

# An unloved mother who learned to worship God

Gen. 29:21-35

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**Introduction:** We're seeking to honor mothers (and grandmothers) today in a special way. So we have to recognize that they come in all sizes, shapes, and characters. Some are wonderful and godly in spite of difficult circumstances, while others suffer from unfulfilled expectations or simply never manage to get the right focus on the task. But the Bible doesn't specify that we should honor only the deserving mothers – it just says you somehow try to dignify and show appreciation for her, whatever she was like, whether yours seemed totally honorable to you or otherwise. We're remembering that our mothers are the primary instrument that God used to give us a platform in this life from which to gaze on His glory. Thank God for your mother, who has had her own share of struggles and turmoil. Everyone does (and usually we don't know the half of it!).

The biblical mother I'd like to focus on today had some special struggles to deal with, but she doesn't normally receive much attention – she was a forgotten mother named Leah – the unwanted wife of Jacob (Gen. 29). You remember how Jacob worked seven years for Laban to get his daughter Rachel, the girl of his dreams; yet on his wedding night, the girl who was actually sent to his bedroom was her older sister Leah [we assume it was too dark to know the difference], because according to the customs of the time, you didn't give the younger sister in marriage before the older sister was taken care of. The biblical text says it all: ***“When morning came, there was Leah!”*** Jacob was devastated and immediately complained to his father-in-law, ***“What is this that you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?!”*** Laban gave his cultural excuses and proceeded to make an arrangement with Jacob so that he would work for him another seven years in exchange for the other daughter. All he had to do was fulfill the first daughter's bridal week; now he would have two wives and another seven years of job security. This wasn't God's idea; mankind came up with polygamy; it was never God's plan, much less this kind of rivalry between sisters (Lev. 18:18). God put up with it for a long time, but it was never His will (it was man's doing, fruit of our sin). You can imagine how “put down” Leah felt, how unappreciated, devalued, diminished, underestimated, unloved! Just imagine Leah was your daughter – what would you want to do to this Jacob fellow?

**1)** So next the biblical text tells us what happened when children were born to Leah. V. 31: ***“When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb, but Rachel was***

**barren.”** And when Leah’s child was born, they didn’t know beforehand what its gender would be; in the old days it was always a surprise! As it turns out God gave her a male child, and she named him **Reuben**, which literally interpreted means “behold, a son.” And even Leah’s motive for naming him Reuben was **recorded in the annals of family history: “It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now.”** What painful words, reflecting Leah’s anguished longing for her husband’s love; but Leah’s hopes would soon be dashed, for the birth of this child did not move Jacob to love her. In fact, the names of Leah’s children are going to tell the story of her continuing disappointment and heartache in life. She longed to find her value in this most important relationship with her husband. Many a wife has experienced the frustration and letdown of not being her husband’s true soul mate, whether the competition has been another woman or his job or his computer or recreation or buddies, etc. Leah was one depressed mother.

But the biblical text says she conceived again and gave birth to another son. Now they didn’t have family Bibles to record their history in; this was **oral tradition** (as with many ancient peoples). For generations they were passing down these stories from parents to children, and within those annals of oral tradition about Jacob’s family, **Leah’s story** was being remembered for our benefit. Her reason for giving the second son the name Simeon is recorded like this: **“Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too.”** [Heb. “hated”; cf. Dt. 21:15.] **Simeon** is the same Hebrew root as “*shema*” (in the Hebrew creed, Dt. 6:4), which means “hear.” In other words, God had heard about her plight and was again looking out for her. Then v. 34 says she conceived a third time and bore Jacob still another son, and this was her hope: **“Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.”** **Levi** means “to be joined or attached.” Three sons – surely that was enough now to draw his affection toward her! But with each son she was left disappointed; it didn’t work; nothing could buy Jacob’s affection. His heart belonged to Rachel. For years Leah just kept putting her hope in this romantic love, thinking her true value depended on Jacob’s response to her, but continually feeling the pain of rejection and loneliness.

**2)** This mother’s story was repeated for generations, kept in the collective memory of how the tribes of Israel had their start – how the mother of a major portion of Israel was slighted and undervalued. But notice what happens the next time she conceives and gives birth. According to Gen. 29:35, when her fourth son is born, she says, **“This time I will praise the LORD.”** So she named him **Judah** (Heb. *Yehudah*), which means thanksgiving or praise. What has happened to Leah that the family history took note of so faithfully? She has finally **taken her husband off the throne of her heart** and has given God his rightful place! There is no biblical evidence that Jacob ever changed in regard to his wives and their place in his heart; even after his wife Rachel died, he continued his favoritism to the two sons that she bore him. But Leah finally decided to **put her hope not in her husband, but in the Lord!** How many times does the god of romantic, sentimental, worldly love have to break your heart before you decide to put your trust elsewhere?! The true God of love is just waiting for you to call on Him in praise, to put your hope and confidence in Him who longs for deep communion with you. Calling on the name of the LORD – in our case, that’s the name of Jesus!

The great irony is that when Jacob was on his death bed in Egypt and was leaving a blessing to all his sons, even though he has powerful words to say over his favorites, calling

Joseph the prince among his brothers, he leaves no doubt about which son's descendants will be given the greatest prominence: ***“Judah, your brothers will praise you, your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you ... The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his”*** (Gen. 49:9-10). Clearly this was a prophetic word about the Messiah and the Gentiles' ultimate loyalty to Him, and the **royalty of Judah's line** was clearly seen by the NT witnesses. When we look at Jesus' family tree in Matthew's Gospel, it doesn't say anything about Jacob being the father of Joseph or Benjamin, Rachel's two sons, but it's Jacob the father of **Judah**, fourth son of a hand-me-down wife, who for the longest felt so lonely and rejected, until one day she decided to put her trust in the LORD. Judah's very name in the genealogy of Jesus is the commemoration of a moment when a mother turned her eyes back to God and found her hope in Him. Leah finally chose to find her identity, value, beauty, and purpose in the love of God: ladies, see her example and run to it! But it took the rejection of a man to help her come to the end of herself so that she was willing to look to her Maker-Redeemer. A spouse was never intended to be your source of worth and meaning – so if you are married, don't put that onus on your spouse (he/she was never supposed to make you happy – though our spouses do bring us much happiness, we cannot make our ultimate happiness depend on them!). ***“As fantastic as human love is, it can never be a substitute for God's love. The void in the human heart is God-shaped, not mate-shaped”*** (Kyle Idleman, *Gods at War*). A mother who knows the Lord as her source of contentment and joy is a mother who will be used to impact her children's lives for good and for God's eternal purposes, even for generations to come!

**3)** A final dimension of this story relates to the name by which Judah's descendants would be known. The word Jew comes from Judah. In the Greek NT, Jew is *Ioudaios*, directly derived from *Ioudas* (Greek form of Judah). In Jesus' day, the Judeans, or Jews, along with some Levites and others from the nearby tribes of Simeon and Benjamin, were all that was left of Israel (the other tribes had been killed, scattered, deported, assimilated); so those who returned from the Babylonian exile (whether they lived in Judea or Galilee) were collectively referred to as Jews, the remnant that was left of God's people to His praise and glory on the earth (this double meaning runs all through Scripture: the very name of the descendants of Judah, the Jews, means “praise” unto the Lord!). So when Leah changed her focus and gave God His rightful place in her heart, she gave her descendants the legacy of being called by the name of her son Yehudah (“Judeans” = Jews): to the praise of Yahweh. And in their descendant Jesus, all nations would be invited to live to the praise of Yahweh! Or as the apostle Paul would put it, ***“A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly, and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God”*** (Rom. 2:28-29).

The Word of God invites us to live for the praise of God, but it's only through Jesus, the Lion of Judah and our Passover Lamb, that you and I can even imagine what that might look like. This Son of the tribe of Judah, Leah's legacy, still invites us today to find our worth and fulfillment in Him. So call on Him as your salvation, your hope, your peace, the One who can order your steps and cause your life to be lived for His praise! Will you confess Him as Lord today? There's nothing in this life better than Jesus!