

## CHAPTER 6

# DOMESTIC TURF WARS

Genesis 29:31–30:24

**A**t the ripe young age of eighty-two, my oldest sister hosted a family reunion. Not wanting to leave anyone out, she issued an APB to Lucados worldwide. All were invited to spend a weekend hanging out under her roof in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

By the time Denalyn and I arrived, the place was abuzz with kith, kin, kids, and cousins. In-laws, out-laws, and a few fugitives of the law. There were some fifty or sixty of us, enough to require the wearing of name tags. I saw a few faces I'd never seen before and many I'd not seen in a long while. A couple were toothless and in diapers, but old age will do that to you.

My sister had accomplished the tedious task of designing a family tree and hanging it on her mantel. It stretched some six feet wide and covered a dozen decades and four generations. It began with the birth of my dad's dad and continued up to the most recent birth of my nephew's son.

She populated every possible corner of her living room with pictures of babies, brides, soldiers, farmers, and hairdressers—all bound by their connection to the Lucado clan.

My sisters and a cousin held high court, answering dozens of questions from the teens and newcomers.

“You mean he fought in World War II?”

“He went to prison?”

“Why didn’t they have kids?”

“Why did they have so many kids?”

Our family tree has blight spots and bright spots. Alcohol and cholesterol have taken their toll. Education and better health habits have paid dividends.

In the final minutes before the final goodbyes, we crammed into the living room for one last look at the genealogy and one final question. “Has anyone learned anything this weekend?” After a few moments a great-grandson spoke up. Fresh out of college, having heard all the stories, he said, “I learned something. Now I know why I am the way I am.”

We never escape our DNA. We may try, but we never succeed. While each life is a new chapter, it remains a chapter within a larger volume. Your biography began before you did. Your family matters.

Jacob’s did. He was famous because of his family. He’s not famous for his talents or treasures or teachings. If he invented a device, wrote a song, or authored a book, we’ve never seen, sung, or read it. But he seeded a family tree whose branches extend into eternity.

Those who know little about the Bible have heard about the twelve tribes of Israel. Those who know a lot about the Bible are aware that the names of the tribes will be inscribed on the gates of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:12).

But even those who know a lot of the Bible have a lot of questions about the family of Jacob, the question at the top of the list being this one—*You mean to tell me that the genealogy of Jesus Christ includes these folks?*

We’re already acquainted with the roller-coaster ride called Jacob’s Life.

Jacob was the second born of Isaac, born second only a second after Esau. He came out of his mama trying to pull himself ahead of his brother. Sibling rivalry and parental favoritism resulted in a toxic stew of deception and death threats, and we aren’t even into Jacob’s marriages. Leah and Rachel, the two sister wives, each had a handmaiden who did more than their laundry. Jacob found himself in the midst of four women bearing his children and complicating his already turbulent and troubled life. His family gave scandal a bad name.

When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. 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. (Gen. 29:31–35 NIV)

The naming of Leah's sons documented the hurt and hatred between the sister wives. Son number one's name, Reuben ("Look, a son"), was a sign that God had seen Leah's affliction. Simeon ("the LORD heard"), son

number two's name, declared that God had heard Leah, a thinly veiled barb from Leah that God had not heard Rachel. The name Levi means "connect," lamenting Leah's lack of connection with Jacob, and Judah meant "Praise God."

The family was pregnant with tension about pregnancies and the lack thereof.

Leah had Jacob's sons but no love.

Rachel had Jacob's love but no sons.

Rachel, having witnessed her sister bear four sons, was so consumed with envy that she stormed into Jacob's tent, demanding, "Give me sons or I'll die" (Gen. 30:1 THE MESSAGE). Jacob mumbled something about the request not falling in his pay grade. Rachel took matters into her own hands and insisted, "Here's my maid Bilhah. Sleep with her. Let her substitute for me so I can have a child through her and build a family" (Gen. 30:3 THE MESSAGE).

Bilhah had a baby and named him—I assume with Rachel's input—Dan, which means "vindication." Or, in Texas slang, "Nanny nanny boo boo." Bilhah became pregnant a second time, and "Rachel said, 'I've been

in an all-out fight with my sister—and I've won.' So she named him Naphtali (Fight)" (Gen. 30:7–8 THE MESSAGE).

Leah could no longer conceive, so she insisted that her maid Zilpah step in. "Zilpah had a son for Jacob. Leah said, 'How fortunate!' and she named him Gad (Lucky)." Then a second son. "Leah said, 'A happy day! The women will congratulate me in my happiness.' So she named him Asher (Happy)" (Gen. 30:10–13 THE MESSAGE).

Something tells me that Rachel did not congratulate Leah in her happiness.

The tone and turmoil of Jacob's dinner table must have been insane. Rachel and Leah despised each other. It was a battle of wills and wombs. The two handmaidens were rivals. Kids were born daily, it seemed. They were into everything: yammering, crying, crawling. No one could talk for the sound of them. Not that anyone wanted to talk. Everyone was at odds with everyone. Kindred, in their case, was dread of kin.

Just when we think the hornet's nest of domestic discord couldn't get more bizarre, it did exactly that.

Reuben, the eldest son, found some mandrakes in the wheat field. In biblical times mandrakes were believed to be an aphrodisiac and to have fertility-producing powers.<sup>1</sup> Reuben gave them to his mother, Leah. Rachel heard about the mandrakes and asked Leah for them. "Leah said, 'Wasn't it enough that you got my husband away from me?'" (Gen. 30:15 THE MESSAGE).

By this point Jacob was full time with Rachel. Leah had been sleeping alone. So, in desperation, Rachel cut a deal with her sister. "If you will give me your son's mandrakes, you may sleep with Jacob tonight" (Gen. 30:15 NCV).

Somehow I missed this story in Sunday school. Take it to the core, and it's a case of Rachel pimping her husband to her sister. Go a level deeper, and it's a case of two women, each longing for something they'd yet to find. Both barren—one of affection, one of children.

And Jacob? Correct me if you disagree, but he seems so clueless. A little leadership wouldn't hurt. If only he'd taken a stand against Laban or taken up the cause of Leah or negotiated a truce between the sisters or

when handed a handmaiden, said, “This crosses a line! Enough is enough!”

But the guy never did a thing. So indifferent. As glassy eyed as a speckled trout. Maybe he felt trapped in the middle of it all. An exile from his Beersheba home. An indentured servant to his uncle. Caught in the cross fire of two wives and two surrogates. Twelve children in seven years. Kids and chaos everywhere.

Sounds wild, right?

Sounds familiar, perhaps?

While writing this chapter, I received a call from a friend who asked, “What are you working on?” I answered, “I’m reading about Jacob’s wacko family.” Without skipping a beat, he offered, “Couldn’t be more wacko than mine.” I get it. The problem with using the phrase “dysfunctional family” is that it implies the existence of a functional one.

How many people find Jacob’s story not only amazing but oddly assuring? In time Jacob would become the embodiment of the people of Israel. He did so, not because of his nature, but in spite of it. Scripture makes no attempt to whitewash his scandal, to gloss over the

flaws, or to hide the humanness. I, for one, find hope in the ability of God to use a family of feuds and friction.

I’m reminded of a framed X-ray I keep in my closet. As I sort through my socks and select my shirt, it greets me. Odd, I know. Other people hang calendars and favorite quotes. But I have a framed X-ray. Here’s why.

The picture is an axial view of a decimated hip. A jarring car crash left it broken in two places. Even an untrained eye like mine can spot the quarter-inch gap between the bones. The breakage was just one of several the victim suffered. Doctors who studied the X-ray feared for her life. Even more so, they feared for the life of her child. An unborn, seven-month-old infant occupies center stage of the X-ray. He floats amidst the fracture, blissfully unaware of the breakage around him.

Dr. Michael Wirth, who gave me the image, remembers the night he saw it in the emergency room. “We wondered, ‘Can both mother and child survive? If not, do we take the mother and lose the child? Lose the mother and save the child?’”

They never had to make the choice. The mother lived, the baby was delivered, and Michael kept the X-ray as a reminder: God delivers life through brokenness. Broken families, hearts, dreams—even broken people. We crack under pressure. Like Esau, we cave in to the cravings that gnaw at our guts. Like Jacob, we connive and control. Who wants to use a broken vessel? God does. His grace never quits.

A person might read about Jacob's clan and ask, "Where are the heroes? Who am I supposed to be emulating? Who is the redeeming character in this polygamous mess?" The answer: God! Where you and I see a family that spends more time at each other's throats than in each other's arms, God sees an opportunity to display his strength—"Watch what I can do."

God used, and uses, flawed people. He made a promise to Abraham: his children would be like dust on the earth and stars in the galaxies. The greatest person who ever lived would spring from his loins. The story

of heaven would be told and distributed through these odd and curious people. God had made them a promise. He never breaks his promises.

Case in point: the family of Jacob.

Dysfunctional families can be used, even fixed.

Function can happen. Good intentions to love can become real. God can flick everything into healing mode. No family is beyond the possibility of a miracle.

Rachel eventually got pregnant. Was it the man-drakes? No, it was God. "God remembered Rachel. God listened to her and opened her womb. She became pregnant and had a son. She said, 'God has taken away my humiliation.' She named him Joseph" (Gen. 30:22–24 THE MESSAGE).

Through the squabbling, strutting, struggling, competing, and comparing; the love potions, surrogate strategies, and tears of the loveless and the childless, God was in control. He delivered on his word then.

He delivers on his word still.