

THE BEAUTY OF HIS CREATION

The
Peony

RACHEL

Rachel



facts from the Bible



- She lived in the time of Abraham
- She married Abraham's grandson, Jacob.
- First betrothed to Jacob, her father Laban, gave Jacob his first born daughter Leah in her place.
- She became Jacob's second wife.
- She was Jacob's favorite.
- She was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin who became heads of two of the Israelite Tribes.

'Do you also hurry, half-dressed and barefoot, into the garden, and softly, and exclaiming of their dearness, fill your arms with the white and pink flowers, with their honeyed heaviness, their lush trembling, their eagerness to be wild and perfect for a moment, before they are nothing, forever?'

**From the Poem: Ponies
by Mary Oliver**



In the Looking Glass



by Melody Lowes

Rachel grabbed her tunic like she had been sucker punched.

It hurt. It hurt so much.

Seeing him like that, his dark hair crisp on his brow, mischief lighting his face as he teased and greeted each of his sons, relaxed and smiling.

*With **her**.*

And her brats.

'Those brats are your own nephews - and you love them dearly!' The softer thought fought like a desert wolf against her powerful jealousy.

Jealousy won.

She turned on her heel and reentered her own tent, fuming. She screeched at the servant girl who was replacing the water skins within and sent her running like a gazelle, terrified of her mistress' wicked expression.

She didn't care.

She overturned the low table the skins were on, and it splintered with a resounding crash, sending precious water cascading over valuable woven floor coverings. Someone would have to return to the well and replace the evening water supply.

It wouldn't be her.

"Bilhah! Bilhah, get in here, I need you!"

Bilhah, younger than her mistress by only six months, appeared almost immediately. Seeing the look on Rachel's face, she braced herself for the volley to come.

Come, it did.

"Where have you been? I've been calling for ages! Clean this mess up - and get me fresh water. No one ever remembers how thirsty I can get in the evening in this infernal desert. Well? What are you waiting for?" Rachel's beautiful eyes ranged around her quarters, looking for something to smash. Having been on the receiving end of several projectiles from her mistress' exceptionally accurate throwing arm, Bilhah needed no further prompting.

Rachel paced, her slender chest rapidly rising and falling with agitated breaths. Slowly, she became aware of another presence.

She turned sharply.

Rizpah.

Rachel stopped pacing and bowed low. "Immah," she murmured, breathless. *Immah*. Mother. Not her biological mother, but her father's second wife, the woman who had raised her after her own Immah had died in childbirth labouring to bring her into the world. Rizpah just smiled, a peculiar knowing smile that made Rachel step back.

Shame. That's what this is, she thought ruefully. She felt a pang of remorse - and dismissed it as quickly as it had come. She formed her beautiful mouth into what she hoped was a neutral and natural smile of greeting.

But Rizpah was no fool.

"So Jacob is learning that your sister's tent is to be preferred over his favourite's? I'm not surprised. Listen to yourself. You sound like a lioness. Why should he seek your arms, only to get his face scratched?" The older woman laughed silently, her shoulders shaking without mirth.

Rachel's smile hardened. She couldn't trust her voice, so she said nothing. She reached for her enameled cosmetics box. Rizpah snorted.

"You're going to rely on that pretty face and beautiful body to lure him back, are you? After all the good advice I've offered?"

Rachel ignored her, applying a careful line of dark kohl to her right eyelid. She wished fervently that her hand wouldn't tremble like that.

"Rachel, metuka." Rachel looked up, startled by the word and the tone. She hadn't heard that tenderness from Rizpah since she was a girl.

"My daughter, why do you fight so hard for what you already have? Jacob loves you. All these hysterics of yours are making it hard for him to show it."

The younger woman's back stiffened as she sat staring into her *mar'eh*, a mirror made of polished brass. "I don't know what you mean." Her hand stopped its ministrations momentarily as she looked through the hazy reflection at Rizpah's shadowy form in the corner. Rizpah sighed. Her face suddenly looked softer, younger.

"Jacob fell in love with you, all those years ago. I've never seen a man more in love." Her face flushed as memories traced the lines in her still beautiful face. "He was driven, a madman. He had to have you. He walked miles for just a glimpse of you at your father's well. He melted with every smile, every promise, every token of affection you gave him. Your beauty gained his affection. Now your **character** - who you are - must hold his heart. No, don't look like that. I speak truth, daughter."

Rachel tried to cover her sneer with a yawn, but Rizpah knew her too well. She frowned at her reflection. She was beautiful still. Her cheeks weren't peony pink as they once were in her youth, but there was a maturity, an elegance that the years had added, a grace to her figure as she walked.

And she knew it.

But she saw more.

Beauty, yes. But there was also uncertainty. Fear. And something else around the corners of her eyes she wasn't sure she liked - vanity, and something close to petulance, perhaps?

"My beauty has always been enough. It's just the brats he goes to visit," she declared airily, as if her heart wasn't beating, beating, beating with the fear of rejection. "He'll be back. You wait and see."

Rizpah pressed her lips together firmly and shook her head. "Rachel, if you don't change these outbursts, these girlish tantrums, your unkind treatment of those in your power, you will lose him completely. Jacob is a man of action, impulsive, high strung. But he loves his God, and he loves peace. He won't choose you and your beauty and the constant drama over Leah and her kind ways, her way of creating a home for him with the boys, for long. Your beauty will fade one day -"

Rachel's cry of protest stopped her.

"Your beauty will fade one day. I know it well." Her eyes clouded with - was it pain? Regret? Rachel couldn't be sure. "And when it does, you need to be ready to offer Jacob what he really needs. A companion. Someone to listen to his plans, his dreams. Someone who can encourage his interests and share his burdens. If it isn't you, well..." Rizpah's voice trailed off.

She was looking across the courtyard.

Toward Leah's quarters.

Rachel shrugged her shapely shoulders, brushing the thought from her mind like so much lint. "Oh, Immah, you always did mother me too much," she said lightly.

She saw the hurt in the older woman's eyes. Regret prompted her to impulsively plant a kiss on the weathered cheek. "Don't worry. I'm listening. But I know Jacob better than you do. Trust me."

Rizpah stood with an effort and smiled sadly. "I hope you know what you're doing. You always were too much like your mama. She was always too certain of her powers, too apt to see her experiences through her own lens, her own looking glass. She spent a lifetime trying to prove her own value. And look where that got her."

She moved slowly with the stiff gait of age to the doorway, then turned back.

"Don't you know yet who you are? I was so careful, so determined to teach you to know that above all else. In this, too, I have failed." Her shoulders slumped. Her eyes, dimmed by endless desert sands, leaked solemn regrets onto leathery cheeks.

She left without another word.

Rachel waited until Bilhah returned with the water she had requested. She silently watched as her servant girl cleaned up the fallout of her earlier tantrum, then demanded that her best tunic be brought in, the sumptuous garment of richly ornamented embroidery that clung just the right way to her curves. She ordered more water heated for a bath, and aromatic herbs and oils.

She would show Rizpah.

She would show Leah.

She was **somebody**.

Preparations completed, she called for a chair outside the doorway to her quarters. She placed the chair carefully, optimizing the light, aware of what the setting sun would do with her garments and freshly washed and perfumed hair.

She didn't have long to wait.

Jacob.

The look on his face was visible even across the courtyard. There were reluctant good-byes and much ruffling of tousled heads as their father took his leave, and headed in her direction. Leah, standing at the entrance to her quarters, pressed her thin lips together when she sighted her sister dressed in her finest, and abruptly went inside to tend to her young sons.

Jacob's footsteps sounded loud in the stillness of the evening.

He smiled and took her hand. "Here is my Rachel, my flower," he said softly. He pressed her dainty hand to his mouth and kissed it slowly, tenderly. His eyes took in her tunic, her hair. He leaned into her, pressing her to his chest.

Rachel smiled at Rizpah, leaning at the door to her own tent. The older woman shook her head slowly and disappeared into the folds of the doorway.

Jacob led Rachel by the hand inside and sat down, drawing her tiny frame onto his lap.

"What a day!" he exclaimed. "I'm tired out. Can you believe that we lambed out sixty ewes today? Sixty! And all healthy and happy, nursing like mad." His smile was boyish, delighted. He loved his flock and cared for them with a personal interest unusual among his peers. Rachel shrugged.

"Do we have to talk about your stinky sheep tonight? I had other things in mind," she murmured, her hands traveling across Jacob's broad chest. Jacob frowned.

“Those ‘stinky sheep’ pay for your tunics, and your floor coverings, and your baubles,” he said testily, playing with the bangles on her delicate wrists and sending them dancing and tinkling like chimes.

Rachel shrugged again, a bored expression on her beautiful features. “I know, I know. We’ve talked about this before, remember? I’m sick of that kind of talk. Let’s talk about us. Is this the night you will give me a babe of my own to hold?” Her words grew soft and seductive.

Jacob stood up so abruptly, she almost fell on the floor.

“This again? A baby? You don’t have time to listen to anything I say about my day, you dress like – like **that** – and then you wreck it with a demand for a child? Rachel, honestly.”

He paced, agitated.

“Well, you love your sons. I want one, too!” Rachel said petulantly, her plans for the evening forgotten. Her little chin stuck out stubbornly, her hands on her hips emphasizing her words.

“Rachel, love, little flower, I would love for you to have a son. But sometimes I want you to just want **me**. No ulterior motives. No games. Just me.” He ran his hand through his dark hair, making it stick up wildly.

Her eyes narrowed.

“I want a son. I need a son! Leah has four. Four! Yet you have given me nothing!”

Her chest heaved with emotion. Never had she looked so beautiful. Jacob took a breath. Stepped nearer. Reached out a conciliatory hand.

"I know, love. I know. I would like a son from you as well. I have asked God, but He hasn't answered yet. I know He will send one in time. Right now, let's just enjoy our time together. Just us." He was so close, she could smell him, the earthiness of him.

"You have asked God?" Sarcasm dripped from her tongue.

She snapped. All the time spent with his sons. With Leah. With the sheep. All the hopes and dreams and disappointment and wondering all came tumbling out in a whirlwind of pain.

"I want a child! Give me children, or I'll die!" The words ripped past her clenched teeth in a firestorm of fury. Jacob's dark head snapped back as if he had been slapped.

"Am I God?" he stormed. "He's the one who has kept you from having children!" He glared at Rachel, fuming, his shoulders quivering with outrage.

She had never seen him like this. Her hand covered her face, alarmed.

What have I done?

Jacob stared at her for a moment. He looked as he had when he had taken a healthy swallow of milk from a skin that had gone rancid. She felt like he wanted to spit her out, as he had that rotten drink.

She felt sick to her stomach.

Rather than spend a delightful evening with her husband, she rocked herself to sleep alone, tears of regret staining her pillows.

It didn't help that Jacob spent the night with her sister...

In the morning, she sent Bilhah away. She couldn't bear the humiliation. She couldn't bear the weight of her choices. She laid in bed and counted tassels on the bed curtains.

And wept.

And - prayed.

Tentatively, haltingly, she opened a difficult conversation with the God her husband knew and trusted, but in whom she hadn't expressed an interest.

Before now.

When she finally rose and got dressed, Rizpah was waiting.

"Are you going to say 'I told you so?'" she asked quietly.

"No. No, I'm not," the older woman replied. "I'm going to be your mar'eh. Show you who you are... or could be. I'm going to remind you to think of your husband's needs, not just your own. I'm going to remind you to stop whining and expecting everyone to kow-tow to your needs, and start thinking of the bigger picture. You have today. You are young and strong. You are alive. It is a gift. What will you do with it?" She looked pointedly at Rachel for a moment, and glided out as silently as she had come.

Rachel sat hugging her knees for a long time. Rizpah's words fell like rain on the tentative prayers she had planted all night - sank deep, took root in softened soil.

Then she stirred. "Bilhah, bring my robe!" he ordered. When Bilhah appeared, she quietly added, "Please."

The young woman looked startled, then smiled shyly as she proffered the requested garment.

"Will you ask Kenan to send Leah's boys over for the day? I'm sure Leah could use a break." She tried to ignore the shock on her servant girl's face, and busied herself in her plans.

She stepped outside her tent when she heard the patter of small feet clattering cross the square. The sun felt warm on her face.

It was going to be a good day after all...



P
L
A
N
T

Pearly

Petals

THE FRAGILE BEAUTY OF THE
SITUATION

LOVE
Of God

AWAKEN

your hearts desire

*it's our
Nature*

**Ready to become
transplanted?**

Plant

Petals



THE FRAGILE BEAUTY OF THE SITUATION

Peonies are known for their stunning beauty. They are also known for their weak stems! Most of us who grow these beauties provide a frame of some sort to hold them up and support those beautiful blooms, or they end up down in the dirt. Rachel, relying on her beauty, needed to bolster her character and learn to rely on God to hold her up in her time of need.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5,6

How are you trying to bolster places where you are weak in your own strength? Are your attempts helping or harming your relationships? Make a list of habits or attitudes you rely on to feel more acceptable. Ask God to help you to understand your true value better.



Plant Love

OF CHRIST THROUGH THE SITUATION

What do you see in your
looking glass?

*But God demonstrates his own love
for us in this: While we were still
sinners, Christ died for us.*

Romans 5:8

In Christ, we are already perfectly accepted and completely, astonishingly loved. Yet often we resort to all kinds of behaviours to prove to ourselves or others that we are important, and have value. Rather than focus others on our value, we end up showcasing our insecurities. Ask God to change how you see your own worth, and begin to shift where you find your value from others-based to God-based.

Plant

Awaken



THE HEARTS DESIRE

When Rachel chose to pray and seek God's opinion, her focus shifted from fighting so hard to claw her way to a place of importance, to being open to see the needs around her and taking responsibility for her choices. Our value is deeper than our appearance, and doesn't need to be dictated by the reactions and choices of others, or our own imperfect view

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. Luke 23:27

Jesus blasted the religious leaders of his day who made every effort to earn favour with the people outwardly, but neglected their hearts.

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. 1 Peter 3: 4-5

God finds value in our inner self, in who we are. In His Word, He encourages us to develop qualities that will outlast - and better complement - our outer beauty.



Plant

Nature

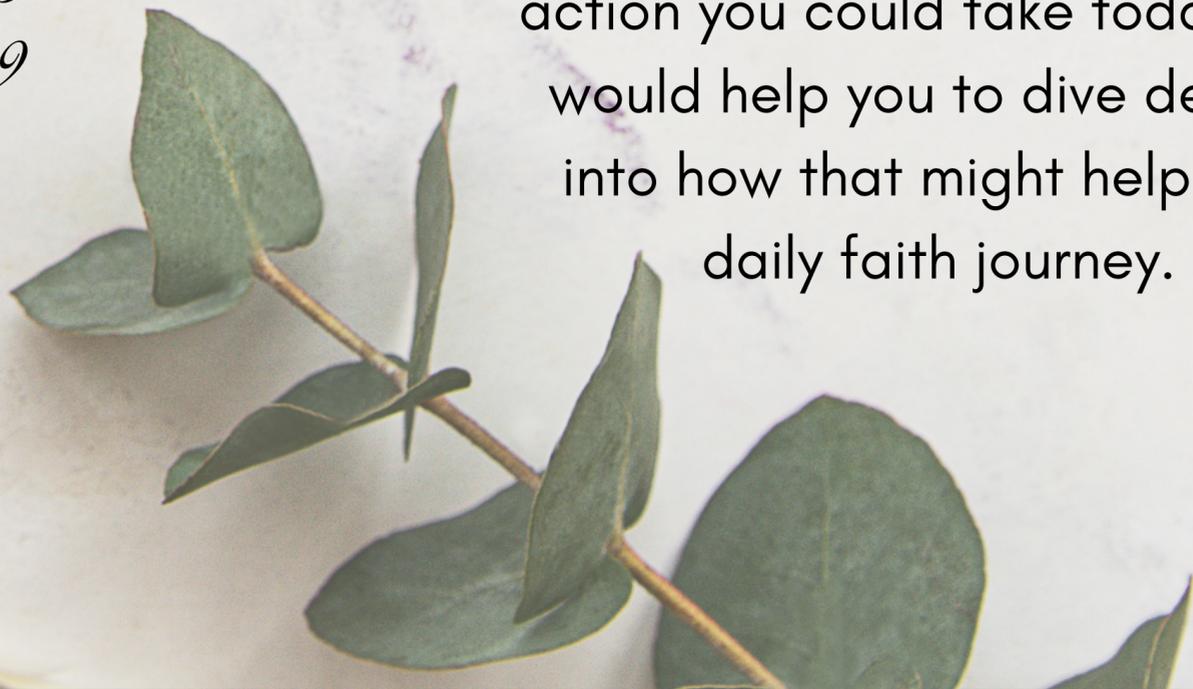


OF WHO WE ARE IN CHRIST

Our view of ourselves comes from a variety of factors – how our parents showed love, how we as a separate individual were reflected back to us by the responses of others, and the quality of friendships we form. Abuse, neglect, and the sin of others can often have a profound impact on how we view ourselves. But God's Word encourages us to base our value on His opinion of us, not our own. It is therefore not 'self-esteem' that we need, but "God-esteem".

*As the Father has loved me,
so have I loved you.
Now remain in my love."
John 15:9*

We are loved. It is a fact, with no argument. The trick is for us to **remain in that love**. What does this mean to you? Journal one action you could take today that would help you to dive deeper into how that might help your daily faith journey.



Plant

Transplant



WITHIN

Rachel's mirror would have been made of polished metal, likely brass or silver. It would have produced a very imperfect reflection.

*"Now we see things imperfectly,
like puzzling reflections in a mirror,
but then we will see everything with
perfect clarity. All that I know
now is partial and incomplete, but
then I will know everything
completely, just as God now knows
me completely."*

1 Corinthians 12:13



Don't miss this - God knows you **completely**. Here, we only see a dim reflection of who we really are in Him. One day we will see clearly how deeply, tenderly, and graciously we are loved. We will see ourselves at last as God **already sees us**.

