

## CHAPTER 5

# THE TRICKSTER GETS TRICKED

### Genesis 29

**I**'ve had a few arguments with scales. Not fish scales. Weight scales. I've stared at the number and refuted, "No, you can't be correct. You're inaccurate. You're overweighing me. I'm not that heavy! You're wrong."

But the scales never reply. They remain mute. They do not defend themselves. It does no good to contend with scales about your weight.

It does no good to argue with the mirror about your appearance. Even so, I did. Dena-

lyn commented on my bald spot. I didn't know I had one. Apparently it was spreading on my scalp years before I noticed it. Thanks to my dear, observant wife, I'm ignorant no longer. I hurried to the bathroom and held a hand mirror so I could see the back of my head. There it was. Sitting like a yarmulke, spreading like an amoeba. You've seen the monks who shave a saucer-sized circle on their heads?

I qualify.

I expressed my displeasure to the mirrors. "You must be incorrect." No reply. They, like the bathroom scales, are impervious to objections.

So is the radar gun. "That can't be true, officer. I wasn't speeding."

"The radar gun says otherwise."

Growl. Case closed. No rebuttal allowed.

It's hard to deny the truth when it stares at you squarely in the face.

In Jacob's case God gave him a face full of facts in the distant land of Haran. You'll find his twenty-year sojourn there one of the most curious, entertaining, and fascinating stories in the Bible. Can a man marry one woman all the while thinking he is marrying someone else? Would a swindler ever be outswindled by another swindler? Genesis 29 offers answers.

Before we follow Jacob to Haran, keep in mind that Jacob was a player in heaven's greatest promise: the deliverance of Jesus to earth. Two generations earlier God had spoken to Abraham, Jacob's grandfather, and promised, in so many words, "I'm going to do something about the misery, death, and brokenness in the world. And I'm going to do it through you and your descendants."

One of those descendants was Jacob. From the top of Jacob's ladder God promised, "in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 28:14). Yet, Jacob's rap sheet included words like *cheater*, *deceiver*, *trickster*, *grifter*, and *liar*. His spiritual life had more ups and downs than the Rocky Mountains. But God kept him on the team. God used the man in spite of the man. Odd, I know. Jacob seemed more at home in a gambling casino than in a church sanctuary. He was a bit of a mess, this guy.

Aren't we all? Like him, our spiritual walk follows a crooked path. Our cheese keeps falling off our cracker, and our bad habits scuttle our good intentions. And we wonder, does God have a place for us?

The answer through Jacob is "yes." Our failures are great, but God's grace is greater. He

uses flawed folks. He doesn't cast us out when we deserve it. He does, however, let us reap what we sow.

Scripture waves this warning flag often and with no small amount of flair.

“The wicked are trapped by their own deeds.” (Ps. 9:16 NLT)

“Cruel people bring trouble on themselves.” (Prov. 11:17 NCV)

“The unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.” (Prov. 11:3 NIV)

“The wicked are brought down by their own wickedness.” (Prov. 11:5 NIV)

“As you have done, it will be done to you;  
your deeds will return upon your own head.”  
(Obad. 1:15 NIV)

“The nations have fallen into the pit they dug.  
Their feet are caught in the nets they  
laid.” (Ps. 9:15 NCV)

The list of such advisements goes on and on.<sup>1</sup> The fact that we reap what we sow is no small matter in Scripture. Evil rebounds.

So does good.

“Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” (Luke 6:37 NCV)

“Well-spoken words bring satisfaction;  
well-done work has its own reward.”  
(Prov. 12:14 THE MESSAGE)

“Kind people do themselves a favor,  
but cruel people bring trouble on them-  
selves.”  
(Prov. 11:17 NCV)

“Whoever gives to others will get richer;  
those who help others will themselves be  
helped.” (Prov. 11:25 NCV)

Jesus summed up the bounce-back principle when he said, “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Matt. 7:2 NIV).

Do you want God to disperse mercy upon you with a bucket? Then use a bucket as you disperse mercy to others. Would you want him

to use a teaspoon? Then . . . well, you get the point.

I'm not sure Jacob did.

To help him learn it, God took Jacob to the land of Laban, the region known as Haran.

Rebekah, his mother, commissioned this journey. Her plan was simple: send Jacob to a safe place where he could stay with her brother Laban while Esau's anger subsided. Who knows, while there he might find a nice young girl to marry.

Jacob thought he was going to Haran to meet his uncle and marry a wife. God, however, sent Jacob to Haran so Jacob could step on the scales. It was time to look in the mirror. It was time to read the radar gun. It was time for Jacob to face the facts about Jacob. He had, not a bald spot, but a few blind spots. He traveled east across the Jordan River, north toward Damascus, east to Tadmor, then a sharp north over the Euphrates River and through the Fertile Crescent into modern-day Turkey.

The first thing Jacob saw in Haran was a water well. A stone plugged the mouth to prevent pollution and theft. Three shepherds stood near the well. Jacob asked if they knew a man named Laban. They said they did.

While he was still talking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherd. 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. Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud. (Gen. 29:9–11 NIV)

What a made-for-movie moment! I see Rachel with dark hair that was gathered at the nape of her neck by a scarlet string. Her eyes were the color of chocolate and shaped like almonds. Her chin had a slight cleft. Her mouth, a shy smile. She shepherded her flock with a willow branch.

She was a portrait of charm, this Rachel.

She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.<sup>2</sup>

She was a knockout. And Jacob fell head over heels.

One sight of her and he ripped open his robe, revealing the S on his chest. Pop-eyed and palpitating, he flexed his pecs, pressed his

shoulder against the stone, and gave it a heave. The rock gave way. Jacob did what the three men had yet to do. He then did what no one imagined he would do. “He kissed Rachel and broke into tears” (Gen. 29:11 THE MESSAGE).

Commentaries describe this kiss as a respected and expected cultural gesture.<sup>3</sup> A slight peck on the cheek. Really?

I see passion. I see Jacob cupping her face in his hands and kissing her like it was their wedding day. He then wept. For her beauty? For the end of his pilgrimage? At the thought that he, the heel grabber, would meet such a queen? Maybe all of the above.

The name Rachel means “ewe” (as in lamb).<sup>4</sup> The moment Jacob saw her, he said, “I want ewe.” (Sorry, couldn’t resist.) Rachel ran and fetched her father, Laban.

Prepare yourself for this guy. He was a slick one. Part Bernie Madoff, part P. T. Barnum. Ponzi meister and circus promoter. He could, at once, put an arm around your shoulders and his hand on your wallet. He wore his silk shirt unbuttoned to the navel, a gold chain around his neck, and gold rings on each pinkie. His hair was colored with grocery store hair dye that didn’t match his sideburns.

He gave Jacob a squeeze.



“Oh, Rebekah’s boy! You will come to my tent. You will live in my house! You will want for nothing as long as you are here.”

Jacob went to work for Laban and, after a month of tending his flocks, requested permission to marry Rachel. The typical bride price was thirty to forty shekels. Since a shepherd’s annual wage was ten shekels a year, Jacob most likely expected to work three or four years for the hand of Rachel.<sup>5</sup> Boy, was he in for a surprise.

I imagine the conversation went something like this:

“What would you take in exchange for the hand of your daughter?”

Laban placed a hand over his heart. “I could never give up my precious Rachel.”

“I’ll work for you.”

“I could never accept labor from my sister’s son.”

“I’ll tend your flocks for a year.”

“But Rachel is my special daughter.”

“I’ll serve for three years.”

“But Rachel has such beauty.”

Jacob, who'd moved the stone to impress Rachel, was willing to move heaven and earth to marry her. "Four years."

Back and forth they volleyed until Jacob agreed to work seven years (double the expected dowry!) for only room and board.

Remember, this was Jacob, the grandson of the richest man in the promised land. And he was working for free? Either Rachel was drop-dead gorgeous, or greedy Laban could talk birds out of trees. I suspect that both were the case.

Some of the Bible's most poetic language was used to describe the romance between Jacob and Rachel. "So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed only a few days to him because of the love he had for her" (Gen. 29:20).

*Sigh.*

All would have gone well had Laban not been such a backroom dealer. Rachel had an older sister named Leah, who was still single. Scripture is a bit cryptic about her appearance: "Leah's eyes were delicate, but Rachel was beautiful of form and appearance" (Gen. 29:17). *Delicate* means "soft." Leah's eyes lacked the fire and sparkle of her younger sis-

ter's. Whereas the name Rachel meant "ewe," the name Leah meant "cow."<sup>6</sup>

"Ewe" and "moo" in the same family.

A reflection on her appearance? Seems to be the case. "While Leah is not without striking features, she pales in comparison to Rachel's overall beauty."<sup>7</sup> What we can say with certainty is that Rachel was heading to the wedding altar, and her big sister, Leah, was not. Laban, however, had other plans. I do not know how to say "switcheroo" in Hebrew, but Laban pulled off the biggest one in the Bible.

The day of the wedding finally arrived; seven years of labor were completed. Laban invited everyone. The brickmakers, the goatherds, and shepherds. The grain-growing farmers and the camel-riding merchants. "Laban gathered together all the men of the place and made a feast" (Gen. 29:22). The word for *feast* means "drinking fest."<sup>8</sup> Wine flowed like water. Everyone drank and danced. There was hand clapping, music making, joke telling, backslapping, drumbeating, meat eating, feet kicking, and sandal stomping, and just when the bibulous bunch thought they could drink no more, they did just that.

The women prepared the bridal tent. They covered the ground with carpets, perfumed

the air with incense, and placed lamps, lit ever so dimly, on the table.

As the sun set, the stage was set for the magic moment. Rising branches became dancing silhouettes in the circle of the moonlight. Stars sat like diamonds on the velvet night sky. Laban fetched the heavily veiled bride and led her to the tent. She'd been kept out of sight all day. By the time it was time for Jacob to consummate his marriage, he was so drunk he could scarcely see what he was doing. At least that's the best way to explain how he fell for Laban's chicanery.

The next morning, with the fog cleared from his brain and the wine flushed out of his system, he rolled over in bed, expecting to see his lovely Rachel, and, holy cow, was he surprised! "Morning came: There was Leah in the marriage bed! Jacob confronted Laban: 'What have you done to me? Didn't I work all this time for the hand of Rachel? Why did you cheat me?'" (Gen. 29:25 THE MESSAGE).

Remember the phrase "a taste of your own medicine"? Jacob was handed a spoonful.

1. Jacob, who fooled his near-blind father, Isaac, in a tent, was fooled in a tent when

he was blind on wine, blinded by night, blinded by lust, and blindly in love.

2. Jacob, who by the most calculating stealth stole what could not be returned, was tricked into a marriage that could not be undone.
3. Jacob, who begrudged and resisted the tradition of firstborn going first, fell victim to Laban's explanation that it was wrong "to give the younger before the firstborn" (Gen. 29:26).
4. Jacob, who complained to Laban, "Why did you cheat me?" (Gen. 29:25 THE MESSAGE), used the same word Esau used: "[Jacob] has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing" (Gen. 27:36 ESV).<sup>9</sup>

Confident that Jacob would agree, Laban offered to let Jacob marry Rachel as well. The condition? Seven more years of labor. Verse 28 is as terse as Jacob's expression must have been. "Jacob agreed" (THE MESSAGE). He finished the seven-day wedding with Leah and married Rachel. Something tells me the second party was a bit more subdued.

The chapter concludes with Jacob having sister wives—one wanted, the other not—seven more years of work to fulfill, and plenty of time to ponder a fundamental, recurring truth of Scripture: “You cannot cheat God. People harvest only what they plant” (Gal. 6:7 NCV).

Jacob planted seeds of deceit. He harvested the crop of deceit. He fooled Esau. He fooled Isaac. He was fooled by Laban. Jacob got “Jacobed.”

I wish I could say he learned his lesson. What a delight it would be to write a paragraph like the following: “Jacob had an *aha* moment that rerouted his life for the better. He realized that he had spent his years dealing cards from the bottom of the deck and made a life change. Henceforth he treated every person with respect and honored God with reverence. Haran had its intended impact on Jacob.”

But, alas, the paragraph would be fiction. Jacob remained stiff and unresponsive. Slow learner, this patriarch.

God sent him multiple messages. Some came in the form of blessings: A safe arrival in Haran. A stunning visage named Rachel. The ability to do the work of three men and move the rock from the well. Seven years of service

that felt more like a delight than a duty. Could Jacob not have interpreted these gifts as indications that God was with him?

Other signals came in the form of burdens: His encounter with Laban the louse. The wedding night swap. Seven more years of hard work. At any point Jacob could have, should have, looked up. “Are you trying to tell me something, God?” God gave him plenty of opportunities to learn his lesson and change his ways. But he never did. Incredible.

And even more incredible, God never gave up on him. He never turned away. He never threw up his hands and quit.

Grace. Grace. Grace.

And you?

You find yourself far from home, far from hope, and far from the life you’d hoped to find. You’re working hard on an advanced degree from the University of Hard Knocks, and graduation seems forever away. If that describes you, before you blame Laban or scowl at Leah, take a long look in the mirror. Let Jacob’s story be a warning: we reap what we sow.

A parable of this principle is found in British landscape. The gardens of England are famed for their beauty. But only one holds

the peculiar distinction of a garden designed to kill. Alnwick Garden in Northumberland boasts the typical scenery of primroses, lavish blooms, luscious ivy, and cascading fountains. Yet, if you journey deep into its heart, you'll find yourself beyond the black iron gates of the Poison Garden. Filled with approximately one hundred of the world's deadliest plants, this eerie plot requires strict rules for visitors, including no smelling, touching, or tasting. Every year incredulous tourists ignore the warning, and many faint from the deadly fragrances. What strikes most is the realization that so many of the deadly plants they encounter exist naturally alongside many they love. Both death and beauty sway in the wind as you walk through the park . . . and it all starts with just a little seed.<sup>10</sup>

What seeds are you sowing today? Just as seeds of deceit result in a harvest of deception, seeds of truth give way to a bountiful barnful of life. Consequences have compound interest.

You determine the quality of tomorrow by the seeds you sow today.

Jacob's story did not have to be routed through Haran. Marriage to the wrong sister was not mandated. Fourteen years of hard labor was not a requirement to be a patriarch.



He could have completed God's plan and led a much more peaceful life.

But when we "sow the wind, [we] reap the whirlwind" (Hos. 8:7).

Or as the wise man stated: "When you're kind to others, you help yourself; when you're cruel to others, you hurt yourself. Bad work gets paid with a bad check; good work gets solid pay" (Prov. 11:17–18 THE MESSAGE).

Did Jacob learn his lesson? You'll need to keep reading about his life to find a definitive answer.

There is one redeeming detail in this honeymoon heist that needs to be mentioned. Remember Leah? The elder sister? The unwanted sister? The girl with the soft eyes and less fortunate name?

She gave birth to a son named Judah. Among her descendants were a shepherd boy of Bethlehem named David and a carpenter from Nazareth named Jesus. Yes, Leah, unchosen by Jacob, was chosen by God to be a mother in the bloodline of the King of kings.

Oh how the portraits of grace continue.