

Modern Day Idols: The Idol of Romance

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Genesis 29

I really enjoyed studying Genesis 29, and as I studied it, with the help of some good commentators and scholars, most notably Tim Keller, I realized that in many ways Genesis 29 is a romance, a biblical romance. It's not a supermarket romance. If you were putting a cover on Genesis 29, it wouldn't be a picture of a muscular Jacob with his shirt falling off and beautiful Rachel swooning beneath him, all of this under some steamy title like "Desire in the Desert." No, this romance is different. Let's go back to the story and look at it again and see if we can find the differences.

I love the opening scene. Jacob is on the run from his brother. He's fled from his father's home and now he's in the desert looking to take refuge with his mother's family. After a long journey he arrives at a well. There are some shepherds sitting around the well and a lot of sheep lying in the afternoon sun, and they all look hot and thirsty. But no one is drinking any of the water because there is a huge stone over the mouth of the well. Jacob asks, "Say, are you boys from around these parts? You wouldn't happen to know a fella named Laban would you?" "Sure we know him!" say the Shepherds, "In fact look over there, here comes his daughter Rachel." And Jacob turns and looks...*and there she is*. Jacob sees this dark haired beauty moving towards him in the shimmering heat. If this were a movie, Rachel would be walking in slow motion and Roy Orbison's "Pretty Woman" would be playing on the soundtrack.

Then comes one of my favorite moments in the story. Jacob is so excited by the vision of this woman coming towards him that he gets up, he puffs out his chest, and in a feat of manly strength, he single-handedly moves the stone from the top of the well and waters all the flocks and herds "When Jacob saw Rachel...he went over and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well." This is Jacob's Charles Atlas moment. All his male vanity is on full display for the sake of this pretty woman. Jacob fulfills the male stereotype here. If a female gives us a jar to open, we manage to open the jar, and we start to strut. Jacob is basically a man opening a really big jar. The text doesn't say so directly, but Jacob is clearly head over heels. He is gaga. It is love at first sight.

Scene 2 takes place in Uncle Laban's house, and now Jacob's passion comes boiling to the surface. Jacob has started working for Laban, and Laban offers to pay him something for all his work, and Jacob says breathlessly, "I will serve you seven years for your daughter Rachel!" "I'll do anything for your daughter's hand. She is my muse, my morning star, my song in the night!!" "That's the sentiment of Jacob's extravagant offer. According to what I've read, the value of 7 years of labor was worth the highest bride price a groom would be expected to pay in those days. So Jacob is making a dramatic, romantic gesture. When the 7 years is up, Jacob's passion for his beloved is still as strong as ever. He goes to Laban, and instead of asking politely for his daughter's hand he says, "Give me my wife I want to make love with her!" Not a recommended approach to your future father-in-law. It's jarring and it shows us that Jacob still burns with romantic passion for her. The fire that made him take the rock off the well hasn't diminished. Even when Laban pulls that nasty wedding night trick on Jacob, substituting Leah for Rachel, Jacob's passion does not wane: "I will work 7 more years for the woman I love!" So I think we

can all see how this story is a romance and how some of the elements and sentiments here are the same as what we find in modern romances.

But if we look closely, there are important differences here too. In modern romantic comedies, Jacob's passion would have been nothing but good. In modern stories, Jacob would be held up as an example of the kind of romantic feeling every man should strive for and every woman should want. In a modern rom-com the story would end in a perfect wedding and the curtain would come down as the two lovers finally kiss. But that's not how Genesis 29 goes. That's not how Genesis 29 ends. Read Genesis 29, Jacob's obsessive passion for Rachel is not a beautiful, redeeming force, it becomes a destructive force. Remember our definition of an idol. An idol is a good, God-created thing lifted up too high or twisted out of shape. Romance is good. Romance is really good. But Jacob's passion for Rachael is an almost religious fervor. He will do anything for her. He will give his soul, his life, his all. And because it's raised too high, because it's overheated, it becomes a destructive force.

Where do we see the destructive side of Jacob's passion? Jacob's obsessive passion hurts Leah. He's so fixated on Rachel, that it seems there is no room for him to show any love for anyone or anything else. It's not simply that he loves Rachel more than Leah; it's that he doesn't love Leah at all. He seems to pay no attention to her. You can see how deeply she is hurt in the names of her first three children. All the names express the hope that Jacob will show some level of care for her. And he doesn't. Jacob's obsessive passion damages the relationship between the sisters.

Read ahead to chapter 30 and we will see them fighting: Rachel envies Leah because she has children. Leah envies Rachel because she has Jacob's love. Their relationship is seriously damaged. Jacob's obsession with Rachel damages his children. The sin of the father is passed down to the next generation. You know the story. How would you describe the relationship between Joseph and his brothers? Terrible right? Murderous. Why was that? Because Joseph is favored by his father. Why is he favored? Because he is Rachel's son, he is the child of his one true love. Jacob dotes on Joseph and buys him colorful coats and puts up with his boasting all because Joseph is the son of his beloved Rachael. Romantic love is a good and beautiful thing. It is a good and beautiful gift of God. But when romantic love is put on a flowery pedestal bad things happen.

Is this a problem in our world? Is romance ever turned into an idol in our society? You bet it is. As I studied this week, I read a Banner article written back in 2016 by a young woman named Mariellen Hofland. She was 21 and a senior at Dort college when she wrote the article. Ms. Hofland describes what it's like for her to be a single young woman in our society. She starts with a confession: "I am 21 years old and I have never been on a date." She pauses to let that sink in and then she asks: "What did you feel when you read that sentence? I'm guessing you felt sorry for me. But I am not looking for pity. I only mention this to demonstrate to you your own reaction. You see, whether we admit it or not, our culture has taught us that the single life is pitiful. What is worse is that I too have adopted this strange intuition that if only I were to fall head over heels in love, then all my days would be splendidly happy. In fact, I believe this so strongly that not only do I have a great desire to date, to fall in love, and be married-but this has become something that consumes my thoughts every single day." "The world has trained me that being in a romantic relationship is the only thing that will make me truly happy." I think a lot of single people would agree with Ms. Hofland. The world does train young people-and other people too-that the romance is the only way to happiness.

Listen carefully to how our culture talks about romantic love and you will hear it speaking in religious terms. You will hear it telling you a story that somewhere out there is a girl or a boy who will make your dreams come true, who will usher you into a world of fulfillment and happiness. That story is everywhere. It's in pop songs, you see it in romance novels and romantic comedies, it's the story behind the TV series *The Bachelor*. It's a story pumped up by thousands of carefully curated, boyfriend-girlfriend Facebook and Instagram posts. It's a story lifted up and magnified by a wedding industry that pushes more and more extravagant wedding celebrations as a sacrifice to the rosy glow of romance. The romance myth is everywhere. So it's no wonder we have this instinct to feel sorry for single people, and it's no wonder that young women like Mariellen Hofland feel like the single life is a kind of wilderness.

There are a couple of problems with this idolization of Romance. First of all, it's not Biblical. In the Bible, a single person is not underdeveloped. A single person has not failed to accomplish what God wants for him or her. God says, "It is not good for man to be alone." That's not the same thing as saying "It's not good for a man or a woman to be single." In the gospels, Jesus tells us that marriage is not ultimate. In Matthew 22, the Pharisees try to trap him in a question and he says "At the resurrection, men and woman will neither marry, nor be given in marriage." And in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul tells single people "It is good to remain unmarried as I do." In 1 Corinthians 7, not only does Paul put the single life on par with married life, he says that he personally recommends it. He prefers it. So when society teaches us to feel sorry for singles, when society makes them feel incomplete, something is out of order, it's a sign that romance is being made into an idol.

The other problem (and this is a problem for all the idols) is that romance simply cannot bear the weight of our hopes. To put it more specifically and personally, the person you're in love with cannot possibly bear the weight of all your dreams and happiness. One of the classic lines from Romantic Comedies is spoken by Tom Cruise to Renee Zellweger in the movie *Jerry Maguire*. I'm sure many of you remember the line: "You complete me." The sentiment is: I am broken but you make me whole. In the movie it sweeps Zellweger off her feet. And who wouldn't be swept? If you were dating and someone said "Honey, you complete me," who wouldn't feel special! But ultimately I think if someone said something like that to me I would feel burdened. I'm just a regular person. I have fears and anxieties. I sometimes feel overwhelmed by my own stuff. I can't complete you. I can't be the source of your hope and your redemption! I can't be the rock on which you stand! When people make romance an idol, they imagine this glorious life with this other person, but then the other person turns out to be really, really human. Insecure. Stubborn. Fickle. The idol comes crashing down, and sometimes, so does the relationship. Or so does the marriage.

Ultimately there is only one person who can bear the weight of our hopes and dreams. There is only one person who completes us, only one person who can bear the weight of our hopes, and that is Jesus Christ our Lord.

I said that Genesis 29 has a different ending from a typical Romantic Comedy. If the Jacob and Rachel romance were a modern rom-com it would end in a wedding. It would end with the two of them looking into each other's faces as if they'd found perfect happiness in each other. But that's not how Genesis 29 ends. It ends with Leah and a very different kind of love. Jacob treats Leah badly. He doesn't love her. He all but ignores her. He performs his husbandly duties, but that's about it. Leah clearly loves Jacob. Her face is towards him. She longs for the warmth of his romantic attention. God sees Leah's suffering. He moves towards her and he keeps providing her with sons. And eventually he changes Leah.

For the first three sons, the names she gives the boys show us that Leah's face is still turned toward Jacob. She's still looking to him for happiness. "Surely my husband will love me now!" "At last my husband will become attached to me" But for the last son, that changes. She names the child Judah. "This time I will praise the Lord," she says. Do you see how her vision has shifted? She's no longer hoping for Jacob to complete her. Her face is now turned away from Jacob and toward her Lord. Her help is in the name of the Lord her God, because that's the only name that can bear the weight of our hopes.

Human relationships, romantic and otherwise, do not work if we are looking to each other to fulfill our hopes and dreams. If we look to one another for completion and happiness, we will be disappointed. Your boyfriend girlfriend, husband, wife-they are all busted people, they will let you down. Your parents, your siblings, your pastor, your fellow church members, they are just human beings, they will let you down. No matter how hard we try, we love each other imperfectly. Romance works best when two people start with their faces towards our God. Or to put in a New Testament terms: Romance begins at the cross. I know that sounds strange. At first glance, the cross doesn't seem romantic at all. But romance works best when both people in the relationship begin with their eyes on Jesus. At the cross we see ourselves as we truly are. Broken people. Incomplete people. Sinful people. But not just broken. We are broken people fiercely, firmly, unshakably loved by the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. At the cross we receive a grace that completes us. At the cross Jesus anchors our hope in eternal places. At the cross we find a place to stand. Then, standing on that firm foundation we can look at each other and see each other as we really are. We can love each other joyfully, freely, unconditionally, generously. And we can find the grace to forgive each other when we fail.

The Bible often uses the metaphor of a romance to talk about our relationship with God. The Bible often uses the metaphor of a marriage. Christ is the groom and we are the bride. Now that sounds like a romantic metaphor, but it really isn't. When you realize how difficult that relationship has been for God and how much it has cost him, you realize that his love for us is much more than just romantic. It's stronger than that. It's something deeper and more resilient: It's a covenantal. It's unconditional. It's eternal. That's a kind of love you want to put at the center of your life. That's the kind of love you want to give your soul, your life, your all.

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