

Leah, the Other



Are you the kind of person that likes to cheer for the underdog? It is quite fascinating how often Hollywood will showcase the “girl next door” winning the heart of the handsome quarterback, rather than the beautiful cheer leader, or the clumsy, geeky kid that ends up saving the world or at least the football game. The message they try to send is that we are all more than what we “appear” to be – and yet in the real life of actors, beauty is everything! From facelifts to beauty products that defy aging to wearing the perfect gown to the Oscars, the message they scream is – “beauty wins” – and it is only in the fantasy world of fairy tales and movies that goodness of heart is enough.

In this story of two sisters, it is Leah that draws me more than Rachel in her life’s drama which can only be described as tragic. Leah has a tough start just with her name, meaning “cow” over her sister’s moniker of “ewe” (though depending on how you pronounce that, you might prefer cow!). As the older sister, it is difficult enough to be outshone by her younger sibling but to be used as a pawn in her father’s schemes is the ultimate degradation and betrayal. I want to know this woman and her story better because I believe that in each of our own stories, we have known some level of rejection, manipulation and unrequited love. In Hollywood fashion, it has all the drama and intrigue of a great love story, except that there is no happy ending. Or is there?

Before we wade into the depth of these women’s lives, take a moment and reflect on Psalm 63: 1 – 4. What has your soul thirsted for in love and relationship? What journey has brought you to the place where you might say with the Psalmist, “Your steadfast love is better than life!”

Prayer: *Dear Father, give us the courage to enter into this story with our hearts open and vulnerable, allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal the loves that we thought could save us. Draw us back into Your perfect heart of love that is truly better than any this life can offer. Amen.*

Read together Genesis 29: 1 – 20

We do not know why people fall in love or what is the chemistry that really makes a heart begin to sing at the sight of another. It is a powerful force often overriding good sense and rational decision-making. First love is a wonderful feeling and an all-consuming force where our minds can think of nothing else but that person. First loves, however, are not always the best loves as we may later discover. Few of our personal stories read like a romance novel or a Hollywood script and it may be just me, but I think the idea of the perfect “soul-mate” is also a rare find. Most of our loves fall a bit short of perfection, but that does not mean that they cannot bless us for a lifetime. Jacob sees young Rachel and he is immediately drawn to her. He questions the other sheep herders as to her family connections and is thrilled to discover that she is kin and qualifies as spousal material. In a display of great macho strength, he whips off the massive stone covering the well and waters the flocks for Rachel. He is so taken with his infatuation for Rachel that he actually weeps out loud as he kisses her. Now that is a love story worthy of a motion picture! Rachel seems equally smitten and runs to tell her father the tale.

1. What do you celebrate in this story so far? Do you have a “love at first sight” story? Part of Jacob’s joy must be how God guided him to this place and time to meet the one he was to marry. Where have you experienced God guiding you to just the right place and time?
2. Jacob meets the family and stays with them for a month while the father, Laban assesses his merit as a son-in-law. Perhaps the most insightful words from Laban are found in verse 14: *“Surely you are my bone and my flesh”*. Considering that Jacob was known as a trickster and how Laban eventually treats Jacob, they do seem cut from the same cloth! If applicable, share what kind of family you married into and how it was similar or different from your family of origin.
3. We are now introduced for the first time to Leah, the older sister and there is an immediate comparison. It is true that her name can mean “wild cow” but it can also mean “weary” and neither is overly flattering. “Leah’s eyes were _____?” What do each of your translations read? There is not unity over the definition of the Hebrew word, *rak* – but “tender, delicate, soft, gentle, frail, weak” are all possibilities. Why do you think that the writer of this Scripture chose to comment on Leah’s eyes, whereas Rachel is described as “beautiful in form and favoured”?
4. What damage can be done when we compare children or compare ourselves to one another?

Read Genesis 29: 20 - 35

In fairness to Jacob, he never wavers in his confession of love for Rachel. The infatuation never wears off and he asks Laban to marry her even if it means working free for seven long years, though it seemed barely a week for his love-sick soul. We must not minimize his commitment to her nor the validity of his love. If Laban had not interfered, the story would be simply heartwarming and lovely. This is not the happy ever-after story we all long for, but a heart-wrenching miscarriage of justice where no one wins. What is justice? Laban felt it was unjust that the younger sister would marry before the elder. Laban had seven years to find a husband for Leah, leading one to wonder why it was so hard to find a suitable spouse. Was Leah that unappealing or did Laban even try? Whatever the reason, Laban’s sense of what is just leads to flagrant injustice as he substituted Leah for Rachael in the wedding bed. (And how that happened, I will leave to your imagination!)

5. I cannot imagine what Leah was feeling in this strange and ugly situation. I sense that over the seven years, she had grown in affection for Jacob and perhaps she held out some hope that Jacob could love her as well. Speculating, do you think Leah had any choice in this plan or might she have been the one to convince Laban to let her marry first?
6. Jacob is rightly incensed at the deception and goes straight to Laban which leads one to believe that Laban was the instigator, and Laban does not deny it, but justifies his actions according to custom of the eldest marrying first. Verse 27 is a very cold-hearted response: *“Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years”*. In essence, “Just get through the week of wedding celebrations so the crowd doesn’t know what is going on and you can move on to Rachel”. I cannot fathom the pain felt in that week long “celebration”. Rachel is also cheated of her wedding. Though the Scripture doesn’t say, I cannot imagine that it was the wedding celebration of her dreams but perhaps a quiet affair to say it is done. Injustice upon injustice is heaped on Laban’s daughters.

Leah’s job is done and is cast aside – the custom has been honoured and her purpose complete – she is no longer needed. Laban has no feelings for Leah – she is simply a problem to be solved and a means by which he can take advantage of Jacob. In Laban’s mind, he only inconvenienced

Jacob for one week and now Jacob gets the woman he loves and Leah as a bonus while Laban also gains seven more years of free labour. What a horrible father! If deemed appropriate, you may want to share a story of thanksgiving for the father that you were blessed with, or perhaps share a difficult aspect of your childhood with him. How does one's perception of their father affect their perception of God as Father?

God has a love for both Leah and Rachel and he works in their lives uniquely. As God looks upon Leah and sees her unloved heart, he has compassion for her and so blesses her with a child – a son whom she names Reuben. His name means “See, a son” *“because the Lord has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me”* (verse 32). Leah decides that her worth to Jacob will be defined by what she does – not who she is.

7. Have you been in a relationship where you had to earn another's respect and love? How exhausting! But also, how futile for one's sense of self-worth and self-respect becomes totally tied up in the other person's approval of actions and behaviour. There is never security or peace. If comfortable, share an experience of trying to win another's approval, whether a friend, neighbor, employer or a family member.
8. Have you ever tried to win God's approval? Share what difference it makes for you to truly embrace God's unconditional, unwavering love for who you are, not what you do!
9. Leah gives birth to two more sons, still hoping that one of these sons will help win Jacob's love for her. She names one Simeon, “God hears that I am unloved” and then Levi, “now my husband will be with me.” In verse 34 we hear her hope and her anguish, *“Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have born him three sons.”* Yet after the birth of each son, not a word is heard from Jacob and Leah's love remains unrequited. Three times she turned toward a man to fulfill her and give her value, and three times she is disappointed and rejected. It is important to note that if Leah was conceiving, then Jacob did lay with her. She is used for his physical pleasure, but she is not loved. The hollowness in her heart must have been so overwhelming!
10. Have a discussion on the ways that women look to men for fulfillment and to sexual encounter as proof that they are loved. Will this need ever change in us? Read Genesis 3: 16 and consider what God is saying to Eve and to us. It is vital for your group to discern if this is God's curse upon us, or God pointing out to humanity the resulting consequences of sin.

We have our first glimmer of hope for Leah in the birth of her fourth son, Judah. Where she has longed for Jacob to love her, she finally turns her eyes towards her God, her strong, mighty and loving God who has been with her through this whole saga. When she names Judah, “thanks and praise” and declares, “this time I will praise the Lord”, she turns her heart toward God for blessing, not Jacob. This story never has a ‘happy’ ending, but I believe that in this moment, Leah finds some peace as she receives God's love for her. It is also significant that it is the line of Judah from which David comes, Judah that becomes the last recognized tribe of Israel and from which Jesus completes the lineage. If only Leah had rested here in her salvation – but instead she gets into a “mandrake” war with Rachel!

READ Genesis 30: 1 – 24

We cannot do justice to this half of the story, but we see where envy continues to tear down the relationship between sisters. Rachel also has an ache and longing in her heart for she cannot have

children. Rather than helping and encouraging one other in their painful situation, they pit themselves against each other to heighten the strife. Unlike Hannah's husband (I Samuel 1: 8), Jacob does **not** assure her that his love is worth 10 sons, but rather gets angry and asks, "*Am I the God who closed your womb*"? In that ancient culture, a substitute child from a handmaiden may be considered one's own child. Today, adoption can often ease the pain of not bearing a child and does bring fulfillment to a family. In that day, monogamy did not bear the value that is understood from Scripture as God's initial desire for man and woman. Polygamy is another consequence of the fall and leads to further family pain. Note the names that Rachel gives to her children – Dan, "God has judged me" and Naphtali, "I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed". There is bitterness more than joy. She tried to steal the one joy Leah had in bearing children and wrestle away that only piece of happiness. Leah returns "tit for tat", child for child and her handmaid also bears two sons, Gad and Asher. Notice these names have to do with "fortune" and "happiness", but not the praise and thanksgiving directed to God. Happiness fades very quickly and fortunes turn against us. It is only turning our hearts to God's love in gratitude that joy will root deep into our soul.

The story gets uglier as the sister's fight over mandrakes to help them with their fertility. Rachel now controls whether Jacob can lay with Leah or not and "hires him out" for the mandrakes. One can only weep at the level of mistrust, envy and rivalry that has invaded this family. More children are conceived to Leah and finally to Rachael, but there is little joy, only spite. Rachel's longing for a son is fulfilled but rather than giving thanks to God for the birth of Joseph, she names him, "*May the Lord give me another son.*" The fulfillment of that desire brings her death, for she could not rest in the gift of Joseph from God. This too is tragedy. How often have we looked at what we have and instead of giving thanks, have longed for more, never quite satisfied! That longing for more may steal our "life" away as well if we cannot find space for gratitude. I have read that there are only two options in life, gratitude or bitterness. Is this a true statement and why or why not?

This extreme disfunction carries on into the relationships with the brothers, the horrific story of Dinah (for another study), Joseph and his dream coat, Judah and Tamar and the list goes on. Where is the grace in this family tree? God is present, and God hear their cries. He has compassion upon Leah and remembers Rachael as they cry out in their anguish, but only once is thanksgiving to God returned. Rachel never releases the grip of the household gods. **Read Genesis 33: 1 – 3.** If there is any last insult for Leah, she is sent ahead of Rachel in case Esau decides to take revenge and kill Jacob's family.

I have one final hope for Leah and Jacob's relationship – that perhaps in some way, Jacob did finally learn to love Leah. **Read Genesis 49: 29 - 33** When Leah died, she was buried in the cave that held Jacob's ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and now Jacob asks to be buried with Leah. Rachel was buried on the way to Ephrath (Genesis 35: 16 – 21) and a monument was established in her honour. I may be reading too much into Jacob's choice or not understand burial customs, but for Leah's sake through this story of unrequited love, it is my hope that she did know love in this life. We all need to be loved unconditionally and it is not always easy in this life to have that kind of marriage or friendship. If, however we know we are God's beloved and his delight and we find our identity and our purpose in that love, then every other relationship is a gift to love and celebrate. There is no saving love apart from our Lord Jesus Christ!

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