

Women's Bible Study – Fall 2007
WOMEN IN TRANSITION
Leah: the Unloved Wife (Genesis 29)
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I'm glad to be back with you after the summer break. You know, it's always a little hard to get back into the pattern of studying and writing for Bible study after the break. I was dawdling around, fiddling with my computer, suffering from writer's block, having the munchies, when I opened a fortune cookie the other day. It said, "You'll accomplish more if you start now."

This has been a big year for me. My husband John and I celebrated thirty years of marriage in July. And I am about to celebrate 50 years of life. Mind you, I've been milking that one for all it's worth, all year long. I've managed to parlay my 50th birthday celebrations into all sorts of excuses for fun already, and my birthdate isn't til October. Earlier this year John said to me, rather uncharacteristically I might add, "Would you like to go to the Caribbean for your birthday?" This was thrilling. We travel a lot but it's usually to places where we have relatives who are tolerant enough to put us up. I spent lots of time looking at travel packages on the internet and daydreaming about white, sandy beaches. But a few weeks later I got another invitation. This one was from my four siblings, who planned to backpack for 38 miles along the John Muir trail in the Sierra Nevadas in California. This trip would involve considerable hardship – carrying a heavy load, sleeping on cold ground, eating freeze dried food. I took a good hard look at my two options and didn't hesitate...I went backpacking. Like I told John, "I got a better offer." Actually, I didn't tell him that, and I hope that before we die we make it to the Caribbean—but not this year.

Those of you who have been coming to Bible study for awhile have heard me talk about my family. But this was like *Survivor* with your adult siblings, except that thankfully, no one got voted off. It was both hilarious and painful. There are several writers in this group, and we decided that at least one of us should submit an article to a magazine. We decided we'd title it "The Birthday Party". We were like the Donner Party, only there was no cannibalism. Instead, my sibs surprised me with a party at 10,000 feet. Here you can see my birthday cake, composed of carefully packed hostess cupcakes and candles. They had a sign, tiny squirt guns and noisemakers. And I was totally caught off guard as they were waiting for me behind a large rock after I returned from a walk.

There were five siblings including me, four spouses (John was here getting ready for the 150th anniversary of the church), one nephew, and a friend. And what did I spend a lot of time thinking about? Two sisters, Leah and Rachel. Two sisters who could not have treated each other more differently than my siblings have treated me. I learned many valuable lessons on this backpacking trip, and I'll return to this story in a bit after I first explain the purpose of this fall series, and take a look at Leah's story.

I. Introduction to series

The original working title of this series was “Women in Crisis”. And I have to admit that it didn’t go over all too well with my fellow teachers. I’m not sure we think of ourselves as women in crisis. That’s when the idea morphed to become Women in Transition—because all of us are in transition almost all the time. Just when you think you’ve reached a nice resting point something changes...an illness occurs...A job loss. Someone leaves the nest. Someone you love dies. We are not static in Christ, and the godly women of the Bible have a lot to teach us about coping with changes and challenges.

Having said that though, there has been an interesting response, since we published the lecture titles. I’ve heard from women who have been through some of these situations firsthand—unwed mothers; recovering from abuse; unloved in their marriages. So whether or not you resonate with each week’s topic, be aware that women all around you ARE going through these experiences. And you are their sister in Christ, so listen up and we will together get through the changes and challenges that living presents to us as women. By the grace of God, we’ll do it in a way that honors Christ and brings joy to those around us.

II. Leah’s Story

I’m going to begin with the story of Leah today. We pick up her story in Genesis 29, where she appears as a bit player in the drama of Jacob’s life. Let me fill you in on the background, while you locate Genesis 29 in your Bibles.

Jacob is the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham. Although God promised Abraham many descendents, he had just two sons before he died—Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac then had twins, Jacob and Esau. Esau was the firstborn, but Jacob tricked him out of his inheritance and his blessing. So now Jacob, on the run from his angry brother, has fled to Haran where his uncle Laban lives. He arrives at the well where Laban’s sheep are watered, and he sees little Rachel, his cousin, a shepherdess bringing her sheep. He gallantly springs up, removes the heavy stone from the well, waters her sheep, and greets her with a kiss. Next thing, Jacob is residing in his uncle’s home and is in love with Rachel. We pick up their story in Genesis 29:14 where we get our first picture of Leah as:

a. A Spinster (Genesis 29:14-20)

“After Jacob had stayed with him for a whole month, Laban said to him, ‘Just because you are a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be.’ Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form and beautiful. Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, ‘I’ll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel.’ Laban said, ‘It’s better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me.’ So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her. (Genesis 29: 14-20)

Let's pause for a moment and note a couple of things. First, this really was love at first sight. And it wasn't a love that turned sour with time and age. Jacob continued to love Rachel, through all the hardships, through the rivalry that resulted from having multiple wives, and he loved her two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, more than his other ten. Even when Jacob lay dying at the end of Genesis, in chapter 48, he breaks off to say, **'As I was returning from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan while we were still on the way, a little distance from Ephrath. So I buried her there beside the road to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).'** (Genesis 48: 7) The story of Jacob and Rachel is one of the great love stories of the Bible, despite the flaws in their relationship that came from polygamy.

Seven years' wages was a typical bride price. By this suggestion Jacob showed that he understood the worth of Laban's daughter, and it was a creative way for him to come up with the bride price when he was penniless. The Bible makes this touching statement: *it seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.*

Now what was the deal with Leah, the older sister? The Bible says her eyes were weak. She was either very short sighted, in which case she would have been nearly handicapped in the time before corrective lenses; or the phrase could mean that her eyes were colorless and ugly. By contrast Rachel was beautiful of face and form. Some commentators speculate that Rachel was only 11 or 12 when Jacob met her, and that the 7 years allowed her to grow into the beautiful young woman she promised to become.

The next picture we see of Leah is as

b. An Accomplice (Genesis 29:23-30)

Now return to Genesis 29, verse 23. The 7 years were up and Jacob asked for his wife. Laban gives a big wedding feast, and verse 23, **"When evening came, he took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob, and Jacob lay with her. And Laban gave his servant girl Zilpah to his daughter as her maidservant. When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?'**

Laban replied, 'It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work.' (Genesis 29:23-27).

And finally we read, **"Jacob lay with Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years.'** (Genesis 29:30)

I want you to notice something very important here. This could not have happened unless Leah was in on the trickery. Everyone knew that Jacob loved Rachel. Everyone knew that he had worked seven years to secure her. So for Leah to go along with this deception meant that she was willing to trade off the possible unpleasant circumstances in return for being married.

But poor Leah—she only had Jacob to herself for a week before he married Rachel and the two of them were officially sharing a husband.

I also want to note that Jacob, whose name meant “trickster” or “deceiver”, was finally getting a taste of his own medicine. From this experience he would have understood more how it felt for Esau to be tricked out of his blessing, and we hope Jacob became a more mature and perceptive person after discovering how painful it is to be deceived.

Next we see Leah as

c. An Adversary (Genesis 30:1-3)

In the next few verses, Genesis 29:31-35, we discover that Leah bears Jacob four sons in quick succession. And here is where we finally get a clue about Leah’s internal life. First, it’s obvious that Jacob is sleeping with both of Leah and Rachel, despite the fact that he only loves Rachel. He is taking his legal duties as a husband seriously. Leah’s first son is named Reuben, which means “See, a son!” She explained **‘because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now.’ (Genesis 29:32).**

But he doesn’t. And so her next son is named Simeon, which means “hearing”. As Leah said, **“Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too.” (Genesis 29:33)** The implication is that the Lord heard about Leah because she prayed to him.

A third son comes, and he is named Levi, meaning “attached” and again she voices the hope that her husband will love her, and be attached to her, if not for herself, then at least for the children she is giving him.

Finally she bears a fourth son, Judah, whose name means “Praise”. Now Rachel comes into play and we see the adversarial part develop. Look at Genesis 30:1:

“When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, ‘Give me children, or I’ll die!’ Jacob became angry with her and said, ‘Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?’ Then she said, ‘Here is Bilhah, my maidservant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and that through her I too can build a family.’ (Genesis 30:1-3)

What a tangled mess. Rachel blames Jacob for not giving her sons, but Jacob rightly points out that children come at God’s sovereign will. So Rachel decides to jumpstart the process by giving Jacob Bilhah, who then bears Dan and Naphtali. Leah, not to be outdone, gives her servant Zilpah to Jacob and watches her bear two sons, Gad and Asher. It’s as if the two of them are keeping score. Rachel is jealous, and probably has come to hate Leah because of her sons. But Leah is also probably jealous of Jacob’s love for Rachel. All I can say is, Jacob was probably worn out from trying to keep all these women happy!

Next we see Leah as

d. An Unloved Wife

We come to the most bizarre twist of all in Leah's story. One day her oldest son, Reuben, is out in the field and finds some mandrake plants. Now these are reported to have an aphrodisiac effect and to help with conception. They have leaves and berries above the ground and a man-shaped root below the ground. So Rachel asks for some, but Leah retorts that since she's already stolen her husband, she's not about to take her son's mandrakes. **“Very well,’ Rachel said, ‘he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son’s mandrakes.’ So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him. ‘You must sleep with me,’ she said. ‘I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes.’ So he slept with her that night. God listened to Leah, and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son.” (Genesis 30:15b-17)**

We can see that Rachel's calling the shots in this family, bartering her husband's reproductive capability for plants. But the irony is that it's Leah who conceives, not Rachel, and not just once, but three more times. She bears Issachar, Zebulun, then a daughter, Dinah.

Next we see Leah as

e. A Mother

Leah, in the end, achieves the highest status a woman could in her day. She is the first wife and the mother of the first born son, as well as mother to six boys and one girl. She is married to a man who becomes immensely wealthy, through the blessing of God. And she, who struggled lifelong with her unfortunate appearance, also learned to cope with the sorrows and joys of being married to a man with three other wives. Leah, in the end, looked to God to vindicate her, and that is exactly where we should look when we are in her situation.

There is an interesting footnote. At the end of his life when Jacob lays dying, he gives an unexpected set of directions to Joseph about his own burial. In Genesis 49:29 he tells his sons to bury him in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite – the place where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah are buried. And he adds, **‘and there I buried Leah.’ (Genesis 49:32)**. In the end Jacob treated Leah with the respect due her as his first wife. He chooses to be buried in the family plot with Leah rather than in Rachel's tomb. We don't know that he ever loved Leah, certainly not in the same way that he loved Rachel, but he honored her for being the mother of his sons.

And finally, Leah becomes

f. An Ancestor

Leah also had the last laugh, in a sense. Not only did she give birth to firstborn Reuben, who lost his position as firstborn through sin, but she also bore Simeon, who took the firstborn position after Reuben's disgrace; she bore Levi, who fathered all the priestly line who served God; and most importantly, she bore Judah, the ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ. The unloved wife was

the one who became the ancestor of Jesus, not the loved one. So having looked at Leah's story, what about a modern day unloved wife?

III. What To Do If You're an Unloved Wife

It's intriguing to me that, at the end of the day, Leah probably did not receive the love she craved from her husband. But remember that she entered this union as an accomplice in trickery. We don't see that Jacob loved her. But he did respect and honor her. It was clear that she drew joy from childbearing, and that she saw in her children answers from God for her situation. From Leah's story I would take these three pieces of advice for unloved wives.

The first is to

a. Look to God for vindication

Leah knew that Jacob probably wasn't going to come through for her, especially as Rachel was so resentful of Leah's presence. But she wisely turned to the One who could make things right—her Lord. It was God she begged for children, and God she praised when he answered that prayer, since this was her one route to respect and love from her husband.

For us, looking to God means that we understand that our husbands are not meant to be everything to us. It is God who meets all our needs, not our husbands. They should certainly meet some needs, but it is wrong and doomed to failure to expect them to meet all needs. Enjoy him for what he is...human.

If you are an actively mistreated wife, with someone who is unkind or cruel, it is all the more important that you look to God to fill those needs in your life for protection and affection. I am not advocating staying in a home where you are in physical danger or where the emotional situation is so broken down that it doesn't work. That is the time to call for outside help from counselors, doctors and pastors. But if you are feeling at odds and unloved, as most of us do at some point, take some time to look to God for your needs to be met. He will be your champion. This means that you should be praying fervently about the situation, examining your own life to see if changes could be made, and beseeching God to help you.

Second, unloved wives should

b. Resist bitterness

Hebrews tells us to be wary of the root of bitterness that springs up between us, ruining everything. Ephesians tells us not to let the sun go down on our anger. Verses like these speak to our tendency to harbor grudges and bad feelings...to keep reviewing insults and getting more and more angry. This leads nowhere. A bitter person cannot experience the grace of God, and that is exactly what you need in an unloving home. That's why it's imperative to get outside help and to throw yourself on God's mercy in order to move towards a solution. Leah could have hated Rachel, but at the end of the day they all left their father Laban and threw in their lot

together with Jacob. And we perceive a gradual change in her attitude as she begins to praise God for the children he's given her rather than being bitter.

Third, unloved wives should

c. Foster honor and civility in the home

Leah, in the end, gained honor by doing what she was supposed to do. She was a wife to Jacob. And she bore him children. This bears some thinking about. If a wife withholds physical, sexual contact from her husband, he is very likely to become surly and unkind. 1Cor. 7:5 tells us **"Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent..."** And it is also true that, the bearing of children means that you are sharing a significant part of your lives over a long number of years. That shared history, and shared love for children, can provide some of the glue that keeps marriages together. It is perhaps because of her obedience to Jacob in this area that Leah gained greater honor as the years wore on.

Now civility, or courtesy, is something which is sadly lacking in many homes. I once arrived at church when almost no one else was in the parking lot. In the distance I saw Rich Harris opening the car door for his wife, Michelle. I think Rich and Michelle have been married for quite a while...they have a son in 7th grade, after all. But I have often observed Rich being unfailingly courteous not just to his wife, but to all women. Not all men are naturally courteous in this way. But if we as wives deliberately set an example of civility in our home, we make it more difficult for our family members to return rudeness in the face of our courtesy.

I've observed how some families always interrupt each other. It seems that no one "gets the floor" for any length of time, and that means that they're not listening to each other. Other people yell when they're angry. It's very difficult not to yell back or respond angrily when someone is being angry with you, especially if you feel it is unjust. I'm not talking about being a doormat. But I do think it's worthwhile to examine our speech patterns and see if we are unwittingly escalating conflict by the way we answer our spouses, by the language we use, by the anger we allow to build up inside ourselves that comes bursting out like a breaking dam.

Courtesy is more than just manners, though. It is a way of putting into practice the frequent biblical commands to love each other. Paul writes, **"The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."** (Galatians 5:14-15).

Christ's example made it clear that he loved us when we were not very lovable. And his example also shows us that love is sacrificial, and shows its true depth by DOING, not just saying. If we are to love our families in a Christlike way, then we'll be sacrificial, tolerant towards the unlovable, and involved in actions that convey love.

You may be thinking at this point that I have no idea what I'm talking about. And you would be right, in the sense that I have not had to live through what some of you face daily in your marriages. But if we truly believe, and not just give lip service, to the word of God in providing

a way through every sorrow, then we have to take seriously its advice about how to face suffering in a godly way. We have to cling to the absolute truth of God's word and its applicability to us here and now.

I remember sitting in an English church service long ago during a stretch when I was absolutely fed up with life, particularly with my in laws. The sermon text that day was from 1 Peter 2:23: **“When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” (1 Peter 2:23).** I was startled out of my self pity and forced to focus upon how Jesus faced his tormentors: “Suffering, he made no threats.” I think that is an attitude that serves us very well in relationships. When we suffer, even unjustly, if we can bear it without retaliation and without threats, we are following in the footsteps of Jesus. My heart goes out to you women who are suffering right now in your marriages. But like Leah, if you can throw yourself on the mercy of God, you will find yourself vindicated. And if you believe you cannot change your husband or your marriage, then your only recourse, really, is to change yourself.

But what can the body of Christ do to support those around us who are suffering through painful marriages, poisonous relationships and so on?

IV. What We Should Do For Each Other

I want to tell some stories from my backpacking trip to illustrate what we can do for each other.

We should:

a. Bear Each Other's Burdens

We entered the wilderness at about 8,000 feet. The Lake Florence ferry dropped us on a formidably high slab of granite, so our first act was to stagger up a rocky hillside.

And stagger I did. Wrongly convinced that I was strong and tough, I had crammed about 45 pounds of gear into my ill fitting backpack. By lunchtime I had a blinding headache and nausea (the altitude and exertion were getting to me) and I was convinced that I would die and be left by the trail, to be collected by my siblings on their way back through in four days. I looked around me. My 90 lb sister in law, four years older than me, was easily hiking with a pack that dwarfed her petite frame. Two of my sisters, sedentary until a couple of months ago, were managing just fine. Why was I passing out?

So I learned my first day's lesson. “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2) Finally someone noticed that I was grey in the face and silent. Suddenly my pack was off and its contents were being redistributed among the other ten people, so that I resumed hiking with about 30 lbs instead of 45. In comparison I felt lighter than air! But the first day was pretty terrible nonetheless, and it was all I could do to make it to our first camp, about 9 miles out, pitch my tent, choke down a few bites and go to sleep. If I hadn't been rescued by my siblings, I would not have made it at all.

Bearing each other's burdens is an important lesson. Someone around you is flagging, discouraged, stumbling under the weight of a load far too heavy to carry. Be alert to their distress, and step in with your help.

Right now we have a tremendous opportunity to help bear each other's burdens in the church. The children's ministry is crying out for volunteer workers, and in particular, they are needed on Wednesday evening. I pray that some of you, who are able to attend because of the children's Bible study on Wed. morning, will be willing to volunteer at AWANAS and Kid's Clubs so that other women can attend in the evening. The Wednesday evening ministries are the ones most suffering right now, and I would urge you to speak to Karen Anderle, our children's pastor, if you can help. You can also pass the word along to Brenda Schibilla, our Bible study administrator, if you don't know Karen.

Bearing each other's burdens is something we can do in the body of Christ even with people we don't know at all. If the need is made known, we can bear the burdens. But to help in a more specific way, we need to have a deeper relationship with others.

The second day of the hike, I learned a different lesson, and that was that we must:

b. Balance Each Other

I was practically turning handsprings on the second morning, because I had a manageable pack weight. But before I left the campsite two of the experienced hikers took me aside and checked the fit of my backpack. It turned out that the load was incorrectly distributed. They pulled this strap and that strap, hoisted the backpack up so the weight rested on my hips, not my shoulders, and suddenly the pack felt not like a rock pulling me backwards but like part of me. A large, heavy part, to be sure, but it moved with me in a different, and far easier, way.

So I learned my second day's lesson. If your load is unbalanced, you will not function well. For us as women this can mean too great an emphasis in one area of our lives and not enough in another. Work may dominate while family gets what's left over. Or care for your body has to take second place to the demands of driving our overscheduled children. And so on. God created us to be perfectly balanced, aware of the competing needs of body, mind and spirit. And, like me with the backpack, we sometimes cannot see our own imbalance.

That is where you and I come in. We can serve to balance each other's loads. Maybe we give help. Maybe we give advice. Maybe we just help each other resettle our packs so they fit better. But balancing each other's loads requires involvement in each other's lives. Friends can see about us what we cannot perceive in ourselves. Let's use those relationships to help balance each other's lives in a godly way. We can bear the burdens of people we don't know as well as our closest friends, but we can only balance the load for people that we know enough about to perceive what their lives are like. This is a call away from selfishness and toward community.

Finally,

c. Be a Sister

This is a story from the fourth day of the trip, the one that was to be the most grueling. We planned to hike 12 miles, and our goal was to reach Blayney Hot Springs, so we'd have a reward at the end of our long day.

Towards that goal, we rose at 5:30 am. One helpful group member brought a harmonica and played it in the predawn darkness. By 7:30 we were on the trail. My brother began to fret almost immediately, worrying that my younger sister Tina would end up hiking alone between two groups. She had blistered feet and he was worried about her. So despite our good start, and the mile or more we'd covered, AND the 12 miles ahead of us, three of us started back towards camp to intercept her.

So I learned another lesson: **"It is more blessed to give than receive."** I was grateful to the bone when everyone helped me the first day. But I was even more delighted to help another group member. This sort of community cuts two ways. We have to unbend enough to *ask* for help when we need it, and we also have to be quick to inconvenience ourselves to *give* help when it is needed. In fact, I had an unexpected reward when I turned back. My eye fell on a shiny object in the dust at my feet, and I discovered that one of my favorite silver earrings had fallen off along the trail. I would never would have found it had I not turned back to help. This willingness to help is what I've described as being a sister to someone else. We are, literally, sisters in Christ, related by the blood of Jesus Christ we have in common.

On Sunday I had to make an announcement about women's ministries in each of the three services. For the adoration service at 9:00 on Sunday, I had to sprint from the pulpit to the back of the stage where I quickly threw on my choir robe, gathered up my music and processed in with the choir. As I came around the corner at a typical breakneck pace, Connie Brophy said to me, "You need a pit crew! Can I help you?" I had to laugh. You know, the pit crew are the guys standing by in the Indy 500 who change the tire, fix the engine and get the racecar back on the road in 10 seconds flat. We ALL need pit crews. And I praise God that I have one. I have sisters by blood, sisters in law, and sisters in Christ who help me manage the life that God has given me. And if I can be part of your pit crew, let me know. We want this Bible study to be a place where together we are transformed by the word of God, where we have true community with each other, where we can weep and laugh and learn together. By God's grace, and your willingness, it can be so...sisters!