

39. Domestic pain and Divine purpose (2007)

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn now to our reading this morning, and we're continuing in the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, and reading at the end of chapter 29 and into chapter 30.

It's page 24 if you have one of our church visitors' Bibles. If not, whatever Bible you have, it's right at the beginning. Amen. And we're continuing the story of Jacob, having read last week of the great deceit that was perpetrated on Jacob, himself a deceiver, in having not Rachel, the wife that he'd worked for for seven years, but her sister, her older sister Leah, foisted on him at his wedding. And so, ending up with not just Rachel as a wife, but Leah also. And as verse 30 said, Jacob loved Rachel rather than Leah, but served Laban for another seven years.

So we begin at verse 31. When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, or unloved, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.

And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, because the Lord has looked upon my affliction. Now my husband will love me.

[1 : 29] She conceived again and bore a son and said, because the Lord has heard that I'm hated, he has given me this son also. And she called his name Simeon. You see it in the footnotes, Simeon means heard.

Then she conceived and bore a son and said, now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons. Therefore his name was called Levi.

Attached. Then she conceived again and bore a son, and she said, this time I will praise the Lord. Therefore she called his name Judah.

Then she ceased bearing. When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, give me children or I die.

Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, am I in the place of God who has withheld from you the fruit of your womb? Then she said, here's my servant Bilhah.

[2 : 30] Go into her so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her. So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went into her, and Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son.

Then Rachel said, God has judged or vindicated me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son. Therefore she called his name Dan, vindication. Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son.

Then Rachel said, with mighty wrestlings, or literally with wrestlings of God, I have prevailed with my sister. I have wrestled with my sister and prevailed. So she called his name Naphtali.

When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Then Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son, and Leah said, good fortune has come.

So she called his name Gad. Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son, and Leah said, happy am I, for women have called me happy. So she called his name Asher.

[3 : 40] In the days of the wheat harvest, Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field, sometimes called love apples. That may explain what comes next.

He brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, please give me some of your son's mandrakes. But she said to her, is it a small matter that you've taken away my husband? Would you take away also my son's mandrakes?

Rachel said, then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son's mandrakes. When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, you must come into me, for I have really hired you with my son's mandrakes.

So he lay with her that night. And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son.

Leah said, God has given me my wages because I have given my servant to my husband. So she called his name Isaac. And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son.

[4 : 48] Then Leah said, God has endowed me with a good endowment. Now my husband will honor me because I have borne him six sons. So she called his name Zebulun, for honor.

Afterward, she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah, which also means like Dan, vindication. Then God remembered Rachel.

And God listened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and said, God has taken away my reproach. And she called his name Joseph, saying, may the Lord add to me another son.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Amen. Well, if you turn with me to the passage that we read in Genesis chapter 30, the end of chapter 29.

You'll see I've given you a handout. That's not really for reference in our talk. Just to show you the layout of the story of Jacob, and just how carefully it is laid out there in our Bibles to emphasize the key message there.

[6 : 04] And you'll see that this passage that we come to now really is the very heart of the story. And the great turning point in Jacob's experience as he, after this, begins to look homeward towards the promised land.

Well, I don't know what you made of this chapter when we read it together. Really is quite extraordinary, isn't it?

Perhaps you're wondering how such a chapter could even be in the Bible. I mean, really, if this was a film, it wouldn't really be family viewing, would it?

Probably have to carry an X certificate. It's certainly all about motherhood, but it's certainly not all about motherhood and apple pie. It's about motherhood and maidservants and mandrakes and misery.

A whole lot of misery in a family situation that I think you can only really describe as one of meltdown. Don't you think? Striking, isn't it?

[7 : 10] The Bible doesn't airbrush out. It doesn't sanitize the harsh reality of life. It's one of the reasons that we know we can trust it. For one thing, it's not trying to spindock or buff up the image of the heroes of the faith.

Quite the opposite. Here is a warts and all account of a family situation in absolute domestic meltdown. But it's not just about domestic meltdown.

Above all, it's a story I think you'll see about divine mercy. Mercy to a family in a real mess of misery and of sinful manipulation.

And mercy continuing through this family, a weak and broken community. But ultimately, mercy extending through them to all the weak and broken and messed up people in this whole world. Last week, we saw how in the previous episode, personal history tends to chime with a sort of eerie similarity down the ages. A man reaps what he sows, says the Bible.

[8 : 18] And that is abundantly what we see in Jacob's story. Jacob's deceitful plot against his brother Esau comes back on him.

This time, he's the victim of a switch between the firstborn and the secondborn. So he finds himself married, not to Rachel as he thought, but to Leah. And then to both of them.

And then the ensuing domestic pain in the household that happens, where deceit has played such a big part in marriage and family life. Just as it did, alas, in Jacob's parents' family.

The painful misery of this covenant household fills this chapter. There's absolutely no denying that. And yet we mustn't miss also that it's a chapter full of God's purposeful mercy.

The mercy of the covenant God. It's not just a chapter about domestic pain. It is a chapter also all about divine purpose of grace and mercy.

[9 : 22] And his faithfulness to his promise of grace and to his people of grace, despite all of their shortcomings that are only too evident. Notice how the whole story is framed.

Did you see that? Everything that happens in that passage that we read is bracketed by God's great mercy. Do you see? The God who sees and hears and acts in mercy towards those who are in misery and in distress, even though it's of their own sinful making.

Look at the beginning, verse 31 of chapter 29. The Lord saw that Leah was hated and he opened her womb. And it's the same at the end, isn't it? In verse 17 and verse 22 of chapter 30. God listened to Leah and she conceived verse 17 and verse 22. God remembered Rachel and listened to her and opened her womb. God's great mercy, not only to assuage his people's pain, but also through them to accomplish his promised purpose for blessing. Blessing for all his people Israel and, of course, through them, blessing to all the peoples of the world. So, yes, it is a story of warning, a story of instruction for us as God's people today about the folly.

[10:35] The folly of disregarding God's will and his ways for family life. It is that. But it's not just that. Not just a story about sin.

It is a story also about God's persistent grace. And above all, it's therefore a story to give us great encouragement and hope. Hope in the grace and mercy of God, whose purpose is at work always, even amid pain and perplexity and even perversity.

Always at work to accomplish what he has promised for his people and in his people and through his people for the glory of his son and his kingdom in which we share a part by that wonderful mercy.

Well, let's look at the story then and see if we can grasp its message for us today. It falls really into six scenes. You'll see the first three each begin with the verb to see.

The Lord saw, verse 31. Rachel saw, verse 1 of chapter 30. And Leah saw in verse 9. Then there's the Mandrake episode, verses 14 to 16. And then the two last scenes, beginning at verse 17 and verse 22 with the words, and God.

[11:48] But that's too many to look at one by one. So we're going to divide it into three movements, which I think it fits into quite well, each of which involves the birth of four sons. First is the misery, verse 31 down to the end, and the first two verses of chapter 30.

Then there's all the manipulations with the Mandrakes and the maids, verses 3 down to verse 16. And then there's the mercy, finally, that dominates, verse 17 to verse 24.

So let's look at these in turn then and try and draw some conclusions. First of all, shared misery. Verses 31 to 35 and also the first two verses of chapter 30 surely speak of widespread misery in marriage and family.

And yet it's misery that is met by God's particular and very protective mercy towards the most needy and the most unloved.

Per Leah, says verse 31, is hated. Not hated in the absolute sense, but unloved and unwanted as a wife because Jacob wanted Rachel, not Leah, but he was stuck also with Leah.

[12:59] Now Leah, of course, was far from blameless in all of this. Leah played along with the great deception quite willingly, it seems, to trap Jacob into that marriage by sleeping with him. It's not actually uncommon, is it, or unknown for that to happen?

Maybe it's less so today because the tragedy is that abortion is so much easier, isn't it? And sexual equality has changed the goalposts, but that just means that it's much easier for men to actually opt out of their responsibilities.

It's the irony, isn't it, of feminism's triumph. But many a man with a sense of decency and responsibility, well, he's been trapped in just such a loveless marriage by that kind of thing.

So Leah is far from blameless. But she does pay a heavy price. She is very vulnerable. She could easily be discarded, especially if she was seen to be infertile.

Well, she's weak, she's unloved, and she's yearning for her husband's affection. And the Lord saw all of that, and he opened her womb.

[14:10] And in quick succession, it seems she bore four strapping sons. Whatever was wrong with her eyes, there was nothing wrong with her ovaries. And fertility and fecundity seems to be in abundance here.

And these are not immaculate conceptions. Jacob obviously is seeking to honor her, not denying her her marital rights, which would have just compounded the wrong in an unhappy situation like this.

You read Exodus 21, verse 10. It makes it clear that even an unwanted wife has rights. And God moves Jacob to act justly, and God shows his justice and his protective care of Leah in the mercy that lavishes these sons on her.

But her misery and her yearning for love, her yearning for recognition, are given voice in the names that she gives to her sons, aren't they? The pathos is so palpable. Reuben, now my husband will love me, she says.

Simeon, because the Lord knows that I'm hated. Levi, surely this time my husband will be attached to me.

[15:22] Desperate, unrequited love, isn't it? What a mess. But the Lord saw, and he looked on her affliction, and in his protective mercy he gave her sons.

Psalms 127 says, Children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb, a reward. A reward, notice here, not to the deserving, but to the undeserving.

To somebody whose misery was largely self-inflicted. And yet God's protective mercy drew near to her, despite her sin. Just as in Genesis 16, remember, God's mercy came to Hagar in her distress, despite her sinfulness.

That's one of the habits of God that human beings don't find very easy, isn't it? God seems to reward with mercy, self-inflicted misery. Would you have rewarded Leah?

Ephesians chapter 5 says, Be imitators of God. The Lord Jesus said, Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

[16:35] God's protective mercy. Meanwhile, Rachel, we're told in verse 1, remains barren. But not only barren, she's very bitter. No sign of any mercy there. She's loved by Jacob, as Leah isn't, but she isn't having any babies.

While Leah is filling the creche single-handedly. And Rachel is full of envy for Leah. For what Leah has, and what she doesn't have. And of course, that makes the whole situation even worse, doesn't it?

And poor Jacob is caught up in the middle of it all. And Rachel's anger is vented on her husband. It's your fault, she says. Give me children, or I die. She's jealous.

She's bitter. Now, it's really God that Rachel is angry with. She knows fine that there's nothing wrong with Jacob's part in the process.

Leah's children are ample testimony to that. But it's always the case, isn't it? That when we're angry with God, we never say that. We never say, It's God that I'm angry with. We complain instead about the church, or our boss, or our spouse, or somebody else whose fault it is that life isn't going the way we want it to go.

[17:45] And so Jacob gets it in the neck. And he doesn't handle it very brilliantly, does he? He gets mad with Rachel. Because she's been so hard to live with, no doubt.

And he's right in what he says there in verse 2. He sets her right, doesn't he? On an understanding of God's sovereignty. It's God that has withheld the fruit of your womb, he says.

Now, he's theologically correct, isn't he? But he's psychologically utterly inept. That's just classic male mishandling of an emotional woman situation, isn't it? Especially, especially on such a fraught and deeply painful issue as that.

Rachel doesn't want logic and theology from Jacob. She needs loving. She doesn't need bare doctrines. She needs the enfleshed living truth of a godly leader and a husband to comfort her, to encourage her, to help her understand and to be in prayerful dependence on the Lord.

But you see, Jacob's angry with God too. He's bitter. And he's miserable in this dire domestic situation. He doesn't know what to do. It's a mess.

[18:57] Widespread misery in the marriage and in the family. And yet, there is mercy in this mess. Protective mercy to Leah in the birth of her sons.

And she does acknowledge God's kindness to her. Do you see? Notice that last name, Judah, which means praise. Now, I will praise the Lord, she says. She's using that special covenant name of the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Abraham, the God of promise.

But then we're told she ceased bearing. That probably means that Jacob withdrew from her. Probably to mollify Rachel, to make things easier.

Sisterly relations, certainly not very good. And spousal relations, not terribly good either. A mess of domestic pain and misery all round.

But despite all this, the divine purpose is unfolding. Four sons are born to Jacob, offspring of promise, through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed.

[20:06] God's promise is being fulfilled. Isaac had said back in chapter 28, verse 3, that God would make Jacob seed a company of peoples. And here we are, the first four tribes of Israel get

their birth.

Including Levi, the priestly tribe, the ancestor of Moses himself. And Judah, the kingly tribe. About whom even Moses' readers knew that there was a future fraught with destiny.

They knew the words that Jacob himself, in his old age, had blessed upon Judah, as with all of his other sons. You can read it in Genesis chapter 49.

The scepter will not depart from Judah, he said. To him will be the obedience of all peoples. It's a mess. Shared misery.

But God's mercy is in the midst of this mess. Both showing kindness to broken people and showing commitment to his promise for a broken world.

[21 : 10] Well, with the middle scenes, the whole situation gets even more messy, doesn't it? Verses 3 to 16 is a story of sordid manipulation.

Willful maneuvering in the family life and the marriage. A disregarding both of God's sovereignty, that it is God alone who gives children his way, and of God's commands about the sanctity of marriage.

And yet, even in this sordid and sinful manipulation, again, we are met with God's patient and persistent mercy. Ralph Davis calls this passage a biblical soap opera.

And it is that, or worse, isn't it? It's like something after one of those ghastly daytime TV programs, the Jeremy Kyle show or something. Or one of these dreadful documentaries about feral families.

Today, that is exactly what this is. It's a story of escalating rivalry between Leah and Rachel, first for sons in their respective maids, and then for sex through bargaining with mandrakes.

[22 : 18] Look at the episode with the maids first, verses 3 to 13. Rachel is so determined to have children to call her own that she resorts to surrogacy. Isn't it striking how contemporary the Bible really is?

These issues we talk about today, they're not new. And nowadays, it would be a little bit more high-tech. AIH, we call it, artificial insemination by husband. This is just the old-fashioned version. And it still goes on, indeed, just exactly like this today as well. Here's Bilhah, says Rachel. She can be a surrogate mother for me and bear me a child. She's so desperate for a child that she's willing to share her husband, not just with her sister, but another woman, her maid.

I don't know what Jacob thought about it, but he did what he was told, no doubt, to avoid the incessant nagging. And it worked. So God must have approved of it.

Right. That's Rachel's reckoning in verse 6. You see, God has vindicated me, she says. And so she calls her surrogate son Dan. Vindication. So they do it again.

[23 : 24] With mighty wrestlings, with wrestlings of God, she says, I've prevailed over my sister. So she names this one Naphtali. We're very good, aren't we, at providing very pious-sounding justifications for the things that we do.

It's so easy to convince yourself you've got God's backing for what you're doing. That's what Rachel's doing here. But notice, by the way, that the writer doesn't actually say that. The writer doesn't say here that God listened to Rachel.

Don't get that, do we, until verse 22. But Rachel seems to think that and she at least seems to get what she thinks she wants. So now, verse 9, Leah feels threatened about this and she joins in.

Zilpah becomes wife number four and out pops Gad, good fortune, or lucky, we might call him, and Asher, happy. Well, people might call her happy, she says.

I don't think Leah's really all that happy, do you? Maybe a measure of pride and satisfaction of being ahead again in the baby races, but she's no longer in Jacob's bed where her sister is, and indeed, both of her servants have been as well.

[24 : 37] And yet, four more sons are born to Jacob. Four more of the tribes of Israel find their patriarchs. God didn't strike the whole lot of them with infertility as he did to Pharaoh's household or to Abimelech's household in the past, did he?

Could have done that for their sin. But God's patient mercy is at work, bringing his divine purpose to pass, even in all this mess, even though people are totally confused and corrupted in their interpretation of God's will, people, even though his own chosen people have no understanding of his ways.

Reviving the surrogacy that had been such a disaster with Abraham and Sagar, do you remember? Further cheapening the marriage bed into all out polygamy of four wives for Jacob.

And probably exhausting poor Jacob in the process, don't you think? You might laugh, you might think that's funny that Jacob really probably enjoyed a rather more spicy sex life. People would have us believe that sort of thing today.

I bet the reality was really very different. Ask any man whose wife is fixated on getting pregnant. Ask what the pressure is like to be involved in that situation.

[25 : 58] Ask any couple that are undergoing infertility treatment. It is a very stressful thing indeed. Sometimes it's so stressful it puts such a strain on a marriage that the marriage itself breaks up.

And Jacob had not one woman at this but four of them. And all of these pregnancies we read about here weren't successive. A lot of them were all happening at the same time. Can you imagine? Can you imagine the hormone situation that Jacob was living with there? This is a mess. Willful and sinful, manipulating in the most intimate relationships of life.

people determined to have what God hasn't given and to have it their way and their time. And yet God doesn't abandon his people.

His persistent patient mercy is at work in the midst of this mess. Four more sons are born. Sin has its consequences. Of course it does.

[27 : 01] There's no doubting the misery and the pain and the bitterness that surely only poisons the household relationships here even more. And the manipulation and the maneuvering continues.

Look at the rivalry of the mandrakes episode in verse 14. A rivalry for sexual attention. That's what mandrakes are. Love apples. They were known to be or thought to be aphrodisiacs and fertility drugs.

You'll read about them in Song of Songs, chapter 7. And Reuben, little boy Reuben out in the field, he finds some, brings some to Leah, but Rachel wants some. Maybe Jacob is in bad shape.

Maybe he is in need of a bit of a pep up. Who could blame him? But the exchange here reveals, doesn't it, desperately sad and bitter things in the lives of these two women. Despite the triumphant naming of their children, things are not as they would have them be.

Leah's reply in verse 15 seems to affirm that she no longer has any real relationship with Jacob. She's so desperate, desperate for love that she'll trade all these valuable fruit for just one night in Jacob's bed.

[28 : 11] It really is a rather pathetic picture, isn't it? But Rachel's equally desperate. She's still desperate for a child of her own, not just the child of her mate. So much for the name Vindication, I have prevailed.

She knows that's all show. She's desperate for her own child. She's longing. And so she'll chase after any old superstition and quackery, mandrakes, to try and get what she wants.

And so Leah, verse 16, gets her night with Jacob. But isn't it pitiful? She runs out and says, you must come to me. I've really hired you with my son's mandrakes.

Jacob's reduced to just being a mere stud up for hire. He's a slave to Laban in his work. And now he's a slave even in his own household. And the irony is, isn't it, that Leah gives up the mandrakes, the love apples, and in fact, she gets her night with Jacob and indeed much more while Rachel gets the mandrakes but remains childless perhaps for another two or three years, it seems.

Because the blessing of children, as indeed the blessing in every part of our life, doesn't come through selfish and sinful manipulation of God. It comes from God's mercy.

[29 : 38] And that's what these last two scenes are really all about. They underline it, don't they, in triplicate for us, because at last the awful picture of domestic pain in these last verses now seems to become eclipsed by the divine purpose of grace and mercy.

It's been there all the time in the background, but now it seems to come right out into the foreground, so we just can't miss the point. You see, it's all about sheer mercy.

That's what verses 17 to 24 tell us, the wonderful mercy of a sovereign God who is both personal and persistent to everyone in this messed up covenant family and through that messed up covenant family, ultimately to the whole world.

God's tender mercy, both to loveless Leah and to childless Rachel.

First of all, there's mercy to Leah, verse 17. God listened to Leah. Leah had turned to God in prayer, it seems. It's not that she's suddenly become all sound and discerning so that she's deserving of God's answer to prayer.

[30 : 50] It's obvious in verse 18. She's just as confused and mixed up as ever, isn't she? God has given me my wages, she says, my just reward because I sacrificed so much in giving him, giving

my husband my maid.

What a lot of nonsense. She gave the maid utterly selfishly, not sacrificially at all. Yet she's just as lonely, just as desperate, just as loveless, just as longing for love as she always was.

And God's mercy reaches out and touches her. He listens to her. And he grants her, we read, not only another son, but it seems also a measure at least of restored relationship with Jacob.

She must be sleeping with Jacob again. She has another son, we're told, and then a daughter.

Seven children in all, the perfect number in Hebrew thought.

And their names here do seem, don't they, to speak much more of optimism. Zebulun, now my husband will honor me, I've borne him six sons. And Dinah, also meaning vindication like Dan, but here much more convincing perhaps.

[32 : 02] God's healing mercy is there for loveless Leah. And, verse 22, at last, for Rachel also.

Verse 22 really is the climax of the whole story of Jacob. Jacob. It's the capstone of this central part of the story. It's the great turning point. Then God remembered Rachel.

That remembering language signifies the great turning points of God's covenant blessing, doesn't it? Do you remember Genesis chapter 8? Then God remembered Noah and the floodwaters dissipated.

Or chapter 19, then God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the destruction of Sodom.

Perhaps most memorable of all in Exodus chapter 2 that would be so familiar to all Moses hearers.

God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and God saw the misery of the people of Israel and he went down to save them. God remembered.

[33 : 07] it. And here God remembered Rachel and listened to her and opened her womb and she conceived and bore a son named Joseph.

Because she says God has taken away my reproach, my shame, and has given her hope. She can say in faith, may God add to me another son. As indeed he would a little later on, Benjamin.

Do you notice by the way that Rachel here uses God's personal covenant name for the very first time in verse 24? The name of the Lord, the name of Yahweh, just as Leah did at the end of the first section in Judah's word.

I think that we're being told that at last here she sees that real hope and happiness comes only from him. Only the Lord, the covenant God, can take away your shame.

Only the Lord can give you hope for the future. Real hope and real happiness in life comes not from blaming your spouse or yourself or your life or God himself for what he doesn't give, but it comes in finding satisfaction in thanksgiving and in praise for what he does give in his time and in his way.

[34 : 32] We find that so hard to learn, don't we? That's why there's so much misery. That's why there's so much manipulation in our lives and in our marriages and in our families.

Isn't that right? Some writers and preachers in this chapter really go to town on the wickedness of idolatry. Leah's idolatrous quest for affection and for love.

Rachel's idolatrous pursuit for children. I think we need to be a little bit careful not to be too harsh on these women, not to be more harsh than God himself seems to be here.

Surely it was natural, surely it was right for Leah to crave her husband's love. Certainly this story highlights, doesn't it, the impossibility of true marital love ever being a shared love with more than one marriage partner.

There can never be anything but destruction of love when there's a third person in the marriage. But surely Leah's desire was right. Surely Rachel's desire for children was utterly natural and right.

[35 : 38] Surely her infertility was deeply painful. We've got to recognize the agonies of that. We've got to share God's merciful love, haven't we?

And yet it is true enough to say that no earthly relationship will ever bring the satisfaction that meets our deepest human desires, except the one that we were made to be loved by and the one that we were made to bear fruit with in our lives, the Lord himself.

It seems that Rachel and Leah do grasp at least something of that in naming the covenant name of the Lord as their God, as they do here. It is his covenant mercy and his alone that will solve not just the pain of this family, but all the pain and the misery of a sinful and accursed world.

And friends, that is what this story is really all about. It points us to the answer of God to all human pain worldwide. And that lies in the divine purpose, in God's unfolding promise of grace and mercy through his promised seed of salvation.

Ralph Davis captures it with his characteristic flair. He says, it seems like sheer bedlam, this story. Conjugal arguments, mandrake madness, bedroom deals, the covenant family and all its dysfunctional splendor.

[37 : 08] Yet, in spite of all this, crabbing, strife, conflict, tensions, bickering, hatred, misery, in spite of all this, God is faithful to his promise.

Here, after all, are 11 sons. God's fidelity doesn't sanitize all the circumstances or twistedness of his people, but in all the slop, the seed is multiplying.

You see that? You see that? That's what this story is about, above everything else. It's to point us to God. It's to point us to God's purpose, his purpose of gospel grace and mercy that is unfolding, unstoppable.

It forces us to see past the sin and the weakness of the covenant people to the covenant God, whose mercy, as we sang earlier, whose mercy gives us hope and light from heaven above in this dark day, through Christ, who takes our sin and our guilt away.

That's why this story is written for us. As we draw to our close, let me just try and crystallize three ways that this chapter teaches us about the covenant mercy of God.

[38 : 26] First of all, it points us, doesn't it, to God's merciful precepts, to the wisdom of God's law. What this story exemplifies in hideous technicolor is the catastrophic result of when God's merciful ordering of things in the institution of marriage when that is ignored and corrupted?

Because God's word teaches us from Genesis to Revelation, from Moses to Jesus, that marriage is the exclusive union of one man and one woman for life.

Now, is God being restrictive? Is God being repressive? Is God being vindictive in that? As many people want to say today. Well, just read this chapter and read the further fallout that goes down and down the generations to see that God is being the very opposite.

His precepts are merciful. He prohibits this kind of things to protect his people from the pain, from the misery, from the disharmony, from the distress that is exactly illustrated in this chapter in front of us.

Moses' readers knew, find the law that Moses had taught to them from God, including specific prohibitions ever for marrying two sisters in Leviticus 18, specific protection even for an unloved wife and the sons of unloved wives in Deuteronomy chapter 21, not because polygamy was approved of, because it was so damaging.

[40 : 05] But when it did happen, it led to such sinful disregard of God and disregard of people that it needed specific protective legislation to protect people from the mess.

So friends, believe me and believe the Apostle Paul when he says chapters like this were written for us upon whom the end of the ages has come. He says in 1 Corinthians 10, there are warnings to us not to behave as they did.

Don't kick against God's merciful precepts for marriage and for the right place for exclusive sexual relationships within marriage. These precepts are merciful.

They're for our blessing, not for our harm. And this passage of all passages surely shows us the wisdom of God's law. And our politicians need to hear that today, don't they, Mr. Salmond?

And indeed, Mr. Cameron, and now President Obama just this week, needs to hear that, doesn't he? Disregard the creation ordinance of marriage and the inevitable result will be domestic pain.

[41 : 13] We tinker with the institution of marriage at our peril and communities and whole countries will reap, indeed are already reaping, a terrible harvest of family breakdown, of domestic despair, of strife going on right through the generations.

So let this chapter indeed be a warning to us. Personally, and as the Christian church in its thinking, and indeed as a nation. But if that's all this story does, then it may be nothing more than a counsel of despair, but it's not.

Because above all, as I've said, this story is here to point us to God's merciful promise, to point us to the wonder of his love in the Lord Jesus Christ.

His love and grace and mercy, not only to this dysfunctional family with all its disasters and mistakes and sin, but through the unfolding of this covenant history of Israel, his great mercy to the whole wide world through God's Messiah in Jesus Christ.

Sometimes it's very hard, isn't it, to believe that God really is in control of his world and what's going on. It's hard to believe sometimes God's really in control of our lives and what's going on in them.

Because it looks like such a mess so much of the time, doesn't it, in the world and even in our own

lives.

[42 : 40] Don't you think Moses people wondered that as they stood on the brink of the promised land about to enter after 40 years looking back of a torturous, tortured, disastrous history of mess and of sinfulness.

But God can work even in a mess with very messed up people. That's what this chapter tells us. And the Israelites knew it. Don't you think verse 24 would have thrilled their hearts when they hear of the birth of Joseph? Joseph, the great savior of all the tribes of Israel.

Joseph, who though he was hated by his brothers, said to them, what you meant for evil, God meant for good, for the saving of many lives as he went before them all those years later and brought them salvation in Egypt.

It's just the same here. In this mess, God turned sinful manipulation and selfish sin into his saving mercy.

[43 : 47] As a savior was born, he would go before this family and win them the blessing and the prosperity. God gave them, though none of them deserved it. And not only Joseph, of course, Rachel's son, but Leah's son, Judah, whose birth is the climax of the first scene.

Through Judah's line, God preserved that holy seed all down the generations until at last the whole story of God's wonderful purpose reaches its climax and its fulfillment in the birth of a baby.

The Lord Jesus Christ himself, the true seed, the ultimate seed of Abraham, the savior of the whole world. This is a story that points us to God's merciful promise, to God's merciful promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ so that the wonderful love and mercy that this family experienced, despite the mess and the pain of their lives, will be experienced by every human family, every broken man and woman, every unloved wife, every messed up child through faith in Jesus Christ.

Because as the apostle says, the promise is to you and to your children, to all who are far off, to all who the Lord will call through this merciful gospel. That's the message of the gospel.

And that's also why it was written for us, that through the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope. Because finally, you see, this story points us to what can be God's merciful pattern, God's working in our lives.

[45 : 36] Because of God's merciful promise fulfilled in Christ, his saving mercy is poured out to bless all the families of the earth. And that means that everyone, everyone who will call on the name of this covenant Lord in Jesus Christ, everyone can find that same saving mercy and that same sovereign mercy to cover the mess and the misery of our lives.

Even though that mess and that misery is in large part of our own making, which so often, alas, it is. But God's mercy reaches down into mess and uses people with lots of mess and lots of baggage in their lives.

And he takes them up and he weaves them into a part in his great story. Just as he did with Rachel and Leah and even Bilhah and Zilpah, along with feeble Jacob.

Despite all the mess of these relationships, which should never even have been. God doesn't condone sin. Don't make mistake. But because of the triumph of the lion of the tribe of Judah, the lamb who was slain, the Lord Jesus Christ, nor does he condemn our sin.

He washes it away. And through his great mercy, he invites us also to play a part in his ongoing story. That means that even our domestic pain, domestic pain is very real today, isn't it?

[47 : 16] Domestic pain touches Christian people today, just as it touched covenant people way back then. But it means that our domestic pain can become a vehicle by his grace for God's divine purpose.

That's his merciful pattern still today. It really is. It's how he works in our lives if we love the Lord Jesus Christ, despite all the mess. Let me close with another Ralph Davis-ism.

The chemistry of divine providence, he says, takes the sludge and the crud and the confusion of our doings and makes it the soil that produces the fruit of his faithfulness.

Isn't that a wonderful thing for people like us to hear? We get in such a mess too, don't we, so often? Our sinful maneuverings cause so much misery, so much self-inflicted misery.

But thank God that we also share the same great mercy. Thank God that we can say with Rachel, God has taken away my shame.

[48 : 35] And with Leah, therefore, I will praise the Lord. Let's pray. Lord, how we thank you that your mercy transcends even the greatest misery and mess that our lives can ever generate.

How we thank you for your great purpose, that that great mercy, great grace and mercy would be preserved until the coming of our great Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, that his mercy might now preserve us who are his forever and ever.
Amen.