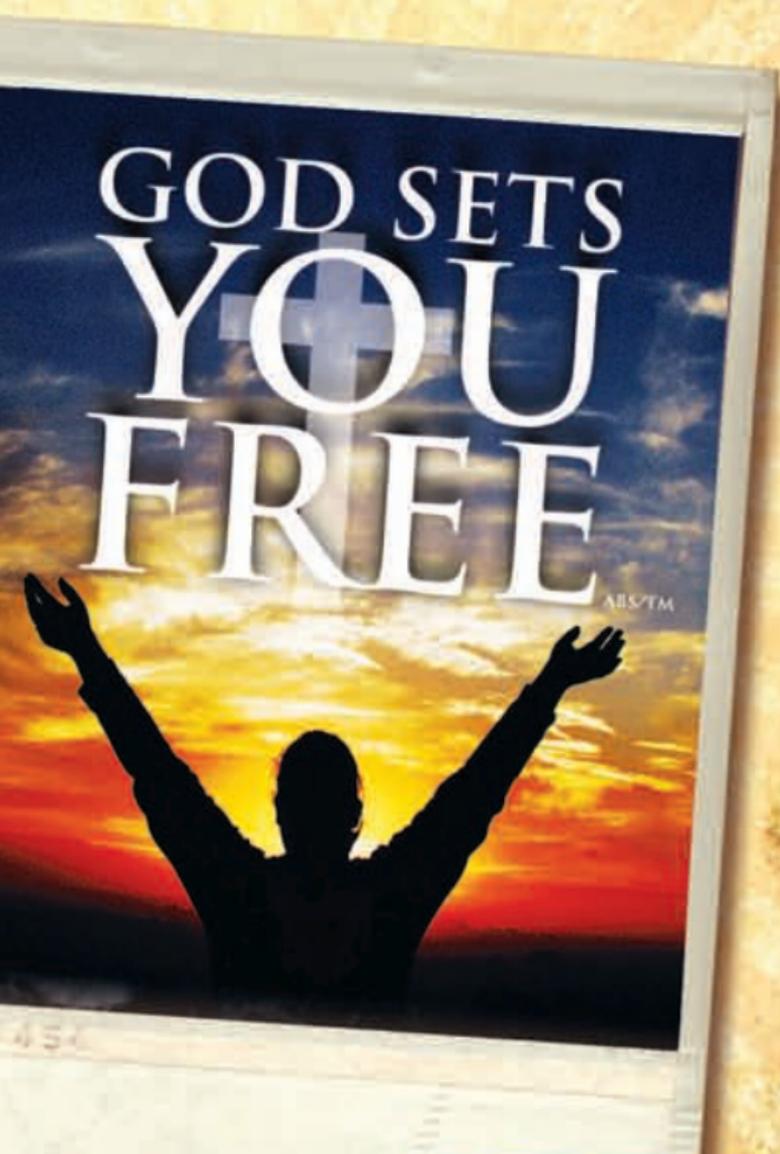


RAGS
2
RICHES



Leah with
Joe Garman at
ARM headquarters
in Joplin, MO.



AN AURA OF EVIL

The story you're about to read is true. You may doubt it. You may think to yourself, "It's too terrible – too tragic. It has to be made up." It's not. I know this because it is my story. My name is Leah and I'm 26 years old.

I was born into wickedness. My parents divorced when I was two and my mother felt she had to hide us from my dad. My mother was a lost woman. There is no better way to say it. As Christians, we use the term loosely to describe anyone who doesn't know Christ. My mom was lost in every sense of the word. She definitely didn't know Christ, but she also didn't know what she wanted or how to get what she wanted from life. She had no clear picture of who she was as a person or a mother and taught us the same vague unpurposeful way of living. Even though she absolutely denied the existence of God, she spent a good deal of her time saying hateful and degrading things about Him; she taught us to feel the same way.

As a child, no matter how bad your home is, and it was bad, you still want to please your mother, and if hating God right along with her put us on her good side, then that's what we did. It was hard to get on her good side. My mother was a drug addict until the day she died. Every man she dated or married was also hooked on drugs. I have three siblings by three different fathers and countless step-fathers and boyfriend "father figures." That kind of a lifestyle invites unspeakable evil into your life and home – the home where her children lived. And so, depravity became our way of life.

There are things I'm still finding out my mother did, even to this day. She cheated on every man she was ever married to. The quality of the males she brought into our lives sealed our fate. My siblings and I were constantly abused physically, mentally and emotionally. Several of my step-dads and one of my cousins also abused us sexually. This kind of sickness constantly in our home led to us acting out sexually between siblings. As I grew older I became promiscuous and got involved in alcohol and drugs to make it all go away. It was an incredibly corrupt environment. We were living below the poverty level – surviving day to day in a life that often felt "not worth living." There is a word I didn't know then that fit my home life perfectly, Iniquity. Iniquity had an open door in our home.

By the time I was 13, my sister (who was about 15) began using drugs. I willingly followed her example and started drinking as well. My life was quickly spiraling out of control. At this time, my mother was married to our fourth step-dad, who was also an alcoholic. At fifteen years young, my life crashed. My

mother was murdered in our own home. On April Fool's Day of my fifteenth year, two men terrorized western Indiana and southern Illinois shooting people at random. My mother was one of their victims.

After her murder, I felt hopeless. On top of everything else already wrong with my life, I was now an orphan. All of my siblings eventually moved away. My sister got pregnant at 17 and moved in with her boyfriend. My older brother went to college and my younger brother moved to a different state with his dad. I didn't see him for 10 years after that. I didn't blame them for wanting to escape our miserable existence, but I was now totally alone. Here I was, a 15-year-old living with my abusive step-dad and given absolute free reign. I delved deeper into drugs to escape the misery that was my life. Sometimes I slept in the park. It was an indescribably wild lifestyle I lived during most of my teenage years. I was a desperately lonely, tragically unhappy teenage girl without a single reason in the world to go on living.

I began writing poetry as a way of expressing the pain heaped up inside me and found I was really good at it. Most of my poems reflected the ongoing search in my own life for a purpose and for truth – what was truth, where was it and most of all. . .how could I find it?

At 18, I somehow managed to graduate from high school. I didn't deserve to pass for sure, but I thank God now for allowing it to happen. I think most of my teachers saw a bright kid with a really tragic home life and gave me the benefit of the doubt. The day I graduated, I moved back into the park. While the other kids were at Project Graduation playing games and hanging out with their friends, I was in the city park – just me, my backpack, a bottle of whiskey and the five books of poetry I had composed. It should have been a stark wake up call as to where I was headed, but the truth was – I didn't care. I wasn't motivated to make my life better. I basically just lay around the park and a few other choice locations for about eight months.

The only thing that was a constant in my life was my obsession with truth and philosophy. I became obsessed with philosophy and arrived at the conclusion that everything is meaningless. My mother's death had taught me that nothing matters – there are no second chances or greater meanings to the hardships we endured. My mother had been pursuing all kinds of things when she was murdered and none of them mattered. Nobody but me even seemed to care that she was gone. Nothing matters, it's all meaningless – these were my constant thought companions.

When an extra cold winter hit, it became physically difficult to be homeless and survive; so in January of 2002, when I was 19

years old, I showed up on the doorstep of my friend Andrea's house. Andrea was still 16 and lived with her parents. They were extremely hesitant to allow me into their home and lives and I couldn't blame them. I was infamous in my town.

"I have nowhere to go! Please, can I stay with you? Please?" I literally pleaded for my life as I had nowhere else to go and the winter would probably have killed me. I was willing to do or say anything. I brazenly lied about using drugs. "I'll never touch them again, I promise!"

After about a week of begging and pleading, they agreed to let me stay with them. Andrea's family had attended church for many years, but they didn't know Jesus on a personal level. Andrea had grown up with the knowledge that there was a God, what the Bible says about Him and who Jesus is; but she had never allowed Jesus to truly be Lord in her life. She had no relationship with Him. This was the girl I had always known and was surprised when she told me about what she'd been reading in the Bible.

***I have nowhere to go!
Please, can I stay with you? Please?***

"I want to change my life, Leah. I want to stop doing drugs and having dark thoughts. The only way I can do that is if I really get to know who Jesus is and let Him do it for me."

I had never heard that concept before. I didn't know anything about God – that Jesus was the Son of God or that God had created the world I lived in – that He'd even created me. I had no clue. Every time I'd heard the words "God" or "Jesus," they were being used as curses. The way Andrea talked about Him it was like He was an actual person who was going to help her become this different girl. She made God sound so...real. So I asked her, "What do you mean you want to know Jesus?"

She had really gotten my attention. Over the next three days and nights I could think of nothing else. I tried to chase these thoughts out of my head with constant partying. Who was He? Why would I want to "follow" Him? What did that even mean?

Follow Him where? Did that mean I couldn't go right on doing whatever I wanted to do, because that was a deal breaker! Day after day I tried to drink away these questions and every night when I would come home, Andrea would be reading her Bible and telling me things like, "Leah, I'm going to repent of my sins. It all stops today!" And she looked so happy about it! I had to ask her to explain to me what sin even was and what did "repent" mean? And why did it seem to make her so happy? The happier she got, the more frustrated I got. It was all she

talked about and every time I'd see her, she'd have that Bible in her hands. I couldn't get away from it or from the questions it had simmered in my head. I began to see my friend change literally before my very eyes.

I couldn't deny the truth right in front of me. Wasn't I in search of truth after all and Andrea seemed to be living it out right in front of me? Finally, I dropped my pride and asked her to explain to me what had happened to her. She did. She said that God was holy and that He hated my sin – that it was unacceptable to Him and that unless I stopped it, I was on my way to Hell forever because of it. Now I understood what repent meant! Before seeing Andrea's transformation with my own eyes, I had never really even believed God existed. But here He was in my friend – there was no denying it. I began to actually believe what she was telling me.

I was used to darkness and it was painful to bring some of my life out into the light. I didn't want anybody else in on this thing just yet, so I began to talk to God at night, alone. I would cry and repent, even though I hadn't yet fully comprehended all that meant. I remember saying, "I know I'm sinful, God. I've never honored You. I've treated you like a joke my entire life. My Mom did...everyone I ever knew did. How could I have been so wrong all this time and you still love me?"

That I had neglected His love for me absolutely overwhelmed me! I didn't know what to do to make it better. I hadn't just sinned – I was sinful! Years and years of it was heaped on my soul – I'd lived as a slave to sin longer than I could remember. My mind was sinful, my speech was sinful, my thoughts were sinful – how could I ever be clean? How could I ever be different than I was now? I wanted to be someone else – someone...new. I didn't understand then that my Savior had given that to me when He died for me. The guilt of the knowledge of all I had been overwhelmed me.

Andrea could see what was happening and decided all the talking we were doing wasn't enough. She began to encourage me to read the Bible on my own. But I told myself I wasn't worthy to read it and didn't deserve to know any more about such a holy God. Andrea started really pushing me to pick up the Bible and see for myself what God had to say about my sin and about my future. She reminded me that she had been just as sinful as I was and that God had accepted her. That clicked, so I began to read.

I didn't know anything at all about the Bible – who wrote it or how it was arranged; I just knew it was a really big book. I didn't know about the Old and New Testaments, so I just opened it up around the middle and found a word I had to sound out – "ECCLESIASTES." I had no clue how to pronounce it, but

God knew what I needed to read and was leading me even then. The first two verses said, “The words of the preacher, the son of David, king of Jerusalem. ‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the preacher; ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’ ” Poetry! This was something I could relate to. The words immediately drew me in and made perfect sense to me. I’d never read anything so true. I actually thought, “This is truth.” And then I proceeded to read the entire book of Ecclesiastes, carefully scrutinizing every word.

“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”

Poetry! This was something I could relate to.

I went running to Andrea with the Bible in my hand, “You’ll never believe what I just read!” She waited with a smile. “The truth! I just read the truth. This is the truth, isn’t it?” She nodded her head, and with tears in her eyes, let me get back to my reading. I read Ecclesiastes again and cried the whole way through. When I came to the end, I had to read it aloud, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.” I wasn’t sure exactly what all that meant, but I knew I wanted to be part of it.

For the next several days I did nothing but read the Word of God in the Old Testament. It was just me and the Lord. I was fascinated by Old Testament poetry. I didn’t know the historical background of the books or even how to pronounce “Psalms,” but I read it. Then I read Job and Genesis. I was reading the words of God almost nonstop for twelve hours a day. Even at night, I would cry and read. It had been a long time since I had cried. At some point, I had just stopped – the pain was so much – but now, all I could do was cry. It was like my very heart was being softened and changed. During this time, my addictions never even crossed my mind. No drugs, no alcohol. I just read the Word. I was learning that He was awesome, eternal, light, magnificent and the King of Glory. I learned that God is my Creator – the entire world and all the people in it. Yes, He had made even me!

Next I read Isaiah, how he pleaded with the people to come to Him to eat of the Bread of Life. After reading this book, I went outside and looked up at the sky, seeing it as if it were the first time with open eyes. My voice cracked with emotion as I confessed out loud, “You made that, God. You made that tree and that star.” Tears were coursing down my cheeks as a breeze blew across them. “You made the wind...you even made me!” Wow! God’s nature was a transforming experience. I quoted aloud a verse I had learned in Psalms, “As the deer pants for the water, so my soul pants for

you.” I shouted to His heavens, the ones He’d created with His own hands, “You are wonderful, Lord! I want to know You. I know I’m not worthy, that my whole life has been against You. If I had another chance, I would turn to You and never turn away!”

I began to read two of the Gospels that very night, for the very first time – Luke and John. It was too wonderful. One story that especially caught my eye was the one about the sinful woman who anointed Jesus’ feet. I didn’t know what a Pharisee was, but I knew what a sinful woman was. When Jesus forgave her I thought to myself, “Is this possible? Is it possible that the Lord might accept me and love me, as sinful as I have been? If it is, that would be the greatest news ever!” This idea, as obvious as it may seem to you, was astounding to me. Those questions actually went through my head.

God was working on Andrea too, and through her. One day she came to me and said, “Leah, I want to be baptized.” I didn’t know what that meant. I hadn’t gotten that far. I will forever remember the moment she taught me about baptism. I was sitting on the floor, Indian-style, with an open Bible in my lap. She looked into my eyes and said, “It’s like you die and you’re born new again.” New? That was possible? I leaned in closer. “Leah, when you believe in Jesus and you repent and are baptized, it’s like your sins are just washed away through the blood of Jesus.” The expression on her face was pure joy. “It’s just like all that sin never even happened,” she continued. “You become a totally

He was going to take the gross filthy rags of my old life and give me the riches of a future in Him in return.

new creation in God’s eyes.” I jumped to my feet and cried out, “Are you serious?” When she nodded her head, I broke down in tears right then and there. The thought of God never looking at me and seeing my ugly sins again was too good to be true – but it was!

There’s a huge field right next to Andrea’s house. This may sound crazy, but I went running outside all over that open field, screaming at the top of my lungs for joy because God had made a way for me. I was really getting a second chance! He was going to take the gross filthy rags of my old life and give me the riches of a future in Him in return. Who would do such a thing? My heart felt like it would explode! Why would He do this for me? Nobody had ever loved me like that – I didn’t know what to do with it, so I just kept running and screaming and crying and finally fell flat on my face in that field and lay there thanking God for about an hour for the gift of His salvation. I could literally feel the enormous burden

of my old sin being lifted off me. That Friday night, Andrea's dad baptized Andrea and me and her parents rededicated their lives to the Lord because they were so touched by what He had done in me and Andrea.

Several months later I went on a short-term mission trip to Haiti – something I had no concept of but had been convicted to do while attending a local church camp. Upon arriving, I met missionaries and native evangelists who taught me more about missions and evangelism. When I returned to the States, I decided that this was what the Lord was calling me to do. I was going to be a missionary.

About six months later I heard about Ozark Christian College in Joplin, MO. Almost a year to the day I became a Christian, I enrolled at Ozark to be trained for world missions. The Lord really started molding me there. Some of my college classmates and I organized a team and did lots of street evangelism in Joplin. Through that, the Lord refined my spiritual gift of soul winning and used us to disciple and baptize many people. It was a spiritually transforming time in my life. Through Ozark, God opened more doors to serve Him overseas. I went to Zimbabwe for a couple of months, back to Haiti for about a year and then to North Africa.

God continues to heal my soul and trade my ashes for joy in Him. I praise God for how He is using my (His) story to glorify His name! I learn everyday what His true plan is and always was for my life. Even when it didn't feel worth living, He never saw me as less valuable, and now I am in the process of raising support so I can return to North Africa and serve the Lord full-time as a missionary. Because of Christ I truly am a new creation (2 Co. 5:17)!



You can be an "Andrea" in another Rags to Riches story.

Countless men, women, boys and girls are waiting for the opportunity to experience God's cleansing and redemption.

To receive free copies of **RAGS TO RICHES** please write:



ARM MINISTRIES

P.O. Box 1490 • Joplin, MO. 64802-1490

Ph: (417) 781-9100 • Fax: (417) 781-9532

Email: info@arm.org