 3:1-6, women in the church are counseled towards internal adornment (gentle and quiet spirit, submissiveness) rather than external adornment (braids, jewelry, clothing).

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. – **Proverbs 31:30**

In Proverbs 31:30, men are encouraged to beware of a fixation on physical beauty. Because beauty can deceive. External beauty can cover up internal flaws. Men see the beauty but not the person. Because beauty is *"vain"* = "fleeting" or "passing" or "transitory." Beauty isn't permanent. Women age. Men need to look for something permanent, namely, character grounded in the fear of the LORD.

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion. – **Proverbs 11:22**

The idea is something beautiful on top of something ugly. *"discretion"* = discernment, judgment, moral sensibility. Like a shining gold ring on a pig's snout is a physically beautiful woman without moral sense. Physical beauty on top of a heart that doesn't fear the LORD. This isn't what godly men should be after.

Was I physically attracted to my wife? Absolutely. But without the accompanying Proverbs 31 character it would have been a no go.

So men are designed to be attracted to women. Women are designed to care about their appearance. We get in trouble when things are out of proportion and matters of the heart are neglected.

Love

Because of her beauty, ***"Jacob loved Rachel"*** (29:18).

Love is used of romantic love, parental love (*"Isaac loved Esau…, but Rebekah loved Jacob"* – Gen 25:28), Isaac's love for meat, love for God, love for God's word, love for sin, God's love for righteousness. Love speaks to our affection for another person. People we treasure. Love speaks to what we delight in. Things we treasure. Moses highlights Jacob's delight in Rachel's beauty.

Agreement

Jacob has a proposal: ***"I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel"*** (29:18). Laban agrees to the terms (29:19). Jacob serves the seven year term.

So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. – 29:20

Time went by quick because of Jacob's delight in Rachel. It wasn't a horrific sacrifice. Because the prize, Rachel, was worth it. If a person truly means something to us, the work we put in for them isn't a torment, a drudging obligation, etc. I'm thinking a parent serving their child. A child caring for an aged parent. Or a spouse caring for a spouse. The affection for the person overrides the sacrifice. Jacob's willingness to serve for Rachel indicates he delighted in Rachel the person, not just her beauty.

Because his obligation was met, Jacob demands that Laban hand over Rachel (29:21). So Laban calls for a feast (29:22).

Deception

At this point, Jacob got a taste of his own medicine, he reaped what he sowed, what goes around comes around, poetic justice, whatever you want to call it. Like Isaac thought he was blessing Esau but was actually blessing Jacob, Jacob thinks he's getting Rachel but he actually got Leah.

So on the wedding night Laban brings Leah to Jacob and the two have sexual relations (29:23). Why didn't Jacob notice he wasn't getting Rachel? One, the betrothed woman would have been wearing a veil over her face that covered all but her eyes. Two, with it being evening it was dark, so he couldn't see very well. Third, Jacob could have gotten drunk at the feast. So it's quite possible his senses were impaired.

The next morning, when there was no veil, light, and the alcohol wore off(?), Jacob discovers it was Leah, so he calls out Laban asking, ***"What is this you have done to me"*** (29:25)? Laban provides no apology, but he does provide his reason: ***"It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn"*** (29:26). Jacob, you didn't get what you wanted because that's not how we do things here.

But Laban has an offer: ***"Complete the week of this one*** [Leah]***, and we will give you the other*** [Rachel] ***also in return for serving me another seven years"*** (29:27). If you serve another seven years, you can have both Leah and Rachel. That's 14 years of labor for two daughters.

To recap:

1. A week of wedding festivities with his new wife Leah.
2. Then Rachel is handed over to be his wife.
3. Then Jacob works seven more years.

Here we're told Jacob ***"loved Rachel more than Leah"*** (29:30).

Why seven years?

It was customary in that culture for the groom to provide a betrothal gift to the father of the bride. Jacob was penniless. So he needed to work to pay off the bride price.

Why the mention of the maid servants?

To introduce the maid servants of Jacob's wives to readers. These two maid servants will play a vital role in the formation of the nation of Israel.

Application

Wives have been provided. Presumably offspring will follow. Things are shaping up for the fulfillment of God's promises.

Earlier I noted that Jacob's affection for Rachel prevailed over the sacrifice required (i.e., seven years of labor). Love is a motivator that makes great sacrifices of one's time, energy, and resources seem like nothing.

Practical question: Do I find myself saying it's little sacrifice because I treasure that person?

READ 29:31-35

Point 3: Four offspring (29:31-35)

When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. – 29:31

God takes note of Leah's plight and acts for her. God has a particular concern for miseries of mistreated people. For example, the repeated refrains of widows, orphans, sojourners (foreigners outside their homeland), the poor. Here it's an unloved wife.

In what sense did Jacob "hate" Leah?

Used of hatred for God (Exod 20:5). People hating David (Ps 9:13). Fools hating knowledge (Prov 1:22). God's hatred for pride, deception, murder (Prov 6:16). God's hatred for idolatry (Deut 16:22). The Psalmist's hatred for false ways (Ps 119:104). We believers are exhorted to hate evil: *"O you who love the LORD, hate evil!"* – **Psalm 97:10**

When someone (or something) is hated that person is often opposed, detested, despised. On the other hand, hatred may not involve intense illwill, rather, indifference and a lack of concern for that person.

Hatred involves relational separation and distance: no relationship exists. There's no desire for contact or relationship with that person. The person is found unappealing.

In Leah's experience, it's the opposite of love. Rachel is loved (29:20) while Leah desires Jacob's love (29:32). Leah's loved less (29:30), but Leah views herself as unloved (29:32).

The idea is Leah isn't loved. Jacob was conned into a relationship with her. Jacob has zero desire for this relationship. Jacob's affections are set on Rachel. As a result, Leah finds herself neither desired nor treasured. To be hated is to be unloved. Not treasured. Not valued. A horrible place for Leah in marriage!

God's compassion

God has authority over every woman's womb. So he opens Leah's womb, but he doesn't open Rachel's womb.

Leah then conceives a son named Reuben. Notably Leah ascribes Reuben's birth to God's concern for her (29:32).

"Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction" – 29:32

She believes God sees, God cares, God acts. She expects Reuben's birth will provoke Jacob to love her (29:32). I've provided a son when Rachel has not she thinks?

Leah conceives a 2nd son named Simeon. Notably Leah ascribes Simeon's birth to God once again.

"Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also." – 29:33

Leah's expectations went unmet. Reuben didn't provoke Jacob's love. So God looks on her misery and gives her Simeon.

Leah conceives a 3rd son named Levi. Again, Leah has expectations: ***"Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons"*** (29:34). ***"attached"*** = joined together, bound to one another suggesting a disconnect between Leah and Jacob. Leah was experiencing a marriage characterized by distance, isolation, separation rather than a one flesh, holding fast (continuing to cling to one another, continuing to be attached to one another), relationship (Gen 2:24). Jacob was neglecting his marital obligations to Leah.

Leah conceives a 4th son named Judah. Leah responds, ***"This time I will praise the LORD."*** No pining for Jacob. Just praise. Because God saw, God cared, God acted.

Application

Once again we see the trauma of polygamy. A wife is hated, unloved, neglected, distant from her husband whom she's supposed to be clinging to. She longs for his affection, but it's nowhere to be found. Polygamy severs the one flesh relationship, results in neglected wives, creates rival wives. Things don't go well for us when we deviate from God's design!

God takes note when people suffer because of sinful deviation from God's design. To take note of someone's suffering and care by acting for them is to share the heart of God.

No polygamists here. No one duped into marrying the wrong person. But we might have people who find themselves in a relationship where you're unloved. Doesn't have to be romantic. God sees. God cares. God acts. God cares about human misery and brings aid in various ways. Trust in God to help.

The local church is uniquely suited to provide practical help and relational affection where it lacks. People who find themselves unloved by a parent or a child can find people who care in the church!

It's right and good to do what's in your power to bring aid to the suffering. No guilt there. I think we Christians sometimes think it's not good to alleviate suffering because we're supposed to proclaim the gospel. We pit good works against the gospel message. What they need more than practical acts of kindness is the gospel we think. True. But it's okay to do people good simply because you care. When you do, you're just imitating God. And yes, there's something else we can do. We can point them to the God who's worthy of praise by speaking the gospel. We can point them to the Savior who brings soul rest to weary people.

Practical question: Do I take note of hurting people and bring them aid?

Why is this section in the Bible?

Offspring have been provided. The nation promised to Abraham is beginning to take shape.

From the tribe of Judah will emerge the singular offspring of Eve that will crush the serpent (Gen 3:15), the singular offspring of Abraham in whom *"all the families of the earth shall be blessed"* (Gen 12:3), the singular offspring who *"shall possess the gate of his enemies"* (Gen 22:17), *"the Lion of the tribe of Judah"* (Rev 5:5), Jesus Christ.

How will Jesus defeat the serpent and bless the nations and conquer his enemies?

Conclusion

Jesus defeated sin and death and Satan on the cross. By dying as a substitute for sinners such that those who believe will experience forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Eternal life meaning everlasting dwelling in the land, the world to come, the kingdom of God, a place without death, sin, and suffering. Those who believe will be blessed in Jesus.

One day Jesus will return to defeat his enemies and sentence them to the lake of fire. Jesus wins!

Blessing isn't limited to the future. Blessing happens today. Jesus said, ***"Whoever in believes in me…Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water"*** (John 7:38). Jesus came to forgive people. Jesus came to change people. To give internal peace to the unloved and those in misery.

Why do we need forgiveness? Because of our sins. Doing life our own way, not God's way, renders us guilty before a holy God and worthy of judgment.

How do I experience God's forgiveness? Turn from your sin by trusting in Jesus.

Confess your sin. Concede your only hope is Jesus' death on the cross. Thank God for sending Jesus to the cross. Ask God for forgiveness. And keep trusting in Jesus.

Tell us if you do.