Today is week 5 in our Family Tree series… a series where we are looking at important moments in the lives of a number of Biblical characters from both the Old Testament and the New Testament… Bible characters who are all members of our spiritual family tree… people like Abraham and Hagar and Isaac… And this week we are focusing on the lives of the two women that were married to Jacob, the member of our spiritual family that Maron talked about last week. And if you heard Maron’s message last week, you’ll know that Maron gave us a lot of information about Jacob…. and while Maron certainly covered much of what happened in Jacob’s life, (and, by the way, if you didn’t hear Maron’s message last week I highly suggest that you find the time to listen to it) again, even though Maron told us a lot about Jacob, she was very clear that there is a lot about Jacob in Genesis that she didn’t have the time to talk about. And one important aspect of Jacob’s life that she didn’t talk about was the fact that he was married to two young women named Rachel and Leah. And while we aren’t focusing on Jacob specifically this weekend, we do need to revisit a bit of what Maron told us last week about Jacob’s life so we can better understand Jacob being married to both Leah and Rachel. Maron told us that Jacob was a twin, a fraternal twin who had a difficult relationship with his twin brother Esau… a difficult relationship that was even evident as they wrestled in their mother’s womb! Maron also told that we know these two boys were fraternal twins because Esau was a very hairy, outdoorsman type and Jacob was a smooth-skinned, stay at home momma’s boy. They weren’t even close to identical! And we also learned last week that Jacob not once, but twice had deceived his twin brother Esau… the first time he’d tricked him into trading his larger, first-born-son portion of the family inheritance for a bowl of bean soup. And then there was a second time, where Jacob, with the help of the twin’s mother, Rebecca, deceived his now-blind father into giving Jacob the family blessing… an important blessing that was supposed to only be given to the first-born son. We also heard last week that Esau, after having been deceived twice by his brother, deceived in ways that were simply unconscionable, by the way, was so angry that he said out loud that he was looking for the right time to kill his brother… and hearing this Rebecca convinced Jacob that he needed to run off and stay with her brother Laban, who lived some 300 or so miles away, to give Esau some time to cool down… and she also suggested that while he was there he ought to look for a wife. What Maron didn’t have time to tell us was that when Jacob took off to stay with his Uncle Laban he was completely alone, and he took absolutely nothing of value with him… What this meant was that when he finally arrived in the vicinity of where he believed his uncle Laban was living, he was feeling hopeless. What Genesis us is that Jacob had stopped by a well and he asked some local shepherds, who were there watering their flocks, if they knew his uncle Laban… And they said something like this to him, ‘Why don’t you ask her… she’s his daughter.’ and they pointed to a young girl out in the distance leading a flock of sheep to the well. Well, let’s turn to Genesis 29:9 page ??? and see what happened. WELCOME! And talk about the pg13 nature of some of the things in this story… I will do my best to protect your children from things that aren’t appropriate for them… in some cases I will be using KJ English in the place of modern words…

*Jacob was still talking with them* (the shepherds) *when Rachel arrived with her father’s flock, for she was a shepherd.****10****And because Rachel was his cousin—the daughter of Laban, his mother’s brother—and because the sheep and goats belonged to his uncle Laban, Jacob went over to the well and moved the stone from its mouth and watered his uncle’s flock.* (This is an important detail… it usually took 4 men to move these well stones. Moving this stone alone would have been a feat of great strength! So much for Jacob still being a momma’s boy!) ***11****Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and he wept aloud.* (Two things that ‘real men’ never did in their culture, by the way)***12****He explained to Rachel that he was her cousin on her father’s side—the son of her aunt Rebekah. So, Rachel quickly ran and told her father, Laban.* ***13****As soon as Laban heard that his nephew Jacob had arrived, he ran out to meet him. He embraced and kissed him and brought him home. When Jacob had told him his story,****14****Laban exclaimed, “You really are my own flesh and blood!”* And now things start to get interesting… look at the last half of verse 14 *After Jacob had stayed with Laban for about a month,****15****Laban said to him, “You shouldn’t work for me without pay just because we are relatives. Tell me how much your wages should be.”* What we are about to learn is that Jacob was really smitten by this girl at the well. Verse 16 then tells us, ‘*Now Laban had two daughters. The older daughter was named Leah, and the younger one was Rachel.****17****There was no sparkle in Leah’s eyes, but Rachel had a beautiful figure and a lovely face.*Okay, we need to stop here for a minute. That’s quite a comparison, wouldn’t you say? First off, saying there wasn’t a sparkle in Leah’s eyes is taking a bit of liberty with the original language. The word here is ‘rak’ and it can mean weak… soft… tender-hearted… or delicate. Some scholars say this meant she was ugly… that she was weak on the eyes. Others say this means she was nearsighted. Others believe this means she was naïve, while still others say this was a compliment… as in her sister may have been a beauty queen, but that was all! Leah had a tender heart, and you could see it in her eyes. I don’t know what to tell you, but what I do know is that neither Leah nor Rachel had anything to say about what happens next! ***18****Since Jacob was in love with Rachel, he told her father, “I’ll work for you for seven years if you’ll give me Rachel, your younger daughter, as my wife.”* Why seven years we don’t know. When you find the number 7 or multiples of 7’s in the Bible it generally means that God is involved in something, but we have no other information about this other than it seems like 7 years was a long time to work for a wife. ***19****“Agreed!” Laban replied. “I’d rather give her to you than to anyone else. Stay and work with me.”* By the way, the Hebrew here tells us that Laban’s response is very matter-of-fact; it’s like he said, ‘I guess it’s better to give her to you than anyone else.’ And I think he was careful to say “give ‘her’ to you” and not ‘give Rachel to you’ because, as you’ll see, he had a scheme up his sleeve. ***20****So Jacob worked seven years to pay for Rachel. But his love for her was so strong that it seemed to him but a few days.* Such is love! Then we read this in verse 21. *Finally, the time came for him to marry her. “I have fulfilled my agreement,” Jacob said to Laban. “Now give me my wife so I can sleep with her.”* How romantic!

 A bit about weddings and such. Weddings weren’t sacred ceremonies then; romance, love, and eternal commitments before God and man had no place in a wedding… or a marriage for that matter. Marriages were deals between families... deals worked out between the fathers of the bride and groom. But since Jacob didn’t have a father with him to make a deal with Laban and he had nothing of value to offer Laban as a bride price, Laban was in the driver’s seat! But even though there wasn’t a deal to settle between two families that day… there still needed to be a good party… Verse 22: *So, Laban invited everyone in the neighborhood and prepared a wedding feast.*Now, we have no idea how old Rachel was at this time. There is a rabbinical midrash that says she was 22… which means she was 15 when she first met Jacob, but 22 would have been a really late age for a girl to be getting married in their culture… and we’re going to find soon that Leah, Rachel’s older sister was also unmarried… and this would have been even more unusual. In fact, the same Jewish teachings that say that Rachel was 22 when she married also say that Leah, was actually Rachel’s twin and only older by a few minutes, just like Jacob and Esau… but we have no way to know if any of this is true. But what we do know is that it was pretty much of a given then that a 22-year-old, unmarried girl would have been considered a real family problem in those days and an older unmarried daughter would have bordered on the tragic! This is probably why we read this in verse *23 But that night, when it was dark, Laban took Leah to Jacob, and he slept with her. 24 (Laban had given Leah a servant, Zilpah, to be her maid.) 25 But when Jacob woke up in the morning—it was Leah! “What have you done to me?” Jacob raged at Laban. “I worked seven years for Rachel! Why have you tricked me?” 26 Laban replied, “It’s not our custom here to marry off a younger daughter ahead of the firstborn,”* Just an aside, there is absolutely no historical anything that tells us that this was ever anyone’s custom… but it **was** a part of Laban’s plan to give ‘her’ to Jacob!

Now, there is a good deal of speculation as to how Laban pulled this off… which I won’t go into… but pull it off he did! And notice that neither of the girls nor their mother, or the handmaidens had anything to say about any of this! This was all Laban’s plan, and everyone else had to get in line. And something else that is important to notice is that Jacob’s response to being tricked by Laban, *“What have you done to me?”* is almost exactly what Esau and Jacob’s father, Isaac, had said when he had deceived them! But look at Laban’s calm response to Jacob’s rage in verse *27.* He says,*“Wait until the bridal week is over; then we’ll give you Rachel, too—provided you promise to work another seven years for me.”* How kind of him! *28 So Jacob agreed to work seven more years. A week after Jacob had married Leah, Laban gave him Rachel, too. 29 (Laban gave Rachel a servant, Bilhah, to be her maid.) 30 So Jacob slept with Rachel, too, and he loved her much more than Leah. He then stayed and worked for Laban the additional seven years.* That sounds like a great start to married life, doesn’t it?

Now, what we get in the next passage is an outline of what happened during those next 7 years of Jacob working for Laban… and it is all about babies! Women in this world had one primary purpose in life: to make as many babies as possible. But I need to tell you something about how the ancient world viewed baby making. And I am going to be careful here. First, they believed that women had nothing to do with making babies; they believed that men gave little, tiny people to women; women did have a nest, or a womb, for these little folk to grow in, but that was all they contributed to the process. Plus, it was also believed that a woman’s womb had a door on it, with a lock; and the only person with the key to unlock that door was God… what this meant was that all women were infertile all the time except when God unlocked the door and let one or two of those little folk in. So, keep all of this in mind as we read, *When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, he enabled her to have children, but Rachel could not conceive.****32****So Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, “The Lord has noticed my misery, and now my husband will love me.”* *Reuben:* “The Lord has seen my misery.”***33****She soon became pregnant again and gave birth to another son. She named him Simeon, for she said, ‘The Lord has heard that I am unloved and has given me another son.” Simeon:* “The One who hears.” ***34****Then she became pregnant a third time and gave birth to another son. He was named Levi, for she said, “Surely this time my husband will feel affection for me, since I have given him three sons!” Levi:* “My husband will become attached to me.” ***35****Once again Leah became pregnant and gave birth to another son. She named him Judah for she said, “Now I will praise the Lord!” Judah:* ‘I will praise the Lord.’ *And then she stopped having children.* ***30****When Rachel saw that she wasn’t having any children for Jacob, she became jealous of her sister. She pleaded with Jacob, “Give me children, or I’ll die!”* ***2****Then Jacob became furious with Rachel. “Am I God?” he asked. “He’s the one who has kept you from having children!”* A couple of things. Women did not name children in this culture and yet all the children born in this chapter are going to be named by their mothers. Clearly, Jacob wasn’t paying much attention. Plus, every single child is named for something related to the circumstances at the time of the child’s birth. It was as if these women wanted their children to be symbols of the family issues forever… Naphtali: ‘I have had a great struggle.’ Gad: ‘good fortune has come.’ Zebulun: ‘This time my husband will honor me.’ Joseph: ‘God has taken away my humiliation.’ And by the time we get to the end of verse 24 of Chapter 30 we find that Jacob has 12 sons and a daughter by 4 different women; 8 by the 2 rival sisters and 4 others by the 2, rival sister’s young handmaidens, think slaves here, slaves who had nothing to say about any of this. Just read the entire story of these 4 women having children sometime and you’ll find jealousy and scheming and rivalry and condescension… all sorts of messy drama. In fact, this entire story is a mess… or rather, this entire story tells us that this family was a mess. I know that we are calling this series our ‘family tree’ series, but at first glance I’m unsure I really want all these people in my family tree!

I want to list out some of the things we’ve been told about this family in this passage: First, A Missing Father . Actually, we don’t see him involved in much of anything. Then there is An Unloved Wife... and can I just say if Leah was unloved because she wasn’t as pretty as her sister and yet Jacob was still willing to have 7 children with her, that’s terrible! And then we have A Woman Carrying Great Shame. Rachel might have been beautiful, but not having had any children in their culture meant something shameful was up with either her or her family that was keeping God from unlocking the door to her womb. And who knows what people were saying was the reason God was keeping that door locked! Beautiful Rachel was full of shame for years until the day God answered her prayers and she finally gave birth to Joseph, whose name, again, means, ‘God has taken away my humiliation!” We also have 4 young women being used as property. A Complete Lack of Individual Dignity. Can I just ask, where is the dignity in Rachel and Leah being given to a man they hardly knew, or the 2 handmaidens being forced to bear children that they knew would belong to their slave masters? And finally, we have Children Brought into a Volatile and Broken Situation… this seems like a recipe for disaster to me! So, the question is, what is the point of God making certain that we know all of this about our spiritual ancestors? Well, first off, I can tell you what the point isn’t; the point isn’t that God is okay with polygamy. It’s always important to remember that just because something is in the Bible that doesn’t mean God approves of it. Sometimes we get things that are meant to show us how much trouble you can get into if you go down a certain path, and the path in this story, having multiple wives, leads to nothing but trouble. But, with that said, I can’t help but think that we have this story because it will always be a pretty good description of our world. What family hasn’t had either an absent father or an unloved wife or someone carrying great shame, or a lack of dignity or children being brought up in the middle of a mess? I know my wider family has had some of this… I’m just saying. This family is typical in many ways… except for one thing: God had promised Abraham and Jacob that this family would someday be so numerous that you couldn’t count them and that he would use this family to be a blessing to the world… and now Jacob has 12 sons. The family is growing just like God promised… and while this large family may have come about through circumstances that were less than what God would have wanted, just the fact that they existed proved that God was present and faithful; and we can also see that God was present and faithful to Rachel and Leah, 2 women who, as we can see in the way they talked about their boys as they named them, turned to God in their sorrow and praised him in their joys. And even though Leah and Rachel’s son’s names came straight out of the circumstances of their birth... those names have now taken on new meaning… Levi and Simeon and Judah, along with all 9 of their brothers names now are forever be associated with this greater truth: God can be trusted fully… if you turn to him in your sadness and shame, He will listen and will keep his promise to never leave you or forsake you.

 Interestingly, today’s passage has bookends, bookends that remind us that God is paying attention. At the beginning of this story, God sees Leah’s loneliness and gives her many children; and at the end He remembers Rachel’s barrenness and gives her, her son Joseph. And the reason we are still talking about Leah and Rachel is that their stories tell us that there is hope: hope that God is present; hope that God is paying attention; hope that God cares about the things that bring us anxiety and worry and shame. And in the end we can trust him with our lives, especially when our lives resemble the lives of some of our spiritual ancestors… when we feel alone, when we know we are unloved, when we are bearing the burden of shame we have a God who was and will always be is, as Simeon’s name tells us, ‘The One Who Hears.’ In all honesty, I am thankful that I know that these 2 women are our spiritual relatives… and I am sure that someday, at some future family reunion these four mothers will gather their sons around them and tell us this about this time in their lives by saying something like this: God saw our suffering: right Ruben?; And God listened to us, didn’t he Simeon? And Joseph, God he took away our humiliation, didn’t he? And Judah, will we always praise Him? And we, along with Judah will answer, ‘Yes, we will always praise him for his love endures forever.’