

Good morning, my name is Shane Gould, and I am one of the pastoral team here at North Shore Alliance. If you're joining us for the first time, we want you to know we are so glad you are here. This summer we are working through the last half of the Book of Genesis, as we explore and follow the lives of Abraham's descendants, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Genesis is the beginning of God's unfolding promise to bless and bring people to himself from every culture and nation. It's the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but it's also a story about you and I. It's an incredible story that has so much to say to us about God's gracious heart and his desire to bless our lives.

This teaching series is called "Beauty and Brokenness: The Unfolding Story of God's Redemption." In Genesis, God began a grand plan of redemption for the world by calling one man, Abraham, and his family into relationship, promising to be their God, promising to prosper, protect, and bless them.

In Genesis 22, God repeats the promise he has made to Abraham, saying, "I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."<sup>1</sup>

God promised not to just bless Abraham, but through him, all people. Out of this one family, God eventually brings the gift of his own Son, Jesus, something Abraham could never have imagined. It is amazing to read through the genealogy of Jesus in the opening chapter of the Gospel of Matthew as it traces Jesus' earthly lineage, descendant by descendant, all the way back to the family of Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham. God made a promise to blessing Abraham and Sarah, but it was a promise with you and I in mind.

As we look at the story, I've been praying that God would renew our hope in him as we see God at work in the life of Jacob's family, a

family that was incredibly broken.

### **Pray.**

Growing up, I basically watched three tv shows, and all of them about family: *Family Ties*, *Who's the Boss*, and *The Cosby Show*. These were shows from the 80's, my formative tv watching years. In the 1980's, there was no such thing as a dysfunctional family because *The Simpsons* or *Married....With Children* hadn't been created yet!

If you are both old enough and young enough to have watched *Family Ties*, you'll remember that just about every episode was about Alex P. Keaton, an ambitious yet nerdy younger brother, played by Michael J. Fox, pushing his right-wing agenda to the horror of his left-leaning parents, while his older sister, Malory, constantly found herself in and out of the drama of dating her deadbeat boyfriend, Nick. Every situation of the show would wrap up with the voice of reason coming from one of the family members, bringing things to a happy resolution. I always wanted to be Alex P. Keaton, aka Michael J. Fox, but God has graciously reformed me!

These shows had it all! In one hour, the Keaton's, the Bauer's, and the Cosby's laughed, cried, made up, and learned a new moral to the story. Life happened in a one our hour "they lived happily ever after" segment - it was beautiful! These shows were great entertainment, but they weren't realistic portraits of the pain of life's brokenness.

When it comes to the Bible, we don't find fiction, we don't find contrived 'happily ever after' life segments. Instead, the Bible serves us with stories of real people encountering real brokenness, and real pain. But in doing so, the Bible offers us real hope. Amidst the brokenness, imperfection, and sin of real people, in today's case the family of Jacob, God continues His beautiful work of redeeming, reconciling, and transforming people so that they could mediate God's blessing to the world.

This morning we pick up the Genesis story where we left off two

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 22:17-18, New International Version.

weeks ago at chapter 29 where Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, leaves his father, Isaac, and the land of Canaan to go on a journey to find a wife, begin a family of his own, and become established enough to eventually return to claim the land God promised to him. Like a movie, the story starts out really good but it soon encounters the brokenness of real life.

If you have a Bible, I encourage you to turn to Genesis chapter 29 verse 1, page 44 in the Blue Bibles. Our story covers a lot of ground, so I'm going to lead us through highlights of the story as we make our way from the beginning of chapter 29 to the end of chapter 31.

**Genesis 29:1-6, 9-12**

*1 Then Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the eastern peoples. 2 There he saw a well in the open country, with three flocks of sheep lying near it because the flocks were watered from that well.... 4 Jacob asked the shepherds, "My brothers, where are you from?" "We're from Haran," they replied. 5 He said to them, "Do you know Laban, Nahor's grandson?" "Yes, we know him," they answered. 6 Then Jacob asked them, "Is he well?" "Yes, he is," they said, "and here comes his daughter Rachel with the sheep."*

*9 While he was still talking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherd. 10 When Jacob saw Rachel daughter of his uncle Laban, and Laban's sheep, he went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered his uncle's sheep. 11 Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud. 12 He had told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and a son of Rebekah. So she ran and told her father.*

Jacob's journey to find a wife starts out like a fairy tale. He meets Rachel in the open fields, the girl of his dreams, a beautiful shepherdess. Like a lot of men, before he knows it, Jacob finds himself married but in a marriage but one he hadn't expected.

**Genesis 29:16-27**

*16 Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and*

*the name of the younger was Rachel. 17 Leah had weak[a] eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. 18 Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel."*

*19 Laban said, "It's better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me." 20 So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her. 21 Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her." 22 So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. 23 But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her. 24 And Laban gave his servant Zilpah to his daughter as her attendant.*

And here's the punch line...

*25 When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?" 26 Laban replied, "It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. 27 Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work."*

As you can imagine, Jacob is in shock and angry. Suddenly, his dream has become a nightmare. Now, Jacob is no stranger to scheming and deception – that's how Jacob has operated all of his life. It's just that he's never been the one on the other end. So, suddenly, Jacob is finding out that sometimes what goes around comes around. In his new father-in-law, Laban, Jacob has met his match.

I'm not sure exactly how Jacob could not have known it was Leah and not Rachel that he was marrying, but suddenly he finds himself married to the wrong girl and now ends up having to marry two women instead of one.

To understand the story, it's important to understand two things about the ancient world: 1) It was customary for the groom and his family to pay a bride price to the bride's family in order to marry – in this case, 7 years worth of labour. But it wasn't exactly buying someone to marry. Rather, the bride price was held in trust by the bride's family to ensure that in the event that the groom abandoned his bride, she would not become financially destitute.

The second thing is that it was customary in the ancient world for a man to have more than one wife, so throughout Genesis and the Old Testament, you find large families consisting of multiple wives. Now, this was never God's design but it was something God allowed. The New Testament repeatedly says that a man should be the husband of one wife. And there are few, if any, portrayals of positive marriages involving multiple wives in the whole of the Bible.

Writer and Christian thinker, Tim Keller, writes, "Many years ago, when I first started reading the Book of Genesis, it was very upsetting to me. Here are all these spiritual heroes—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph—and look at how they treat women. They engage in polygamy, and they buy and sell their wives. It was awful to read their stories at times.... There are two institutions present in the Book of Genesis that were universal in ancient cultures: polygamy and primogeniture. Polygamy said a husband could have multiple wives, and primogeniture said the oldest son got everything—all the power, all the money. In other words, the oldest son basically ruled over everyone else in the family....when you read the Book of Genesis, you'll see two things. First of all, in every generation polygamy wreaks havoc. Having multiple wives is an absolute disaster—socially, culturally, spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, and relationally. Second, when it comes to primogeniture, in every generation God favors the younger son over the older. He favors Abel, not Cain; Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau....you begin to realize what the Book of Genesis is doing—it is subverting, not supporting, those ancient institutions at every turn."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller, from his sermon, "Literalism."

Even when culture itself is broken, like it has been with polygamy, God is at work subverting it and transforming it.

Getting back to the story, Jacob now has two wives, one he loves and one he doesn't. To make matters worse, both Leah and Rachel experience seasons of barrenness in childbearing. And both respond with anguish and bitter jealousy. Jacob is caught in a marriage triangle of jealousy and pain.

### **Genesis 29:31-32**

*31 When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. 32 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."*

### **Genesis 30:1-3**

*1 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!" 2 Jacob became angry with her and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?" 3 Then she said, "Here is Bilhah, my servant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and I too can build a family through her."*

Jacob's family is filled with jealousy and anger. Leah and Rachel even begin to give their children names that voice their pain and rivalry. Effectively, their children become trophies of their place in the family. They both invite Jacob to use their maids as surrogate mothers. Each woman is tries to win love or social standing by having one more child. Jacob's family is very broken. But this is the family God has chosen to use to display his blessing and his grace.

Well, the brokenness of Jacob's family doesn't stop there. God begins to bless Jacob with material wealth. God soon positions Jacob to become financially independent so that he can return to the land of Canaan that God has promised to him and his descendants.

But before Jacob can leave, his controlling father-in-law, Laban, begs

Jacob to stay...

**Genesis 30:25-27**

*25 After Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Send me on my way so I can go back to my own homeland. 26 Give me my wives and children, for whom I have served you, and I will be on my way. You know how much work I've done for you."*

*27 But Laban said to him, "If I have found favor in your eyes, please stay. I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me because of you."*

Can't you hear the manipulation in that conversation? *'Don't leave me Jacob! You can't leave. God is using you to help me!'* Nothing seems beneath Laban, not even pulling the 'God' card to get what he wants.

Jacob falls for it, giving in to Laban, and entering into a new financial agreement but one that again leaves Jacob with the short end of the stick. Jacob, again outwitted by his father-in-law, finds a way to still prosper as he manipulates the breeding of their livestock...

**Genesis 30:42-43**

*"So the weak animals went to Laban and the strong ones to Jacob. 43 In this way the man grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks, and female and male servants, and camels and donkeys."*

Jacob's prosperity only seems to bring more trouble. Leah and Rachel's brothers soon become jealous and angry of their brother-in-law's continual success. Growing ever fearful of his father-in-law and brothers-in-law jealousy, Jacob makes plans to secretly run away.

**Genesis 31:1-2, 20-21**

*1 Jacob heard that Laban's sons were saying, "Jacob has taken everything our father owned and has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father." 2 And Jacob noticed that Laban's attitude toward him was not what it had been....20 Moreover, Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him he was running away. 21 So he fled with all he had, crossed the Euphrates River, and headed for the*

*hill country of Gilead.*

Laban gets wind of Jacob leaving, and in hot pursuit, pursue Jacob for seven days until he finally catches up with Jacob. But there's no real reconciliation. The best the two can do is agree to a truce. So they make a mutual agreement to leave each other alone. And to witness it, they set up a pile of stones as a kind of monument to their truce.

**Genesis 31:51-53**

*51 Laban also said to Jacob, "Here is this heap, and here is this pillar I have set up between you and me. 52 This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not go past this heap to your side to harm you and that you will not go past this heap and pillar to my side to harm me. 53 May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us." So Jacob took an oath in the name of the Fear of his father Isaac.*

So Jacob and Laban agree to disagree and part ways – not a real happy ending. Jacob's family life was a mess and reads like a soap opera. If you could sum up Jacob's life in one word, I think the word would be *complicated*. But if you summed it up in two, the first word would definitely be *broken*.

Jacob is desperate to get the family inheritance, so he deceives his brother and father for it, and ends up alienating his family. Jacob is desperate to for a wife, but ends up marrying two and one he doesn't love. Jacob is desperate for possessions, he finds success but at a huge cost. Jacob's not the only one desperate in the family.

Jacob's wives are also desperate. They're the real *Desperate Housewives*. One is desperate for love, getting pregnant for the sake of attention. The other, Rachel, is desperate for children, willing to have her husband sleep with a surrogate someone else in order to gain the status of being a mother. Jacob's family is filled with difficulty, conflict, barrenness, and mistreatment.

In a word, Jacob's family life is incredibly *broken*. But while it may be

broken it is also blessed. When we read this story closely, we find that through all of the struggle, Jacob's life was actually under the constant blessing of God.

Now, that may seem strange or out of order to us, but it's what we find in every biblical life – brokenness and blessing. It's what we find in our lives. While we may have begun a journey with Jesus, we are still a long way off from the absolute healing our lives need. God remains committed to us, faithfully at work within us and at work in the circumstances of our lives. And while God doesn't immediately remove our brokenness, he begins taking us on a journey of transformation, pouring out his blessing all the way along.

Throughout the story *God is at work behind the scenes*. In the midst of what was broken, God was graciously bringing blessing.

Chapter 29:1 reads that "When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb..."

Chapter 30:22 it says that "Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, 'God has taken away my disgrace.'"

Later in chapter 31:4-9 Jacob himself recognizes God's hand of blessing. He says to Leah and Rachel, "I see that your father's attitude toward me is not what it was before, but the God of my father has been with me. 6 You know that I've worked for your father with all my strength, 7 yet your father has cheated me by changing my wages ten times. However, God has not allowed him to harm me....9 So God has taken away your father's livestock and has given them to me."

It was God, we find out, who told Jacob to go back to the land of Canaan, giving Jacob the promise that He would be with him. But it was Jacob's idea to go secretly, running away under the cover of night. God wanted Jacob to be free of Laban and the control he had over Jacob's life. I believe God would have wanted Jacob to leave in the day, with honesty and courage, as a person of integrity. Jacob

goes, but not without resorting back to his old pattern of dishonesty.

Abraham and his family were a lot like us: sometimes they took three steps forward and two steps back. But God was still at work bringing about blessing in their lives. Whether you realize it or not, God is at work bringing about blessing in the midst of your brokenness, no matter how broken your life may be.

The Lord remembered Leah, he remembered Rachel, he directed Jacob. And he will *remember* you! God wants to bring freedom to your life, just as he did for Jacob. So often, I'm tempted to think God has forgotten me. I'm sure Leah, Rachel, and Jacob thought that at points in their lives. But God never forgotten them. God kept showing up to bless, protect, and lead them, despite their jealousy, conflict, and mistreatment of one another.

Genesis tells the story of Jacob's family from a perspective of faith. From an earthly perspective, Jacob's family is hopelessly broken, maybe getting a few lucky breaks. But the Bible tells a different story. Genesis gives us a perspective of life based on faith, where God is at work bringing about the blessing of children, provision, and a meaningful life destiny despite the brokenness.

God wants us to see our lives with eyes of faith. I love the song Forever and a Day by Brian and Jenn Johnson. It's chorus reads,

*"When I go to bed, You are near  
When I wake up, You are there  
When I say Your name, You are here  
When I walk in faith, You're everywhere  
You catch and save every tear I cry  
You journal everyday about my life  
Your love for me reaches to the sky  
I am Yours, You are mine"*

Can you look at your life with eyes of faith and see that God has been there even when you haven't called on him?

Essentially, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel – even Laban – were all living what you might call a “half-life”<sup>3</sup> blocked by sorrow, hostility, and competition. Leah has children but not the love of her husband. Rachel has love but no children. Jacob has wealth but no freedom.

To those of us here this morning caught in a “half-life,” God isn’t assigning blame or offering a cliché like, ‘*Everything happens for a reason.*’ God is offering hope. With God, there is hope for the broken, that’s the title of this message. God is inviting you to believe that his desire is to bless you as you keep looking to him, that he remembers you. Will you believe that?

Genesis isn’t celebrating brokenness. Genesis is celebrating the triumph of his grace over our sin and our brokenness.

Jesus said, “I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.”<sup>4</sup> Whether the powers of hell are pushing from the outside or within you in the patterns of your own behavior, Jesus promises to make you an *over comer* as you commit yourself to him.

I believe there is more blessing available to us than what any of us are currently experiencing. Jesus said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”<sup>5</sup>

In the midst of our “half-lives,” Jesus wants us to begin to experience the fullness of life that is promised in his redeeming, transforming work within our hearts. Brokenness doesn’t have to be our only experience. This morning God wants us to take hold of his promise to redeem our lives, making it something beautiful.

In Jesus, we have the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham,

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Waltke, Genesis. A Commentary, Zondervan, 2001. pg. 415

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16:18, NLT

<sup>5</sup> John 10:10, NIV

Isaac, and Jacob. Let me end with Ephesians 1:3, which reads, “All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ” (NLT).