

WOMEN'S BIBLE STUDIES
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GREAT CANADIAN BIBLE STUDY



CANADIAN BAPTISTS OF
WESTERN CANADA

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ABOUT GCBS

Great Canadian Bible Study began as a project of Canadian Baptist women in hopes of encouraging younger women to give to missions—showing that a little can mean a lot. Our first project was for the Eva Rose York School for Girls in Tuni, Andhra Pradesh, India. Our pitch was “A toonie for Tuni” and we hoped to raise \$50,000 over 5 years. We met our goal in less than 3 years.

Every year since then, women from all across Canada gather in small groups for a Bible study written specifically for this special occasion. These studies were written by Faye Reynolds, until her retirement in 2022.

The study is provided free of charge, and each is based on a woman’s story from the scriptures—but over the years we invite participants to contribute to a selected project.

We have been able to support women who are victims of rape and abuse in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, contribute towards women's literacy projects in Rwanda, and give towards children's ministries in South America.



SISTERS OF LAZARUS, FRIENDS OF JESUS



INTRODUCTION

We all face sickness, death, and loss throughout our lives and each of us handles those experiences differently. We have different personalities. Though we might come from the same background or family, we process our grief in unique ways. In this study, we will look at two very different women, Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, to observe their behaviour in a time of crisis and grief. Perhaps we will see ourselves, or perhaps we may not. It is my hope that you will, at the very least, discover that Jesus comes to each of us in the way that is just right.

In Luke 10, we meet two sisters—Mary and Martha. They live together in the home of Martha. As it was unusual for a woman to own property, it is likely that she is a widow and the home was left to her. If it were a family inheritance, the property would belong to Lazarus, her brother. Widows were most often dependent upon male family members for income and support because they could not hold land title or take employment.

Jesus had been to this home many times, for He knew He was loved and accepted here. In this story, Jesus and His disciples sit down for some relaxation away from the press of the crowds. Both sisters are delighted to see Jesus, but they express their enthusiasm in very different ways. As we understand these women, it is important to not pass judgment upon their personalities, but rather to consider how they react to certain situations.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

MARTHA

1. Read Luke 10:38-42. Describe the personality of Martha.
2. What are Martha's strengths?
3. How might her personality have helped her in her life situation?
4. What is Martha's way of expressing her love to Jesus?
5. What goes wrong for Martha in this story? How does she become upset and begin to lose focus on the day?
6. Have you ever slipped into the "poor me" syndrome? What situations do you tend to feel "hard done by" even when you are doing what comes easiest to you?

MARY

1. Describe the personality of Mary.
2. What are her strengths?
3. How might her personality have helped her in her life situation?
4. What is Mary's way of expressing her love to Jesus?
5. How has your desire to learn more about Jesus placed you in the right place at the right time? (Note: It was improper for women to take the position of a learner at the foot of a teacher. Only men would do this. Mary took a risk and received the praise of Jesus.)

SISTERS OF LAZARUS, FRIENDS OF JESUS



The two sisters are struck down with grief and loss. Lazarus has died. This is the brother they love. He was their security in a world so unfriendly to women. Their beloved has been taken away and the future looks bleak indeed. Let's see how each woman handles her grief and how they bring that sorrow to Jesus.

MARTHA

1. Read John 11:7–44. Martha goes out to meet Jesus on the road. What does that tell you about Martha's personality? What approach does she seem to take toward difficult situations?

2. What does she say to Jesus? What does she imply by her first statement, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died"? Would Martha have "stayed where she was for two days" (John 11:6) if she had heard the news that a loved one was sick? How is she processing the recent events?

3. "But I know that even now, God will give you whatever you ask." What does this statement reveal about Martha and her relationship with Jesus? What do you think she is expecting?

4. Read the next dialogue (vv. 23–27). Consider that Jesus knows Martha well and understands her. What is Martha's need at this time of grief and how does Jesus meet that need?

5. How does her response to Jesus' statements express her understanding of Jesus as Messiah?

Author's Note: I see Martha as a practical, logical thinker who copes by doing. I believe she thought that Jesus could have healed Lazarus if He had arrived in time; I don't think it entered her mind that Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead. She needed reassurance from Jesus that Lazarus would rise in the last days, as she understood Jewish teaching on the subject. (Pharisees believed in a resurrection and afterlife, Sadducees didn't.) She also trusts in Jesus to take care of her and Mary's needs for the future. A woman without male family to care for their needs would be placed in great difficulty. That is my understanding of her statement, "But I know that even now, God will give you whatever you ask." Her future was in Jesus' hands, and she was comfortable with that. I believe that is the strength of her faith. The miracle of Lazarus coming to life would be more than she could even conceive, as it would be difficult for you or I to conceive of today.

SISTERS OF LAZARUS, FRIENDS OF JESUS



MARY

1. When Mary hears that Jesus is coming, she doesn't initially go out, but waits. What does that reveal to you about Mary's personality? How does she cope at this point in time?
2. When Martha announces that Jesus is here, what is Mary's response?
3. What is Mary's reaction when she sees Jesus? What does she say to Jesus? Though the words are similar to Martha's words, do you sense a different meaning behind them?
4. How does Jesus respond to Mary's statement? What is it that moves Jesus to tears? How is he giving Mary what she needs at this stage of her grief?

Author's Note: *The Scripture states that Jesus was "deeply moved in spirit" (NIV) or "He groaned in Spirit" (KJV). This phrase is difficult to translate and carries the sense of anguish, agitation, anger, and distress. Jesus isn't just sad; His soul is in anguish. Some say He was indignant at the mourners following Mary. I personally believe that the reality of earthly death and suffering struck Jesus very personally. Yes, He could raise Lazarus and intervene in this situation, but many others have and will continue to suffer grief and loss in this life. He enters into the grief of Mary, and He weeps.*

SISTERS OF LAZARUS, FRIENDS OF JESUS



Mary, not one to look ahead, is stuck in the moment of overwhelming grief. Jesus doesn't try to comfort her with any words or theological discourses of Lazarus's destiny; He cries with her. He came to Martha in the way she needed, and now He comes to Mary in the way that she needs. Neither is better or worse. Two different women have two different needs, and Jesus comforts them both. When Jesus asks for the stone to be removed, Martha's response reveals once again her practical outlook. He was dead, and death stinks. None the less, she is obedient to the request. Even though Martha is a logical thinker and action based, she is willing to act even when she doesn't understand. That reveals the depth of faith that Martha had in Jesus, and how miracles can happen even for those that do not expect them.

We do not know what Mary expected, but we certainly know what she desired. She just wanted her brother back. She received her heart's desire. Oh, how we would all love to receive that kind of miracle in the midst of our grieving.

YOU AND ME

1. What words, actions or beliefs were most helpful to you at a time when you were grieving?
2. How did Jesus come to you, and what healing did you receive?
3. Are you more like Martha or Mary in your personality?
4. What are some of the traits in you that might hinder you from receiving all that Jesus has to offer you?
5. What are the strengths within your character that help see you through difficult times?
6. Has Jesus ever used these strengths to help comfort others in a time of need?
7. What have you learned about Jesus? What have you learned about yourself?
8. What is your hope?

MEMOIRS OF A CONCUBINE: A STUDY OF ESTHER



INTRODUCTION

This study is not a recommendation for the book *Memoirs of a Geisha*, or its movie counterpart. However, there are some interesting parallels between this story and the book of Esther that give new insight into the journey that Esther must have travelled. It will be helpful if each participant has a copy of the study before them for the comparative materials and questions.

In Vacation Bible School many years ago, the Book of Esther was presented as a gripping cliff-hanging flannelgraph story not easily forgotten by those in attendance. The visuals typically pictured Esther as a beautiful, mature woman who had found the favour of a handsome, honourable king and consequently lived a wonderful fairytale existence as the Queen of Persia. These images have been blown away with the realization that Esther was probably a very young woman, in her early teens.

As an orphan, she lived with her uncle who, for reasons beyond modern understanding, willingly gave her up to become a concubine (plaything) of an over-indulgent, likely very fat (by the number of parties he throws), older king. Note these comparisons between the life of a Geisha and Esther's story:

MEMOIRS OF A CONCUBINE: A STUDY OF ESTHER



Memoirs of a Geisha	The Story of Esther
Mother dies and father sells her, believing her life could be better than he can ever offer her. She is sold to be either a prostitute or Geisha.	An orphan whose uncle releases her to the King's court of concubines perhaps also believing it offered her a chance at a better life.
Chiyo is tested to be certain she is a virgin around 12 years old.	Hadassah must also be a virgin, likely 12 years old.
Chiyo's name is changed to Sayari.	Hadassah's name is changed to Esther.
Sayari is favoured because of her blue eyes and, therefore, is placed into training as a Geisha, an honourable position compared to being a prostitute.	Esther is favoured because of her beauty and is put through a year of beauty treatment to gain a higher position in the king's harem.
Sayari gains the favour of an unattractive man who protects her and ensures her future safety.	Esther gains the favour of the king's eunuch and becomes the chosen virgin from the harem.
Sayari becomes a woman of influence, in spite of her circumstances.	Esther becomes a woman of influence, in spite of her circumstances.

MEMOIRS OF A CONCUBINE: A STUDY OF ESTHER



What is most important to realize through this exercise is what an awful journey this is for a young woman to take—to be removed from all that she loved in order to become sexual amusement for a man of power. Esther is NO LOVE STORY. It is a story of abuse that echoes the oppressive plight of women in many cultures. Today, even in Canada, young girls are brought here and trafficked (literally, sold) into prostitution because they believe that a life in Canada must be better than life in her homeland.

The Book of Esther was not easily accepted into the Old Testament canon because it never mentions God once in all ten chapters. It is rich in satire, filled with burlesque, robust with court intrigue, and bursting with a cast of wild characters. If you prefer your Bible reading to be moralistic, straightforward, somber, and sacred, Esther is not your cup of tea.

Esther is also a story of survival—a story of incredible courage and resilience. There is no doubt about the power of God’s presence in this girl’s life to overcome the oppressive circumstance forced upon her. Through this study, we hope you will see Esther with new eyes and come to an even a greater understanding of this truly amazing young woman.

Background

After the exile and the fall of Babylon to Persia, many Jewish exiles chose to stay in Persia rather than return to Jerusalem. They could live comfortably there but were still vulnerable to persecution by the foreign power. It was wise for Esther to keep her heritage a secret in this potentially hostile environment.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

BACKGROUND

1. Read Esther 1:4–12: Describe briefly what kind of man was King Xerxes (also known by the Hebrew name, Ahasuerus).
2. What did he ask of Queen Vashti? What was unreasonable about his request?
3. Read verses 18–22: What was the threat created by Vashti's response and what was the consequence? How do you react to this as a woman?
4. The king is advised to search the kingdom for "beautiful, young virgins" (2:2) to feed his excessive appetite for more than food and drink. Read chapter 2:5-15. Why do you think Mordecai placed Esther into this situation? What evidence do we have of how much Mordecai cared for Esther? 2:14 reveals what the life of a concubine was like.

At the risk of being crude, one can see what a difficult, oppressive situation it was for a young girl to face. From our North American perspective, was the hope of a better future worth the dehumanization that Esther went through?

MEMOIRS OF A CONCUBINE: A STUDY OF ESTHER



THE PLOT

1. Read 2:21–3:6: What motivated Mordecai to report the conspiracy plot on the king and yet ignore the king's command to honour Haman? What chain reactions did his attitude bring about?
2. Describe an example where being a person of integrity has caused conflict or created more hardship than it seemed it was worth.

The date in Esther 3:7 tells us it is now 9 years since Esther became a concubine, which would still leave her barely 20 years old. We see even more clearly what kind of man she was forced to live with as he easily gives permission for the genocide of thousands of Jews living in the land of Persia. (See 3:8–11.)

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

1. Read 4:1–6. What do we learn about the relationship of Mordecai and Esther? What is Mordecai asking of Esther, and what is Esther's fear? Is his request reasonable? Was there any other choice?
2. Esther 4:14 is the pivotal verse in this book. In this verse we find the familiar phrase, "For such a time as this." What do these words mean to you?

MEMOIRS OF A CONCUBINE: A STUDY OF ESTHER



OUR PART TO PLAY

1. What are some situations today that God is calling us to speak up in “such a time as this”? What are the issues that the church needs to address? What are the costs of raising such issues? Is there a place for women to lead the way in calling for justice?
2. What kind of issue would bring you to your knees to fast and pray for three solid days? Again, how could women lead the way in such a calling?
3. Read Chapter 5:4–8. Esther is very astute and makes a suggestion that plays on the king’s first love: food! She asks for a banquet, knowing he’s always game for a party. What other character traits of Esther are revealed by her actions?
4. Read Chapter 6:1. How does God enter the scene even though He is not named? Name examples where God has intervened to prepare a person’s heart for action.
5. Summarize chapters 7–8 in regards to Esther’s part in saving her people. What did she risk and what did she gain? What was Esther’s part in this miracle? What was God’s part?

Today God is calling women “for such a time as this.” Though we may feel as innocent and helpless as young Esther, we have been placed where we are and given what we have to be used by God for mighty things.

Like Esther, we can overcome many difficult situations such as abuse, divorce, discrimination, physical illness, and numerous other painful pasts. God is calling us all to fast and pray against injustice and oppression. God is calling each of us to take risks for His sake. May Esther’s example inspire us to speak and act with courage and faith!

HAGAR THE HANDMAIDEN



INTRODUCTION

One of the difficulties exploring Biblical characters is that they are so messy. In the cartoon world, the good guys are dressed in white and the bad guys in black. There is no mistaking the goodness from the evil. The real world has never been so clean and neither has Scripture. Each person we meet on those sacred pages is a complex mix of occasional holy brilliance with liberal doses of frail humanity. The chapters in Genesis that will be studied together illustrate this reality in the characters we will meet there. There will be no temptation to hold up those we meet as perfect models of trust, faithfulness, patience, love, or any other such virtue. The only hero in this story is God and, ultimately, that is true of every story, especially yours and mine.

This study is focused particularly on Hagar although her story is so intertwined with Sarai and Abram, that we can't help but look at all three of these individuals and the parts that they play. The challenge for each of us will be to allow the characters to be both sinner and saint. There is no good girl or bad girl, blessed or cursed. God does amazing things in all three lives, in spite of their glaring faults. In the words of Walter Brueggemann, "The story of their lives is the story of hopeful but impatient groaning as they wait for the redemption of their bodies and of their history" (page 151). His commentary on Genesis from the Interpretation Series is the primary resource for this study. (Copyright: John Knox Press 1982)

We are all messy—we get things right and God uses us in ways we cannot have ever imagined. We also get things horribly, horribly wrong. But even then, God does not abandon us. He grants us His blessings and promises His presence as we walk through the consequences of the best of our choices and the worst of our choices. Whatever we might ask or pray for or desire, ultimately, all we truly ever need is to be embraced in the loving arms of our God.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

CAN GOD BE TRUSTED?

*"Faith is not easy. It calls for a persistence which is against common sense. It calls for believing in a gift from God which none of the present data can substantiate."
(Brueggemann, pg 152)*

1. Read Genesis 15:4–6. What exactly is God's promise to Abram? Is Sarai mentioned as part of the fulfillment of the promise? What exactly is it that Abram believed that becomes a credit of faith?
2. Now Read Genesis 16. The theme of this chapter is "Can God be trusted?" The promise has been given but it has not been fulfilled. What might be the reasons Sarai decided to take charge of the promise of God in order to see it fulfilled?
3. Why did Abram let Sarai take charge of the fulfillment of the promise? What strengths of character are revealed in their actions? What weaknesses?
4. If willing, share any personal examples where your faith has had to persevere when the facts stood against it.
5. Hagar was a slave from Egypt. She did not even have the status of a concubine. She had no choice in this situation but to be obedient to the demands of her masters. "When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress" (v.4, NIV). Discuss together all the possible feelings that Hagar might have gone through as this situation evolved.

HAGAR THE HANDMAIDEN



THE BLAME GAME

1. In 16:5, what is going on in Sarai that she now puts the blame on Abram? What is she really angry about? Does Abram deserve any of her anger?

2. How do you feel about Abram's response? Where does he place the responsibility? Why did he act so passively toward this situation when it was so pivotal to his entire future?

3. Have you ever been sorry to get what you asked for? Sarai received what she had asked for, but it did not fulfill the desire of her heart. What are some ways that we circumvent God's fulfillment by seeking temporal solutions to the desires of our own hearts?

Quote: Rev. Samuel Jackson of Old Presbyterian Church, June 2003

"The trouble is, where does this leave Hagar? It leaves Hagar on the outside and on the downside. It leaves Hagar as a person without a voice. She is that person throughout human history who simply does not have the power to do what she needs to do. She is sent away.

Consider all of those people who had been enslaved, all of those people who have been pressed down, whose limits had been truncated, whose minds feel closed and small because something from the outside has cut them off and made them less than they should be; people who are on the fringes theologically, who feel as though they are being shunted and pushed away and devalued as human beings. This is Hagar. This is Hagar who sits outside the dominant paradigm as it were.

Persons who are legitimately cut off, cut down, and oppressed are unwilling or do not have the fortitude to do whatever it is they can do to gather hope together to march on. The Bible is full of stories of God enabling the victims as they take some responsibility for their own lives."

HAGAR THE HANDMAIDEN



GOD SPEAKS

1. The beauty of this story is the appearance of the “Angel of the Lord” to Hagar. Hagar is a slave. Hagar is an outsider. The God of Abram is a stranger to Hagar—not one of the gods of Egypt that she had known. And yet it is Hagar who receives the first face-to-face visitation of God (theophany) recorded in the Old Testament since the garden. The angel speaks four times to Hagar. What does this teach us about God?

2. What instructions does God give to Hagar? (vs. 8–9) Note how He addresses Hagar by reminding her of her status. What does Hagar need to change in her life, even though she has been a victim of unwanted circumstances?

3. What is the promise contained in those instructions? The comments God made about Ishmael do not sound very flattering. Discuss whether this is a curse from God or just a statement of consequential reality—that there would be inevitable sibling rivalry that would lead to conflict, a conflict that continues to this very day.

4. Read Genesis 17:19–22. What is the difference between the promise regarding Isaac and the promise regarding Ishmael? What was God’s desire for the two nations?

5. Hagar gives God a name. What does that name mean to her in her situation? What might it mean to you in your situation?

6. If you could give God a name according to how you have experienced Him in your life, what name would you give Him?

HAGAR THE HANDMAIDEN



God reaches out to Hagar in grace and does not abandon her to the mess into which she has been thrust. God moves toward her first. Isn't this the message of the pure gospel? God always makes the first move—that is the definition of grace. God loves the outsiders and is always at work to bring them into the sheep fold (John 10:16).

Quote: in sermon by Linda W. McFadden, Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, June 20, 1999

"When Isaac was born, Sarah couldn't bear the thought that her child would have to share the inheritance with the slave girl's son. Suddenly Hagar and Ishmael were an embarrassment, an irritation. So Sarah told Abraham to get rid of them. These two people whom Sarah had used to salvage God's plan had become expendable.

But God is so stubborn about loving us humans and so determined to stick with us even when we mess up that God told Abraham not to worry about it! God said that the blessing was good for both sons so Ishmael, too, would be the father of a nation. Even so, it must have been with a heavy heart that Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness with only a little food and a skin of water.

So, Hagar and Ishmael walked and walked until the water ran out. Where could they go? Hagar was a young woman in a patriarchal culture, a foreigner without kinfolk, without resources, without hope. Given these prospects, Hagar did an entirely understandable thing: she gave up. When the water ran out, Hagar put Ishmael down on the ground and went off a ways and sat down so she wouldn't have to hear her child's suffering. The story says that God hears Ishmael crying. That's a Hebrew pun because Ishmael's name means "God hears."

First, she receives hope; she is told that her child will not perish there in the desert but will live to become the father of a great nation. And secondly, she gets just what she needs to sustain her child then and there—a well of water. This is a story about despair transformed to hope. In a hopeless situation, Hagar got what she needed to nurture her child. Evelyn Underhill writes, "No Christian escapes a taste of the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land" (Fruits of the Spirit, Morehouse Publishing, 1989). Most of us do know in our hearts what it is to be lost with an empty canteen and no help in sight. And for most of us, there also comes a time when, like Hagar, we're ready to give up...

HAGAR THE HANDMAIDEN



...As a single parent who never expected to be one, a woman whose life had taken her places she wasn't prepared to go, this story told me that Hagar made it. God responded to Hagar, and she had brought Ishmael through. So it gave me hope that I just might be able to bring my child through the wilderness, too.

Hagar found her well only after she had taken Ishmael by the hand and journeyed into the wilderness. And I think that's how it is with us, too. Finding the well requires our faithfulness to our responsibilities.

Not long after the Hagar and Ishmael incident, the tribes of Israel would find themselves in the wilderness. In an interesting twist of historical irony, Hagar's descendants, the Egyptians, will hold the children of Israel as slaves, and when they escape they will wander in the wilderness just like Hagar and Ishmael. And just like Hagar and Ishmael they, too, will feel that they have been abandoned, forgotten by God, and left to die of hunger and thirst. And like Hagar and Ishmael, they will discover in the wilderness that God remembers them. God is with them, God's presence will save them.

GOD HEARS

1. Read Genesis 21:8–21. What issues still continue to trouble Sarah? Is there any change in how Abraham handles Sarah from the first time we read about? Any thoughts about why God continues to allow Sarah to call the shots regarding Hagar and Ishmael?
2. Whose cries did God respond to? Note that Ishmael's name means, "God hears"!
3. How did God meet Hagar where she was and minister to her?
4. What promise do you need to claim today as a result of this study?

THE GAZELLE, A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN OF GOD



INTRODUCTION

This year, the Great Canadian Bible Study will explore the life, the death and the resurrection of a woman named Tabitha (Hebrew), or Dorcas (Greek), both of which mean *gazelle*. The gazelle evokes the image of grace and beauty. We actually know very little about this woman, and we certainly do not know what she looked like—but there is no doubt that she was a beautiful, beautiful woman of God, and not because of any physical features she may have had. In reflecting together on her story, it will be noteworthy that though an amazing miracle occurred in her life—unlike Lazarus who is remembered for being brought back to life by Christ—Dorcas seems to be remembered more for her acts of charity. We will consider together why this might be so through the study.

Our story takes place in the sea port of Joppa (which interestingly also means *beautiful*), 35 miles northwest of Jerusalem and 10 miles from the town of Lydda, where Peter will be found and called upon. There appears to have been a group of believers located in Joppa, which must have organized very soon after Christ's resurrection or perhaps were even active followers when Jesus was still living. We do not know the beginnings of this particular church but gather from the text that it was active and faithful, and that they were connected to the greater body of believers—as they were aware of Peter's activities.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

PREPARATION

1. Read Psalm 20:1–5 as a blessing to one another. Reflect in a minute of silence, and then read the psalm once more. Consider what might be the desire of your heart for this time of study together and lift that desire to your Heavenly Father. Read the verses of Psalm 20 one last time as you open your heart to receive what God has to give to you.
2. As mentioned, the meaning of the name of Tabitha or Dorcas in either language is *gazelle*. Reflect upon your own name. Share the story with each other of how you received your name and what meaning it holds for you.
3. Without referring to the text, if you had heard the story of Dorcas previously, what are some things that come to mind when you hear her name?

PETER

1. Read Acts 9:32–43. We include in our study a story about Peter, who was travelling around the area of Jerusalem. What is the significance of this miracle by Peter in light of the development of the new church?
2. Peter is adamant as to who performed the healing. Where does our power come from in any good that we might do?

THE GAZELLE, A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN OF GOD



GREATER THINGS

1. Read John 14:11–14. Discuss what these verses mean for the birth of the early church and then the church today. Are we able to do greater things, and if not, what are we lacking in our Christian experience?
2. Read verse 35. What was the response to the miracle? Would we see more response to the Gospel of Jesus if we saw more miracles among us, or is the world too skeptical for that kind of evidence?
3. What do you think is our best witness today?

BEING A DISCIPLE

1. Tabitha is referred to as a “disciple” or learner. A disciple was more than one who simply learned from the master, but one who would also strive to imitate the teacher. It is significant that this is the only time in the New Testament that the feminine form of the word for disciple, *mathetria*, is used. Evidently, she was so committed to Christ that this description fit her better than “follower” or “servant.” How do you see Dorcas as an imitator of Jesus? What does this tell us about the ministry that women had and can have within the church?
2. By the actions described in verses 37 and 38, how important was Tabitha to that community of believers, and what evidence verifies your thoughts? Was it only the women that seemed to feel the loss of Tabitha?

THE GAZELLE, A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN OF GOD



DORCAS, DOING GOOD

1. How important would a matter be considered that they would disturb a leader such as Peter to come to them? Who is mobilized to go and get Peter? What did they expect of Peter? Did they expect Peter to heal her, or were they calling upon him for comfort?
2. What does it tell us about Peter that he would come?
3. Verse 39 defines more clearly the “doing good and helping the poor” mentioned in verse 36. What was the ministry of Dorcas that was so valued by the community?
4. What challenges might Dorcas have faced as she cared for the poor? Compare resources we have now with those available to her.

In first-century Palestine, women without men were first on the list of completely vulnerable populations. A widow during the first century would have absolutely no access to economic structures, no independence, no one to advocate for her—absolutely no way to live. This was a very serious societal problem at the time Luke was writing, and in other parts of the book of Acts, you’ll see that the plight of widows was a topic of hot debate within the first church.

MERCY MINISTRY

1. Look up Acts 6:1–7. How important was this ministry to the life of the early church?
2. Who was assigned to look after the widows in this chapter and what qualifications were necessary for those appointed to this ministry? What might that tell us about Dorcas?

THE GAZELLE, A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN OF GOD



DÉJÀ VU

1. Read Mark 5:35–43 and Acts 9:40. “Talitha Kumi” is very similar to “Tabitha Kumi” which is the Hebrew translation of “get up. Jesus said, “Little girl, get up.” Peter said, “Tabitha, get up,” using her Hebrew name. Peter was present with Jesus in the Marcan account. As far as we know, Peter had never raised a person back to life. What gave Peter the courage to try this miracle?

2. Is there any significance to him choosing to use the same phrasing?

Author’s thoughts: Commentaries with which I consulted agree that these stories were included by Luke in the book of the Acts of the Apostles to show how the power of the resurrected Christ was at work among the apostles. Miracles were evidence that God’s work, begun in Jesus, would be carried on through His believers. But what is most fascinating to me about the story of Dorcas is that her name is not so much remembered because she was brought back from death. Instead, she is remembered as a woman who radically addressed the suffering of the most vulnerable and destitute population of her community. In response to the need around her, you could say she started a faith-based initiative.

Her name is synonymous with radical acts of justice and mercy on behalf of the poorest and most discarded members of society. Today, many missions in North America are called Dorcas Houses for that very reason. And while one verse is dedicated to recounting her miraculous healing, the other verses tell, in myriad of ways, the grief of a community who heard her name and immediately thought of the Gospel of Jesus Christ lived out in tangible ways. Whether as Dorcas or Tabitha, the name of this devoted disciple of Jesus Christ meant then, and means now, a radical, extreme living out of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that has the power to transform lives and communities.

And, she is remembered because she is a woman. For certain, I believe that is why women are particularly drawn to the story of Tabitha or Dorcas. She brings dignity and importance to the many ministries that we often carry out behind the scenes; ministries of compassion and service that seem insignificant to the more upfront ministries of the church and yet, in truth, constitute the backbone of the church of Christ.

FROM DISGRACE TO DIGNITY – A WOMAN BY A WELL



INTRODUCTION

It is so difficult to read Scripture and not place the understandings of our day and age onto the reading of a passage. When we read of a woman who has been married five times and is now “living in sin,” we believe we know her. This woman struggles with commitment. She must have wanderlust problems or some kind of emotional addictions, or she must be terribly hard to live with. Whatever we think, most of us think that this is a woman with problems. She is the problem. She is not well. She is sinful.

I wonder if we are being fair to this woman we think we know because of a few words of Scripture. Perhaps it is time that we dig a little deeper into the history behind her story. This woman is from Samaria, not North America, and her situation is quite different from the culture to which we are accustomed. She wears a label: divorced. That label is hard enough to bear today in Canada, but what did it mean to a woman in her day?

Last year, we learned about the importance of a name in the one called Tabitha, but in this story, our subject is nameless except for labels. To simply refer to her as “that woman” places us with the neighbours she would avoid by going for her water at noon when no one was around. If you would forgive my boldness, I would like to name her *Samantha* for the purpose of this study. Samantha reminds me that she is from Samaria and also it is a Hebrew derivative that means “listener of God.” I believe that is an accurate description of her character. So, let me introduce you to Samantha, the woman Jesus met, spoke with, listened to, understood, and redeemed by the well in Samaria.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

PREPARATION

Begin this study by reading aloud together Psalm 5:1–8. Have another person read it again and ask yourself what word or phrase speaks to your life today. Share your thoughts. Read it a third time and think about what word or phrase might speak to *Samantha* and her life situation. Share those ideas with one another. Spend a moment in prayer asking that God would open your mind and heart to the word that He would speak to you in this study.

OVERVIEW

1. Read John 4:1–42 as an overview of the story. What are the strikes that Samantha has against her that would make it unwise for Jesus to speak with her?
2. Was *Samantha* taking any risks in speaking back to Jesus?
3. Focus on verses 16–18. Share some ideas of how this woman might have found herself in this situation of having had many husbands.

FROM DISGRACE TO DIGNITY – A WOMAN BY A WELL



It is possible that she may have been widowed at some point, but not likely each time. It is important to consider the following concerning the rules surrounding divorce in Jewish and Eastern Culture. Marriage was primarily considered as a legal financial arrangement, and obtaining a wife was very similar to obtaining other property. Though a wife was considered a man's "most valued possession," she was a possession nonetheless.

There was no provision for a woman to divorce her husband, but it was rather easy for a man to dismiss his wife as unsatisfactory. A wife could never divorce her husband, though possibly she could make his life so miserable that it might force him to divorce her—but it would be a great financial disadvantage for her to do so. She was a man's property, which he purchased by the bride price. There was a cost to divorce, as the bride price would have to be returned to the family. The less value the woman held, the less secure she would be. The divorce was always from first to last, in Jewish law, the husband's act." The common term used in the Bible for divorce is *shilluach 'ishshah*, "the sending away of a wife."

The following was the usual form of a decree:

On the ____ day of the week ____ in the month ____ in the year ____ from the beginning of the world, according to the common computation in the province of ____ I ____ the son of ____ by whatever name I may be known, of the town of ____ with entire consent of mind, and without any constraint, have divorced, dismissed, and expelled thee ____ daughter of ____ by whatever name thou art called, of the town who hast been my wife hitherto; But now I have dismissed thee ____ the daughter of ____ by whatever name thou art called, of the town of ____ so as to be free at thy own disposal, to marry whomsoever thou pleasest, without hindrance from anyone, from this day for ever. Thou art therefore free for anyone (who would marry thee). Let this be thy bill of divorce from me, a writing of separation and expulsion, according to the law of Moses and Israel.

____, the son of____, witness.

FROM DISGRACE TO DIGNITY – A WOMAN BY A WELL



All that was needed for a man to dismiss his wife was a written note to say that the husband was no longer pleased. It really didn't matter if the woman was faithful and devoted or not. Perhaps she couldn't bear children. Perhaps she didn't cook well enough. Perhaps she was simply physically unpleasing in her looks. It is also important to remember that most marriages were arranged, and the girls were very young when they were married off for financial, social or political reasons. There are not too many love stories but "mutual arrangements." And then... to be dismissed.

"DISMISSED"

1. From this information, consider what happened to *Samantha* and how she came to be "dismissed" from her husband? What would it do to her sense of self-worth and esteem?
2. What would she experience when she was dismissed a second time? A third time?
3. Share a personal example or what some women may have experienced in being "dismissed." Perhaps their ideas or opinions are dismissed. Perhaps you have felt dismissed in a friendship, or ignored when you had something important to contribute. Are there ways that you can think of where women are dismissed as invalid?

Consider this Samaritan woman in a new light. Once she was a young girl with dreams of a bright future. She was married to a man whom she wanted to please, but something went wrong, and she was dismissed. She was now "damaged goods." What respectful man would marry a divorced woman?

FROM DISGRACE TO DIGNITY – A WOMAN BY A WELL



Perhaps he was a man who had another wife already—or someone who had no dowry to offer, or nothing valuable to use for bargaining. She was just second-rate merchandise; the price had gone down. And so she is married again—but that does not work out. Through no choice of her own, she is dismissed again, and again, and again. She is used and abused until finally the last man doesn't even bother to marry her, declaring her to be of no value. (Living common-law was not a common practice.)

THROUGH JESUS' EYES

1. In what ways did Jesus not dismiss *Samantha*? How did He validate her as a person of dignity and worth?
2. How do you envision the tone of voice that Jesus used with her? What words or actions or attitudes showed respect to this one who had lost all self-respect and respect from her community?
3. How does Jesus handle her questions?
4. What do *Samantha*'s questions regarding worship reveal about her character? What did Jesus see that others missed?

SOMETHING'S DIFFERENT ABOUT YOU!

1. Focus now on John 4:27–30. What happened to *Samantha* that gave her the courage to face the people who disdained her?
2. What part of the conversation made the difference in her life?
3. What words of Jesus would have impacted your life and changed your self image?
4. What change would the community have noticed that would make them listen to her and want to follow her?

FROM DISGRACE TO DIGNITY – A WOMAN BY A WELL



“Come; see a man who told me everything I ever did!” What did Jesus say to her that gave her the courage to face down those very people that had dismissed her most of her life?

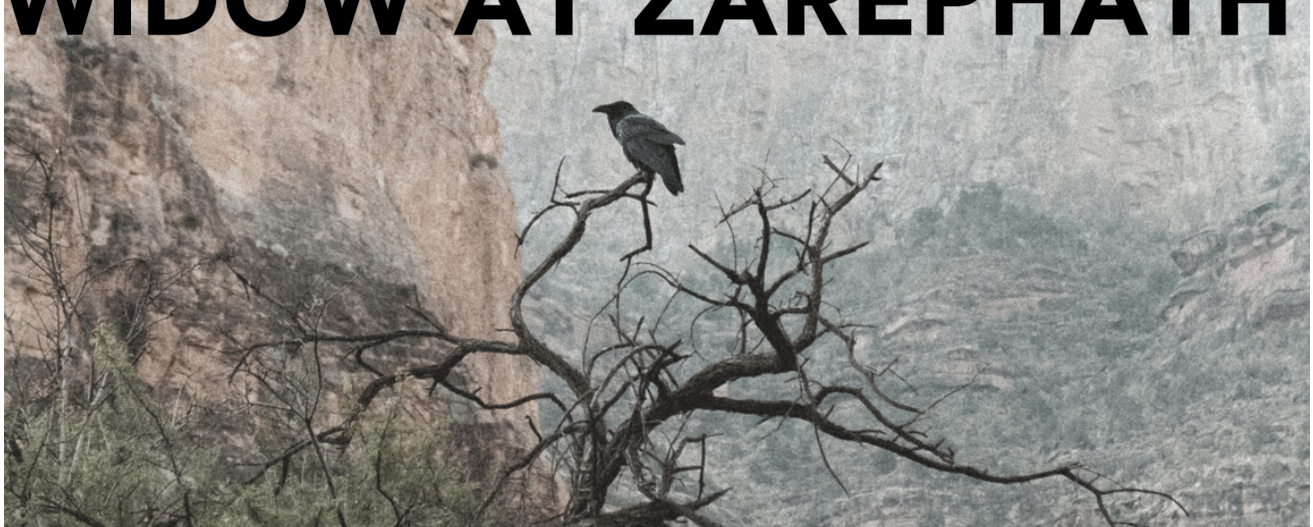
We have assumed that when Jesus told her everything she ever did, that He spent the time listing all of her sinful living patterns and errant behaviors. Would that listing of all her “badness” give her the courage to face the very community who already knew that list and called her on it daily?

Perhaps as Jesus talked to this woman down at the well, He actually told her about her good qualities. Perhaps He reminded her of the hopes and dreams that she had as a child and how full of life and promise she had been. Maybe He mentioned times that she had been truly caring for others. He may have told her that her longing to worship was a good thing, revealing her desire to know and love God. He may also have mentioned the areas of her life that weren’t so great, but I don’t think He needed to dwell on that. She lived each day with the reminders of her past. I believe it was her infinite value as a woman that Jesus recounted to her at the well.

BEARING WITNESS

1. I realize that I am speculating on what the conversation may have been between Jesus and *Samantha*, which is not recorded in Scripture, but how do you respond to the above paragraph? Is there any validity in the thought that Jesus might have talked about her life in positive ways, as well as the struggles?
2. What gifts did Jesus give to *Samantha* on this day?
3. What gifts does Jesus give to all women through the telling and retelling of this story?
4. Read verses 39–42: What is our greatest witness? What changes in your life bear witness to the power of Christ?
5. Where is your “Samaria”? Who are the people that you don’t really understand, or agree with, or pay much attention to? What is a Samaria that God is calling His believers to, where we need to bring dignity to an oppressed people or honour their ways of worship? What is the good news that we can bring?

HE GIVES, TAKES, AND GIVES AGAIN – THE WIDOW AT ZAREPHATH



INTRODUCTION

The prophet Elijah was serving God in very hostile territory. King Ahab and Jezebel had made Israel an intolerable place for the faithful to live as the worship of Baal was not simply ignored but promoted, and God's prophets put to death. Elijah speaks out against the king and pronounces a coming drought as a sign of God's anger against Israel. Since Baal was considered the god of rain, it was Yahweh's direct challenge to Baal worship to dry up the land. God promises to provide for Elijah by brook and raven, and when the brook dries up, He sends him to Zarephath.

Zarephath was 80–90 miles away (about where Lebanon is today) and into the heart of Baal country. It would be the last place that Elijah would want to go, and then to rely on a poor widow for sustenance is strange indeed. Elijah continues to trust in God to provide, and so he goes. Perhaps being fed by a widow was no less strange than being fed by ravens!

As we study this story together, we will be placing our focus primarily on the widow and her response to this strange request from this man of a foreign God, rather than on Elijah.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

PREPARATION

Have one person read Psalm 63:1–5 out loud, and then allow for a few moments of silence before reading the passage again. Think of one area of your life where you feel dry and have a sense of longing. Pray that God might offer you some insight into where you might go to quench your thirst and how He might meet you there.

NEEDING EACH OTHER

1. Read 1 Kings 17:7–16. Do you think that Elijah was sent to this woman for her sake and her need, or for his sake and his need? Why would God care about a poor widow outside of Israel and send His primary prophet, who was quite a distance away, to help her?
2. It is unlikely that this woman knew anything about Elijah or about his God. Consider what she might have been thinking as she was approached by him. If possible, imagine yourself in her situation and what might have been your first response.
3. What does God mean when He says, “I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food” (v.9)? How could God command a non-believer? Compare this with v.4, “I have ordered the ravens to feed you there.” Was the woman simply an instrument like the raven? Did she have a choice in the matter?

HE GIVES, TAKES, AND GIVES AGAIN – THE WIDOW AT ZAREPHATH



The widow did not take much risk in helping Elijah, as she assumed her fate was sealed and she and her son would perish—whether after this meal or the next. Yes, she gave everything she had, but in other ways, she risked very little. Why do we believe that she was a woman of great faith? With faith the size of a grain of mustard seed, God can bless.

A NEW MINDSET

1. Read Luke 4:24–26. Jesus raises the huge issue of why blessing was bestowed upon someone outside of Israel and not upon Israel itself. He infuriated the people who heard Him speak, and they tried to run him off a cliff for His words. What made them so angry? In what ways do we like to box God into working where and when we think He should?
2. Could Jesus also be speaking to the Christian church? How does our theology handle it when God uses people outside of the faith to speak a truth or be a blessing?
3. God does provide for the needs of Elijah, the woman, and her son through a miracle. The resources needed do not run out. Share some miracles that you have experienced, great or small, where God provided for your needs.

The story becomes more difficult when the most precious person in the widow's life takes ill and dies. The fact that the woman owned her home is evidence that she was truly alone and had no other family or support system. She has lived dependent on God's hand to feed them day after day, and suddenly this God seems to turn on her.

HE GIVES, TAKES, AND GIVES AGAIN – THE WIDOW AT ZAREPHATH



WHEN THINGS DON'T MAKE SENSE

1. Read 1 Kings 17:17–24. What kinds of circumstances have thrown your faith or theology into a tailspin and life no longer seems to make sense?
2. How do you think Elijah felt about this tragedy? Did he also believe that God brought this sorrow upon the widow? If so, is he then trying to change God's mind with his actions? How do you reconcile your understanding of God as the source of blessing in your life and also the source of sorrow? Once again we are faced with the question of "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People."

Author's note: *There is no correct answer to the problem of good and evil. We each need to come to a personal understanding of how we see God's hand upon our lives and how we accept the hard things in life. Does God cause illness or simply allow it? Does God heal some and not others, and for what purpose? These are questions of faith. What I do believe is that God is comfortable with our anger and allows us to cry out to Him when no answers make sense. The woman vents her anger to Elijah, the man of God, and Elijah in turns vents his anger and frustration to God. But he moves beyond his anger to action. He does not know God's will for the son, but he prays the best way he knows how, to change the outcome. In the worship song by Matt Redman, "Blessed be the Name of the Lord," we sing, "He gives and takes away, He gives and takes away. My heart will chose to say, 'Lord blessed be your name.'"*

This is truly a song of faith!

TOTAL TRUST

1. The Scripture paints a beautiful picture of Elijah's prayer; more than his words, with his action of love as he laid himself upon the boy as if his own life source might flow out of him and into the other. It is an image of total abandonment to the will and power of God. Compare this story with Paul's actions in Acts 20:7–11. What might we learn from the connection of these two stories of healing?

HE GIVES, TAKES, AND GIVES AGAIN – THE WIDOW AT ZAREPHATH



Notice that Elijah does not ask *why*, but rather raises the question, “O Lord, my God, have you brought this tragedy upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?” Even this man of God, who has been hand fed by ravens and experienced God’s power, admits that he doesn’t have the answers and doesn’t understand the ways or mind of God. He does not spout theology to the widow or pat answers, but joins her in her suffering and also in her questions.

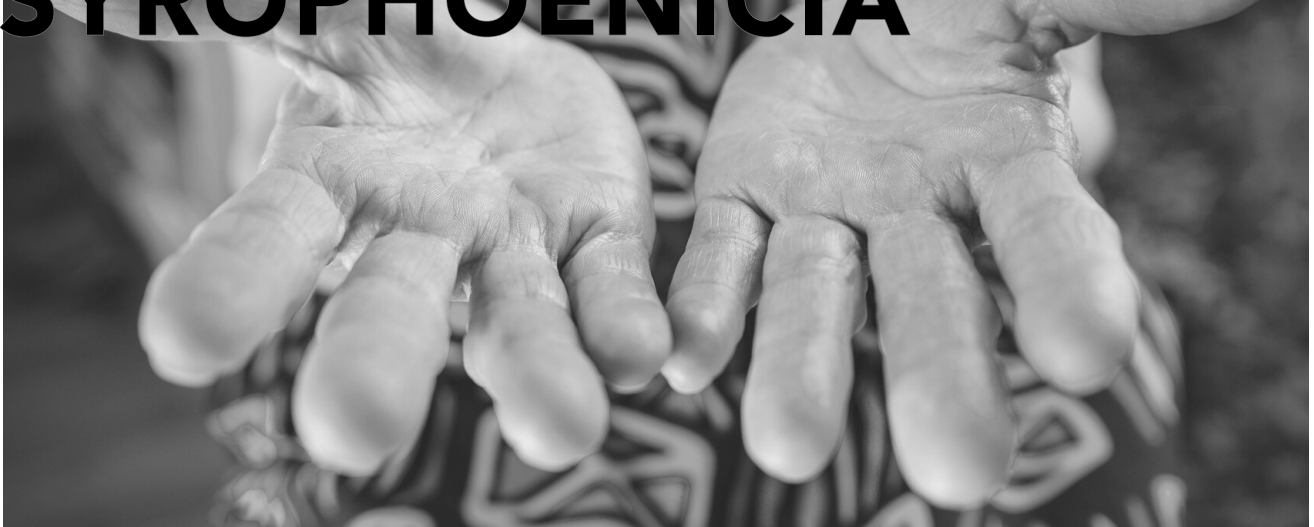
“Did the boy die because of my sin?, asks the widow. “Have you brought this tragedy?” cries the prophet. He joins her in her pain and struggle and brings her questions to God.

EXPERIENCING RESURRECTION

1. What does this story teach us about how we might come alongside someone who has experienced tragedy and sorrow in their life?
2. This story ends much more joyfully than many of our sorrows. She receives her son back. She experiences resurrection. Oh, can you imagine how excited Elijah must have been when he placed a very alive boy back into the arms of his mother! Share a time when you received a reprieve from the worst-case scenario, and the joy you experienced.
3. Think also of a time when the worst you could imagine did happen and you lost a loved one. Has there been an experience of resurrection in your ability to laugh and know joy again in the face of your deep grief?

The greatest mystery of all is that when we experience the worst that we can imagine, God, our loving Father, still brings us hope and peace and joy, and somehow we manage to live again—when we thought we could not face the day ahead. There is life after death, not only in the eternal sense, but in the day to day walk on this earth. That is our greatest hope and source of comfort.

CRUMBS OF GRACE – THE WOMAN FROM SYROPHOENICIA



INTRODUCTION

This gospel story found in Mark 7 and also Matthew 15 has caused readers difficulty in the apparent harshness of Jesus toward this desperate woman. The words seem so out of character with the nature of Jesus and His usual patience and kindness toward the outsider. It is my prayer that in this study we might together glean a better understanding of abundant grace and mercy out of this unique context.

PREPARATION

Spend a few minutes reading Ephesians 3:17b–19 out loud, three or four times to allow this message of generosity and abundance to soak into your soul. Do you receive and understand that Christ's love for you is limitless? Is there anywhere you could go, any despair you could experience, any loneliness you could feel where Christ's love for you is not greater?

Pray together and seek God's desire for you as you enter into this story of the Gentile woman who takes great risk in order to find healing for her daughter.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

SOUL CARE

1. Read Mark 7:25–30 and Matthew 15:21–28. Jesus feels the need to get away from the crowds pressing upon Him for healing, and so He goes to an area outside of Judea where He hopes He is not so recognizable. He goes to a private home for rest and to experience care. Do you ever weary in doing good works?
2. What are ways that you step away from “doing” in order to restore your soul? What are the practices that refresh your spirit?

A DESPERATE PLEA

1. Jesus fails to keep His presence a secret and a woman comes to seek His help. She is desperate for the sake of her tormented daughter. The woman is not Jewish but comes from a Greek heritage. What are the risks that she is taking and barriers she must cross in seeking Jesus?
2. Has there ever been a time when you took a risk for the sake of another, that you would share with this group? Why was it risky, and what was the cost? Did it pay off?
3. This woman will do anything for her child. How do/did you balance the responsibility of being a giving, caring parent with the desire to not overprotect your child or spoil them? When do we stick our neck out for our children, and when do we allow them to bear life’s hardships?

CRUMBS OF GRACE – THE WOMAN FROM SYROPHOENICIA



Now the story gets difficult, as Jesus does not react in the way that we would expect or hope. His words sound very harsh and almost uncaring.

A DIFFERENT SENSE

1. How do you explain Jesus' response to this woman?
2. Consider I Corinthians 13:4 & 5, "Love is patient, love is kind . . . it is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered . . . " If Jesus is our loving God, is it possible for Jesus to be impatient and unkind, as these words appear?
3. Consider the setting of this scene a little differently. Imagine that Jesus has a slight smile on His face and a bit of a twinkle in His eye as He looks at the woman and says, "First, let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs" (the literal Greek word is *puppies*). Do you get any different sense of how Jesus might be interacting with the woman?

In Eastern cultures, most dogs are not pets, and run the streets as mangy and dirty animals. When I saw the many dogs running the streets in India, I had no desire to pet one or even go near it. Gentiles were considered "unclean" to the Jewish people, as the dogs were unclean. However, dogs that were owned by masters and allowed in a home to eat crumbs from a table were domesticated and treated well. The word used in Greek as well as the context of the text would indicate that Jesus used the word *puppy* and not the derogatory reference of *dog* used against Gentiles.

THE TRUE MESSIAH

1. Jesus is basically communicating a long-held belief that the Messiah would come from the Jews for the Jews. This is the question we must consider: Is Jesus affirming that value system or challenging it?

CRUMBS OF GRACE – THE WOMAN FROM SYROPHOENICIA



Dean Breidenthal from Princeton University offers an interesting perspective in a 2003 sermon. He explains that there are many themes of God's abundance throughout the book of Mark—such as feeding 5000, or a mustard seed growing into a huge tree. God continually surprises us by giving more than we can imagine, honouring the humble with abundant mercy and grace. Out of this woman's humility, she accepts the crumbs of grace from God's hand, knowing that even crumbs are more than enough to satisfy.

He also points out that the theme of liberation from demons in Mark's gospel refers to liberation from isolation and rejection, to be reunited in fellowship with both God and others. This woman's daughter is ostracized because of her condition, and that alienation breaks her mother's heart. She assumes that Jesus will give full liberation to her daughter, in spite of her status as a Gentile, because she seems to get how God's kingdom works. Breidenthal writes: "...in the currency of God's economy, there is no small change. Every crumb from God's table is the whole kingdom; every encounter with God's mercy is a completely new beginning, every taste of God's goodness is total assurance that God will give us everything we need, and more."

THE CRUMBS

1. However Jesus intended His words, the woman definitely challenges such a belief statement. Think about her response: "Yes, Lord, but even the puppies under the table eat the children's crumbs." What do you think she is saying to Jesus, and what does it reveal about her?
2. "Every crumb from God's table is the whole kingdom." Consider that statement. Are there ways that you have not trusted in the generosity of God? Have you ever feared that there would not be enough of something you've needed? What are some tangible ways that you have trusted the abundance of God?
3. Read Ephesians 3 one more time, and offer some prayers of thanksgiving for God's abundant grace and mercy. Ask for help in areas where you need to trust in God's generosity in a more tangible way.

MIRIAM, THE SINGING SISTER



INTRODUCTION

As in most women's stories, Miriam is much more than the woman behind the scenes; she is acknowledged as a key leader in the story of Israel and their exodus from Egypt. Leaders come in many different styles—some are up front, charismatic personalities that draw the masses, while others influence change from a less prominent role. As we study Miriam's story, I pray that God might reveal the ways that He has used each of us to lead and influence change in ways which we may not have previously recognized.

There are three main vignettes recorded in Scripture that help us to get to know Miriam and the role she played in the lives of her brothers, Moses and Aaron, as well as the emancipated slaves from Egypt. There is also one special verse in Micah 6:4 where the voice of God acknowledges the leadership of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam." She was the 'woman behind the man' as well as a prophet, a musician, and a caring, resourceful—but sometimes meddlesome—sister. Most Bible characters are complicated, multi-faceted characters, and Miriam is no different. It is one reason that we can find ourselves in their stories—that in spite of their flaws, God uses His children for His good and great plan of redemption.

PREPARATION

Reflect upon Exodus 15:11–13. As a group, read the verses through a couple of times. Share a time when you experienced God's deliverance or faithfulness (or simply bring it to mind,) and then take a moment to express prayers of praise for God's character and unfailing love.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

MIRIAM AS A CHILD

1. Read Exodus 2:1–10. It is so seldom that we get a glimpse of a Biblical character as a child, so it is a great privilege to meet Miriam, likely around the age of 7–10, living enslaved in an oppressive, violent culture. What is your first impression of this young girl in your initial reading?
2. Why did she watch over the baby when it was placed in the reeds? It could have been on her mom's instructions, and it could have been her own love for her baby brother. Either way, what were the risks that she took?
3. Discuss the courage that it took for Miriam to speak to Pharaoh's daughter. What might she have been thinking, and what motivated her to speak to this royal woman? What leadership skill does she show even at this young age? What did she read in the character of Pharaoh's daughter? If she had been wrong, how might the story have turned out differently?
4. Notice that both parents of Miriam were from the tribe of Levi. Read what is said about Levi in Genesis 49:5–7. It is not an overly flattering picture of this family's traits or bloodline. What character traits might have filtered down to Miriam to help her brave the task of protecting baby Moses? (1 Chronicles 6:1-3, Miriam was the fourth generation of Levi).
5. Share a bit of your own family background and what values or traits you have adopted as your own. What patterns you have tried to change or minimize the influence in your adult life? How has God helped shape you apart from your family heritage?



MIRIAM: PROPHET AND MUSICIAN

1. Read Exodus 15:19-21 (or start at verse 1 for the whole song). What gifts does Miriam have that are revealed in these two short verses? How would those gifts have been useful in bringing the people to this point in their escape from Egypt?
2. What spiritual gift can you name that God has used through you to help or touch others?
3. What is the definition of a prophet, and how does that shed light on the support that Miriam would have been to Moses and Aaron? (Hebrew *nabi*, from a root meaning "to bubble forth, as from a fountain, hence 'to utter'").
4. Look at Exodus 7:1–2 and also Exodus 4:16–17 and the role of Aaron as a prophet. How might Aaron's role and Miriam's role dovetailed to reinforce Moses' leadership? How might their gifts have differed, offering different strengths or audience? (The word for prophetess, *nabiya*, is the feminine form of the Hebrew word but does not infer lesser status.)
5. Consider her gift of music. Why was it important for the people to sing at this moment of their journey? How is her leadership ability revealed and how did she inspire the people?
6. How has music blessed you in your relationship with God?

MIRIAM, THE SINGING SISTER



Read Numbers 12. There are many differing and scholarly opinions on the context of this passage regarding the Cushite wife and the nature of the conflict. The following possibilities exist:

- a) Zipporah, the Midianite in Exodus 2:21, is the same woman as the Cushite and the words can be interchangeable. Moses was only married once and for some reason, Miriam and Aaron are displeased with her—in spite of their years together.
- b) Zipporah died, and Moses remarried a Cushite woman or Ethiopian of dark skin—and his siblings were displeased with an inter-racial marriage.
- c) Miriam was actually defending Zipporah because Moses was so busy leading the people that he had neglected his marriage and family. Cushite can also mean *beautiful*.

I am drawn to the interpretation from the Kolel Adult Center for Jewish Learning (www.kolel.org) that identifies the issue as a matter of prophetic authority rather than Moses' marriage. The issue of the Cushite woman seems to be a smokescreen for the larger issue of Moses being the primary spokesperson for God to the people. The question raised in verse 2 seems to be the heart of the matter, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?...Hasn't He also spoken through us?"

We see that the prophetic gift was extended to all three siblings, and initially Moses was insecure in his ability to speak to the people—it wasn't his best gift. However, God seems to now favour Moses, and perhaps Miriam and Aaron are jealous and frustrated. Their attitude is contrasted with the very humble nature of Moses (v.3).

MIRIAM, THE SINGING SISTER

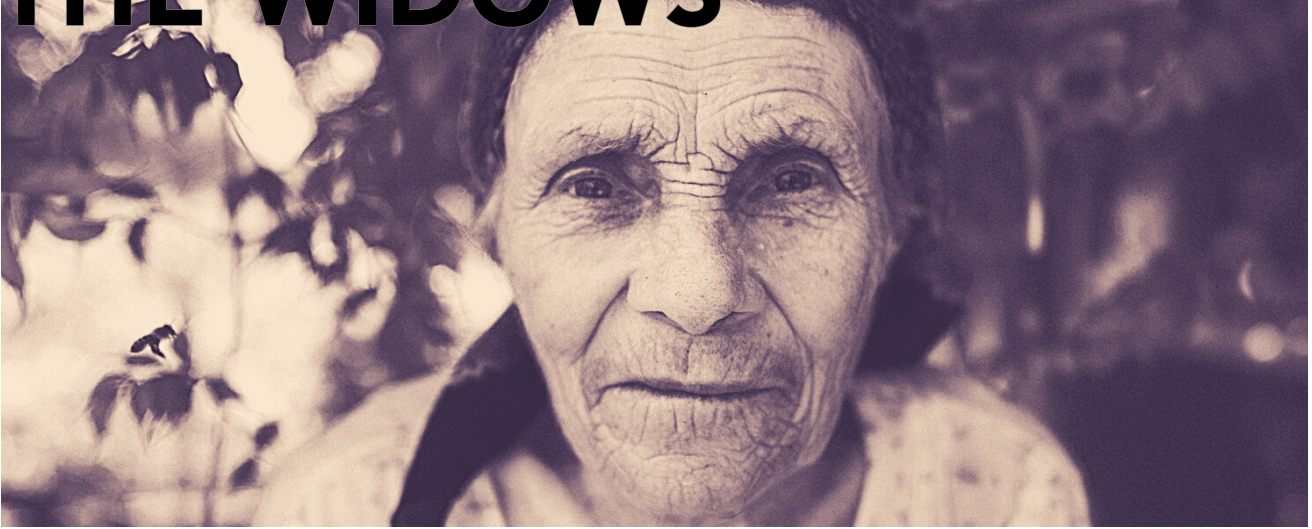


MIRIAM: OVER- PROTECTIVE SISTER

1. Why does the spirit of humility make Moses a better spokesperson than one gifted with eloquent speech?
2. Note in verse 1 that Miriam's name comes before Aaron, which is a departure from the normal listing of the male's name first, suggesting that Miriam was the instigator of the complaint. What other evidence backs up this assumption?
3. Why did Miriam bring up the issue of the Cushite woman when the true issue is something different? In what ways might we confuse matters, attempting to fool others and ourselves in order to protect insecurities by bringing up smoke screen issues?
4. When we are jealous of others, we often chip away at minor flaws. What are other ways that people have a tendency to put others down in order to promote their own agenda? Does it ever really work?
14. Is God's anger justified? What is God protecting?
15. How does the love that Aaron and Moses have for their sister override this flaw in her behavior? Do you think their relationship was ever healed? What character traits does each bring to the family that might lead to healing and peace?

In this story of Miriam, we see an intuitive, courageous child willing to risk her own life to save her brother. We see a poet and musician leading her people in a triumphant song of worship and praise. And we also see a flawed human being who allows her own ambition to interfere with God's divine calling on each of their lives. The beauty of Bible characters is that in their gifts, as well as their flaws, we can find our own stories. As grace is shown to them, so we see how God's grace has touched our lives and offered us cleansing and forgiveness. But more than that, if we come before God with a humble spirit, He will use us according to His will and we will know His joy.

LESSONS FROM THE WIDOWS



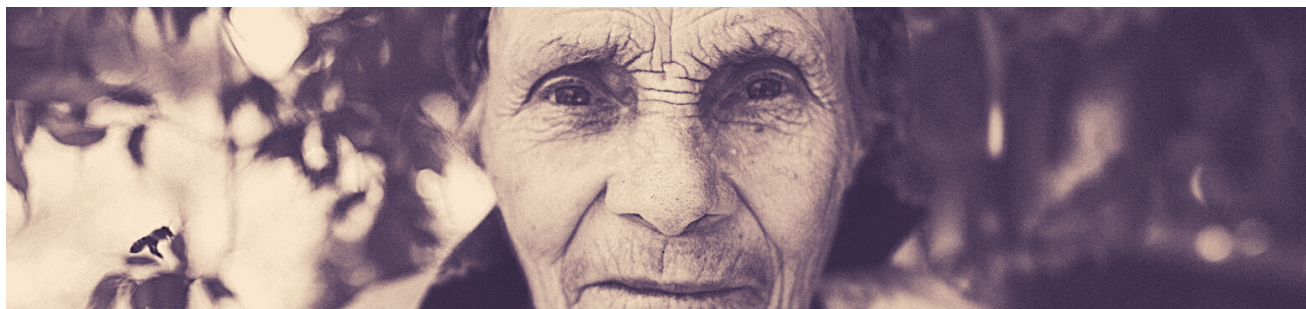
INTRODUCTION

This year for the Great Canadian Bible Study, we will not be looking at one particular woman, but rather several women with one trait in common. Jesus seemed to have a great, compassionate heart toward the widow of His day. In His parables, He holds them up as models and examples. He had compassion and brought hope and healing to some, and was blessed by another. Some widows are weak and vulnerable, while others show wisdom and a tenacious spirit. My prayer is that together we will glean the lessons that Jesus would have us learn as we study their stories.

Background information on the Widow

The words of Scripture associated with the widow can shed light on their social plight and vulnerability. How does Lamentations 1:1–2 give a sense of what the widow might have faced and felt? Also quickly explore Job 22: 8–11, Job 24:1–4, II Kings 4:1, and Isaiah 10:1–3.

In the social structure of that ancient time, the widow had few, if any, property rights once her husband had died. Her ties to her own family were broken, and she was often left vulnerable to the will of her husband's family. She came to be identified with the poorest of the poor, along with the orphan and the stranger, and she often suffered exploitation. God reveals His compassion for these most vulnerable ones in society. When Israel was once in a powerless condition, God had mercy on her and delivered her from oppression in Egypt—so God called her to remember that grace and to imitate their God who was not only the father of the orphan, but the legal defender of the widow and the guardian of her property (Exod. 22:21–24; Deut. 10:17–19; Prov. 15:25).



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

PREPARATION

Let us begin with a quiet reflection on Psalm 68: –6. Read it a couple of times, and share what is revealed about God's heart in these short verses.

PROTECTING THE WIDOW

1. What social structures did God through the Old Testament law put in place to help protect the widow? See Deut. 14:28–29, Deut. 24:17–24, and Deut. 26:12–14.
2. How does God feel about those who take advantage of the widow? (Mark 12:38–40) Do you see any evidence today of widows being vulnerable and thus exploited in Canada? In other countries?

In India today, thousands of widows are thrown out of their families because they are believed to bring bad luck after their husband's death. They travel to the holy city of Varanasi to beg for money from pilgrims, who may pay them a penny or two to offer prayers. They live on their own in decrepit ghettos and are prevented from participating in any religious festival and other community events. (This is not true of every Indian family, but the practice is still prevalent.)

The widow is a symbol of the most vulnerable of the vulnerable, the poorest of the poor, and the one most dependent upon the goodness of others. She is also a symbol for us of complete and utter dependency upon God. God desires us to fully lean and trust in Him. So, we will now look at four widows from the book of Luke and the lessons Jesus would have us discover through their stories.

LESSONS FROM THE WIDOWS



ANNA: PROPHET AND WIDOW

1. What is Anna's story from this text, and how would you envision her life after her husband died?
2. Do you think that she chose not to remarry? (She would likely have been around the age of 20–22 when she was widowed.) Why or how did she end up devoting her life to prayer in the temple? Do you imagine that she was lonely or what was her community?
3. Why do you think God chose Anna with the blessing of seeing the Messiah? Why or how did she recognize Jesus for who He was and would become? How did she become a blessing to Jesus?
4. How might the reality of oppression been experienced by this widow? Why would the hope of redemption be even more meaningful to her?
5. What, in Anna's story, could you connect to your story, or what does she model for us? Consider the words "devotion," "thanksgiving," "hope," and "sacrifice."

We do not hear the words that Anna proclaimed, but we know that it inspired praise and thanksgiving grounded in the hope of redemption. The Greek imperfect tense found in verse 38 indicates that she kept on praising God and kept on telling people. The word *anthomologeomai* (biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/anthomologeomai.html) indicates a continual public expression of praise or thanksgiving. What a witness Anna is to the need to continually worship in praise and thanksgiving, not just in our private worship but to publicly express that joy to our communities!!!!

The word *redemption* is also revealing (Greek *lutrosis*). In this context, rather than being used in a commercial sense of redeeming for a price, it connotes the experience of being liberated from an oppressive situation. (biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/lutrosis.html)



THE WIDOW OF NAIN

1. Read Luke 7:11-17. Everything about Nain is insignificant. It was a small town six miles southwest of Nazareth whose name meant “green pasture.” It could signify that it was an agricultural community and perhaps land had been left to the son and farmed by him after his father’s passing. The woman herself is insignificant in that she is not named or described. Yet Jesus notices her plight, offers compassion, and does a very significant act of grace. What was the plight of this widow that was magnified by the death of her son?
2. “A large crowd from the town was with her.” What does this tell us about the character of the woman?
3. Why do you think Jesus took notice of this particular woman? Did the woman ask or beseech anything of Jesus? What moved Jesus’ heart to compassion and to action?
4. Why did Jesus touch the coffin, and what was the result? What did it cost Jesus to raise her son? (Consider laws regarding clean and unclean.)
5. This is the first record of Jesus bringing a person back to life. What perspective do you gain about the authoritative nature of Jesus? How did people respond to Him?
6. Share how Jesus met a need in you in a unique or caring way. Have you felt that God cared about your specific situation even before you asked?

The widow in this story is only known for her need. She is not a woman of great faith or powerful prayer. We do not know if she attended the temple regularly or worshipped often. All we know is that she was a woman in great need, and that Jesus had compassion and met that need. What does that tell you about Jesus’ compassion toward your needs? What does that tell you about the compassion you must show to others in need?

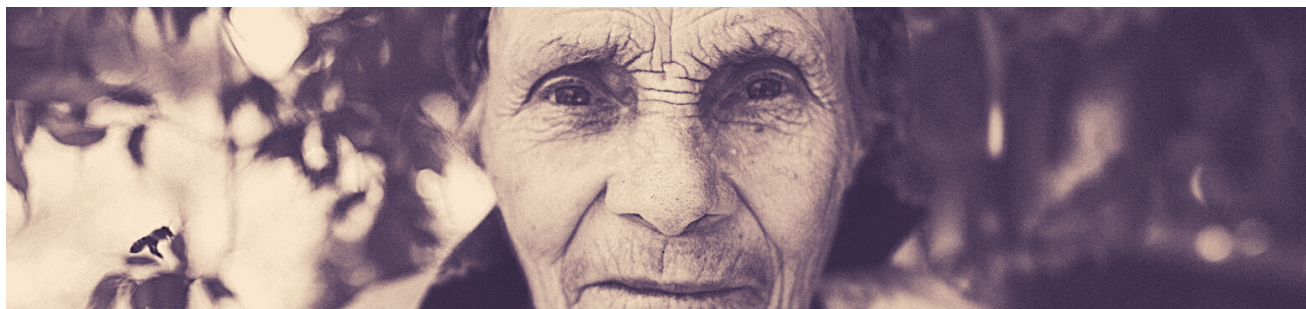


THE PARABLE OF THE PERSISTENT WIDOW

1. Read Luke 18:1–8. How do you personally define prayer? Share with one another what your prayer life looks and feels like. (This is not a competition of spirituality but an honest sharing of how we talk and listen to God.) Do you feel like you come to God out of a position of strength or a place of weakness, and what does that mean for you?
2. How often to you pray for justice issues? How does this parable call us to broaden the issues that we bring before God with passion and longing?
3. What gives you confidence that God has heard your prayers?
4. Are there times when you feel like you have to beg God for answers or pray over and over in order to get the desired action, such as salvation or healing for a loved one?
5. What is the difference between being persistent and being a nag as a measure of faith? How is this feisty widow an example, and how can this story encourage you in your prayer life? How does she encourage you in seeking justice?

This parable deals primarily with prayer and the nature of God. This parable often gets misinterpreted, by emphasizing the widow's persistence (hence, the title). However, the point of the parable is that God is not like an unjust judge, and you do not have to plead and beg to get Him to listen to you. The parable shows a widow, the least powerful, least influential person in society—pitted against one of the most powerful people of society. In the eyes of God, her prayers are as valid as any others. There is no distinction—no value judgment. She has every right to plead her case before God, and God will hear and answer that prayer.

LESSONS FROM THE WIDOWS



The poverty of a widow extended far beyond financial poverty. Many would be socially poor, having lost family and community. They were certainly politically poor, in the sense of having little to no power to influence their personal situation or change society. They were destitute in power and incredibly vulnerable to the bankers and creditors, to cheats and creeps. They were “esteem” poor, having lost any sense of identity and value to society. Yet, they could still be spiritually rich by understanding their true purpose and value.

Anna found her identity in dedicating her life to prayer and prophecy. The Widow from Nain was shown how precious and valued she was as Jesus met her greatest need. The tenacious widow of the parable found the strength within to fight for her place before the judge, and now we have a widow who placed ultimate value in offering and sacrifice over possession. Our situation in life need not determine our spiritual heart or dignity as God’s beloved.

THE WIDOW WHO GAVE OUT OF POVERTY

1. Read Luke 21:1-4. In what aspects of your life do you feel quite rich and blessed? Some examples are: rich in time, in good health, in talents and skills, material blessings, power of influence, hospitality, life experience, strong sense of value, esteem, and dignity.
2. How have you been able to give out of that richness to bless others? (It takes humility to share how you have helped others, so try to be honest.)
3. In what aspects of your life do you feel quite poor and impoverished? Do you have a sense of how you might give or have given to others out of that poverty?
4. What does it mean for you to give all for God? Is it possible or idealistic? What does sacrificially giving mean for you and how do you know if you’ve given “enough”?

LESSONS FROM THE WIDOWS



Is it easier to give out of wealth or out of poverty? In many ways it feels easier to give out of our poverty than out of our riches. After all, what do we have to lose if we give the only penny we have? It wasn't going to make that big a difference for us anyway! But how does a millionaire give everything, and when is enough? We have to get past the specific details and down to the principles of heart. Read II Corinthians 8:1–7, and see how Paul caught onto the theme of giving out of poverty and how it applied to the early church. Catching the vision of what God is doing certainly helps us to give fully toward that vision. Giving comes from a heart of passion, not obligation.

When we grasp what God is planning to do and how we can be part of that mission, our giving easily moves from an attitude of sacrifice (do I have to???) to generosity (what an opportunity!) When we respond with a heart of love and worship as we embrace God's vision, we will give our all!

In closing

The widow, in her destitution, poverty and great need has taught us so much about loving God, not from a place of confidence but a place of open vulnerability and dependence. We are each widows in a place of poverty, weakness, and powerlessness apart from the love and grace of God. As Israel was redeemed from oppression and called therefore to have compassion on the widow and orphan, so we—along with the early church—must define the essence of true religion as demonstrating compassion to the poor and needy. With Anna in praise and thanksgiving, we celebrate the hope of redemption and catch the vision of the Messiah. With the persistent widow, we pray and pray and pray against injustice, and with the model of the widow's mite give our all to the cause of God's kingdom come and will be done.

In the words of Paul in II Corinthians 8:15, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." Amen, may it be so.

THE LEGACY OF EVE



INTRODUCTION

Women carry a confusing and often-tainted legacy as daughters of Eve, and depending on the perspective, we have been labeled anything from the Mother of all Life to the Great Seductive Temptress. Some modern-day, feminist movements have reinterpreted Eve's act of rebellion as a courageous move of independence and applaud her assertive thinking—where more misogynist views cast blame for every evil in the world at our feet. This study will engage the story of Genesis with the prayer that God will allow us to see whom He created and called us to be from the outset, while acknowledging our weaknesses and continued need for dependency and healing ultimately found in Christ.

PREPARATION

Begin with reading Psalm 16:5–11 slowly and perhaps with 2 or 3 different readers. Consider what might be your “delightful inheritance” (NIV) or “goodly heritage” (NRSV). Share with another person one woman from your heritage who has left a Godly legacy that you long to continue through coming generations. Perhaps you are the beginning of a new legacy of faith and prayer. In prayer, give thanks for what God has done and will continue to do through a legacy of faithfulness.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Study of Genesis 1–3: We have two accounts of the creation of Eve in these first chapters. The first chapter speaks of the creation of both man and woman as a unit and reveals God’s desires and purposes for their lives. The second chapter expands on the details of God’s creation of Adam and then Eve, giving greater definition to their relationship and calling. The quick failure and breakdown of the relationship with God and with one another, along with the consequences of that breakdown, are detailed in Chapter 3. As these passages are very familiar to most readers, ask the Holy Spirit to give fresh eyes and ears to the texts as we seek His truth. It is very helpful to hear the text from the NRSV with inclusive language, so that it is easy to differentiate between *humankind* as man and woman, and specific gender references to *male* and *female*. What has become a proper name, Adam, is from the three Hebrew letters *adm* and simply mean “human.”

IN OUR IMAGE

1. Read Genesis 1:26–31. “Let us make (*adm*) in our own image, in our likeness, and let them rule...” There are many ideas of what it means for us to be created in the image of God. Have fun sharing as many ideas as possible of what the image of God looks like in us, especially as women.
2. “Male and female He created them. God blessed them and said to them...” What is the joint work and calling of both men and women? What are the joint blessings both receive?
3. So we see that in God’s initial design, there is no division of labour, in calling or in blessing. Both men and women bear the image of God and it is Very Good! Relationships are established between God, the humans, and the rest of creation. How would you define those relationships from these verses so far?



THE HELPER

1. Read Genesis 2:4–9 and 15–25. The Hebrew continues to refer to *adm* (the human), but most translations now use the form “man”—though it is not technically a gendered term. The order of creation seems slightly different in this chapter for the human is becoming the central character, and the role of humanity defined further. We have a very descriptive image of God breathing into the nostrils of His creation. What meaning does that image convey to you?

2. What is 1) the work, 2) the blessing, and 3) the limitation placed on the man?

3. There is also a problem stated: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a *ezer* (biblehub.com/hebrew/5828.htm) suitable for him.” The Hebrew word for *helper* occurs 4 times in this form in the Old Testament and 21 times in other forms, and it most often refers to God as our helper. This is significant in that it is clear that the role of helper is in no way a subservient role. So, discuss how God has been your helper and how you live out your own role as helper.

4. “Eve was not taken out of Adam's head to top him, neither out of his feet to be trampled on by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected by him, and near his heart to be loved by him.” (Attributed to Matthew Henry). Is this a helpful quote for you? What did it mean to Adam that his helper was created out of his very essence? How would you now define God's plan for the relationship between husband and wife? Men and women in general?

THE LEGACY OF EVE



It is significant to note in verse 24 that it is the man who leaves behind his family of origin to be united with his wife, in that it continues to balance out the power base. When a woman is forced to leave her family to join the man's family unit, it leaves the woman in a much more vulnerable place, than when a man joins her family base. However, we see quickly as we move through the stories of the Old Testament that this is forgotten and the woman is often removed from her support base, and her status becomes one of possession—not partner.

We now move from God's original dream and desire for his Creation to the reality of sin and its relational consequences.

TEMPTATION AND DOUBT

1. Read Genesis 3:1-13. Look closely at the way the serpent raises doubt in the woman. How does he ask questions or make statements that slightly twist the words of God? How does Eve also add to the command of God? Remember also that Eve was not present when God gave the specific order to Adam, so we do not know if God repeated the command specifically to Eve or only through Adam.
2. Share together any thoughts as to why Eve was so vulnerable to this temptation and what was the true desire. Was it the fruit or the idea of gaining wisdom? Why did the serpent talk to Eve and not to Adam, who received the order firsthand from God?
3. You will notice in verse 6 some very key words: "She gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it." Adam was there all along, so why is Eve the target?
4. Is there any evidence that Eve was the "temptress"?

Look at Romans 5:12–17. Paul is using the argument that sin entered the world through the act of one man and Jesus, as one man, would reverse the consequences. "As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive." For the sake of this particular argument, Paul puts the responsibility for sin on Adam.

THE LEGACY OF EVE



More problematic is Paul's writing to Timothy in 1 Timothy 2:13–15 where the blame is laid fully at the feet of Eve. Both texts are important within the context that Paul is arguing. In the Romans passage, Paul is using man versus man and so Adam is singled out. In the text from 1 Timothy, Paul is addressing false teachings. In Ephesus, some Greek women were taking liberties from their background in Artemis fertility worship and their newfound freedom in Christ to spread false teachings.

PARTNERS

1. Paul reminds the women that it was twisting the truth that got Eve into trouble in the first place. Women are not to have authority over men because they were meant to be partners. Discuss what might have been a different scenario if Adam and Eve had confronted the serpent together .
2. Also because they did not act together, how are they both culpable for the failure?
3. What was Eve's weakness in the garden, and what was Adam's weakness? How do those weaknesses translate into our relationships today?

The consequences of Eve's actions are found in Genesis 3:14-16. It is important to read these "curses" not as God's arbitrary punishment, but truly as the outcome of broken relationship. The first consequence takes place before God speaks. Man and woman are suddenly on different sides, noticing their differences and feeling shame. They are no longer "one flesh." When God seeks out Adam, he stands apart from Eve and points the finger of blame her way. Eve owns none of it, especially not influencing Adam's actions. They are truly torn asunder.



BRING FORTH LIFE

1. Now, God speaks to their future as an outcome of their actions. "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." Eve will now long for the intimacy and oneness that they once had, but her husband will not reciprocate that longing. What evidence is there in our legacy from Eve that we long for intimacy and oneness that often seems to go unfulfilled?

2. The ultimate sin described in this chapter is acting apart from God and one another. The consequences of relational separation will be for the man to endeavor to dominate—to wrestle with creation rather than partner with it, and to rule over woman with distrust. The woman will fall into the "people-pleasing" trap of trying to win the affections of another. Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen states sin's distortion this way. *The Man's Abuse: Dominion to Domination. The Woman's Abuse: Sociability becomes Social Enmeshment.* (Van Leeuwen, Mary Stewart: *Gender and Grace*, Intervarsity Press, 1990. Pg 44-46.) How is this evidenced in society today?

3. In Genesis 3:20, the man gives a name to his wife. *Eve* simply means "life," and our true legacy is to bring forth life. This is a wonderful privilege and delight to bear children, but not every woman is granted this opportunity. What are other ways that women can bring forth life beyond bearing children?

The good news of Jesus Christ is that the serpent's head has been crushed. In reversing sin's consequences, Jesus taught us to serve one another rather than dominate. He revealed a love so deep for us that the ache in our heart for intimacy is at last filled completely in the love of Jesus. As men and women, we can once again be in a partnership dependent upon God's provisions, His grace, mercy and love. That is our true legacy as daughters of Eve.

THE TALE OF TWO WIVES



INTRODUCTION

The Bible shares many stories of husbands and wives and the influences that they have upon one another. There are infamous pairings like Ahab and Jezebel, Nabal and Abigail, Hosea and Gomer; or marriages facing challenges like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Jacob and Leah and Rachel. We have women who are known only as the wife of so-and-so who stand alone in their part of the Biblical narrative, and others whose actions cannot be separated from their spouse.

This year, we want to take a look at two very different couples found in the book of Acts; Ananias and Sapphira, and Priscilla and Aquila. One story is tragic and the other triumphant, so let us delve into what might be some of the similarities and important differences of these marriages.

PREPARATION

Begin by reading Psalm 128. Consider a family that has been an inspiration and witness to you because you have recognized that God was the center of the home. If it is your own family, what blessings have you experienced by placing God's will and love first in your home? Share as you feel led.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA

1. Turn the book of Acts and begin reading from 4:32–37. The stage is set for the kind of community to which Ananias and Sapphira belong. Describe the attributes of this community. Which practices of the early church are quite appealing to you, and which aspects might be stretching?
2. Luke uses this opportunity to introduce us to Barnabas, who will continue to feature greatly in The Acts of the Apostles, but this tidbit of information also helps to establish the contrast of behaviors soon to be witnessed. Consider the feelings of Ananias and Sapphira as Joseph is given this endearing new name of “son of encouragement.” How might this have affected their consequent actions?
3. Read Matthew 19:5–6 and consider what it means for a husband and wife to be of one flesh. What does it mean for a couple to act in unity, and how is this most often a positive thing? Is this necessarily a loss of personal independence?
4. Read Acts 5:1–11. The Scripture is very clear that this couple was working together. What do you think was their motivation for selling their land?
5. Why the deception over the selling price? What did they hope to gain from this ill-conceived plan?
6. Agreement does not necessarily mean discernment! Just because two people are in agreement over a certain action, it does not mean that it is the right thing to do. Discuss together how decisions are generally made in your marriage or other working relationships. How do you come to a sense of agreement?

THE TALE OF TWO WIVES



HIDING BEHIND A MASK

1. You will notice that there is no sense here that the man is the head and therefore responsible for the decision-making in the family. Have you ever deferred to your husband in hopes of washing your own hands of responsibility? When “two become one” the man does not become the brain and the woman the feet! God calls for unity, but He calls for two people, together, seeking God’s will and best for their lives. Discuss whether you agree or disagree with me in this statement and its implications.

2. When do you find it most easy to give generously and what situations if any make it more difficult? Consider Matthew 6:3, “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” How does this play into your acts of charity, and how could it have guided Ananias and Sapphira?

3. How did this couple struggle with authenticity? Are their times when we might hide behind a mask for fear of being unaccepted by others? What might be some other reasons for wearing masks within the Christian community?

The early church never demanded that members give all they have; it was a voluntary program to help the needy amongst them. There seemed to be considerable poor in Jerusalem, and we see throughout the book of Acts—the need for special offerings to be sent by other churches to Jerusalem. It is a mystery as to why the two felt the need to be deceptive about their donation. The couple seemed more concerned about appearances than about the needs of their community. Whether motivated by jealousy, the need for affirmation and attention, or greed, their lie was not to the community but to God. Satan, the author of lies, fed on their need and exploited it. Rather than trusting in God to meet all of their needs, the couple doubted God’s faithfulness, which affected their ability to be generous. Human nature looks on the outside appearance, but God looks upon the heart!

THE TALE OF TWO WIVES



Aquila was a Jew who was born in Pontus but lived in Rome. His wife has a Roman name, but we are uncertain of her family of origin. Around the year 49 AD, the Roman emperor Claudius issued an edict expelling all Jews from the city of Rome due to the unrest created between the Jews and the Christian converts. So, Aquila and Priscilla left their city and moved to Corinth, a Roman colony where they continued their business of tent making. Tent making involved sewing woven goat hair, which was very heavy and tough material to work with, requiring a lot of hard labour. We do not know how long they had been settled there before they encountered Paul. We must assume that they were already believers and this drew Paul to them, as well as the trade they held in common.

PRISCILLA AND AQUILA

1. Read Acts 18:1-4. Though it must have been hard for Aquila and Priscilla to leave their home in Rome, God seems to have a wonderful plan for them. In what ways have hardships or unplanned events turned into a blessing for you, as you look back over the circumstances?
2. Not every couple can work together well. How do you think this couple worked out their partnership in the business, as it was quite physically taxing?
3. Read Acts 18: 18 – 21. It is estimated that Paul stayed there for 18 months and then invited Priscilla and Aquila to accompany him on a journey. What does this tell you about the relationship that has formed between them? Why would they so willingly pack up and leave once more? (Note: Ephesus was nearer to Pontus.)
4. What kind of faith did Paul have in their gifts that he would leave them in Ephesus to build a church on their own? Name some of the gifts you think that they had together?

THE TALE OF TWO WIVES



When Paul left Antioch on his third missionary journey, he traveled through Asia Minor and returned to Ephesus, where he remained for approximately three years in partnership with Priscilla and Aquila. There he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians and said, “The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house” (1 Cor. 16:19). Once again, the picture of their ministry and influence of these two people is expanded. Note: *Prisca* is the formal name, and *Priscilla* the name of affection.

After three years, Paul left Ephesus for Greece. It seems that Priscilla and Aquila evidently believed God was directing them back to Rome. In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he writes this greeting—so they must be living now in Rome—“Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Also greet the church that is in their house” (Romans 16:3–5). What a wonderful recommendation of these two saints as they continue to build church communities wherever they go and offer their homes.

PARTNERS

1. Read Acts 18:24–28. The picture of their gifts begins to expand as they minister to Apollos. Do you put any merit to the fact that Priscilla’s name is now preceding Aquila? What might that tell you about their marriage, their business, their relationship, and their gifts? Is it proper that Priscilla take the lead over her husband?

2. Contrast their devotion with that of Ananias and Sapphira. Where do you see evidence of generosity, sacrifice, commitment, and devotion to community that was lacking in Ananias and Sapphira? How did their passions differ and what role did material comfort play in each one’s choices?

Author's Note: *It is my personal speculation that once they settled back in Rome, Priscilla continued to take the lead as the church leader, and Aquila provided the financial support with his tent-making, as it was such tough, physical work to sew the heavy goat-hair canvases. Am I making a gender stereotype? Why is gifting more important than assigned gender roles?*



RELATIONSHIPS

1. Aquila and Priscilla together endangered their own lives to save Paul's. We do not have the story in the Scriptures of this event, but we see, once again, the contrast of Ananias and Sapphira who worked hard to save their own reputation and ended up losing their lives—with Aquila and Priscilla who were willing to risk their lives for the Gospel. How hard is it for you to take risks, knowing how it might affect your family? How do you discern what God might require of you in light of family responsibilities?

2. Do you have any stories or struggles to share of how God's call on your life would mean sacrifice for your family?

3. Personal influence carries much power in relationships, and this can be used and abused. Paul obviously was a very powerful influence upon Priscilla and Aquila, and the couple was also influential upon one another—as was Ananias and Sapphira. Where do you recognize your own sphere of influence? How do you use this influence in a positive way, and are there times that you have abused the power that you have in a relationship?

Author's Note One simple, personal example was deciding whether to do doctoral studies and the financial cost that would be to our family at the time. I could not justify taking \$40,000 of our family income for personal study and was not convinced that the doctoral degree would necessarily enable God to use my gifts in a broader way. I am not certain but at the time, it seemed the best decision—though my dear husband would have supported me either way.

THE TALE OF TWO WIVES



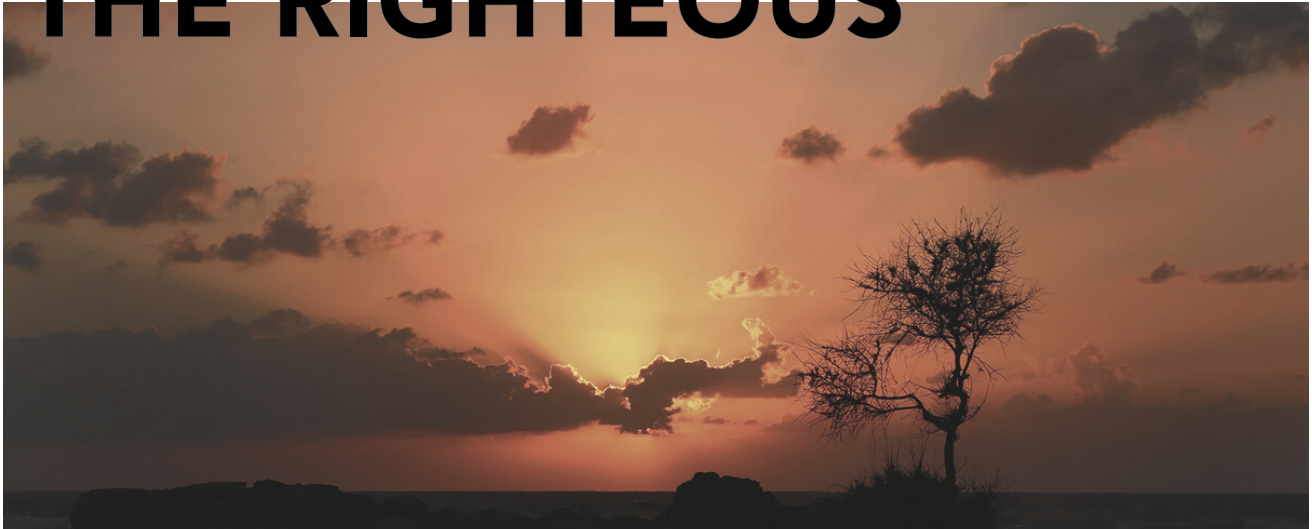
Aquila and Priscilla are mentioned one more time in the New Testament, in the last chapter of the last book the Apostle Paul wrote. It had been sixteen or so years since Paul first met them at Corinth, and now he was in a Roman prison for the second time. His death at the hands of the emperor Nero was imminent, and he was writing the last paragraph of his long and fruitful life.

“Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus” (2 Tim. 4:19). We note that Paul does not mention a church meeting in their house, and perhaps they even live with Onesiphorus. The Great Fire of July 19 in 64 AD completely destroyed or seriously damaged 10 of the 14 districts of Rome, and so it is highly possible the Priscilla and Aquila lost everything in that fire and returned to Ephesus where they would find support from the Christian community. Timothy was now leading the church in that community, and Priscilla and Aquila would have been a great support to him as he carried on where Paul would leave off. Consider what Paul’s final greeting tells us of his relationship to this couple.

The call of God upon the lives of Priscilla and Aquila was much more costly than the obedience required of Ananias and Sapphira, who simply could have offered the proceeds from one of their fields. The legacy of deception cannot begin to compare to the legacy of sacrifice and obedience. The names of Priscilla and Aquila are never mentioned separately but always “two-gether” as they ministered in unity out of their personal giftedness and calling. There is no evidence of hierarchy within their marriage but a working-out together their call to gospel ministry.

We are not always so blessed to have that kind of unity in our marriages as many women often attend church alone, bringing their children to Sunday school. There is no shame in being the spiritual lead if that is your life’s situation, for though there is great blessing in unity, ultimately God will still call each one to be accountable for the faith that we have and how we have responded to His hand upon our lives. And whether married or single, may we truly live out of obedience to God alone.

TAMAR THE RIGHTEOUS



INTRODUCTION

I confess that I have never really understood the story of Tamar as found in Genesis 38. It is such a strange tale, stuck in the middle of the life account of Joseph with all its unpleasantness and apparent immorality. What could possibly be admirable about her actions that would warrant her a place in the listing of the genealogies of Christ?

And so I must give credit to Carolyn Curtis James for the insights found in her book, *Lost Women of the Bible: Finding Strength and Significance Through Their Stories*, ©2005 Zondervan Press. Her explanations of the historical practices and implications were profoundly helpful in gaining understanding of Tamar as a definition of *righteous*. I pray that I accurately convey these insights to you.

PREPARATION

Begin together by reading Psalm 11. As you reflect upon it, think of the wicked environment that Tamar was forced to live in, and consider if there is anything within your environment of family, work or community that is displeasing to God which you face regularly. Pray silently for the situations that come to mind, asking for God's protection and guidance.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

Most of us are aware of the practice of arranged marriages which were the norm of ancient eastern cultures and continue to be prevalently practiced today. Most marriages were based on political alliances to protect family fortunes and had little, if anything, to do with romantic attraction. Families worked out a deal that would be in the best interest of both parties, and that was the end of it—especially when it involved the first-born son as the primary heir.

We do see in the Biblical narrative that men could be attracted to a woman and choose her, but whether the woman was attracted back is rarely considered. And so we see in Genesis 38, that Judah was attracted to the daughter of Shua. A marriage took place without much influence from Jacob, because Judah was fourth son of Leah and not really on Jacob's radar anymore after he had fled to the land of Canaanites.

We never know his chosen wife's name, the quality of her character, or outlook on life. All we know is that she bore three sons to Judah, and those sons didn't turn out very well. At least two of the three were deemed "wicked" by the Lord.

Though Judah chose a woman he was attracted to, for his eldest son Er, "he took a wife" for him. As the first-born, Judah wanted the best family match for the estate, and so the marriage is arranged. Judah may also have been aware of Er's errant nature and thought it wise to make this decision rather than trust Er to choose. We already have seen in Genesis 37:26–27 that Judah has some business savvy. It doesn't appear to be for compassionate reasons that he saves Joseph's life, but rather, he sees a better financial asset if sold rather than killed.



FAMILY DYNAMICS

1. Imagine the family into which Tamar has been placed. Remember that in Genesis 2:24 it states that a man is to leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife, and they become one flesh. The woman was to stay in the protection of her family, and the husband was to leave his roots behind to join the woman. It doesn't take long before this practice is abandoned, and the vulnerable woman is pulled from her home to live at the mercy of the man's family as property. Discuss all of the things that would be hard for Tamar right from the start.

2. The Lord puts the wicked Er to death before any children can be conceived. For the significance of this event, it is important to understand the inheritance laws of the day. Upon the death of the patriarch, the estate was to be equally divided among the male children, with the eldest receiving two portions so that the majority of the family land would continue to prosper. In this case, with three sons, the land was divided into 4 sections, with the eldest receiving 2 sections and the others each receiving one section. Male children were essential for this system to continue, and so if the eldest son died before having a son, then it was the duty of the second son to take the widow as his own wife to produce the needed son to carry on with the inheritance (the Levirate Law). This duty fell to Onan, and Tamar is simply passed along as the tool necessary to fulfill the task. Onan is no financial dummy and fully understands that if he is left as the eldest son, the four-way settlement becomes a three-way settlement, with Onan receiving two-thirds of the inheritance, rather than the initial quarter. It is clear why Onan was not crazy about Tamar bearing a child. Onan may have had good reason for not wanting a new heir on the scene, but his treatment of Tamar is disgusting. What is happening to Tamar here?

TAMAR THE RIGHTEOUS



Once again, the Lord steps in and puts the wicked Onan to death, leaving Tamar's fate uncertain. By law, she should be given to the third son to once again bear an heir for her first husband Er, but this son is too young to marry. Also, Judah is now wondering if the fate of his sons is more connected to Tamar than to their personal wickedness.

LOSE-LOSE

1. From his part in the story of Joseph, to his moving to Canaan, and now this action with Shelah, what are you gleanng about the character of Judah so far?
2. Tamar is allowed to go back and live with her own family while she waits for Shelah to become old enough to marry. She returns twice-widowed and childless. What would her life be like back at home? What hope does Tamar have for a positive future? What might drive her to a desperate act?
3. Shelah has now grown, but there has been no call from Judah for Tamar to return and marry the third son. What is Judah's procrastination about? Judah and his family would likely be happy if Tamar just disappeared from their lives, but the law has bound their fates together. It seems like a lose-lose for everyone. Shelah would love to be the only heir and to marry the wife of his own choosing, but instead he is honor-bound to produce a child with Tamar. But Tamar is also not free to marry a man of her own choosing. She is "used goods" and of little worth to anyone, including her own family. Imagine the despair facing all involved. What is at the root of the problem here, and is there any situation today that might be similar—where the laws or the rules make it difficult for everyone involved?



BACKED INTO A CORNER

1. Tamar has been a simple pawn in all of the events taking place, but we finally see her make a decision to determine her own fate. In our modern day context we cannot imagine how she came up with her plan to prostitute herself, and how any good might come from this scheme. Even using the word “scheme” paints the act in a certain light. What are your initial thoughts and feelings regarding what she is about to attempt?

2. What might be some of the reasons that women have entered prostitution today because of feeling helpless? Are there any stories to be shared where you have had to take back control, having realized that you were allowing others too much power over your personal life?

3. We cannot understand the culture, the moral structure, or taboos of that day with our modern mindset—yet it is obvious that Tamar is flirting with danger, knowing full well that if she is caught, it is certain death. Betrothed to Shelah, she cannot marry another. Childless, she has not fulfilled her destiny. Feeling trapped and hopeless, she sets her own trap. What does Tamar know about Judah’s present circumstance and his vulnerabilities? What else might Tamar have known in order for her plan to succeed?

TAMAR THE RIGHTEOUS



So many factors needed to fall into place for this plan to work. First of all, Judah had to give into this temptation along the roadside. Secondly, he had to fail to have payment with him, so that Tamar could bargain the collateral in lieu of cash on hand. She had to get pregnant after one encounter. Judah had to be so enticed that he was willing to leave behind his personal seal (signet), the cord it was attached to (bracelets is an inaccurate translation) from around his neck, and his staff. Tamar reveals herself as a strategic thinker with an aptitude for business securing her payment.

RIGHTEOUS

1. In effect, she actually takes his symbols of authority away (like leaving his I.D. and credit card), the very authority that has harmed Tamar's life. In what way is Tamar claiming personal empowerment over such authority?
2. Yes, Tamar executes her plan, but what evidence do you see that perhaps God's hand was in the outcome as well?
3. Everything does go according to plan, and in three months—when Tamar begins to show and the rumors start to fly—she puts the final act into motion. Accused of her harlotry, she produces the evidence as to the father of her expected child. Judah, who is ready to burn her for her transgressions, is suddenly faced with a consequence of his own. Discuss the double standards that existed then and still exist today.
4. Judah makes the most amazing declaration by bestowing the word *righteous* upon Tamar when he realizes what has taken place. How would you define righteousness? Why is Tamar righteous?



FACING THE TRUTH

1. Up to this point, Judah has not been rightly following the ways of the God of his ancestors. He betrayed his brother, Joseph. He moved away from the family into a land of foreign gods and married outside of the clan. We have no sense of Judah ever calling upon his God, and he certainly did not raise God-fearing children. Tamar pulls away the blankets of deception, and Judah is left facing the truth. Everything that Judah has done has been from selfish motives for personal gain. Think of a time where someone outside of the Christian faith has exposed the actions and attitudes of a believer as lacking in love or compassion or other attributes of righteousness. What are the ways that society has pointed out failings within or outside the church?

2. Tamar, on the other hand, has acted sacrificially to fulfill her obligation to Judah in providing an heir. It is this act that is righteous and puts Judah to shame. This woman who did not know our God, reared in a different religious culture and brought into a family that showed no evidence of worship or faith, somehow managed to do the right thing—in spite of everything about it seeming to be wrong! Tell of someone that you recognize follows the teaching of Jesus more righteously than those who testify to be Christian. Why is salvation more than just being good? On the other hand, discuss examples of followers of Jesus who truly live according to the example of Jesus in sacrificially laying down their lives for the sake of others.

3. Why might Tamar be interested in the God of her oppressor, Judah? Consider the African slaves brought into the Southern Confederate States. Why did so many of slaves adopt the Christian faith of their oppressors? How can God work in people's lives in spite of the horrid examples set by His supposed followers?

4. Share any stories of how the righteousness of a woman you know brought salvation to her family.

TAMAR THE RIGHTEOUS



Tamar took a huge risk, but she also took charge of her own life and destiny. Her courageous act allowed God to bless her with twins and continue the line of Judah. She became the matriarch of the Jewish race today, warranting her place in the genealogy of Jesus. Her actions also made Judah into a better, Godly man. In Genesis 43 and 44, we see a humbler man, ready to die to protect his brother, Benjamin. We see him back with the family and ready to face the one he had sold into slavery.

Quote from pg 118 of *Lost Women of the Bible: Finding Strength and Significance Through Their Stories*: ©2005 Zondervan Press. Carolyn Curtis James writes,

“Tamar shatters the traditional definition of what it means to be a woman by standing up to the most powerful man in her life—her father-in-law and the tribal patriarch. For a time, she takes the symbols of authority away from the man who tells her whom to marry and where to live—a man who can sentence her to death without answering to anyone. Before returning the articles Judah had given her, she pointed Judah back to the God of the covenant, the only true authority over both their lives.”

As you close in prayer, remember the women who do not always have the same choices that many of us with a Christian upbringing have had. Remember the women caught in the cycle of poverty, abuse, drug use, and prostitution—that God might intervene and bring salvation. Ask that we all might be more aware of those on the margins and be open with grace and mercy.

MARIA OF MAGDALA: APOSTLE TO THE APOSTLES

2018



INTRODUCTION

If I counted correctly, Wikipedia lists 150 women mentioned in our Scriptures (wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_women_in_the_Bible). In choosing which woman to explore for our Great Canadian Bible Study, I often wrestle between characters of which little is known, leaving perhaps too much room for speculation, or women of whom much has been written and studied, so what more could be added? Thus, I have avoided the study of Mary Magdalene, upon whom much has been both written and speculated. However, I feel it is time to boldly go where many have gone before and try to rediscover for myself this fascinating woman of Scripture—who gets more mention than most of the twelve disciples in the Gospels. Why is she known by the place where she is from? What were the seven demons cast out from her or does it matter? What was her relationship to Jesus and the twelve? Perhaps none of these questions will be answered, but may God help us discern where Mary's story and ours might intersect.

Maria is the Greek form of Mary and there are 14 Scriptural references (we will read them later) to her in the four Gospels, but she never again appears in connection to the early church in the book of Acts or in any of Paul's letters. I have not included the final verses in Mark, which are a later addition to the manuscripts.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

GET TO KNOW MARY

1. Read Luke 8:1–3 and discuss what can be understood about Mary from these verses. There is no record of Mary's family background, whether married or single or her age, but she seems free to travel with Jesus and the disciples.
2. The number seven in Scripture most often implies a sense of completeness, rather than as a specific number—such as forgiving “seventy times seven.” Evil spirits in Scripture were thought to be the source of mental illness (Luke 8:27ff), epilepsy (Matthew 17:14–17), and other ailments. One of the great signs of the coming of God's kingdom was the driving out of demons. We may not know what ailment Mary suffered from, but we can understand that she was set free from a great affliction. What might her life have been like before meeting Jesus and then after? What is her response to Jesus?
3. Share with one another one or two things for which you are most grateful to Jesus or ways that you have experienced healing. How has gratitude shaped your path of discipleship? Mary was blessed to become a blessing in supporting the mission of Jesus. How have you been blessed to be a blessing?
4. I have always appreciated Luke's attention to the women involved in the ministry of Jesus. Joanna is introduced the same time as Mary Magdalene, inferred in Luke 23:55 and mentioned again in Luke 24:10. We know that Joanna was to Chuza, the manager of the household of Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great), whose primary residence was in Galilee, not far from Nazareth. In Luke's gospel, Joanna and Mary Magdalene are often mentioned together, inferring a friendship as they travelled together side by side. How has friendship encouraged your spiritual journey?

MARIA OF MAGDALA



There is no other mention of Mary Magdalene or Joanna in the stories of the gospels until the crucifixion of Jesus. In Luke's gospel, it is not unreasonable to conclude that "the women who had come with him from Galilee" would include Mary and Joanna, Suzanna, and others. It is not as clear if verse 27 are the same women, but the magnitude of their grief would lead me to believe that this is also reference to those women close to Him. The title "Daughters of Jerusalem" may seem a bit confusing since Mary and Joanna were from Galilee, but it is an inclusive term referring to all Jewish women, and Jesus may be referencing the destruction of Jerusalem which would occur in 70 AD. Women have long wept for their children, the innocent caught in systems of injustice, victims of war, famine, a drunk driver, or a killing cancer. There is no greater grief than the loss of a child, and often mothers would take upon themselves their child's suffering if it were possible.

LARGER THAN LIFE?

1. Read Luke 23:26–31 and verse 49. What is Jesus saying to these women? How does the suffering of Jesus in His innocence speak to those who have suffered such loss? How do these words, "Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore" address other atrocities in the world today? Is there anything in this warning of Jesus that continues to resonate with us?

2. Read Luke 23:54 – 24:12. Is Mary's role any more significant here than the other women from Galilee? The intriguing thing about Luke is that he is the only author that gives us any sense of who Mary Magdalene was and the role she played as a supporter of Jesus along with other women—yet he does not mention her individual encounter with the risen Lord. She plays no more a role than does Joanna, and we actually know a bit more about her background than we do of Mary. One question to consider is why has Mary Magdalene grown "larger than life" throughout church history?



A WITNESS

1. When the women shared with the disciples what they had seen, the “words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” Were their words dismissed because they were women, or because of the fantastic nature of their report? Are there times that women’s words are considered to hold less weight, or have we moved past that stereotype as a society?
2. Let us now turn to the other gospel narratives. In Mark, the earliest gospel written, the first reference to Mary Magdalene is Mark 15:40. It is noted here that she, along with many women, followed and provided for Jesus in His ministry around Galilee. Pick up the story at Mark 15:46 – Mark 16:8. Again, what role does Mary play here, and is it in any way distinguishable from the others?
3. Read Matthew 27:55–61. Describe the scene at the tomb. What were the angel’s instructions to them? What emotions were the women experiencing first with the angel, and then when they actually encounter Jesus? How has your personal testimony been shaped by your own encounter with the risen Christ? In what ways do we get stuck in our intellectual beliefs and fail to put words to our personal experiences with Jesus?

Whereas in Luke, the women who observe the crucifixion and find the location of His tomb remain unnamed, in Matthew we are told that Mary Magdalene and Mary, Mother of James and Joseph, are among them. Luke names those who found the tomb empty but does not include an encounter with the risen Christ. Now read Matthew 28:1–10 on the resurrection. For Matthew, the number two is very significant in that it adds weight and authority to the author’s arguments. Thus, it is important that two witness the resurrection of Jesus, rather than one (especially since the witness is by women), and thus we have both Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who encounter the risen Lord.

MARIA OF MAGDALA



If we did not have the Gospel of John (the latest of the four gospels), Mary Magdalene would not have found such a place of prominence in the story of Jesus. She would simply have been one of several Galilean women who experienced such profound healing from Jesus that they determined to dedicate their lives to following and serving Him. Then came the overwhelming, chest-beating grief when their rabbi and master was arrested, tortured and crucified like a common criminal as they stood helplessly by. Their only comfort was to tend to His body with a dignity it deserved—but there was no body! From shock and horror, to confusion, to wonder, and finally unbelievable joy, they met their risen Lord! John, however, tells a different story.

APOSTLE TO THE APOSTLES

1. Read John 19:25 and 20:1–18: It is from this text that Thomas Aquinas coined the title for Mary Magdalene as “an apostle to the apostles.” Thus, as already indicated, she becomes an evangelist, that is a messenger who announces the Good News of the Lord’s resurrection or, as Rabanus Maurus and Saint Thomas Aquinas say, she becomes the “apostolorum apostola” because she announces to the apostles what in turn they will announce to the whole world (Rabanus Maurus, *De vita beatae Mariae Magdaleneae*, XXVII; Saint Thomas Aquinas, *In Ioannem Evangelistam Expositio*, c. XX, L. III, 6). What is your understanding of the role of an apostle, and how did Mary fulfill that role?

2. Mary calls Jesus “Rabbouni” and in that way, she is identifying herself as a disciple of Jesus. How has the testimony of Mary opened the way for women to be disciples and apostles within the church today?

3. What is the difference between what Jesus told Mary to say to the disciples and what she actually said? In what ways have we seen the Lord that we are called to give voice to within and beyond our communities?

MARIA OF MAGDALA



The goal of this study has been two-fold. The first is that we need to be true to the Scriptures when we endeavor to know the Biblical characters and their place in God's story. Even Christian tradition can leave us with understandings that may not be backed by the texts that we have. Mary Magdalene may not have been a prostitute, and we will never know what demons or illnesses she from which she was released—but her place of fame stands firm Scripturally upon her eye witness to the bodily resurrection of Jesus, the very foundation of our Christian faith. In that sense, she is truly an apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, proclamation is one of the key identities and callings of the church, but we have often lost voice as we have endeavored to deepen our understanding of Scriptures, thus moving our faith more and more into our heads and away from our hearts. If we could learn to say to one another in our small groups, in our Sunday school classes, and in our pulpits how we have seen the Lord, we would have a much easier time proclaiming that Good News outside of our church circles! Mary's role must become our role. We must bear witness to the resurrected Lord by sharing our own experiences with the living Christ, for He is alive my friends—He is alive!

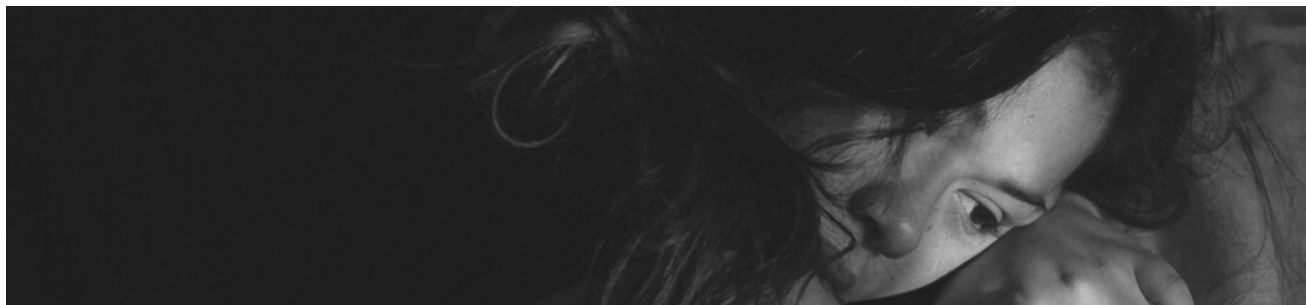
LEAH: THE OTHER SISTER



INTRODUCTION

Are you the kind of person that likes to cheer for the underdog? It is quite fascinating how often Hollywood will showcase the “girl next door” winning the heart of the handsome quarterback, rather than the beautiful cheer leader, or the clumsy, geeky kid that ends up saving the world or at least the football game. The message they try to send is that we are all more than what we “appear” to be—and yet, in the real life of actors, beauty is everything! From facelifts to beauty products that defy aging to wearing the perfect gown to the Oscars, the message they scream is, “Beauty wins”—and it is only in the fantasy world of fairy tales and movies that goodness of heart is enough.

In this story of two sisters, it is Leah that draws me, more than Rachel—in her life’s drama which can only be described as tragic. Leah has a tough start just with her name, meaning “cow,” over her sister’s moniker of “ewe” (though, depending on how you pronounce that, you might prefer cow!). As the older sister, it is difficult enough to be outshone by her younger sibling, but to be used as a pawn in her father’s schemes is the ultimate degradation and betrayal. I want to know this woman and her story better because I believe that in each of our own stories, we have known some level of rejection, manipulation, and unrequited love. In Hollywood fashion, it has all the drama and intrigue of a great love story, except that there is no happy ending. Or is there?



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

PREPARATION

Before we wade into the depth of these women's lives, take a moment and reflect on Psalm 63:1–4. What has your soul thirsted for in love and relationship? What journey has brought you to the place where you might say with the Psalmist, "Your steadfast love is better than life!"

Prayer: Dear Father, give us the courage to enter into this story with our hearts open and vulnerable, allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal the loves that we thought could save us. Draw us back into Your perfect heart of love that is truly better than any this life can offer. Amen.

We do not know why people fall in love, nor what is the chemistry that really makes a heart begin to sing at the sight of another. It is a powerful force, often overriding good sense and rational decision-making. First love is a wonderful feeling and an all-consuming force where our minds can think of nothing else but that person. First loves, however, are not always the best loves—as we may later discover. Few of our personal stories read like a romance novel or a Hollywood script—and it may be just me, but I think the idea of the perfect "soul-mate" is also a rare find. Most of our loves fall a bit short of perfection, but that does not mean that they cannot bless us for a lifetime.

Jacob sees young Rachel, and he is immediately drawn to her. He questions the other sheep herders as to her family connections and is thrilled to discover that she is kin and qualifies as spousal material. In a display of great macho strength, he whips off the massive stone covering the well and waters the flocks for Rachel. He is so taken with his infatuation for Rachel that he actually weeps out loud as he kisses her. Now *that* is a love story worthy of a motion picture! Rachel seems equally smitten and runs to tell her father the tale.

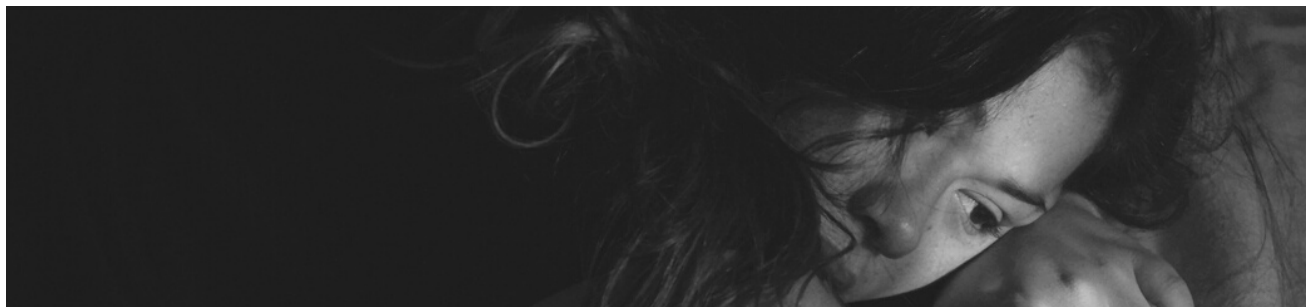


LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT?

1. Read Genesis 29:1–20 together. What do you celebrate in this story so far? Do you have a “love at first sight” story? Part of Jacob’s joy must be how God guided him to this place and time to meet the one he was to marry. Where have you experienced God guiding you to just the right place and time?
2. If applicable, share what kind of family you married into, and how it was similar or different from your family of origin?
3. We are introduced to Leah, the older sister, and there is an immediate comparison. It is true that her name can mean “wild cow,” but it can also mean “weary.” Neither is overly flattering. “Leah’s eyes were ____?” What do each of your translations read? There is not unity over the definition of the Hebrew word, *rak*, but “tender, delicate, soft, gentle, frail, weak” are all possibilities. Why do you think that the writer of this Scripture chose to comment on Leah’s eyes, whereas Rachel is described as “beautiful in form and favoured”?
4. What damage can be done when we compare children or compare ourselves to one another?

Jacob meets the family and stays with them for a month while the father, Laban, assesses his merit as a son-in-law. Perhaps the most insightful words from Laban are found in verse 14, “Surely you are my bone and my flesh.” Considering that Jacob was known as a trickster and how Laban eventually treats Jacob, they do seem cut from the same cloth!

LEAH: THE OTHER SISTER



In fairness to Jacob, he never wavers in his confession of love for Rachel. The infatuation never wears off, and he asks Laban to marry her—even if it means working free for seven long years, though it seemed barely a week for his love-sick soul. We must not minimize his commitment to her nor the validity of his love. If Laban had not interfered, the story would be simply heartwarming and lovely. This is not the happily-ever-after story we all long for, but a heart-wrenching miscarriage of justice where no one wins.

Laban felt it was unjust that the younger sister would marry before the elder. Laban had seven years to find a husband for Leah, leading one to wonder why it was so hard to find a suitable spouse. Was Leah that unappealing, or did Laban even try? Whatever the reason, Laban's sense of what is just leads to flagrant injustice, as he substituted Leah for Rachel in the wedding bed. (And how that happened, I will leave to your imagination!) Jacob is rightly incensed at the deception and goes straight to Laban—which leads one to believe that Laban was the instigator. Laban does not deny it, but justifies his actions according to custom of the eldest marrying first. Verse 27 is a very cold-hearted response, "Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." In essence, "Just get through the week of wedding celebrations so the crowd doesn't know what is going on, and you can move on to Rachel." I cannot fathom the pain felt in that week-long "celebration." Rachel is also cheated of her wedding. Though the Scripture doesn't say, I cannot imagine that it was the wedding celebration of her dreams, but perhaps a quiet affair to say it is done. Injustice upon injustice is heaped on Laban's daughters.

WHEELING AND DEALING

1. Read Genesis 29:20-35. I cannot imagine what Leah was feeling in this strange and ugly situation. I sense that over the seven years, she had grown in affection for Jacob, and perhaps she held out some hope that Jacob could love her as well. Speculating, do you think Leah had any choice in this plan, or might she have been the one to convince Laban to let her marry first?

2. If deemed appropriate, you may want to share a story of thanksgiving for the father that you were blessed with, or perhaps share a difficult aspect of your childhood with him. How does one's perception of their father affect their perception of God as Father?

LEAH: THE OTHER SISTER



God has a love for both Leah and Rachel, and He works in their lives uniquely. As God looks upon Leah and sees her unloved heart, He has compassion for her and so blesses her with a child—a son whom she names Reuben. His name means “See, a son,” “because the Lord has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me” (verse 32). Leah decides that her worth to Jacob will be defined by what she does—not who she is.

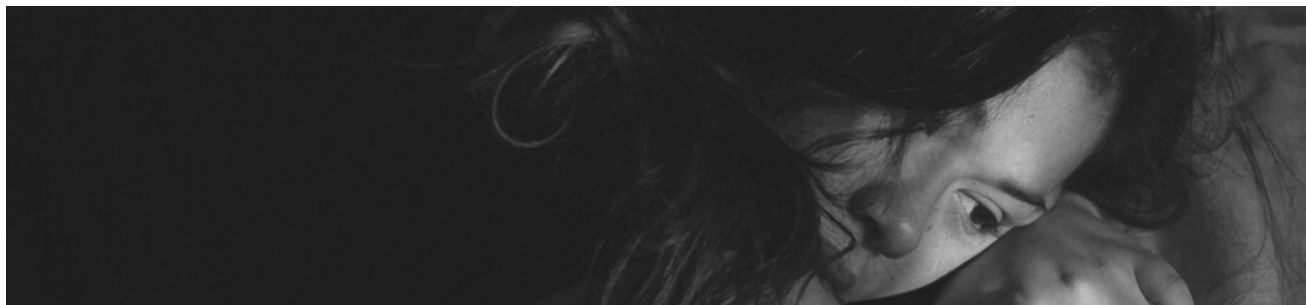
UNREQUITED LOVE

1. Have you been in a relationship where you had to earn another’s respect and love? How exhausting! There is never security or peace. If comfortable, share an experience of trying to win another’s approval, whether a friend, neighbour, employer, or a family member.

2. Have you ever tried to win God’s approval? Share what difference it makes for you to truly embrace God’s unwavering love for who you are, not what you do!

3. Leah gives birth to two more sons, still hoping that one of these sons will help win Jacob’s love for her. She names one Simeon, “God hears that I am unloved,” and then Levi, “now my husband will be with me.” In verse 34, we hear her hope and her anguish, “Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have born him three sons.” Yet after the birth of each son, not a word is heard from Jacob, and Leah’s love remains unrequited. Three times she turned toward a man to fulfill her and give her value, and three times she is disappointed and rejected. She is used for his physical pleasure, but she is not loved. The hollowness in her heart must have been so overwhelming! Have a discussion on the ways that women look to men for fulfillment and to sexual encounter as proof that they are loved. Will this need ever change in us? Read Genesis 3:16 and consider what God is saying to Eve and to us. It is vital for your group to discern if this is God’s curse upon us, or God pointing out to humanity the resulting consequences of sin.

LEAH: THE OTHER SISTER

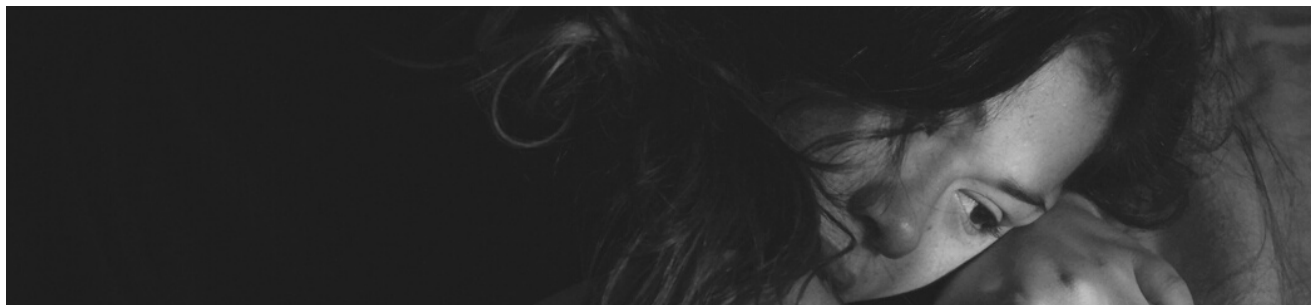


We have our first glimmer of hope for Leah in the birth of her fourth son, Judah. Where she has longed for Jacob to love her, she finally turns her eyes towards her God, her strong, mighty, and loving God who has been with her through this whole saga. When she names Judah, “thanks and praise” and declares, “This time. I will praise the Lord”, she turns her heart toward God for blessing, not toward Jacob. This story never has a “happy” ending, but I believe that in this moment, Leah finds some peace as she receives God’s love for her. It is also significant that it is the line of Judah from which David comes, Judah, that becomes the last recognized tribe of Israel and from which Jesus completes the lineage. If only Leah had rested here in her salvation—but instead she gets into a “mandrake war” with Rachel!

READ Genesis 30:1– 4. We cannot do justice to this half of the story, but we see where envy continues to tear down the relationship between sisters. Rachel also has an ache and longing in her heart, for she cannot have children. Rather than helping and encouraging one other in their painful situation, they pit themselves against each other to heighten the strife. Unlike Hannah’s husband (I Samuel 1:8), Jacob does not assure her that his love is worth 10 sons, but rather gets angry and asks, “Am I the God who closed your womb”?

In that ancient culture, a substitute child from a handmaiden may be considered one’s own child. In that day, monogamy did not bear the value that is understood from Scripture as God’s initial desire for man and woman. Polygamy is another consequence of the fall and leads to further family pain. Note the names that Rachel gives to her children—Dan, “God has judged me” and Naphtali, “I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed.” There is bitterness more than joy. She tried to steal the one joy Leah had in bearing children and wrestle away that only piece of happiness. Leah returns “tit for tat,” child for child, and her handmaid also bears two sons, Gad and Asher. Notice these names have to do with “fortune” and “happiness,” but not the praise and thanksgiving directed to God. Happiness fades very quickly and fortunes turn against us. It is only turning our hearts to God’s love in gratitude that joy will root deep into our soul.

LEAH: THE OTHER SISTER



The story gets uglier as the sisters fight over mandrakes to help them with their fertility. Rachel now controls whether Jacob can lay with Leah or not and “hires him out” for the mandrakes. One can only weep at the level of mistrust, envy, and rivalry that has invaded this family. More children are conceived to Leah and finally to Rachael, but there is little joy, only spite. Rachel’s longing for a son is fulfilled, but rather than giving thanks to God for the birth of Joseph, she names him, “May the Lord give me another son.” The fulfillment of that desire brings her death, for she could not rest in the gift of Joseph from God. This, too, is tragedy. How often have we looked at what we have and instead of giving thanks, have longed for more—never quite satisfied! That longing for more may steal our “life” away, as well, if we cannot find space for gratitude. I have read that there are only two options in life, gratitude or bitterness. Is this a true statement, and why or why not?

This extreme disfunction carries on into the relationships with the brothers, the horrific story of Dinah (for another study), Joseph and his dream coat, Judah and Tamar, and the list goes on. Where is the grace in this family tree? God is present, and God hears their cries. He has compassion upon Leah and remembers Rachel, as they cry out in their anguish—but only once is thanksgiving to God returned. Rachel never releases the grip of the household gods. Read Genesis 33:1–3. If there is any last insult for Leah, she is sent ahead of Rachel in case Esau decides to take revenge and kill Jacob’s family.

I have one final hope for Leah and Jacob’s relationship—that perhaps in some way, Jacob did finally learn to love Leah. Read Genesis 49:29-33. When Leah died, she was buried in the cave that held Jacob’s ancestors—Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebecca. Now, Jacob asks to be buried with Leah. Rachel was buried on the way to Ephrath (Genesis 35:16–21). and a monument was established in her honour. I may be reading too much into Jacob’s choice or not understanding burial customs, but for Leah’s sake through this story of unrequited love, it is my hope that she did know love in this life. We all need to be loved unconditionally, and it is not always easy in this life to have that kind of marriage or friendship. If, however we know we are God’s beloved and his delight, and we find our identity and our purpose in that love, then every other relationship is a gift to love and celebrate. There is no saving love apart from our Lord Jesus Christ!

THE WOMAN WHO WAS KNOWN



INTRODUCTION

Who knows you the best—*really* knows you inside and out? It is not the easiest question to answer. My husband knows me well, but I am sometimes amazed at the things he thinks I might enjoy, or how he has mistaken the meaning of my words—and I’m astounded he could think that of me. But then I wonder if I know myself—that I think I am better than I am, or perhaps worse. I may think I know the motive behind my actions or words, but how often do I deceive myself until I dig deeper into my heart?

Part of being created in the image of God is to be created in and with mystery. We are a puzzle to ourselves and one another. We cannot know the mind, the thoughts and feelings of another person, let alone know the mind and heart of God. We cannot see through another’s eyes or feel their pain. As much as we might try to walk a mile in another’s shoes, their feet are not our feet, and we can never fully enter their unique experience. We all want to be known and loved, but “knowing” is an elusive goal not easily attained.

What I love about this story is the theme of who knows whom and who knows what. The woman is only known to the reader of this text as a sinner. We assume that she is a prostitute and that she has known many men, though the text does not say. As we explore this text together, consider the One who truly does know you and loves you beyond all human comprehension. Enter this study with that peace of heart and mind and rest in His knowing.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

It was common practice for a visiting rabbi to be invited to the home of another rabbi so that they could further discuss the content of his teaching. These meals were held in open court yards so that others could stand around the periphery and listen to the conversations. Beggars were later allowed to eat whatever was left over once the guests had departed. The invited guest would be greeted with a kiss on each cheek, their feet washed from the dusty journey, and a drop of perfumed oil placed on the guest's head in welcome. They would recline at a low table upon their left side and eat with their left hand, leaving their right hand free for animated dialogue and their feet extended away from the table.

Simon, the Pharisee, invited Jesus as the visiting teacher into his home for such a meal and conversation. In this act, he recognizes Jesus as some kind of rabbi in whom he is curious. The invitation is meant as a sign of mutual respect, but Simon's failed actions reveal something else.

PREPARATION

Reflect upon Psalm 139:1–6 and offer prayers of thanksgiving for the message contained in those verses of God's knowing.

THE WOMAN WHO WAS KNOWN



LABELS AND ASSUMPTIONS

1. Read Luke 7:36–50 together. What did Simon fail to do for Jesus? What does this reveal about his true feelings toward Jesus?
2. Why is this woman a ‘sinner’? What has given her this label, and is it a fair label?
3. Her actions and her demeanor do reveal some clues. First of all, she is carrying a vial or jar of perfume, which was a tool for women of the sex trade to mask unpleasant bodily odors. Secondly, she let down her hair in public—another societal “no-no”—for respectable women would keep their hair up and covered in all public settings.
4. Simon mutters to himself, “If this man (Jesus) were a prophet, He would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching Him.” What does Simon think he knows about 1) the woman, 2) Jesus, 3) himself, and what is the source of his knowledge?
5. Compare this with the words and actions of Jesus. What does Jesus know about 1) Simon, 2) the woman, 3) Himself?
6. Note the question Jesus asks of Simon, “Do you see this woman”? What does it mean to truly see another person? What are some things we judge people upon, according to our first impressions of their appearance? How do these impede us from actually seeing the person as God might see them? (It isn’t always the negative things, but we can also be overly impressed with another by their appearance, stature or education!)
7. What do the woman’s actions reveal about what she knows about 1) Simon, 2) Jesus, and 3) herself?

THE WOMAN WHO WAS KNOWN



We see themes of self-deception and self-awareness throughout this story. Simon believes himself to be a righteous man who is a good judge of character and can identify true religious teachers. He does the appropriate thing to invite this Jesus into his home for a conversation, anticipating that he will show Jesus up as the false teacher He is. Since he has no respect for Jesus, he refuses Him the basic common courtesies of hospitality. His actions reveal his true motives, not as one wanting to learn from a learned rabbi, but rather to hopefully humiliate and cast out the false teacher.

When this sinful woman dares to touch Jesus, everything Simon believes about Jesus is confirmed. Jesus has no moral boundaries when He allows any woman, let alone *this* woman, to touch Him. Jesus is no prophet; He is an imposter.

In contrast, the woman has no such notions of her own goodness. She is broken and has lost any sense of shame, as she publicly humiliates herself at the feet of Jesus. She knows that Simon will not approve of her presence, and that she is crossing the boundary line to enter the room to get to Jesus. Simon could have stopped her and had her thrown out, but he allows the woman through as a way of testing Jesus. In this act, the woman reveals no respect for Simon, and Simon no respect for Jesus. Jesus sees something completely different. What He sees is revealed through sharing a parable with them—the two debtors.

THE WOMAN WHO WAS KNOWN



THE TWO DEBTORS

1. When you read the parable in Luke 7:41-42, do you initially identify with the one who owes much or the one who owes little? Would your background/upbringing have more in common with Simon or the woman?
2. Look at the concept of love and of forgiveness. The words seem to be used interchangeably in this passage. What can you learn about each from this?
3. What is the connection between gratitude and love? The woman's acts were an act of worship. What are examples of true acts of worship borne out of love and gratitude?
4. How would the gift of peace be realized in her life? What would have changed in her situation? Would she still be a prostitute?
5. Even though one has a spiritual encounter with the risen Christ, the situations of their lives are often still the same. Chaplain Anna Braun has shared how difficult it is for convicted felons to escape the negative influences of their former lives once leaving prison. It is not so easy to start over. How might the Christian community better assist new believers to find new and healthier friendships and environments?

THE WOMAN WHO WAS KNOWN



DEEPER REFLECTION

1. Are there any ways that you have felt 'unclean'—labeled by yourself or by society? (example, someone might have a weight problem and feel like it is their fault, thus branded by that physical challenge).
2. What are ways you have labeled someone because of something you thought you knew about them, or assumed about them, that was unfair? Did you work to change your attitude? How can we better see with the eyes of Jesus?
3. Why is gratitude so important in understanding our own salvation story, and how does gratitude give us a better understanding of ourselves and others?

We must celebrate the love and forgiveness that we have received from the One who knows the very number of hairs on our head, who formed us in the womb, and hears every thought. There is NO ONE I want to hear my every thought but Jesus! Only there do I find forgiveness, understanding, acceptance, love, AND—with gratitude—the desire to be transformed daily by the renewing of my mind. Whatever I have received from my God, I must offer to another with the same love and gratitude I give back to my Redeemer. I can do no less.

THE WIVES OF DAVID



INTRODUCTION

It is said that behind every great man is a woman. In David's case this meant many women. It is difficult to understand these marriage relationships from our 21st century perspective, where we place high value on romance and finding our one true love or soulmate. "You can't choose who you love" and being "in love" seems to justify adultery, divorce, same-gender relationships, and more. It is God, however who defines love and demonstrates His own love in this, "While we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5: 8). A search of our souls would more readily demand we ask, "Whom do we love in the way that God loved us?"

For several reasons, ancient culture would understand the song, "What's love got to do with it?" First, royal marriages were rarely about love but mostly about political alliances. To keep kingdoms "in the family," a marriage was a form of peace treaty or blood bond. Secondly, a king's strength and greatness was measured by his sexual prowess and the size of his harem. The fertility of a king spoke to the fertility and wealth of the land he governed. The mightiest kings were to have 360 wives and concubines—almost one for every day of the year! You can imagine how great Solomon was considered with his 700 wives and 300 concubines. It is also clear in Scripture that for all of Solomon's wisdom, he failed God in marrying foreign wives and disobeying Deuteronomy 17:17, which stated that a king should not have many wives. [In a convoluted calculation by rabbis, they determined that number to be 18!] The first wife was traditionally the most important, politically, and referred to as the queen—but with David, it is unclear who he considers his queen and even which wife, if any he ever truly loved.

THE WIVES OF DAVID



It puzzles me greatly as to why David is considered a man after God's own heart. He fails in so many ways to live up to the standards that I would look for in a man. In reality, he was not a good husband, father, or strong ruler, though he was a successful warrior. The worthiest character trait I discern in David is humility. He knows his failings as a husband, a father, and a ruler and lays all of that at the feet of his God.

In Matthew 11:29, Jesus describes Himself as gentle and humble, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." I believe David lived this verse, though he preceded Jesus. He took the yoke of God upon his shoulders and was gentle and humble in heart. And God could work with that.

This study is not about David, but about three of the women in his life that—for better or worse—are a part of his story and thus, part of Israel's story, God's story, and just maybe part of your story and mine.

PREPARATION

Use the words of Matthew 11:29 and pray that we might receive from Jesus the lessons He would reveal to us today.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

MICHAL

1. Read I Samuel 18:16–29. As David had killed Goliath, Saul's eldest daughter, Merab, was already promised to him in marriage (I Sam 17:25). Saul makes a grand gesture of the offer once more upon the promise that David will fight Saul's battles (and hopefully be killed in the process). David responds in humility that he and his family are unworthy of such an honour. It was Saul's duty to honour the original offer, but he quickly reneges and marries Merab to a wealthy and politically favorable alliance. There is a second daughter most willing to marry as she has already fallen in love with the ruddy young warrior. David is skeptical of this offer and tries to decline by using the excuse that he cannot pay the dowry befitting a king's daughter, and thus Saul sets a unique price of 100 Philistine foreskins. David takes up the challenge, not for love of Michal, but in essence to win the bet. What are your feelings toward Michal at this point in the story? If you were her mother, what warnings would you offer your love-struck daughter?

2. Read I Samuel 19:1 –17. What risk has Michal taken for David?

3. What do you see in the character of Michal that is noteworthy, and also what are some things that might trouble you about her actions or character?

4. How ought David to feel or act toward Michal from this experience?



RELATIONAL ROLLER COASTER

1. Read I Samuel 25:44. This is an abrupt statement! Was this the consequence of Michal saving David's life, that Saul breaks the relationship and gives her to Paltiel? Saul already had his son, Jonathan, protecting David—and now Michal is, as well! What do you imagine is happening to the heart and spirit of Michal through these transactions of her life?

2. Now read 2 Samuel 3:1–5, 12–16. David has now married Ahinoam, Abigail, Maacah, and Eglah—all of whom have born him sons, thus increasing his political clout. Then, as Abner switches loyalty from Saul to David, David asks for his first wife, Michal, back. Why was this important to him?

4. So far, we have no hint that David loved Michal. But look at the actions of Michal's second husband? What do they tell you?

5. Read 2 Samuel 6:14–16. Michal's heart has turned from deep love to hatred. Now, everything that David does bugs her. I believe that Michal experienced being loved for the first time by Paltiel (whose name means "God has delivered"). Her love for David was never reciprocated as far as we can tell, and now that she is back in the court and can compare the difference, her heart has turned bitter. Note that Michal never bore any children, and I wonder if David did not sleep with her, or if she was simply barren. This, too, would have added to the anguish of her heart, as David's other wives were bearing sons for him. In what parts of Michal's story, if any, do you feel some sympathy for her?

THE WIVES OF DAVID



ABIGAIL, WIFE OF NABAL

1. If time, read I Samuel 25, or have someone summarize. How is Abigail described in verse 3? Her character is contrasted to that of her husband's, and we sense this is a difficult life and marriage for her.
2. In verses 18-35, what is Abigail attempting to do by her actions? What does this reveal about her character and her loyalty to her marriage? In verses 28–30, in whom is she trusting and obeying?
3. Verse 39-42 state that David “wooed” Abigail, yet he sends servants to “take her to him as his wife”—not exactly a romantic gesture! What do these verses continue to reveal about the nature and character of Abigail? Left a widow, Abigail may have had few choices regarding her future and David's kindness would certainly save her from poverty.

Note in verse 43, that David also marries Ahinoam. It is Ahinoam who gives birth to David's first-born son, which would make her the official “queen”—although there is really no mention of their relationship.

BATHSHEBA

1. Read the famous story in 2 Samuel 11:13. What might Bathsheba's part be in this event, and what choices did she have through the course of this story? Do you feel she was complicit or a victim and why?
2. Name the many emotions that Bathsheba would have experienced. Ultimately, where would she find some semblance of peace?

THE WIVES OF DAVID



Many of you will be familiar with the Crawley family from the hit series *Downton Abbey*. Much of its appeal was entering into the lives of women who were making the best out of their circumstance. A father with no sons and complicated inheritance laws created difficult decisions to be made for the estate. The greatest hope rested in good marriages of his daughters to prominent families, calling upon those women to sacrifice their dreams. Women today also face difficult choices around circumstance often beyond their control.

CHOICES

1. Michal wanted to marry David, but she did not choose to be remarried to Paltiel nor returned to David. How might allowing God's love to fill her have prevented her heart from turning bitter? In what ways do women today turn to a man will fulfill their need to be loved?
2. Abigail may not have chosen her marriage to a horrid man; it was most likely an arranged marriage. But she did choose to cover for his bad behavior and make the situation as best for them as possible. She did not choose his death but consented to marry David as protection. How did her choices make the best of a bad situation?
3. Bathsheba did not choose to have a child by a man not her husband, but she deeply grieved the loss of that child. I assume she did not choose the death of Uriah but later chose to be with David, the father of her child—though perhaps that was not her choice either. She did choose to love and support her son, Solomon, and to ensure that he became the next king (I Kings 1).
4. Unwanted pregnancy is all too common a story in the lives of women. How might we empower young women to make better choices in the hopes that every child conceived would be desired?

When we cannot choose the circumstance we are in, what choices can we make within those circumstances? How does your faith and trust in God enable you to make better choices?

THE WIVES OF DAVID



The Scriptures do not explicitly tell us of the relationship these women had with God. Our story is different, for though we may face challenging circumstances and difficult choices, we have not been left alone. We have the love of God to fill us, the power of the resurrected Christ to fuel us, and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit to comfort and guide us. One choice we can always make is to trust in our Triune God of love, presence, and power.

We see strengths to admire in these women we have studied: Michal's loyalty, Abigail's integrity, and Bathsheba's resiliency. How much more would these qualities have carried them if entrusted into hands of our all-loving God? Find God's grace in these stories and forgiveness. We have all made mistakes and poor choices in our journeys, but God is good and ready to do a new thing.

Close in prayer, giving thanks for God's presence, power, love, grace and future hope.

TITUS' CALL TO WOMEN



INTRODUCTION

This study looks at the ways that we can encourage and mentor one another, as guided by this exhortation in the letter to Titus and the church in Crete.

PREPARATION

In silence, lay before your loving Father and Best Friend the desire of your heart for this study. Join together in the following poem from the Northumbria Community Celtic Daily Prayer by Sally Jo Shelton:

*There is a friend that sticks closer than a brother (Prov. 18:24)
God is my best friend.
He cares about the things I care about
He loves me even when I'm unlovable
He is always there to listen and advise
When I need to talk things over*

*God is my heavenly Father
He holds me in the palm of His Hand
He watches over me as the apple of His eye
He wants me to grow up to be like Him*

*God is my rock.
He is my refuge when I'm afraid
My strength when I am weak,
My sure footing when I stumble.*

*God is my shepherd.
He finds me when I'm lost.
He gives me rest when I'm tired.
He leads me when I don't know which way to go.*

TITUS' CALL TO WOMEN



We do not know exactly when the Gentile Titus became a follower of Christ under Paul's ministry, but it was likely early on during Paul's first missionary journey. Titus is mentioned 9 times in II Corinthians, indicating his strong connection to Paul's ministry. We see that Titus has become a trusted leader as Paul mentored him in faith and ministry. At some point, Paul and Titus go to Crete to establish a ministry there, and Titus is left behind to help the churches identify and establish leaders from among the believers.

We can see that Paul's letter is not directed to Titus alone, for the greeting is rather formal—and Paul did not need to establish his credentials with Titus, as he has been mentoring him all along in ministry. Paul's intention is to establish the authority of Titus to the churches in Crete that they would heed the directions of Titus without question. Paul is endorsing the ministry of Titus as he states his own ministry calling, thus the important words in Chapter 1, verse 4, "My loyal child in the faith we share," and 2 Corinthians 8:23, "As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker among you."

Women are often encouraged to be "Titus 2 Women." Many a book and church ministry has been based upon this chapter of Scripture for women. Perhaps because Paul specifically mentions older women and younger women, we can see a clear mandate to come alongside and mentor the next generation. It is important to keep in mind that this chapter is not directed only to women, but to men, as well as slaves. It will be helpful to look at the broader scope of Paul's instructions as we look to deepen our relationships and build the body of Christ, His Church.



READINGS AND DISCUSSION

GENERATIONS

1. Read Titus 2. Why is it so important to mentor the next generation and to have friendships that span age categories? What is the value of inter-generational connections? What are the ways your church encourages and fosters the cross-connection of children, youth, adults, and seniors?
2. Look up and read the following—Psalms 145:4; 48:12-14; 71:18; and 78:4. Share one story of God's faithfulness that you long to pass on to a new generation, whether in your family or in the church family.
3. Perhaps the first thing to note is Paul's emphasis on behaviour. What characteristics or behaviours are the same for men and women, and what differences do you note? What significance might you draw from the differences?

Greek words for men from verse 2: *nephalious* (not intoxicated but clear-minded); *semnous* (dignified, reverend, serious); *sophronas* (of sound mind, modest, chaste) *hugiaino* (sound, healthy) in *pistei* (faith) in *agape* (love) in *hypomone* (endurance – a patient waiting)

Greek words for women from verse 3: *hieroprepeis* (reverent, sacred character) not *diabolous* (accusing falsely) not *doulou* (enslaved) to much wine; *kalodidaskalous* (teacher of good things)

Greek words for young men from verses 6 – 8: *sophronas* (of sound mind, modest, chaste)



EXPECTATIONS

1. Why is behaviour so important in our spiritual journeys?
2. Paul tells Titus to teach what is consistent with sound doctrine, and then goes on to describe what the life of a believer ought to look like. How does our doctrine and beliefs inform our behaviours?
3. In what ways, if any, might these lists of behaviors be in contrast or conflict with today's societal expectations?
4. Paul's instruction to the woman is placed within a marital context. What is the responsibility of the husband and what of a wife? If you could offer some helpful marriage advice to a newlywed, what would be some things you would say?
5. Brainstorm creative ways that couples with marriage experience could connect with younger couples in mentoring or friendship capacity.
6. In this 21st century, how would you apply the list in verses 4-5 that Paul has created for teaching and encouraging younger women? Are there things on the list that are less important today and those that are timeless?

Submission is *hypotasso* (under the arrangement of) their *idiosis* (own) husband. The author's take on this is that the relationship between husband and wife is a mutually agreed upon arrangement of responsibilities and not subject to any other household's arrangements. What do you think?



COMMUNITY

1. Verse 6-8 speaks to how we are to teach or model to the younger generation. We are not all given the spiritual gift of teaching, and yet when we take on a role as a mentor or mature friend there is a teaching aspect to it. From Paul's perspective, what is the most important quality of a teacher/mentor?

2. Interpreting Scripture from its original audience into today's church can sometimes be a challenge, as we see in verses 9–10, where we know that this is not an endorsement for keeping slaves. Now, we most often think of it as how we relate to our employers or leaders of ministries under which we volunteer. Whether we are in charge, or a servant, we are to be people of integrity, honesty, and respect. If you were working with someone who was having difficulties in their workplace, how might you help them and what have you experienced that you could draw upon as helpful?

3. Think of one or two close Christian friends as you again read Titus 2:11–15. How can spiritual friendship help you live according to Paul's standard here?

4. What role does your community of faith play in your faith journey?

TITUS' CALL TO WOMEN



Paul's instructions continue regarding the lessons Titus is to pass along to those he is mentoring in the Churches of Crete. We see more lists of behaviours, both the positive and negative attitudes and actions that we need to become more conscious of in our Christian walk and Paul "insists" we adopt what is "excellent and profitable for everyone" (Titus 3:8). There is always a strong emphasis on community over individualism. Paul is concerned about the church as a body of believers who get along and support one another. Note particularly the role of the Holy Spirit in working to strengthen each believer as part of the greater whole.

A LIFE OF WITNESS

1. Read Titus 3. Most of us do not struggle with being law-abiding citizens. This became much more challenging during the COVID crisis, when churches were prohibited from their normal gathering for worship. It was a struggle to be "obedient and ready for every good work." How did your church navigate the restrictions as a community of faith?
2. Paul says to never slander or to speak evil of another and to avoid quarreling (NRSV). How can our words hurt our witness? What are signs of "true humility" in a Christian?
3. Paul states a "before and after" scenario. What was he like before receiving Christ, and what attitudes and behaviors have changed? Do you have a "before and after" testimony of your own that could be an encouragement to another?
4. What has been one primary area of growth for you in your faith journey and how might this help encourage another in their journey?



EXCELLENT AND PROFITABLE

1. Paul gives a description of Baptism in verse 5. If you have been baptized, what did that experience mean to you? If you were to encourage another to be baptized or mentor them toward that decision, what would be some reasons and blessings for a believer to experience baptism by immersion out of your own experience?

2. In what ways are you conscious of the Holy Spirit guiding and directing your life? Do you sense the Holy Spirit's presence in your friendships? Why or why not? What might you share with another who was struggling to sense the leading of the Spirit?

3. Paul insists that our actions and attitudes be excellent and profitable to everyone. He cautions against stupid controversies and quarrels. How is this causing division in our churches now? Paul mentions genealogies as a source of contention which may not be a relevant issue for us, but what are the issues that do divide us?

4. What is the difference between "discussion" and "quarrel"? It is important in friendships to feel safe with freedom to ask questions, and so it is important to encourage discussion and interaction—raising questions that may not have easy answers or any answers at all. There are many things that fall into the category of "mystery" in our faith. These are still worthy of discussion, and to offer any friend a safe place to raise doubts or struggles is a wonderful gift. How would you discern when the discussions are helpful and when they are less helpful for a person's growth?

5. Paul recommends two warnings to be given if you believe that the discussions are not helpful, or even divisive. His language is strong, but what characteristics of a person would make it difficult for you to carry on in the relationship or discussion?

TITUS' CALL TO WOMEN



Paul's final thoughts in this letter again give insight into his love and trust of Titus. He is hoping to send either Artemas or Tychicus to take the place of Titus in Crete so that he can join Paul in Nikopolis. Paul wants Titus to leave a good foundation so that he can then pass the mantle onto another. We see two levels of relationship here. Titus and his relationship to the church are for a season; he is to bless and encourage them and establish good leadership among them, and upon completion, another will take the place of Titus. However, Paul and Titus have a strong working relationship that is meant to continue on into a new circumstance. In our friendships, some are for a special season and naturally come to an end—and some last a lifetime, though our settings change. Think of a few of these friendships that you have experienced and why some were for a season in your life and why others have lasted.

In summary, Paul mentored Titus in how to find good leaders and how to encourage a church to good works and holy attitudes. These chapters offer many good reminders of how we are to live holy lives and how to encourage one another along that path of right living through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Paul expects community to be community and to work together in living well, rather than trying to live out our Christian life in isolation from each other. In some ways, it is easier to work alone—and other times, it hard to carry the burden on our own. Committing to community is difficult because there are always those that we appreciate and respect as role models and others that try our patience. Paul has a balance of encouragement and exhortation along with warnings of what should not be tolerated within the community of believers. Always remember that we represent Jesus Christ to those outside the community of faith and this is a very high calling! Be encouraged to seek support and to walk along side others as Paul has modeled for us here.

Close in a time of prayer, reflecting on Paul's exhortation to teach one another, woman to woman or friend to friend. Ask of God what experiences He would have you share with another and who might that be? Give thanks for those that have touched your life and spiritual friends that have encouraged your journey.