



Photo: Pieter Symonsz Potter, 1638

Leah: Our Matriarch of Prayer

Leah is the fourth and final matriarch in the Jewish Bible. Although all the matriarchs are considered the spiritual mothers of Israel, Leah is the biological mother of half the 12 tribes of Israel, but only became a matriarch because Laban tricked Jacob into marrying her.

Leah started out as a young woman with “weak eyes” (Genesis 29:17), and became the wife who was unloved (Genesis 29:31), but ultimately fulfilled her role in the development of the nation of Israel. In the Bible, we find the following blessing made upon Ruth before her marriage to Boaz: “*May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel!*” (Ruth 4:11).

Leah’s name means “tired” or “weary.” According to Jewish tradition, Leah was disillusioned with her life. However, she harnessed the power of prayer to change her fate, and altered the history of all humankind.

Leah went from being the unwanted wife to becoming the eternal mother of royalty and priesthood. Judah, Levi, Moses, Miriam, Aaron, David, Solomon, and Hezekiah are just some of those who came from Leah’s line.

While Leah felt like a second-class wife for most of her life, it was she and not Rachel buried with Jacob in the Cave of the Patriarchs. At the end of Jacob’s life, we read, “*Israel [Jacob] bowed himself on the head of the bed*” (Genesis 47:31, NKJV). According to Jewish tradition, “the head of his bed” is a reference to Leah. In death, Jacob acknowledged that Leah was the head of his household.

Join me this month as we learn how Leah was able to transform a life of neglect and rejection into one of purpose and eternal significance through the power of prayer. Leah’s example of prayer is her legacy to all people of faith. In this Fellowship study, we will explore how we can model and harness this powerful approach to prayer into our own lives.

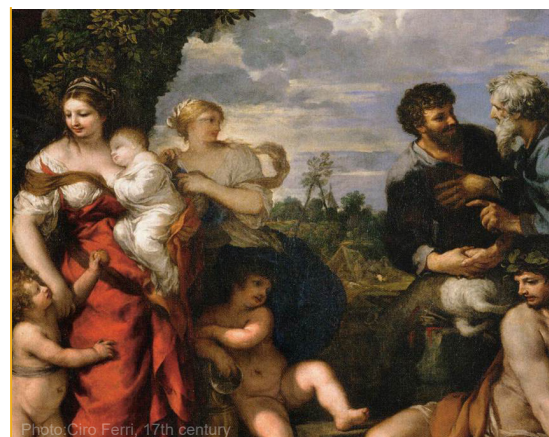


Photo: Ciro Ferri, 17th century

The sons of Leah: Reuben the firstborn of Jacob, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun.

— GENESIS 35:23



Shaping Her Own Destiny

Our first introduction to the matriarch Leah is a bit odd. After the “love at first sight” meeting between Jacob and Rachel, we read “*Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel*” (Genesis 29:16). We meet Leah in the shadow of her younger sister.

Next we learn, “*Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful*” (v.17). This, too, seems peculiar. The opposite of beautiful is ugly, not weak eyes. What was the Bible telling us with this description?

Jewish tradition teaches that while Rachel was physically beautiful, Leah’s beauty was hidden inside, and that Leah’s eyes were “weak” because of her crying out to God in prayer over her intended destiny.

In biblical times, it was common practice for marriages to be arranged between extended family members. The elder daughter of Laban, Leah, was to marry the elder son of Rebekah, Esau. The younger daughter, Rachel, was to marry the younger son of Rebekah, Jacob.

Imagine Leah’s horror when she learned that her intended partner was an immoral man. (According to Jewish tradition, Esau had murdered Nimrod and stole valuable possessions from him.) How could she wed such a wicked man? She might be trapped in this marriage forever.

Yet, Leah understood that God controlled everything. And she did the only thing she could do—she poured out her heart before God with tears and supplication. This is why Leah’s eyes were “weak.” They were swollen and tender from her tears.

Leah’s prayers were heard and answered as her father contrived to have her marry Jacob in place of Rachel (see Genesis 29:21-27). And although she was not Jacob’s first choice, she was overjoyed to be wed to the righteous brother instead of Esau.

Leah is the first woman in the Bible to teach us about the power of prayer. Centuries later, Hannah, found herself in a similar situation. She, too, shared her husband Elkanah with another wife, Penninah, and while Penninah had children, Hannah was childless. Year after year when Elkanah and his family would go to Shiloh and offer sacrifices to the Lord, Hannah would cry to God about her situation.

We read in 1 Samuel 1:10, “*In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly.*” Following Leah’s example, Hannah poured out her heart to God (v.15). Hannah’s prayer resulted in the birth of Samuel, the prophet. Like Leah, through prayer, Hannah changed her own destiny and that of the nation of Israel.

Because of her “weak eyes,” Leah takes her rightful place as our matriarch of prayer, the first to model the power of heartfelt prayer. Leah’s life reminds us to pour out our hearts in prayer, too: “*Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge*” (Psalm 62:8). Only then, can we, too, can change the destiny of our lives and our world.



Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful.

— GENESIS 29:17

He Hears Our Prayers

As the story of Rachel and Leah unfolds, it becomes clear that each sister struggled with very different challenges. Scripture tells us: “When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless.” Rachel enjoyed the love of Jacob, but like Sarah and Rebekah before her, endured the pain of being childless and the longing for what she did not have. Leah was blessed with multiple children, but never had Jacob’s love, and so she longed for his affection.

Leah hoped that bearing children would win Jacob’s heart, and indeed the first three names that she chose for her children reflected that.

Leah chose Reuben (Re’uven) for the name of her firstborn: “It is because the LORD has seen (*ra’ah*) my misery (*b’anyi*). Surely my husband will love me now” (v.32). God had given Leah a son; she was now the mother of Jacob’s child. She was confident that this would cement her relationship with Jacob and raise her status in the home. But Jacob was unmoved.

Leah’s second son was named Simeon (Shimon), “Because the LORD heard (*shamah*) that I am not loved, he gave me this one too” (v.33). Once again, Leah affirmed that God heard her prayers and answered them with another son. She was certain he would love her. But Jacob remained aloof, and Leah remained alone much of the time.

Leah called her third son Levi (*Layvi*) in hopes that “Now at last my husband will become attached (*yilaveh*) to me, because I have borne him three sons” (v.34). This time Leah had no doubt that God answered her prayer; certainly Jacob would spend more time with their growing family.

In naming her sons Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, Leah asserted the main foundations of the Jewish faith—that God sees us in our suffering, hears us, cares about us, and will act on our behalf. Indeed, Christian author Liz Curtis Higgs wrote, “For all the hurting Leahs among us—those of us who are ignored by the men in our life, who feel unloved by a father, boyfriend, husband, or son—here’s a word of hope: You are indeed loved, and your suffering hasn’t gone unnoticed.”

Years later, when Leah’s descendants were enslaved in Egypt, we read, “The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out... God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant ... So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them” (Exodus 2:23-25). These foundational ideas played a critical role in the Exodus story and the forming of the nation of Israel.

King David, a descendant from the tribe of Judah, expressed his confidence that God saw him and heard him at all times. In Psalm 18:6, David wrote, “In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.” And in Psalm 33:13-14, he affirmed, “From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth.”

Knowing that God saw, heard, and cared for him gave David the strength to overcome his many challenges—just as his ancestor Leah drew strength from her own prayers. And just as we, as people of faith, do today.



When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless.

— GENESIS 29:31

A Model of Thanksgiving

When Leah gave birth to her fourth son, she chose a name that reflected her gratitude to God. Leah named her fourth son Judah (Yehudah), declaring *“This time I will praise (odeh) the LORD.”*

The name Judah comes from the Hebrew word *hoda’a*, which means to thank or give praise. Instead of focusing on what was lacking, in naming her fourth son “praise,” Leah chose to focus on God’s goodness.

According to Jewish Tradition, Leah is the first person to praise God. Surely, Adam praised God when he was given another chance after he sinned in the Garden of Eden. Or surely, Noah praised God after he and his family were saved from the flood. Abraham and Sarah surely praised God for the miracle of a son in their last years. The list goes on and on.

So why is that distinction made in Leah’s case? In all earlier accounts of thanksgiving to God, gratitude was expressed for something miraculous. Leah is the first to thank God for everyday miracles.

Leah was the first to recognize that bringing a child into the world was no less miraculous than the splitting of the sea. Everything in life is because of God, and Leah even praised Him for the ordinary things.

Leah was rewarded for praising God. Her son Judah and his descendants figure prominently in both the Jewish and Christian tradition. Jacob pronounced this blessing on Judah: *“You are he whom your brothers shall praise; Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; Your father’s children shall bow down before you”* (Genesis 49:8, NKJV).

A royal scepter of kingship was established in Judah’s family line (Genesis 49:10). Israel’s greatest king, David, was a descendant from the tribe of Judah. In the Christian Bible, Jesus’ lineage is traced to *“Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers”* (Matthew 1:2).

Praise and thanksgiving are essential components of prayer. Prayer can take the form of requests, and Leah certainly engaged in this. But, it is also necessary to praise God for the many blessings in our lives.

We find this call to give thanks to God repeated throughout both the Jewish and Christian Bibles. David wrote in Psalm 34:1, *“I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.”* In instructing the church in Ephesus, Paul wrote, *“Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving”* (Ephesians 5:4). (See also Job 1:21; Psalm 100:1; Ephesians 5:20, 1 Thessalonians 5:18).

So let’s thank God by recognizing the all-encompassing role He plays in our lives. Thanksgiving is a way to strengthen our bond with Him. When we reflect on the miracles that we experience every single day, we continue Leah’s legacy of prayer and praise.



She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, “This time I will praise the LORD.” So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children.

— GENESIS 29:35

Think About It

1. **If you could change one thing about your life, what would it be?** If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be? Keep a prayer journal of how you are praying for those things daily.
2. **In the Jewish tradition, prayer is often compared to a bow and arrow – the deeper the prayer comes from inside us, the further it “shoots” toward heaven.** How does knowing this affect your prayers?
3. **In what ways has Leah’s story inspired you?** What lessons from her life might you share with others?
4. **God sees our suffering – and He also sees any suffering we cause others?** Knowing this, how might that change the way you interact with the people in your life?
5. **Thanksgiving and praise to God are part of the Jewish prayer service three times a day, every day.** How might you incorporate thanksgiving and praise to God more routinely into your life?



Apply It

1. **Pray for change.** When we know that God can do anything, we can pray for anything. Don't be satisfied with how things look right now. Pray to God for a better future. (Nehemiah 1:1-11; Acts 8:14-15)
2. **Pour your heart out.** Talk to God as if He is your best friend. Tell Him about your challenges, your concerns, and your feelings. Prayer from the heart is the most powerful prayer of all. (1 Samuel 1:10; Mark 14:32-34)
3. **Count your miracles.** How many miracles can you find in one day? When we open our eyes to everyday miracles, we appreciate God's hand in our lives, at all times. (1 Chronicles 16:12; James 1:17)
4. **Know that you are loved.** As we face challenges and difficulties in our lives, it's easy to feel abandoned and alone. Never forget that God loves us more than we can ever know. (Deuteronomy 31:6; Hebrews 13:5)
5. **Praise God.** When we take the time to thank God, we demonstrate that we appreciate the source of our blessings. (Psalm 34:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:18)



Photo: Laurent de La-Hyre, 1647

