

When DAD and MOM Don't LOVE Each Other

by J. David Hertzler



When Parents Don't Love Each Other

"WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN WHETHER OR NOT THEIR PARENTS DEMONSTRATE AFFECTION FOR EACH OTHER?" a student asked in a family dynamics course I once taught.

"These children are more likely to be violent and immoral," I replied.

"Hold it!" You say. "Children don't become violent and immoral for reasons that simple."

Of course! There are always other influences. But wouldn't you expect that something as powerful as marital love could tip the child one way or the other?

In the Bible (Genesis 29-50) we find the story of a husband who didn't love his wife. Most of their children became violent and immoral. But the grace of God restored this family, and through this family God fulfilled His promises to the world.

"I just wanted Rachel"

This is the story of the patriarch Jacob and his wife Leah, the wife he didn't love.

As a young man, Jacob earned a reputation for being deceptive. He tricked his father and his twin brother Esau. When Esau threatened to kill him, he ran away to live in another country with his uncle Laban. There he fell in love with his beautiful cousin Rachel.

Marriage to first cousins was legal in those days. So Laban made Jacob a deal. He could have Rachel in return for seven years of work as a herdsman. Jacob accepted this "bargain." There was a wedding.

The bride, properly veiled, was pledged to him in marriage. He slept with her in the darkness of their tent.

The next morning he got his first good look at her. What a shock! It wasn't Rachel at all. It was her older sister Leah, the "ugly duckling" of the family. Furiously Jacob demanded an explanation from his uncle. Laban smugly replied, "It's not the custom in our country to give the younger daughter in marriage before the elder. But if you'll work an additional seven years, you can have Rachel too." Polygamy was also legal in those days.



Now Jacob had two wives. Each of them brought to the marriage a "maidservant". One duty of these slave girls was to be available sexually to the master of the house. This gave Jacob legal access to four women.

But Jacob wasn't excited about having four women on call. He was in love with Rachel. The Bible doesn't say how he showed that love except for hints that he spent a lot more time with Rachel than with Leah, his first wife.

God Helps the Unloved Wife

God looked down and saw this family situation. In His mercy, and perhaps with a sense of humour, He applied the equalizer. The Bible tells what happened next.

When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him

Reuben, for she said, "It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now."

She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too." So she named him Simeon.

Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." So he was named Levi.

She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "This time I will praise the Lord." So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children.

When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die."

Jacob became angry with her and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?"

Then she said, "Here is Bilhah, my maidservant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and that through her I too can build a family."

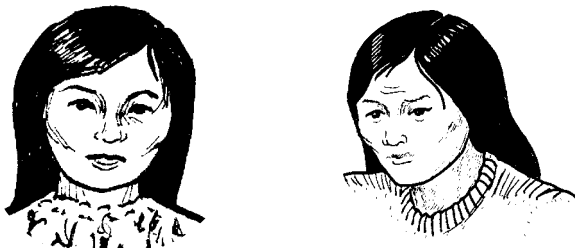
So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife. Jacob slept with her, and she became pregnant and bore him a son. Then Rachel said, "God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son." Because of this she named him Dan.

Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, "I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won." So she named him Naphtali.

When Leah saw that she had stopped having children, she took her maidservant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, "What good fortune!" So she named him Gad.

Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. Then Leah said, "How happy I am! The women will call me happy." So she named him Asher.

During the wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes."



But she said to her, "Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?"

"Very well," Rachel said, "he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes."

So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him. "You must sleep with me,"

she said. "I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he slept with her that night.

God listened to Leah, and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son. Then Leah said, "God has rewarded me for giving my maidservant to my husband." So she named him Issachar.

Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son. Then Leah said, "God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons." So she named him Zebulun.

Some time later she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dinah. (Genesis 29:31-30:21, NIV)

Now the score is Leah, six sons; Rachel, no sons; the slave girls, two sons each.

Trying to Earn Her Husband's Love

Can you see what was at the top of Leah's agenda? **She would win her husband's affection by giving him sons.** Children, especially sons, were prized possessions. Leah would add to her husband's prosperity by giving him lots of sons.

Look at the names Leah gave her sons. She tells us the meaning of each name. Three of the sons' names reflected her belief that she could win her husband's affection with lots of sons. The other three names reflected the equally false belief that the Lord was rewarding her for her strategies. Her daughter Dinah is mentioned almost as an afterthought. Daughters weren't valued as much as sons.

In all fairness, we must point out that Rachel, the beautiful Rachel, didn't really have a much better attitude than Leah. Look how she pouted: "Give me children, or I'll die." Look at the names she gave the sons of her slave girl. "I have been vindicated. I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won!"

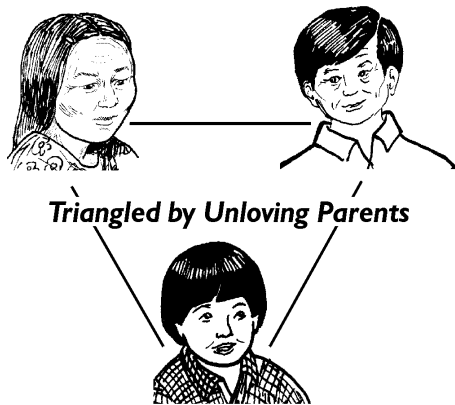
These two wives were quite a pair. But we should not be surprised. Even nature teaches us that we can't have two queen bees in one hive. One will kill the other, take sole command of the hive and have uncontested access to all the males. Like the bees, Leah and Rachel were fighting for an exclusive place in their husband's heart.

But by this time it was becoming clear that Leah's strategy to win her husband's affection wasn't working. Even though Jacob slept with her often enough to produce plenty of children, he still didn't love her.

An Unhealthy Family Triangle

So Leah turned to another strategy. In modern family counselling we call it "triangling." It happens in many families. When one family member doesn't get his emotional needs met by the family member who is supposed to meet them, he/she turns to another family member, forming a triangle. The result is an unhealthy attachment to the third family member.

As husband, Jacob was supposed to meet his wife's emotional needs. Like all women, Leah had a large "love tank". Leah's love tank was always running on empty, because she didn't get enough love from her husband to keep it even half full. So Leah began to form unhealthy attachments to her boys.



Few details are given of her sons' early lives. However, we can see that Reuben, the eldest, was already being drawn into the family conflict at an early age. He found some mandrakes in the field. Mandrakes were a great prize, because oriental peoples believed they could be made into a love potion. This tonic could cause someone to fall in love with you.

It is not hard to understand why Leah would want the mandrakes. But why was Rachel bargaining to get some of them? Did she feel unloved too? Was her childlessness making her desperate? We can only guess.

Anyway, Leah sold her mandrakes to Rachel in return for a night with Jacob. She became pregnant and bore her fifth son, and later her sixth. Finally, after all Leah's sons were born, Rachel conceived and gave birth to a son, naming him Joseph. Rachel's second son Benjamin gave her such a difficult childbirth that she died from it. Now Leah, the unloved wife, was undisputed "queen of the hive".

However, Rachel's death didn't end the strife. Jacob transferred his affection for Rachel to her elder son Joseph. Jacob (Israel) loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, Genesis 37:3 tells us. Leah's sons reacted angrily to this favoritism and hated Joseph. So the family conflict went on.

Bitter Fruit of an Unloving Marriage

By now Leah's sons were young men and strong enough to plan war strategies of their own. Reuben led things off. Genesis 35:22 tells us that he *slept with his father's concubine Bilhah*.

Most of us would assume that this was a case of a young man's hormones running wild. I thought so, too, until I remembered who Bilhah was. **She was Rachel's slave.**

Then I began to see this act for what it really

was. The issue wasn't lust; it was **power**. Reuben, his father's firstborn, was beginning to assert his claim to family headship. He had entered the family war on his mother's side by striking as close as he dared to his father's heart. He would not have dared to touch Rachel, but he felt strong enough to risk an assault on her slave girl.



Sure enough, he got away with it. Jacob said nothing. But he remembered it and mentioned it at the end of his life when he blessed his sons (Genesis 49). In this blessing he made it clear that Reuben's immorality disqualified him for family leadership.

The next two sons were Simeon and Levi. In Genesis 34, we see them in an incident involving their sister Dinah. Dinah had inherited from her mother a wanton eye, wandering feet, and an empty love tank. Her father wasn't paying any more attention to her than he was to her mother. So she went looking for ways to get her love tank filled.

Her wanderings took her into the camp of the Hivites, a tribe with whom her family was on friendly terms. She met the young son of the Hivite ruler. He was attracted to her and showed his affection by seducing her. Then he and his father sent Jacob's family a proposal of marriage.

When Jacob found out what had happened, he passively sat and waited for Dinah's brothers to come in from the fields. Then he let them negotiate with the Hivites.



There was no passivity on the brothers' part. The Bible says that, *they were filled with grief and fury*. However, they concealed their feelings in order to trick the Hivites. They told the Hivites, "*We will give our consent to you on one condition only: that you become like us by circumcising all your males.*"

This minor surgery, commanded by God as a distinguishing mark for His people the Jews, was

normally done on baby boys. On adults it is so painful that Dinah's brothers knew it would put the Hivite men out of commission for several days.

But the young Hivite's desire for Dinah was so great that he agreed to these terms. The Hivites quickly completed their part of the agreement. Then, while they were still sore from their surgery, Simeon and Levi took their swords and attacked the unsuspecting camp. They slaughtered all the men and took their flocks, women and children for themselves. Then they took their sister from the Hivite's house and went home.

This time Jacob spoke up. He gave his violent sons a scolding. "Boys, boys, you're giving us a bad reputation." They brushed this off with the flippant remark, "Should he have treated our sister like a prostitute?"

We can only speculate on the cause of this senseless violence. Like Reuben's assault of Bilhah, this was an immoral act. Were Simeon and Levi sexually immoral as well? It is possible. Young men like this often have a double standard, insisting on a moral code for others that they aren't willing to keep themselves. Their violence may have been a cover up for their sexual immorality. The Bible doesn't give us enough information to be sure.



This incident wasn't the end of the violence. When Rachel's son Joseph was old enough to leave the protection of his father, his brothers' violent tendencies showed up again. They caught him out in the fields by himself and made plans to kill him. Reuben talked them out of it. Instead, they sold Joseph to slave traders who in turn sold him to a wealthy Egyptian. It was Judah's idea to sell his brother. But it is quite possible that Simeon may have been a ringleader in the plot to kill him.

So we know that Reuben, Simeon and Levi, the eldest sons of Leah and Jacob, were violent, immoral and unruly men. What about the fourth son Judah?

Genesis 38 records that Judah left home, possibly in disgust at the family conflict, and went to live among the Canaanites. He married a Canaanite wife who gave him three sons. When Er, the eldest, grew up, Judah found a Canaanite wife for him named Tamar. But Er was so wicked that God took his life. Judah told his second son Onan to fulfill the part of a husband to Tamar and raise up children for his

brother. This was the custom in those days. But when Onan was unwilling to do this and sabotaged the sex act, God took his life too.

Now Judah had only one son left. He told Tamar to go back to her father and wait until his third son was grown.

Time passed, and Judah's wife died. Tamar began to realize that Judah had no intentions of giving his only remaining son to her. So she took matters into her own hands. Dressing as a prostitute, she sat along the road where she expected Judah to pass. When Judah came by, still missing his wife, he seized the opportunity and slept with the "prostitute". She kept his seal and staff as pledge that he would pay for her services. Then she put on her regular clothes and went home.

When Tamar's pregnancy was discovered, the "righteous" men of the community were going to burn her at the stake for "playing the harlot". They thought better of it when she produced Judah's seal and staff as evidence that he was the father of her child. She was allowed to live. She carried the pregnancy to term and gave birth to twins. What a family! It is not at all what you would expect from a great patriarch, the prince of God, a man of faith who gave his name to the modern nation of Israel. Jacob's unloving marriage bore bitter fruit.

But before we start comparing ourselves among ourselves and thanking God that we are not like that, let's see what God in His mercy did with these violent, immoral children. It has been said that where it is darkest, the light can shine the brightest. So it seems to be in this family when God started working with them.

God's Grace for Unloved Children

In Egypt, God was with Joseph. He rose to become prime minister of the country. God showed him that there would be a great famine. Joseph helped the Egyptians store their food in preparation for this famine.

When his violent, immoral brothers showed up, wanting to buy food from the Egyptians, Joseph recognized them instantly. To test them, he accused them of being spies. He put one of them into prison and sent the rest home with orders to bring Rachel's younger son Benjamin the next time they came. The brother he imprisoned was Simeon. Could it be that he identified Simeon as the ringleader in the original plot to kill him?

When the food ran out, Jacob told his sons to return to Egypt and buy more. But he refused to send Benjamin along as Joseph had ordered. Reuben tried to negotiate with him: "Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you" (Genesis 42:37). Still Jacob refused. Can you blame him for not trusting Reuben?

Into this family crisis stepped Judah, the immoral Judah. Facing famine, he returned from Canaanite country to show genuine care for his father and brothers. He gently pleaded with his father: *“If I do not bring Benjamin back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever”* (Genesis 43:9). To this suggestion Jacob finally consented.



When the brothers reached Egypt, Joseph continued to test them. Judah served as spokesman for the brothers. When Joseph was convinced that his brothers' hearts and habits were indeed changed, he made himself known to them and forgave them. Then he invited the whole family to move to Egypt where they could be near him and he could feed them.

So it is clear that the brothers' hearts were changing. But perhaps the greatest miracle of all is what happened to Jacob. When his sons were young, he had moved his family from Laban's farm back to his own birthplace in Canaan. On the way, God met him and *“wrestled with him”* (Genesis 32:24). Jacob refused to let go of his opponent until He blessed him. God did this by giving him a new name, Israel, which means *“prince of God”*. Although it took many years for Jacob to live up to his new name, from that day on his life began to change. By the time he died, he knew God so well that he was able to give each of his sons a blessing straight from God.

One of the most beautiful of the blessings was the one Jacob gave Judah. He prophesied that Judah would be the ancestor of the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that this prophecy was fulfilled, not through Judah's legitimate son but through one of the illegitimate twin sons born by Judah's incestuous union with Tamar, his Canaanite daughter-in-law.

Centuries later, the time came for the Israelites to establish a family of priests. Which family did God choose? None other than the descendants of Levi, one of the violent sons of Leah! When Moses, the great leader of Israel, died, he blessed the tribe of Levi by naming them as priests and teachers of God's law (Deuteronomy 33:10).

God's Grace for Us

It would be convenient if we could figure out a formula for earning God's grace. The Bible says that Noah was a just man and well-behaved, and that Noah

found grace in the eyes of the Lord. If everybody who found grace in God's sight were like Noah, we would have our formula. Just be good and behave yourself, and God will bless you.

But it doesn't turn out this way at all. Jacob the trickster also found grace. So did Reuben and Judah and Simeon and Levi and all the rest of Jacob's sons. So did Samson, the spoiled, sensual muscle-man. So did Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho. They received the benefits of belonging to a family that God chose especially for demonstrating His grace.

Perhaps God was trying to make the point that the Apostle Paul stated so well: *God has mercy on anyone he wishes* (Romans 9:18).

How then do we apply this story to our own lives?

Our parents' love for each other wasn't perfect. Some of us may never have seen our parents display love for each other at all. Like Jacob's sons, we struggle with immoral thoughts and anger. If parents don't show their children in ways the children can understand that they love each other, those children will have problems with their own gender identity. They won't be sure what it means to be a man or woman. They will be tempted to use ways outside of God's plan to establish their identity. To some degree, we have all experienced this temptation.

I think this is why, immediately after telling husbands three times in Ephesians 5 to love their wives, Paul says to them, *“Fathers, do not exasperate your children”* (Ephesians 6:4). Few things exasperate a child more than for their father to fail in his duty to love their mother.

All of our parents were imperfect. All of us have been exasperated at times. But now God has stepped into our lives. He has seen whatever moral weaknesses may be there. He says, *“Here is an opportunity to show My grace by empowering you to love to a greater degree than you were ever loved and to avoid the moral snares set for the weak. Even if you were not prepared by your parents to be a priest or ambassador of God, I will empower you to be that servant of the Most High. If I choose to give you children, I will demonstrate My grace by empowering you to love those children as I love them.”*

The Apostle Paul never accepted a deficient family background as an excuse not to live in victory for Christ. Neither did the Apostle Peter, who could have been speaking to *“exasperated children”* when he wrote these familiar words:

But you are a chosen people [not rejected], a royal priesthood [remember Levi?], a holy nation [remember Judah?], a people belonging to God [not neglected], that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people [you were nobodies, like Dinah], but now you are the

people of God; once you had not received mercy [like Leah's children], but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2:9-12 NIV. emphasis and brackets added.)

The mercy and grace of God gives us the power to break generational cycles and give to our children what we did not receive from our own parents.

Scriptures quoted from *The Holy Bible*

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