

Reading Group Guide for
Rachel
by Jill Eileen Smith

1. Rachel's story is set in Harran in 1879 BC and begins by showing us the dysfunctional relationship between Rachel and Leah. What two main factors add to the rift between them? (Look at their birth order and marital status.) How does this set the stage for the rest of the story?

2. In chapter 2, Jacob is on the run from his brother, who wants to kill him, and is in search of his uncle Laban's home, where he is also hoping to find a wife. What happens when he meets Rachel? Do you believe this is a picture of love at first sight or simply overwhelming relief and attraction? Why?

Why do you think Jacob becomes so emotional upon seeing Rachel? Do you think Rachel thought Jacob's actions strange? Why or why not?

3. Jacob finally meets his uncle and tells the man his story. What thoughts do you think cross Laban's mind when he notices how little Jacob brought with him? How does this compare with the wealth Abraham sent with his servant when Laban's sister Rebekah went with the man to marry Isaac? Have you ever judged a person by their wealth or lack thereof? What was the result?

4. When Jacob has been with Laban a month, Laban offers to pay his wages. What does Jacob request? How do you think this makes Leah—the older, unmarried sister—feel? Have you ever felt left out or unwanted? How did you respond?

5. In chapter 4, Jacob has completed his work for Laban and wants to marry Rachel. By now Rachel has been planning her wedding for seven years. What happens to thwart her long-awaited plans? Have you ever faced a reversal so devastating? How did you handle it?

6. Why do you think Laban waited so long to find a husband for Leah? Comparing the biblical account (Gen. 29) with the fictional story, do you think Leah's actions and reactions are plausible? Have you ever been backed into a corner, faced with two impossible choices?

7. Rachel is denied her wedding night, denied being the only wife of one man who wanted only her, and denied children while her unwanted sister has several. Can you imagine living in her place? Have you ever faced constant rejection or been denied the only things you held dear? What did you do about it?
8. Once Jacob becomes aware of the truth of who first shared his bed, what is his reaction? Why do you think he goes along with Laban's demands to finish Leah's wedding week? Do you think he has a choice? Should he have put Leah aside if he could have? Why or why not?
9. Leah is technically the first wife in this polygamous household, and yet Rachel holds Jacob's heart; therefore, she takes the role that should have belonged to her. What impact does that action have on Jacob's relationship with Leah? With Rachel? Do you think Leah ever regretted marrying a man who did not love her?
10. Jacob works for Laban for fourteen years to acquire two brides. During that time, a battle for babies ensues between Rachel and Leah. By the end of those years, Jacob has four wives and ten sons by Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah. Rachel is the last to finally bear Jacob a son.

Have you ever been in a heated competition with someone? A spouse? A sibling? A child? Try to imagine such a situation today, perhaps not to have babies but to succeed, to be the best, to outdo someone else and their abilities. Does such competition bring you peace? Why or why not? What does such competition do to your relationships?

11. During her many years of waiting to conceive, Rachel struggles (see Gen. 30). What is the longest time you've had to wait for something that you wanted with all your heart?
12. Shortly after Joseph's birth, Jacob asks Laban to let him return to his father. Laban talks Jacob into working another six years for wages to build Jacob's flocks. What does Laban do to thwart Jacob's efforts? What does God do to best Laban's deceit?

Do you find yourself giving God credit and thanks when good things come your way? Why or why not? Do you think Jacob recognized God's hand in protecting him from Laban? Explain.

13. Though God protected Jacob and built his flock, Jacob still fears Laban's power. What specifically does he fear? Why do you think he has this fear, and do you think it is justified? What does it lead Jacob to do?

Has fear ever overtaken you to the point of not trusting that God holds the future? Can you give an example?

14. In the story, Rachel feels protective of Joseph. Though the Bible does not give us the ages of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah at this time in their lives, it does give us Jacob's age later in Genesis. If you do the math, you realize that Jacob is much older than either of his wives, making it likely that he would die first. With this in mind, do you think Rachel's worries over Joseph's safety are justified?

Read further in Genesis to Joseph's story. What happens to Joseph once Rachel is dead? Did she have control of her future? Do we? Why or why not?

15. Once Jacob is free of Laban, he encounters the threat of his brother Esau. Before he meets his brother face-to-face, Jacob wrestles with a man he cannot clearly see. They wrestle throughout the night, and Jacob comes away limping. Who wrestled with him? Have you ever found yourself wrestling with God's will for your life? Can you give an example?

16. As Jacob approaches Esau, he bows to his brother seven times. Why do you think he does this?

Isaac had given Jacob the blessing, and Rebekah had been told "the older will serve the younger," and yet Jacob treats Esau like a reigning monarch. What can we learn from Jacob's submission? Have you ever submitted to an authority, even when you were the one in the right?

17. Jacob does not move immediately from his meeting with Esau to see his parents in Hebron. (We don't know at this point if Rebekah is still living.) Why do you think he waited to make that journey?

What happens at Shechem that may have made him wish he had not lingered? How does he handle the situation? Would you have done things differently?

18. After Dinah's disgrace, what does God tell Jacob to do? Why do you think God directs him this way? What does that tell us about seeking the Lord for both the big and the small issues of our lives? Do you think God cared about what happened to Dinah? Why?

19. At some point during this time, Rachel conceives again with a second child. How has her relationship with her sister changed by this time? What has happened during the story to bring reconciliation between the sisters?

Are there relationships in your life that need reconciliation? Are there some relationships that can be forgiven but not restored? Why or why not? (Think of Jacob and Esau in comparison as you answer.)

20. The story's conclusion comes after Rachel dies in childbirth. How does Leah accept her sister's loss, and which of her children seek to comfort a grieving Jacob and Joseph? Why do you think this could be significant?

Jacob loses the woman he loved most. How do you think he handled his grief? How do you think his children were affected by it?

Is there a loss in your life that still brings you grief? If so, I pray God will comfort you in His healing.



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