

Praise Is the Last Word



Gary Wilkerson May 18, 2020

The Power of Gratitude in Your Deepest Struggles

I don't know if you believe in love at first sight, but Jacob did. When he first saw Rachel, he knew wanted to marry her. "Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. Jacob loved Rachel. And he said [to her father, Laban], 'I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel'" (*Genesis 29:17-18, ESV*).

That's how I felt when I first encountered Kelly, who became my wife. When we met as teenagers, I gladly would have worked seven years if it meant I could marry her. I know exactly how Jacob felt.

His father-in-law, Laban, however, played a trick on him. When the wedding night came, Laban sent Rachel's sister Leah in to him instead. Jacob didn't realize until the next morning that he'd married Leah, not Rachel. "And Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?'" (*29:25*).

Laban agreed to let Jacob marry Rachel too if he would work another seven years. Jacob gladly agreed, but imagine how Leah felt. She knew Jacob didn't love her. She felt unwanted, an outcast from her own marriage.

So Leah decided to try to make Jacob love her. This drove everything she did. She reasoned, "Having children will show him I'm worthy of his love."

Like Leah, many of us drive our lives by our wounds, trying to prove our worth to someone or to the world.

When it comes to Jesus' love, a lot of Christians take Leah's approach. They devote themselves to works or self-effort to try to prove they're worthy of him. But we can never win Jesus' love for one simple reason: He already loves us.

God already cared for Leah, and he mercifully acted on her behalf. "When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb... And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, 'Because *the Lord has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me*'" (*Genesis 29:31-32, my emphasis*).

Leah felt seen in her pain. In fact, she was so grateful that she named her son after God's merciful goodness. Unfortunately, that didn't change her marriage to Jacob, so she dug in even harder to win his love.

"She conceived again and bore a son, and said, 'Because *the Lord has heard that I am hated*, he has given me this son also.' And she called his name Simeon" (*29:33, my emphasis*). Leah felt heard by God. A listening ear tells us we matter.

As I read Leah's story, I think of a deep struggle that my wife, Kelly, went through. She has a voice that's full of truth and power, yet Satan attacked this gift of hers. This was especially hard for Kelly because from her earliest

years, everyone recognized that her gorgeous singing revealed her innermost being, from worship to lament to joy to every human emotion. Yet during her critical formative years, Kelly felt she should bottle up her deepest sense of self. A young girl's heart was shut down in a way God never meant for her.

Thankfully, the Lord heard Kelly's inner cry the same way he heard Leah's. Through a deep work of grace, my wife found her voice both in relationships and in music. Now her gift blesses audiences all over the world as she sings at our conferences, ministering Jesus' healing gospel.

Sadly for Leah, she still didn't feel loved, so she gave birth to a third child. "Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, 'Now this time *my husband will be attached to me*, because I have borne him three sons.' Therefore his name was called Levi" (*Genesis 29:34, my emphasis*). The name Levi suggests "belonging" or "connection." Leah reasoned, "With three sons, Jacob will really be attached to me now."

That still didn't happen. Leah felt like many in the church today: despite the appearance of blessings, they feel deep pain over not being seen, heard or attached.

None of us arrived on this earth as a mistake.

From our very beginnings, we are seen by the Lord, heard by him and connected to him. In fact, God shapes each of us for attachment, but our early traumas can make us feel we have to earn our attachment to others. Those traumas can propel us into strife-filled lives looking for something we think we don't have.

I think specifically of two types of trauma. The first is when something happens to us that shouldn't. I have a friend who, as a young boy, was cruelly beaten by his mother. She locked him in a closet for entire days. He endured some of the worst abuse I've ever heard about, and it caused him severe trauma. He almost didn't survive.

When he turned twelve, he grabbed a length of rope, climbed a tree and stood on a limb ready to hang himself. Thankfully, his brother saw him and pleaded with him not to go through with it. That saved his life. A few years later, the boy met my father, a street evangelist, and was rescued by God's love. Nicky Cruz gave his heart to Jesus, and his life was renewed completely. Christ's love delivered him from trauma that had nearly destroyed him.

A second type of trauma has inner effects that go deep as well. This trauma can occur when something didn't happen in childhood but should have. People suffering this trauma tend to hide it from others because it doesn't seem worthy of sympathy.

I've experienced a form of this trauma. I'll always be glad my dad followed the Holy Spirit in his calling as an evangelist, but his demanding travel schedule left an empty well in my siblings and me. I didn't have nearly as much of my dad as I wanted, and I compensated for that void by learning to detach. I didn't deal with this issue until I was in my thirties.

I felt a bit like Leah did, thinking, "I'm not seen. I'm not heard. I'm not connected to somebody whose love I desperately need." I had a core wound in my heart, and the only way I thought I could address it was by achieving. I started programs, ministries and churches; but none of these was enough to silence the gnawing in my heart. That's what many of us do with our pain; we try to create a life we imagine will heal the wounds.

If we build a tower of achievement on the foundation of a core wound, it is bound to come tumbling down.

I built my personal tower on religious works. Because this never met my core hunger, I was always driven to the next thing. Like Leah, I cried within, "Look at me, hear me, connect with me."

One day I had a vision of standing on top of a scaffolding. I had to erect this structure so I could keep building my tower higher. Then the scaffold began swaying. I glanced down and saw Jesus gripping the bars. "Thank you, Lord," I shouted down. "I need you to stabilize this!" Yet Jesus was shaking the scaffold.

"Lord, what are you doing?" I cried. "You'll bring everything down!"

“Good,” he said. “Let it all come down.”

I got the message. It was time for me to come down from the rickety structure I’d built on a shifting foundation.

“I see you, Gary,” Jesus assured me, “just as I saw you formed in your mother’s womb. Today, I hear your heart’s cry. How many times does my Word say, ‘Call on me, and I will answer you’? I created you, and today I say to you, ‘You are perfect in my sight.’”

Leah experienced this kind of grace, after her fourth son was born (*Genesis 29:35*). She named her baby Judah, whose name means “praise.” She declared, in essence, “No more trying to overcome my deep sense that I’m never enough. God has made me worthy. He sees and hears me, and his love connects me to him at all times!”

Unfortunately, Leah reverted to her old, insecure ways. In the very next chapter, she gives her servant to Jacob to have two boys, and then she “buys” Jacob with mandrakes in order to have two more sons with him (*30:9-21*). If only she had rested in the powerful grace and love she was shown by God and trusted in, at least for a short while, after Judah’s birth.

What about you? When you feel your life isn’t seen by God, will you praise him anyway? Will you continue to trust him even if he doesn’t give you the object of your desire? When others don’t give you the credit you’re due, will you still offer him gratitude? When you feel defeated by mounting debts, a strained family relationship or a physical weakness, will you sing his praises then?

Some may read this and say, “It seems cruel to have to praise God when I’m at my lowest.” Friend, Jesus is continually at work for you, especially when you’re at your lowest point. He is worthy of praise no matter what your emotional state because his all-encompassing love is your steady foundation. As you praise him, you’ll find healing for your wounds.

You don’t have to strive anymore. Rest in his words to you. Any trauma you’ve endured is resolved completely in Jesus. No matter what you face, by his stripes you are healed. That is your praise. Speak it to him, sing it to him, pray it to him and experience his healing.

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