

unworthy through weakness we should either abstain from the feast or be prevented from partaking. To the contrary, the man who recognises

his faults and need for Christ is one who ought to celebrate that feast. We may not, however, forget the responsibilities that such a privilege brings.

(To be continued)

Exposition

The faithful of old— studied by the young

Leah: a woman who received God's love

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LEAH WAS an ordinary woman of extraordinary faith who, through much suffering and heartbreak, learnt to lean wholly on God as her source of comfort, strength and joy. She grew up in the shadow of her younger sister, Rachel, who was “beautiful and well favoured” in comparison with Leah, who was “tender eyed” (Gen. 29:17). This word “tender” (Heb. *rak*) is also translated ‘gentle’, ‘weak’ or ‘soft’, and is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe disposition rather than appearance when depicting a person. Rehoboam was “tender hearted” (2 Chron. 13:7), David had been “weak” (2 Sam. 3:39), and we are told that “A soft answer turneth away wrath” (Prov. 15:1). By looking at a number of key events in Leah’s life it is hoped that each of us will be encouraged to nurture characteristics of gentleness, humility and submission as we strive to become more like Christ.

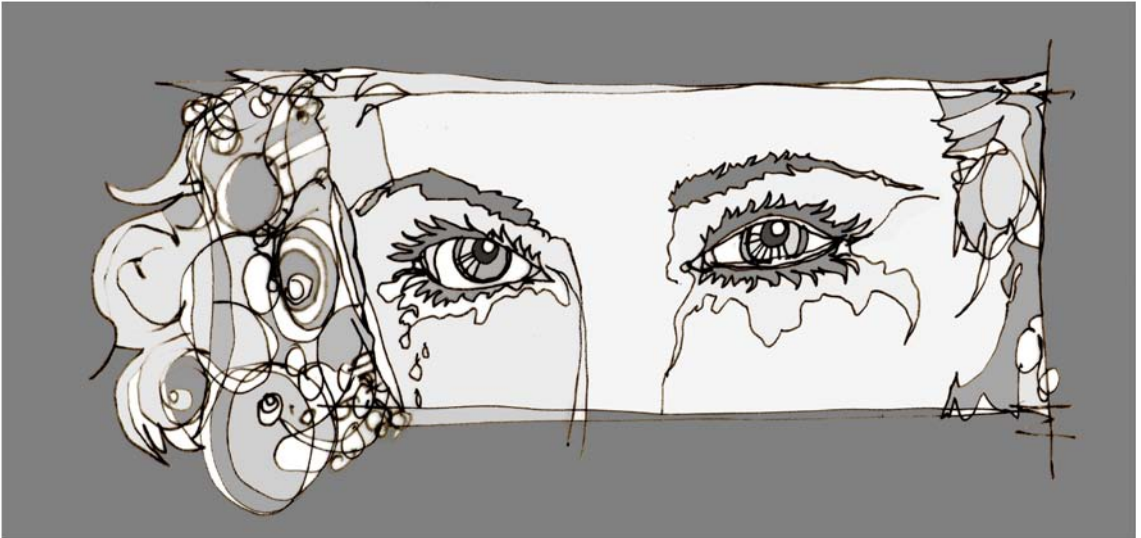
Living under the shadow

Being Leah can’t have been easy, constantly being compared with the more beautiful Rachel. Visitors to the family home would have been stunned by Rachel’s outer beauty and completely ignorant of Leah’s inner beauty; yet in spite of this there is no indication that she moaned or tried to make Rachel’s life a continuing guilt trip. In fact, when Jacob and Rachel fell in love she didn’t interfere in any way, but kept any feelings of loneliness between herself and God. For seven years she watched as Jacob toiled in the field because of his sincere love for her sister; for seven years she watched Jacob and Rachel grow in love and appreciation for each other; and for seven years

she was painfully aware that she had none of this, even though she was the elder sister.

Throughout almost every event we find recorded in Genesis concerning Leah there is an underlying sentiment on her part: “I *must* be equal to Rachel, otherwise my life will not be worth living”. Living under the shadow of her sister Leah felt neglected, unlovable and unwanted. It took many years for her fully to appreciate what the psalmist meant when he said, “the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings” (Ps. 36:7), and even when she understood the sentiment it wasn’t easy to live by. Through many trials Leah had to learn to lean on God and to learn that there was only one shadow she needed to live under.

This feeling of inferiority and a deep-seated desire for approval and acceptance is not unique to Leah; we naturally crave approval and we all have the same lesson to learn. God in His infinite wisdom has provided us with an account of how this particular woman of faith came to find comfort in the living God. Most people, if they really think about it, have felt inferior or left out in some way at some time in their life. For some this feeling rarely gets in the way, but for others the feeling is persistent and problematic. There are, no doubt, many ‘Leahs’ within the Brotherhood, brothers and sisters who feel that they are not as good or worthy as others in their ecclesia. There are also those whose grandiosity creates Leahs when they cause others to feel that they are not good enough because they could never speak as confidently, preach as effectively, devote as much time to ecclesial duties (the list goes on) as these



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brothers and sisters. We can probably see aspects of both extremes in our own day-to-day lives.

As the life of Leah is unravelled the lessons are twofold: we can learn how to overcome our own feelings of inferiority by accepting our situation and cultivating a complete reliance upon God, and we can also examine ourselves and look at how our proud, puffed-up moments might be making life difficult for others by making them feel less valuable than they really are, and as a result we can resolve to be more aware of our attitude and how it affects those around us.

A week of humiliation

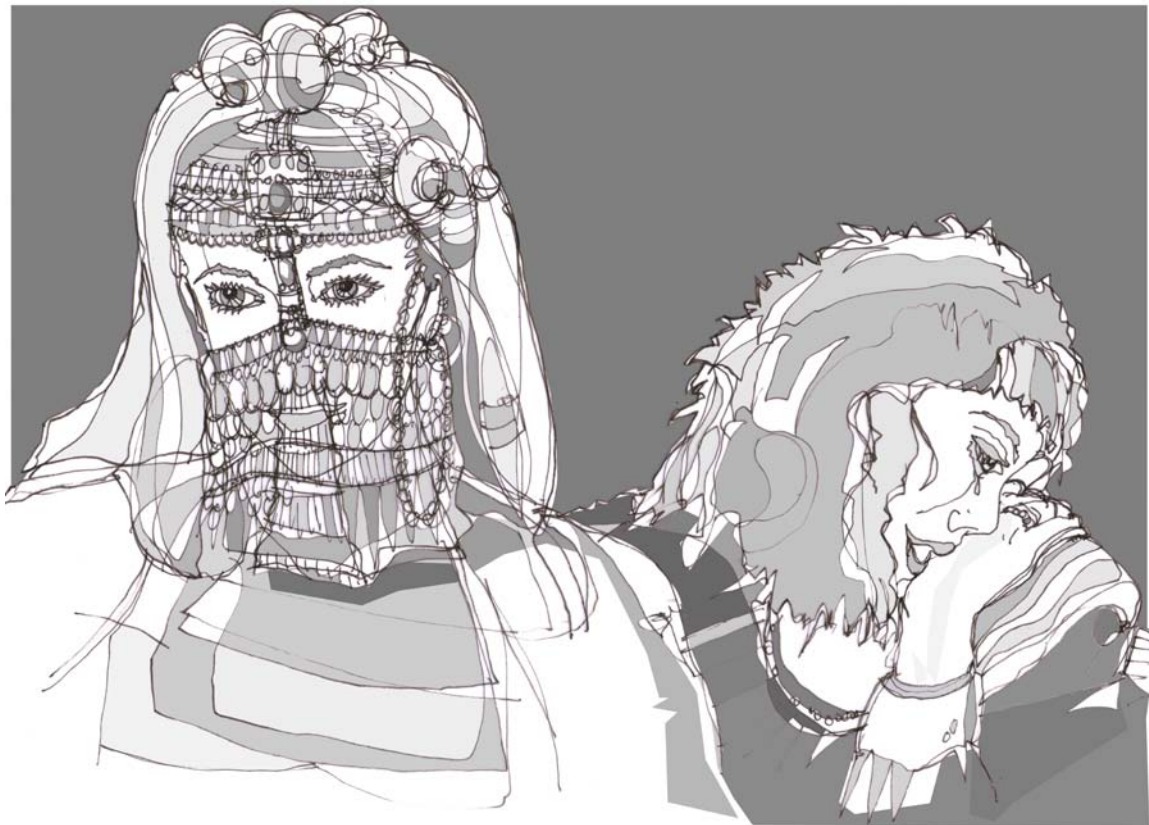
It is easy to see Leah as the ‘bad guy’ in the events surrounding Jacob and Rachel’s marriage, but the Genesis account points to Laban as the source of deception. When Jacob asked Laban to give him Rachel to consummate their marriage, Laban immediately held a large feast, where no doubt wine flowed abundantly. With Jacob comfortably inebriated, under the shadow of the dark night, Laban gave him Leah as his wife instead of Rachel. We cannot know for sure exactly how willing Leah was to deceive Jacob, but, judging by her humble, resilient, determined character, it is hard to believe she didn’t question her father’s intentions. Nevertheless, her desire for acceptance and equality—and her desire to conform to her role as the eldest daughter by marrying first, as was customary—ran so deep and powerfully through her core that she agreed to go in to Jacob. The resulting chaos and humiliation is proof of

the damage that can be done when we go to extremes to find acceptance. Had she known how rejected she would feel afterwards it is unlikely she would ever have considered such deception.

Jacob woke up after his first wonderful night with his wife to find Leah, not Rachel, in bed with him. One can only imagine the look of horror, confusion, anger and disappointment that flashed across Jacob’s face as realisation dawned. Laban told Jacob he was to fulfil the marriage week with Leah, after which he could take Rachel to be his wife also. This sounds like the perfect solution, but have you ever thought how humiliating and upsetting this week was for Leah? She woke up that first morning knowing she had a husband to take care of her and show her love and affection. Even though she knew he loved Rachel, clearly she believed he would love her equally because she was his wife. She could not have anticipated how reluctantly Jacob would honour the marriage week; she had to endure emotional agony as she slowly realised that, just because she now had a husband, this did not mean she was going to feel any less inferior to her sister, and with good reason: “[Jacob] loved also Rachel more than Leah” (Gen. 29:30).

Comfort through childbirth

Throughout the early years of married life Leah’s only source of comfort was her heavenly Father, Who blessed her with children so that she could give and receive the true love that was missing in her marriage. This is a wonderful portrayal,



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not only of the justice and kindness of our loving God, but also of His better judgement. Leah did not get exactly what she asked of God in her own lifetime, but she was given children in order to make her life bearable. God does not see things from our perspective; He is infinitely wiser and wishes to refine our characters through trials and tribulations. Nevertheless, He will always provide small pockets of comfort amidst serious trials. These may come in the form of a friendly face, a comforting exhortation or a real step in a positive direction. Our Father knows that we cannot live through constant trials and temptations without glimmers of hope and glimpses of the Kingdom; He knows that we need encouragement and comfort if we are to survive the refiner's fire. We see here a God Who truly knows our human limitations and understands that, even though He can view them as tiny bumps on a flat plane, to us our trials are very big, very real and often seem insurmountable.

Competition to cooperation

At first Leah tried hard to win Jacob's heart. With the birth of each child she grew surer and surer that Jacob would love her and attach himself to her (v. 34); but, even though Leah bore the most children, Rachel was still more highly favoured by Jacob. The fact that Leah had to hire Jacob for the night using her son's mandrakes (30:15) is telling; Rachel was clearly regarded to be 'wife number one'.

As the children grew older and required less constant attention, Leah had more time to think about her role in the family. It was clear by this stage that nothing could change the fact that Rachel and her children received more love and attention than Leah and her children. She had undoubtedly begun patiently to accept her lot, which was not exactly the life she had hoped for but was bearable and had many sources of comfort, found in her sons, her daughter and her God.

The pivotal point in the relationship between the two sisters came when they both told Jacob he should do what God had told him to in response to Laban's dishonesty (31:14). They finally found themselves on equal footing in one aspect of their lives: they had both lost their inheritance and were both regarded as foreigners in the eyes of their father; they had now both experienced neglect and disappointment, and from this moment onwards there is no mention of rivalry, even though the sisters were no more equal in Jacob's eyes than they had been before.

God's time scale

Years went by, and Leah was on the receiving end of yet more suffering, this time through events in the lives of her children. Her prayers for the acceptance and love of her husband seemed to her forgotten and unanswered, but there was just the tiniest glimmer of hope. As Rachel struggled to give birth to her second child her life slowly ebbed away. Perhaps now God would answer Leah's prayers and Jacob would love her the way he had loved Rachel. To find such affection now would surely be comforting after her sister's death, but God, in His wisdom, determined that it still wasn't time for Leah's prayers to be answered. Leah may have hoped that Jacob would now love her more, but in reality she would almost certainly have felt guilty that she was stealing away Rachel's love for herself.

And so, in time, Leah also died, still feeling second rate, neglected and perhaps even hated. She did not get to see God's answer to her prayers in her lifetime. It was only after her death that Jacob realised how much he really had loved her and how faithful she had been to tolerate his attitude toward her. In the light of his growing relationship with God and his knowledge of who God was and is, he understood now that Leah

was his true spiritual wife and the mother of the seed of Abraham. She was buried in the cave at Machpelah, where Jacob commanded he was also to be buried, along with Abraham and Sarah his wife, Isaac and Rebekah his wife. Even more importantly, it is through Leah that the line of Christ runs. Truly Leah's prayers were answered in God's own time.

Lessons for life

Leah's life was full of lessons for life. It teaches us not to keep comparing ourselves with others who might seem 'worthier' than ourselves. In God's eyes we are all equal, and it is for God alone that we should live our lives, taking refuge under His wings. We also need to be wary of causing others pain by assuming an air of superiority which causes them to feel small, weak and less able to contribute ecclesially.

Her life teaches us that our time perspective is very different from God's. If we can't see a way through our trials we can be sure that God can and is guiding us through them, teaching us lessons of love, patience and justice along the way. He will never test us beyond that which we can bear (1 Cor. 10:13) and will provide relief and comfort to help us carry on.

Through everything that came her way Leah held steadfastly to her faith and clung tight to the knowledge that God would bind up her wounded heart and bear her burden with her, waiting until the right time to act upon her faithful prayers. Now this patient, resilient, faithful sister awaits the day when she will awake to the knowledge that she did not suffer in vain, but through her seed the salvation of the world has been accomplished.

"Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and He shall sustain thee: He shall never suffer the righteous to be moved" (Ps. 55:22).