Unit 3, Session 2

God’s Gift of Love

Summary and Goal
In the past few sessions, we have seen how Jacob was unworthy of God’s mercy, grace, and love, and yet, God remained faithful to him. In this session we pick up with the account of Jacob on his way to Paddan-aram to find a wife. We will see that once again, God graciously provided for Jacob. And once again, we will see that Jacob fell short in that his love was deep and persistent but flawed by sin. We will also be reminded that God provides love for us too—made clearest in the gift of Jesus. God wants us to understand love at an ever-deepening level so that we can reflect the kind of unconditional love that He demonstrated for us when He sent His Son to the cross. This love is the kind of love the world needs.

Session Outline
1. God gave Jacob a gift of love (Gen. 29:13-20).
2. God’s love is persistent through trials (Gen. 29:21-30).
3. God shows love to the unloved (Gen. 29:31-35).

Session in a Sentence
God grants His creatures the gift of love, but His love is greater still, including even love for the unloved.

Christ Connection
Jacob’s love for Rachel was deep, persistent, and yet flawed by sin, and he played favorites. Jesus, however, loved the world and gave His life to save sinners, including the outcasts and the unloved.

Missional Application
Because God has extended His unconditional love to us, we are to share God’s love with everyone, even those whom the world would consider unlovable.
What are some love stories you can think of that include intense struggle? (below are some possible answers)

- In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Elven princess Arwen falls in love with a human king, Aragorn. But to stay with him, she must leave her family and give up her immortality.
- In the *Star Wars* saga, Anakin Skywalker, a Jedi knight, falls in love with Padmé Amidala, a senator of the Republic. Jedi are not allowed to develop attachments to others, so they marry in secret.
- In *Romeo and Juliet*, two young members of warring families fall in love. Just when their plans to be together are nearly realized, a mistake in judgment ends in both lovers killing themselves.

Say: Great love stories have compelling yet often complicated storylines involving intense struggle wrapped up in the evil and failings of humanity.

Explain that what makes these love stories great is that they invite us into the reality of love in a broken world. We see in the characters something of our own predicament—that our love is imperfect too. (Refer to the following paragraph on DDG p. 112.)

We all suffer from the faults, twisted desires, and selfishness of others as well as of ourselves. Yet even in the midst of all the distortions of love in this life and the countless times our hearts have been broken, there is something driving us on to love and to be loved; that something is God Himself, who is love (1 John 4:8). The true power of stories about love and our own experiences of love, then, is that they point us to the fact that there is a real love, a pure love, that is grounded in the very real God who created all things.

Summarize: In this session we pick up with the account of Jacob on his way to Paddan-aram to find a wife, and God graciously provides for Jacob. But the love to and from Jacob is still flawed by sin, illustrating yet again that we need a perfect love provided by God—the gift of Jesus. This love is the kind of love the world needs.
**Point 1: God gave Jacob a gift of love (Gen. 29:13-20).**

**SAY:** At this point in Jacob’s story, the worst—his worst—seemed to be behind him. Heading to Paddan-aram, having encountered the Lord in a vision, he was now on a renewed path, one that would advance the fulfillment of God’s promise to bless the world through him with a wife and a family of his own. Jacob arrived in the land and found a well surrounded by men who knew his uncle, Laban, and they directed his attention to a shepherdess named Rachel, his uncle’s daughter. He wept with joy over having found his family, and Rachel ran home to tell Laban the good news.

**READ** Genesis 29:13-20 (DDG p. 113).

13 When Laban heard the news about his sister’s son Jacob, he ran to meet him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then he took him to his house, and Jacob told him all that had happened.

14 Laban said to him, “Yes, you are my own flesh and blood.”

After Jacob had stayed with him a month, 15 Laban said to him, “Just because you’re my relative, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be.”

16 Now Laban had two daughters: the older was named Leah, and the younger was named Rachel. 17 Leah had tender eyes, but Rachel was shapely and beautiful. 18 Jacob loved Rachel, so he answered Laban, “I’ll work for you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.”

19 Laban replied, “Better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay with me.” 20 So Jacob worked seven years for Rachel, and they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

**READ:** Ask a volunteer to read the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 113).

God providentially brought about the “chance encounter” between Jacob and Rachel. The world might view it as luck, but the people of God know better. Jacob did not just find love; it was provided to him by His loving Father. And his love for Rachel sustained him through seven years of work to marry her.

**INTERACT:** Ask the group the following question.

- **Why do people so often resort to “luck” as the “reason” certain circumstances happen at just the right time?** (it’s a habit to attribute good fortune to luck; some circumstances are so good that an implicit belief in something beyond just has to come out; in the absence of a belief in the sovereign, good God, people must find something to account for the blessings in the midst of chaos)
**EXPLAIN:** Jacob was family, but he was not Laban’s son, so it was natural for the uncle and nephew to work out a mutually beneficial arrangement for him staying there. It would seem Laban wanted to be fair to Jacob for the work he was doing and Jacob wanted to be fair to Laban for his room and board. When asked about an arrangement, Jacob offered to work seven years for Rachel as a wife, notably referring to her as Laban’s younger daughter. Jacob, who had arrived with little to nothing, saw his service as a way to pay Laban something like a dowry. And because of Jacob’s love for Rachel, the years seemed to fly by. Surely those seven years were not without challenge for Jacob. But his love motivated him to persevere. The reward that was in store for him dwarfed any obstacle or difficulty along the way.

**SAY:** This is what God’s gift of love does: It changes our perspective. It motivates us. It sustains us. We see this expressed in our relationships with others—spouses, parents, children, close friends—but we see it more clearly, more beautifully, more powerfully *in Christ.*

**EXPLAIN** the depth of Jesus’ love for us by comparison to Jacob’s love for Rachel, referencing the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 113).

In a greater way than with Jacob, love motivated the Son of God to take on flesh, endure suffering and shame, and lay down His life at Calvary (John 15:13; 1 John 3:16). And it is love that carries us as we seek to follow Him (John 14:15). Yes, our love of Christ is imperfect, but we know that we are loved by God with a perfect love because that is who He is (1 John 4:7-11).

**INTERACT:** Read the “Voices from Church History” quote; then ask group members the following question.

How have you seen God develop, deepen, and purify your love for Him and others? (spending more quality time praying and reading and meditating on God’s Word; increased desire to serve others; greater willingness to sacrifice time to help others; taking advantage of opportunities to share the gospel of Jesus with others)

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**Voices from Church History**

“The only ground of God’s love is his grace. The ground of God’s love is only and wholly in himself. There is neither portion nor proportion in us to draw his love. There is no love nor loveliness in us that should cause a beam of his love to shine upon us.”

—Thomas Brooks (1608-1680)
Point 2: God’s love is persistent through trials (Gen. 29:21-30).


21 Then Jacob said to Laban, “Since my time is complete, give me my wife, so I can sleep with her.” 22 So Laban invited all the men of the place and sponsored a feast. 23 That evening, Laban took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob, and he slept with her. 24 And Laban gave his slave Zilpah to his daughter Leah as her slave.

25 When morning came, there was Leah! So he said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Wasn’t it for Rachel that I worked for you? Why have you deceived me?” 26 Laban answered, “It is not the custom in this place to give the younger daughter in marriage before the firstborn. 27 Complete this week of wedding celebration, and we will also give you this younger one in return for working yet another seven years for me.” 28 And Jacob did just that. He finished the week of celebration, and Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife. 29 And Laban gave his slave Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her slave. 30 Jacob slept with Rachel also, and indeed, he loved Rachel more than Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years.

EXPLAIN: The deceiver was deceived. Jacob was a manipulator, exploiter, and deceiver, and while none of that prevented him from receiving the promised blessing of God, God loved him too much to leave him there. God’s desire is to purify His own, and sometimes that purification comes through pain.

- The narrative covers the span of seven years in one short verse, mirroring Jacob’s experience of those seven years flying by (v. 20). But now he was ready to marry Rachel and be intimate with her, which he demanded of Laban for the completion of his work. That evening, Laban gave Jacob his “wife,” but unbeknownst to Jacob, it was Leah, not Rachel. Concerned that his older daughter was being bypassed in marriage, Laban saw the opportunity to take advantage of his nephew, and his ploy was successful. Jacob slept with Leah, who was perhaps obscured by a wedding veil and the darkness of the night. But all was revealed in the morning.

- In this moment, Jacob knew exactly how Esau felt when the blessing was ripped out from under him through lies and deception. The parallels in the story are clear: the motif of the firstborn, the exploitation of desires, and tragic deception. And that is the point. This was what God wanted Jacob to experience—the pain and fury of deception, especially at the hands of a relative.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 114), which connects the discipline that Jacob received from God to the discipline we experience from His hand as His children.

God used Laban’s trickery to teach Jacob a lesson he needed to learn, to discipline him. Not because He was fed up with Jacob but because He loved him. God disciplines the ones He loves, which produces the fruit of peace and righteousness in those trained by it (Heb. 12:6,11). As sinners ourselves, we are also in need of God’s loving discipline. In spite of our evil, our Father does not turn away from us or leave us to our demise. Rather, God loves and disciplines us so that we might become a blessing to others.
INSTRUCT: Ask group members to use the scale in their DDG (p. 114) to consider how they respond to the loving discipline from God the Father.

How do you respond to the loving discipline from God the Father?

| Hardened Rejection | Repentance and Blessing |

SAY: We live in the age of redemption. Jesus has already come into the world and provided His redeeming salvation for humanity. All we must do is repent and believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord. We can gauge the health of our spiritual life by the way we love God and others. Does God’s discipline push you away or draw you closer in love? Is your love for God fickle or persistent? We cannot judge definitively our own hearts by such questions, but we can get a sense of the status of our relationship by them. And wherever we would place ourselves on this scale, the next step should be prayer to the faithful and persistent God for renewed faith and repentance, perhaps for the first time, in the Son of God sent to save us.

EXPLAIN: Connect the persistent love of Jacob for Rachel to God’s persistent love in Christ for humanity. (Refer to the second paragraph on DDG p. 114.)

Through a new arrangement with Laban, Jacob received his beloved Rachel as his wife, though he would work for Laban for another seven years—fourteen years in total. Such was the persistent love of Jacob for Rachel, but the same could not be said for his wife Leah. This situation helps us see the even greater, more persistent love of God, who used Jacob, Rachel, and Leah as part of His salvation history, even through their sins and wrong choices. It was through this family line that Jesus would be born.

Commentary: God’s design for marriage has always been between one man and one woman, and later, marriage to two sisters would be expressly forbidden (Lev. 18:18). When we encounter polygamy in the Bible, problems inevitably follow. Jacob’s situation was no different, as hinted at in verse 30. And yet, God used Jacob’s marriages to Leah and Rachel to bring His promises to pass.
Point 3: God shows love to the unloved (Gen. 29:31-35).

EXPLAIN: When we read of Laban’s deception on Jacob’s wedding night, we most likely focus on Jacob’s pain. But we cannot miss the pain this caused Leah as well. Here was a woman following her father’s direction and the expectations and customs of her day, and yet, there would be great sorrow and suffering in store for her. Leah was the source of Jacob’s pain. He did not love her and she knew it. But God shows love to those unloved by others.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 29:31-35 (DDG p. 115).

31 When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was unable to conceive. 32 Leah conceived, gave birth to a son, and named him Reuben, for she said, “The LORD has seen my affliction; surely my husband will love me now.”

33 She conceived again, gave birth to a son, and said, “The LORD heard that I am unloved and has given me this son also.” So she named him Simeon.

34 She conceived again, gave birth to a son, and said, “At last, my husband will become attached to me because I have borne three sons for him.” Therefore he was named Levi.

35 And she conceived again, gave birth to a son, and said, “This time I will praise the LORD.” Therefore she named him Judah. Then Leah stopped having children.

EXPLAIN: Referencing the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 115), show how God loved Leah though she was unloved, even despised, by Jacob.

God showed love to unloved Leah and blessed her in her time of distress. To say Leah was merely unloved doesn't communicate enough. The Hebrew word used here can also connote hatred. Jacob wasn’t just apathetic toward Leah—*he despised her,* perhaps because she reminded him of how he had been beaten at his own game of deception. But the Lord had compassion for her and opened her womb to have four sons.

INSTRUCT: As you explain the significance of the sons’ names, ask group members to circle the following words in the Scripture passage: “seen” (v. 32), “heard” (v. 33), “attached” (v. 34), “praise the LORD” (v. 35).

- Leah named her first son Reuben, which literally means “See, a son!” He was a gift from the Lord because of her affliction, but she mistakenly thought this son would cause her husband to love her. Jacob did not even participate in the naming of his own child.

- Leah named her second son Simeon, meaning “One who hears” or “Hearing,” another gift from the Lord who heard her because she was unloved. She named her third son Levi, “Attached,” hoping her husband would finally become attached to her. But once again her hopes went unrealized.

- Leah named her fourth son Judah, “Praise the Lord.” She did not mention her condition or her desire for her husband’s love. Instead, she turned to God in praise because she had learned that she was indeed loved—by the Lord.
INTERACT: Ask the group the following question.

How has God demonstrated His love for you while in the midst of difficult circumstances? (a sense of comfort and peace from God; reading meaningful and applicable truths in Scripture; strength to persevere in prayer and life; tangible expressions of love that have come through God’s people; a renewed understanding of the sacrifice of Christ, followed by a renewed commitment to live for Christ)

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 115).

God Is Love: The greatest act of love by God toward humans isn’t the giving of earthly goods but the giving of Himself in Christ so that we might become reconciled to Him.

Essential Doctrine “God Is Love”: To say that God is love is to say that God is the essence of love, or that perfect love both resides and resonates within God Himself—one God in three Persons. The imperfect love that human beings share between one another is a dim reflection, a sign that points to the perfect love that resides within God. The greatest act of love by God toward humans isn’t the giving of earthly goods but the giving of Himself in Christ so that we might become reconciled to Him.

EXPLAIN: Refer to the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 115), and help group members see how to show God’s love to others.

Leah was not the last person to be unloved and despised. There are people all over the world hungering for the love of a human being, and even deeper, hungering for the love of God. Those in Christ have been given the opportunity to reflect God’s love to others: to family, to friends, to outcasts, to enemies, and to the unknowns in the world.

Application: We love others because God first loved us while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:19). This kind of love is unique to the Christian faith. In Buddhism and atheism, there is no God to love us in our failures. In Islam, “Allah does not love the unbelievers.” We have the one God by whom we know what love is due to the reality that He first loved us. So we can confidently proclaim the truth of the gospel to those around us that they too may experience what they long for, what they feel is so distant and unattainable yet is truly closer and greater than they can fathom.

INTERACT: Ask group members to discuss the following question with someone specific in mind.

What can we do to show the great love of God in Christ to those who feel unloved? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)
EXPLAIN: The love story of Jacob, though filled with exploitation, deceit, and distress, is also abundant with the love of God. As we have seen in Jacob’s story, God’s love for us involves His discipline as well as His provision. No matter what situation you find yourself in today, God loves you, demonstrated in the true, sacrificial love of the Lord Jesus Christ. Though He loves us in ways we will never fully understand, God’s love outshines the darkness of human evil and daily calls us to forgiveness, redemption, and relationship.

READ the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 116), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God’s Word.

Because God has extended His unconditional love to us, we are to share God’s love with everyone, even those whom the world would consider unlovable.

- How will you respond to the gift of God’s love in Christ?
- How can we better demonstrate before the world God’s love as we love one another?
- Whom do you know who may feel unloved or be considered unlovable? How can you show them Jesus’ love this week?

CLOSE IN PRAYER: Father, You are love, and we could neither love You nor others unless You first loved us. Though we were unlovable sinners, You sent Christ to die for the ungodly. Because His atoning death and glorious resurrection have expressed Your saving love toward us, help us by Your Spirit to show this love toward others so that You would be honored and sinners would be saved. Amen.

INSTRUCT: As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the Daily Study devotions in their DDG (pp. 117-119), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use Encourage One Another (p. 120) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God’s Word.
Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Daily Study devotions in the DDG (pp. 117-119) help group members get into God’s Word for themselves. Encourage One Another (p. 120) helps group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 117-119) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.
- Share the following idea from the devotion for Day 2 as a part of point 2 in the session: We should live with integrity because we want to reflect the nature of God to the world and because we find rest, joy, and salvation in the truth—Jesus Christ (John 14:6).

Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God’s Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- Day 3: “Trials and pain often push us away from God. Instead, let us learn as Leah did—through the pain and the hurt, let us praise the Lord.”
- Day 4: “Learning from our sins is important. It is one way we grow in holiness. But it is also important that we learn from the sins of others.”

Visit www.GospelProject.com/blog for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God’s Word.

Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the DDG (p. 120) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using The Gospel Project in their groups.

- Encourage group members to point each other to Jesus’ death on the cross as proof that God stoops down to love even the most unlovable.
- See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.

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Additional Commentary

Point 1: God gave Jacob a gift of love (Gen. 29:13-20).

“It seems that Jacob made himself useful. So after a month Laban discussed paying him a wage (29:15). He did not want to take advantage of Jacob just because he was a close relative. Although he probably did not contribute anything for his lodgings, Jacob certainly did not turn down the suggestion of being paid. He had fallen in love with Rachel, Laban’s younger daughter, who was far more beautiful than her elder sister Leah (29:16-17). So Jacob offered to work as an indentured servant for seven years if he could be allowed to marry Rachel (29:18). According to ancient West Asian labour customs, someone who sold themselves into slavery was expected to work a seven-year term of service. (Later the Lord reduced this to six years for the Israelites—see Ex. 21:1-2.) Laban agreed, perhaps because he was aware that he was getting a very good bargain, and that he was keeping wealth within the family. The narrator then covers those seven years in one verse, explaining that Jacob’s term of service flew by because he loved Rachel so much (29:19-20).”

“Also 29:1-30 introduces us to the strife that the households of Jacob and Laban experience, ending in a standoff by a mutual peace treaty (31:52). By this struggle the Lord establishes the prosperity of Jacob, while reforming this trickster by giving him ‘a dose of his own medicine.’ Jacob meets his match in Laban’s cleverness; Jacob is ‘out-Jacobed’ by his senior, though the Lord finally reverses Jacob’s losses and plunders Laban’s ill-gotten gains. Their dispute was over the ‘wages’ … that Jacob earned by working in Laban’s household. His wages are the subject of 29:15-30 and are central to the remainder of the Jacob-Laban narratives. Repeatedly, Jacob’s ‘wages’ are the source of Laban’s cunning, which in the end comes back to haunt Laban.”

Point 2: God’s love is persistent through trials (Gen. 29:21-30).

“Ironically Laban deceived Jacob in regard to the marriage of his daughters just as Jacob had deceived his father, Isaac, in the matter of the birthright blessing. It is uncertain whether it was an ironclad cultural custom for an older daughter to be married first, or only a custom of Laban’s family. It is interesting, though, that Jacob, who had displaced his older brother, now sought to marry the younger daughter. Again we meet the Genesis theme of younger displacing older.”
The next seven years were not like the first. Isaac and Rebekah’s plan for Jacob to stay a few days had been crushed. Rebekah had intended for her son to be away only long enough for him to find a wife and for Esau’s anger to cool (27:43). However, finding a wife and having a deceptive father-in-law kept Jacob away much longer than expected. In addition, tension had become paramount, for Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, which caused strife and struggle in the family for years. Mosaic law would later forbid a man from taking sisters in marriage when both women were still living (Lev. 18:18). Note the tragedy resulting from polygamous unions: rivalry among wives and children (Gen. 29:30,32); hatred (v. 31); envy (30:1); bitter anger (30:3); infighting (30:8); and bartering for sexual intimacy or virtual prostitution (30:15-16).”

**Point 3: God shows love to the unloved (Gen. 29:31-35).**

“The Lord, who had seen and provided for Hagar previously in her time of need (16:13-14), now saw that Leah was unloved (lit. ‘hated’) and opened her womb. In a society where a woman’s prestige depended almost entirely on her success in bearing sons, the Lord gave Leah four sons before she temporarily (31:17) stopped having children. Three themes are present in Leah’s remarks: her conviction that God provided these children in response to her affliction and unloved condition, her hope that the births would cause her husband to love her, and her praise to the Lord for what he had done. The explanations connected with each son’s name are not linguistic etymologies, but explanations of wordplays.”

“Leah’s reasoning is a product of her culture. She was sure that Jacob would love her if she bore him sons. That is why she greeted Reuben’s birth with the words, Surely my husband will love me now (29:32). That did not happen, and we hear her unfulfilled longings in her words at the birth of Simeon and Levi. But when Judah was born, she changed her focus. Instead of thinking of herself and the misery of not being loved, she focused on God and praised him. Her circumstances remind us of the futility of depending on someone else for happiness (Leah longed for Jacob’s love, which never came), the stupidity of focusing on ourselves (as long as Leah focused on herself, she remained miserable), and the joy of focusing on God. A mourning heart was turned into a praising heart.”

**References**

2. See The Qur’an, Al Imran 3.31-32; Ar-Rum 30.43-45.
For a story to be great, it must include a great beginning. The story of the Bible, which tells the true story of our world, is no exception.

In the Book of Genesis, we see God the Creator in all His majesty and goodness as He spins the world into motion and lavishes His image bearers with love. We have an “inciting incident” that introduces conflict into this good world, as the first humans raise their fists in defiance toward their loving Father and bring havoc into this peaceful paradise. But even here, we have a promise—God will make things right again. God will cover His people’s sins and crush their adversary. The rest of Genesis shows how even though sin spread throughout the world, God remained faithful to His promise to Eve, His promise to Noah, and His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The Book of Genesis is a glorious and earthy tale of rebellion and redemption, of sin and salvation, of failings and faith. Here is a book that shows us who we are in our sin and who God is in His grace. May this study lead you to express gratitude for God’s love toward you and then extend His love to everyone who inhabits this world He has promised to restore.