

leah

Confessions of a First Runner-Up

SHANNON PRIMICERIO

TRUELIFE BIBLE STUDIES



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*To Jessi Whitehead:
Thanks for always being a true friend.*

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THE QUEST THAT UNITES US

EACH OF US WANTS TO be a star. Maybe not on the Hollywood big screen, but somehow and in some way, we want to shine. We want to be good at something. We want to be recognized. We want to be called out and chosen. Each of us wants to be *loved*. And in a fallen world, we don't always feel as if we are. Most of the time, that deep sense of love and acceptance we long for eludes us. So we chase it. With all of the effort we can muster, we strive to be the most beautiful, the most popular, the most athletic, the most scholarly, or the most whatever it is we really want to be.

Simply put, we compete. “Oh, I just have a competitive nature,” we say. But really what our hearts are saying is, *I need to be the _____* (best, prettiest, smartest, most popular, most athletic—fill in the blank as you see fit). *If I'm not, I will do my best to take out whoever is. My worth is wrapped up in this. Being second best won't do.*

More often than not, whatever we chase outruns us in the end.

Sure, for a time we may be able to catch up with our dream of being unconditionally loved and accepted — of being truly good at what it is we want to do — but then out of nowhere someone else steps into our lives, usurping our roles and snatching from us the titles we fought so hard for. But that's not the worst part of it. The worst part is that we think we're the only girl in the entire world who feels this way. We feel cheated and abandoned. We feel alone. Desperately alone.

And no matter how many times it has happened to us in the past, we always feel as if *this* time we will never be able to get back to that place where we had purpose and worth. We blew our last chance. As far as we're concerned, our lives are over. Well-meaning friends and family members usually use these moments to remind us that God loves us and thinks we're special.

We *know* God thinks we are special. Of course He does. He has to. He's God. We're His creation. He made us the way we are for a purpose, we've been told. Over and over again, we've been told that. Yet that purpose eludes us most of the time. One thing we have somehow missed in all of our moping is the fact that we are not *alone* in this. We aren't the first of God's daughters to deal with disappointment and discouragement. Our moments of insecurity and fear don't just unite us with God; they unite us with other girls — even girls who lived long before we ever arrived on this earth.

Insecurity is a language we all speak more fluently than we would like to admit. It spans generations and nationalities, hair colors and music preferences. Our low moments are what make us all the same at the core. How we deal with them, and how we use them for our benefit and God's glory, is what sets us apart.

The Bible contains chapters upon chapters telling the stories of girls just like us who wanted to be loved but seemed to fall short. They were girls who wanted to be somebody, somebody who mattered. In their lifetimes few of them achieved that, at least on the surface. Ironically it was after their deaths, as the pages of history were unfurled, that these girls left their marks. Let me mention just three.

One of them — Leah, the sister who was rarely loved and never chosen — became the mother of a nation that would forever be known as God’s chosen people. Another — Hagar, the slave who was sent away to die in the wilderness because of Sarah’s jealousy — became the mother of a nation whose political and spiritual unrest still marks our world today. And another still — Miriam, known mostly as the sidekick of her brothers Moses and Aaron — played a pivotal role in delivering the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt.

This Bible study is Leah’s story. It’s the story of the older sister who could never quite measure up to the younger. Overlooked and underestimated, Leah took her place with the rest of us in the Broken Hearts Club. But she didn’t stay there. God lifted her out of her heartache and gave her a role to play in history that more than overshadowed that of the sister she couldn’t seem to compete with. We’ll see that God’s providential hand took her where her strivings never could.

As we travel through her story together, we may at times find that peering into her story is almost like looking in a mirror. As Leah looked for love, begged for it, and even schemed and competed for it, her heart bore the same cry that ours do: *Pick me, pick me. Oh please, pick me.* Because of that, her story is worth reading. She was chosen by God even when the world rejected her. Her story will teach us the one thing we all so desperately need to learn: Life is not about being popular; it’s about fulfilling our God-given destinies.

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS BIBLE STUDY

YOU HAVE A BUSY LIFE. Homework, sports, and other extracurricular activities demand a lot of your time. I know that. To make this study easy to fit into your schedule, I have divided Leah's story into six weeklong segments. But I have not broken each week into daily assignments. It's up to you to find the easiest way for you to get through the material allotted for each week.

In order for you to get the most out of this study, it is vital that you take time to read the assigned passages. The main text for each week is provided for you, but you will be responsible for looking up additional passages on your own. It is also essential that you answer each question thoughtfully and thoroughly. The quizzes and various activities are fun, but they are also important. So don't skip over these portions, thinking you won't get anything out of them.

The ideal way to go through this Bible study is in a small group with some other girls so you can talk through Leah's story and the

questions and issues that come up while exploring it. If you choose to do so, I recommend that you complete the assignments on your own each week and then get together to discuss what you have learned.

This Bible study can also be a tool to help you develop a regular quiet time with God each morning or evening. It's a great way to get into God's Word on a daily basis and study a girl whose life is completely relevant to your own. I suggest you set aside a specific time each day (like six thirty every morning, or eight o'clock every night) and commit to doing a portion of this study. That way, you will stay on track to finish studying Leah's story in six short weeks.

It is my prayer that through your study of Leah, you'll come to see and understand that God's Word is real and relevant to your life today.

Grace and peace,
Shannon Primicerio

week one

PALING IN COMPARISON

Leah had nice eyes, but Rachel was stunningly beautiful. And it was Rachel that Jacob loved.

— GENESIS 29:17

DO YOU EVER FEEL LIKE even your best isn't good enough? Maybe for you it's not a beauty thing. Perhaps your sense of worth gets snatched from you when someone gets a higher grade on an assignment, or another girl on your team scores more points than you do and wins MVP of the game. Or maybe it has to do with a certain guy: Just when you think he is finally noticing you, someone else comes along and erases you from his memory. Perhaps your experience—like Leah's—is a little closer to home and you have a sibling you feel you cannot measure up to.

I felt like a princess the night of my senior prom. My hair and makeup had been professionally done, and I had found *the* perfect dress. But when I stepped out of the limo, my bubble burst. Not even a yard away stood one of the most popular girls in school wearing the exact same dress.

I could already hear how people would talk. *Hilary looks better*

in the dress than Shannon does. After all, Hilary does have a better figure. I felt drawn into a state of mourning over my perfect dress that looked just a little more perfect on someone else.

Leah, the older of two sisters, lived back in biblical times. Her sister, Rachel, was “stunningly beautiful,” but Leah’s assets were not her looks. As a matter of fact, the Bible’s first mention of Leah is a comparison between her and Rachel — and Rachel comes out on top. Some translations say Leah was unattractive or even outright ugly. Even *The Message*, which says it nicest, states that Leah wasn’t nearly as beautiful as Rachel.

Although we may be shocked by this seemingly rude introduction to Leah, I suspect she was used to it. If her own insecurities weren’t enough to convince her that she was not the favored, beautiful daughter, I’m sure the actions and words of others (including her father and sister) were enough to clue her in.

Stop and read the following passage, Genesis 29:1-20, so you have the proper context for this story before continuing. Pay special attention to how Leah is introduced.

Jacob set out again on his way to the people of the east. He noticed a well out in an open field with three flocks of sheep bedded down around it. This was the common well from which the flocks were watered. The stone over the mouth of the well was huge. When all the flocks were gathered, the shepherds would roll the stone from the well and water the sheep; then they would return the stone, covering the well.

Jacob said, “Hello friends. Where are you from?”

They said, “We’re from Haran.”

Jacob asked, “Do you know Laban son of Nahor?”

“We do.”

“Are things well with him?” Jacob continued.

“Very well,” they said. “And here is his daughter Rachel coming with the flock.”

Jacob said, “There’s a lot of daylight still left; it isn’t time

to round up the sheep yet, is it? So why not water the flocks and go back to grazing?”

“We can’t,” they said. “Not until all the shepherds get here. It takes all of us to roll the stone from the well. Not until then can we water the flocks.”

While Jacob was in conversation with them, Rachel came up with her father’s sheep. She was the shepherd. The moment Jacob spotted Rachel, daughter of Laban his mother’s brother, saw her arriving with his uncle Laban’s sheep, he went and single-handedly rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the sheep of his uncle Laban. Then he kissed Rachel and broke into tears. He told Rachel that he was related to her father, that he was Rebekah’s son. She ran and told her father. When Laban heard the news — Jacob, his sister’s son! — he ran out to meet him, embraced and kissed him and brought him home. Jacob told Laban the story of everything that had happened.

Laban said, “You’re family! My flesh and blood!”

When Jacob had been with him for a month, Laban said, “Just because you’re my nephew, you shouldn’t work for me for nothing. Tell me what you want to be paid. What’s a fair wage?”

Now Laban had two daughters; Leah was the older and Rachel the younger. Leah had nice eyes, but Rachel was stunningly beautiful. And it was Rachel that Jacob loved.

So Jacob answered, “I will work for you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.”

“It is far better,” said Laban, “that I give her to you than marry her to some outsider. Yes. Stay here with me.”

So Jacob worked seven years for Rachel. But it only seemed like a few days, he loved her so much.

OVERLOOKED AND UNLOVED

So here was Jacob, a strapping young man who went looking for a bride. He fell in love with Rachel at first sight — showed off a little at the well — and struck a deal with Laban (Leah and Rachel’s dad) to work seven years for Rachel’s hand in marriage. He loved her so much that the time flew by, and when the seven years had passed, Jacob went to Laban for his bride. It wasn’t bad enough that Leah was the skipped-over sister the eligible bachelor didn’t even notice; let’s take a look at the scheme her dad put together. Look at Genesis 29:21-30:

Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife; I’ve completed what we agreed I’d do. I’m ready to consummate my marriage.” Laban invited everyone around and threw a big feast. At evening, though, he got his daughter Leah and brought her to the marriage bed, and Jacob slept with her. . . .

Morning came: There was Leah in the marriage bed!

Jacob confronted Laban, “What have you done to me? Didn’t I work all this time for the hand of Rachel? Why did you cheat me?”

“We don’t do it that way in our country,” said Laban. “We don’t marry off the younger daughter before the older. Enjoy your week of honeymoon, and then we’ll give you the other one also. But it will cost you another seven years of work.”

Jacob agreed. When he’d completed the honeymoon week, Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. . . . Jacob then slept with her. And he loved Rachel more than Leah.

Wow! Imagine being Leah. The only way she got married was because her dad tricked some poor fool into doing it! And to make matters worse, when Jacob realized the error, he went flying out of bed to find Laban and see why he had been cheated. The end result

was that Leah was sentenced to spend the rest of her life in her sister's shadow, as they shared the same husband. Even on her wedding day — when she should have felt like the ultimate princess — Leah didn't measure up. Can you relate?

Now, there are some cultural things we will have to overlook in this Bible study. Today, in the United States, it is not acceptable (legal) to be married to more than one person at one time. And it is also not acceptable (legal) to marry your relatives, as Jacob did (both women were Jacob's cousins, as Laban was the brother of Jacob's mother, Rebekah). Back in their time, both practices were not only allowed but also customary. So setting aside how weird this might seem to us, let's think about how Leah must have felt.

HOW WOULD YOU FEEL?

9. If you were Leah, how would you have felt when your dad took you to what was supposed to be your sister's marriage bed? Would you have enjoyed the wedding-night experience? Why or why not?

10. How would you have felt the morning after, when Jacob realized he'd been tricked and then ran off to find your dad, claiming he had been cheated?

NOT ALONE IN HER MISERY

Although our hearts break for Leah, we have to remember she was not alone in her misery. Imagine being Rachel and how she must have felt on what should have been *her* wedding day as her sister went off to honeymoon with the man she loved. Maybe at this point, Rachel thought that she would never be able to marry Jacob and that if she did marry him, she would always be wife number two.

Or imagine being Jacob — having worked seven years (that seemed like just a few days because of his great love for Rachel, according to Genesis 29:20) only to find that to be with Rachel he would also have to marry Leah, dividing his time between two wives. Although Leah's sense of self-worth was probably the most wounded in this situation, I'm sure a few others found themselves with broken hearts.

HOW DID THEY FEEL?

11. If you were Rachel, would you have been mad at Leah, or would you have felt sorry for her? Explain why.

12. What do you think Laban's motives were in doing this to Leah? Were they purely selfish? To what extent do you think he was looking out for Leah's best interest? Explain your reasoning.

13. What about Jacob? How do you think he felt in all of this?

14. Take a look at what the Bible says about marriage in Genesis 2:18-24 and what it says about lying in Colossians 3:9. How do you think God viewed Laban's plan to marry both of his daughters to one man?

Although we may not be able to identify with being forced to marry someone our sister was practically engaged to, I'm sure we've all felt unwanted or like a third wheel at one time or another. As we continue to travel through Leah's story, we may not be able to relate to her exact circumstances, but we can all understand having relationships with imperfect people who cause us pain.

Leah's story is made up mostly of relationships — how she interacted with, and reacted to, other people. Your story consists of much of the same thing. How we react when we have been hurt says a lot about our character.

If your heart is broken, you'll find GOD right there;
if you're kicked in the gut, he'll help you catch your breath.
(Psalm 34:18)

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

15. How do you normally react when someone hurts you? Be honest.

16. Rewrite Psalm 34:18 in your own words, and explain how the knowledge of that verse can change the way you view your circumstances.

GOD SEES WHAT WE THINK HE DOESN'T

Throughout Leah's painful story, we will find that God was with her. Even when circumstances were uncomfortable and her heart throbbed with pain, God was right there making something beautiful out of her life. Leah, the same girl whom Jacob passed by and Laban passed off, was the girl God chose to begin the lineage of the King of kings.

Back in biblical times, people were known by their lineage: who their father was, who their grandfather was, and even sometimes who their great-grandfather was.

Israel was eventually divided into twelve tribes—one for each of Jacob’s sons. Jacob and Leah’s son Judah was the head of the tribe that eventually produced King David and ultimately Jesus Christ. Leah’s past may have been painful as she lived in Rachel’s shadow, but her future was more than bright as God chose to send His Messiah—the Savior of the world—through her lineage. Oddly enough, the chosen son did *not* come from the chosen wife. Funny how God works sometimes.

He sees everything, including our heartaches and broken dreams. He sees the tears that fall when we think no one is looking. God overlooks nothing. And in moments when we feel the most rejected and passed over, we can count on His preparing a future that is brighter than we can imagine.

Our current circumstances may look bleak, but our future never is when we trust God through the hard times.

You’ve kept track of my every toss and turn
through the sleepless nights,
Each tear entered in your ledger,
each ache written in your book. (Psalm 56:8)

GETTING REAL

17. Do you feel as if God sees what is going on in your life? Why or why not?

18. When you read about God seeing all of your tossing and turning, and of Him recording all your tears in His ledger, how does that affect your thoughts about a future to hope for?

WORDS TO LIVE BY

As we begin to understand how God really sees us and the magnitude of the destiny He has for us, one of my favorite verses comes to mind. Write it on a 3x5 card and tape it in your school binder or to your bathroom mirror. Read it over and over again until it sticks in your mind — and in your heart.

“I know what I’m doing. I have it all planned out — plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for.

“When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I’ll listen.

“When you come looking for me, you’ll find me.

“Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I’ll make sure you won’t be disappointed.” (Jeremiah 29:11-13)

PITY PARTIES VS. PURPOSE

Purpose is most likely something Leah didn't see in her life. After all, she never seemed to matter to anyone before. Perhaps you feel the same way. Maybe you wonder why you're here, or perhaps you're too busy feeling sorry for yourself to get around to questions like that. Or maybe you're too busy living to care about what you're living for.

Destiny. Does that word get your heart racing and your blood pumping? If it doesn't, it should. God has a destiny waiting for you that is wilder than any fairy tale and greater than you could ever imagine. Your life has the potential to impact others in a way that will shape their eternal destiny. Every day, or at least every week, you walk by people who are lost: at school, in the grocery store, at the mall. They don't know Christ, and they think God is some distant, gray-haired figure in the sky — if they even believe in Him at all.

Yet your smile and kind hello might be all it takes to soften their hearts and open a door for them to come to know about Jesus. But it's so much easier to have a pity party. It's easier to think about all of those people who don't notice us than it is to think about the people just dying for us to notice them. Don't you think it would have been easier for Leah to withhold love from the husband who never really loved her? Had Leah withheld love in its fullest marital expression, Judah never would have been born. Would the Messiah still have come? Yes, most certainly. But Leah would have missed out on being part of it — and Leah was God's first choice.

You are God's first choice. The eternal destiny of the world — and those in your world — is at stake. Have you noticed, or are you too busy having a pity party to care?

WHAT'S YOUR PPQ?

Here's a little quiz to test your PPQ — your Pity Party Quotient. Answer the following questions honestly, and then tally up your score to see where you stand.

A = Always, B = Sometimes, C = Never

1. When I feel as if someone overlooks me or something I have done, I tend to be in a bad mood for the rest of the day.

A B C

2. When passing by others I don't know in the hallway at school, I am too busy to smile and say hello.

A B C

3. If someone gives me a compliment, I tend to replay it in my head over and over again because it makes my day.

A B C

4. When I wake up in the morning and look in the mirror, my eyes go directly to my flaws.

A B C

5. One pimple is enough to put me in a bad mood.

A B C

6. If I go to school wearing a cute outfit and one of my friends shows up in the very same outfit, I get angry and am embarrassed to be seen with her.

A B C

7. If my crush asks someone else to the school dance, I lock myself in a bathroom stall crying.

A B C

8. If I receive a bad grade on a test, I feel stupid and as if I will never amount to anything.

A B C

9. If two of my friends pair up and seem to be getting really close, I feel left out and decide to stop speaking to them.
A B C
10. If my sibling gets more attention from our parents than I do, I feel unloved and unwanted by my family.
A B C
11. I base my self-worth on how I think other people view me.
A B C
12. I treat other people exactly how they treat me — if they are nice, I am nice. If they are mean, I am mean. If they don't say hi, I don't say hi.
A B C
13. When I am having a crisis and my friends are too busy to talk with me about it, I feel rejected and as if they don't care.
A B C
14. When I read Bible verses about God thinking good thoughts toward His children, I don't think He could possibly think about *me* like that.
A B C
15. I feel as if God doesn't hear my prayers about feeling unloved and rejected, because if He did, He would do something.
A B C

A answers = 1 point each

B answers = 3 points each

C answers = 10 points each

Now add up your answers and see what your PPQ is.

15–45 = Drama Queen. You are a walking pity party. The only time you are thinking about other people is when you are wondering what they are thinking about you! You are at risk of living a miserable life and missing out on your destiny. Spend some time reviewing your answers to see where you seem to struggle most, and work on those areas. Pray and ask God for eyes to see yourself as He sees you, and work on memorizing verses that may help. When you look in the mirror each morning, speak aloud to yourself and quote one of the verses you memorize — only make it personal (“I know the thoughts God thinks toward me . . .”).

46–75 = Pity-Party Planner. You have good days and bad days, but you tend to spend a lot of time focused on negative things about yourself. Sometimes you make things a bigger deal than they really are. Next time you feel a pity party coming on, make a conscious effort to turn your thoughts toward the Lord instead of focusing on yourself. Memorize Jeremiah 29:11-13 and spend some time praying that the Lord would change your attitude and help you to see yourself as He sees you: as a precious treasure.

76–120 = Even-Keeled. You seem to have a good balance between throwing pity parties and knowing when to let things go. But even-keeled girls can have bad days too. Ask the Lord to help you continue to see yourself as He sees you. Memorize Jeremiah 29:11-13 so you are ready to ward off any pity party you feel coming on.

121–150 = Too Good to Be True? You answered almost every question perfectly, and you never seem to have a bad day or an insecure moment. Are you being honest, or just trying to look good? Ask the Lord to remind you of any recent bad days — or bad habits — and go back and retake the quiz to see if you get the same score.

TURNING IT AROUND

One of the most astounding things about Leah's story is that God chose to use her despite her flaws. She wasn't the prettiest or most popular sister, but her life had great impact. God could have used Rachel the way He used Leah, but He didn't. This was Leah's role to play in history. You have a role to play too. But you're going to have to take your feelings of insecurity, fear, and rejection and put them to work for your benefit. What do I mean?

I mean looking for others who may feel insecure or fearful and befriending them. I mean looking for your strengths and talents and putting them to use — after all, God made you good at those things for a reason. If you are tired of feeling as though you're not good enough, smart enough, athletic enough, or pretty enough, then stop sitting around having a pity party and make yourself available to God. Then He can change the way you view yourself and set His plans in motion for you to fulfill your destiny. Leah had to reach out and love someone who didn't love her back in order to fulfill her destiny. What do you have to do to fulfill yours?

THINKING IT OVER

19. Do you find it hard to love people who don't love you much or at all? If yes, why?

20. Think back to a time you felt insecure or fearful. How could you have turned that situation around, making it into something positive rather than having a pity party?

Talking It Out

Prayer is simply talking with God. If you're like me, it can be hard to concentrate for long periods of time when you pray. So try writing your prayer out. Ask the Lord to help you in areas where you may be weak, or thank Him for the plans He has for you and for making you who you are for a reason.

Writing It Down

Look back on what we have learned from Leah's story. What one point affected you the most? Spend some time writing about that point and why it stood out to you.

Setting a Higher Standard

The best way to get from where we are to where we want to be is to set a goal — to put something on paper that we will be accountable to actually do. In reviewing Leah’s story and your PPQ, what is one area in your life where you need some work? Maybe you need to actively work at changing how you view yourself. Or maybe you need to try harder at helping others instead of feeling sorry for yourself. Whatever it is, write it down, date it, and check back in a week to see if you have made any progress. (And don’t kick yourself if big changes take time!)

For example: “This week I am going to try to see myself as God sees me. The next time I encounter a disappointment, I am going to remind myself that God still has plans to give me a future to hope for and that I am not worthless.”