



*Maidens,
Mothers,
& Queens*

Compiled by Dr. Harold Bollinger, D.A.

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Maidens, Mothers and Queens

Women of the Bible

Introduction

The contribution of the ministry of women to God's redemptive plan cannot be over emphasized.

Establishing the image of women in the Bible is considered relevant to our time. Those practicing religion must include a primary focus on how the portrayal is universal as well as cultural. Though the risk is ever present that the method of such an endeavor may be abused, the true motive of the goal requires that nothing less should be attempted.

In the Old Testament, the image of woman is both varied and conflicting. The underlying basis for this circumstance can be explained by a review of the account of creation and the fall of humankind. The first two chapters of Genesis set forth God creating the world, living creatures, and man, with each narrative being a separate version of the same events.

In chapter two, God notes that for the man to be alone is not good, the living creatures are brought to him for naming, but no suitable helper is found. God then causes a deep sleep to come on Adam, and Eve is made from a part of his side chamber (translated rib). When the woman is presented to Adam, the Hebrew manuscripts record his reaction in poetic verse, an indication of the climax of this story, a format followed by the NIV and NKJV.

This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called 'woman' for she was taken out of man. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh. (Genesis 2:23, 24, NIV)

The New Testament brings the special revelation of God to humankind to completion. Christ is held as being the Messiah having come not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17)

God's creative work was not complete until he made woman. He could have made her from the dust of the ground, as he made man. God chose, however, to make her from the

man's flesh and bone. In so doing, he illustrated for us that in marriage man and woman symbolically become one flesh. This is a mystical union of the couple's hearts and lives. Throughout the Bible, God treats this special partnership seriously. If you are married or planning to be married, are you willing to keep the commitment that makes the two of you one? The goal in marriage should be more than friendship; it should be oneness.

God forms and equips men and women for various tasks, but all these tasks lead to the same goal—honoring God. Man gives life to woman; woman gives life to the world. Each role carries exclusive privileges; there is no room for thinking that one gender is superior to the other.

Women were a vital part of Jesus' ministry. He treated them with love and respect, raising them to a new level of dignity. Jesus constantly broke the religious law and custom to look to the spiritual needs of women. He not only changed the nature of religion, he explained the interpretation of what was already written.

The New Testament recognizes the woman who does good deeds, shows hospitality, helps the poor, and is temperate and faithful. (Acts 16:15; 9:36; Timothy 3:11; 5:9)

In II Timothy 1:5; 3:15, Paul tells that the sincerity of Timothy's faith first lived in his grandmother and mother, who taught him the Scriptures from his youth.

Throughout most of time, a woman recognized her role as different, but not inferior. The noble wife of Proverbs 31 was not downtrodden or unhappy.

As we look into the lives and happenings of each of these woman. We will see both good and bad, even as we see such in the men of the Bible. Everyone needs a Savior.

Old Testament Roles

Chapter 1

Eve, the Mother of All Living

We know very little about Eve, the first woman in the world, yet she is the mother of us all. She was the final piece in the intricate and amazing puzzle of God's creation. Adam now had another human being with whom to fellowship—someone with an equal share in God's image.

Here was someone alike enough for companionship, yet different enough for relationship. Together they were greater than either could have been alone.

Satan in the Garden of Eden approached Eve where she and Adam lived. He questioned her contentment. How could she be happy when she was not allowed to eat from one of the fruit trees?

Satan helped Eve shift her focus from all that God had done and given to the one thing he had withheld. Eve was willing to accept Satan's viewpoint without checking with God.

Sound familiar? How often is our attention drawn from that that is ours to the little that isn't? We get that "I've got to have it," feeling. Eve was typical of us all, and we consistently show we are her descendants by repeating her mistakes.

Our desires, like Eve's, can be quite easily manipulated. They are not the best basis for actions. We need to keep God in our decision-making process always. His Word, the Bible, is our guidebook in decision-making.

Eve, the first wife and mother shared a special relationship with God, had co-responsibility with Adam over creation, and displayed certain characteristics of God

She allowed her contentment to be undermined by Satan, and acted impulsively without talking either to God or to her mate. Eve not only sinned, but shared her sin with Adam. When confronted, she blamed others.

God gave marriage as a gift to Adam and Eve. They were created perfect for each other.

Marriage was not just for convenience, nor was it brought about by any culture. It was instituted by God and has three basic aspects: (1) the man leaves his parents and, in a public act, promises himself to his wife; (2) the man and woman are joined together by taking responsibility for each other's welfare and by loving the mate above all others; (3) the two become one flesh in the intimacy and commitment of sexual union that is reserved for marriage.

Strong marriages include all three of these aspects.

“The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’ ” (Genesis 2:18). Find Eve's story in Genesis 2:19-4:26

Chapter 2

Sarah, the Noble Woman of Faith

Sarah's story is told in Genesis 11-25. She is also mentioned in Isaiah 51:2; Romans 4:19; Romans 9:9; Hebrews 11:11; 1 Peter 3:6.

Sarah faced many challenges in life. Her story portrays her as a faithful saint in the history of humanity. Sarah was a fitting partner to Abraham. In this story, Sarah shines as a faithful wife and mother.

To understand Sarah, we must see her in her relationship to her husband Abraham. The book of Genesis begins the story of their lives together while waiting for the promise from God for a child.

Genesis 12:12-20

When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife. Let's kill him; then we can have her!' [13] But if you say you are my sister, then the Egyptians will treat me well because of their interest in you, and they will spare my life." [14] And sure enough, when they arrived in Egypt, everyone spoke of her beauty. [15] When the palace officials saw her, they sang her praises to their king, the pharaoh, and she was taken into his harem. [16] Then Pharaoh gave Abram many gifts because of her—sheep, cattle, donkeys, male and female servants, and camels. [17] But the Lord sent a terrible plague upon Pharaoh's household because of Sarai, Abram's wife. [18] So Pharaoh called for Abram and accused him sharply. "What is this you have done to me?" he demanded. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? [19] Why were you willing to let me marry her, saying she was your sister? Here is your wife! Take her and be gone!" [20] Pharaoh then sent them out of the country under armed escort—Abram and his wife, with all their household and belongings.

Abram's intent was to deceive the Egyptians. He feared that if they knew the truth, they would kill him to get Sarai. She would have been a desirable addition to Pharaoh's harem because of her wealth, beauty, and potential for political alliance. As Sarai's brother, Abram would have been given a place of honor. As her husband, however, his life would be in danger because Sarai could not enter Pharaoh's harem unless Abram was dead. So Abram lost faith in God's protection, even after all God had promised him, and told a half-truth. This shows how lying compounds the effects of sin. When he lied, Abram's problems multiplied.

A lack of faith in the heart of Sarah, reveals that she could no longer believe that she could have a child, so she took matters into her own hands to see that Abraham had a son.

Genesis 16:1-12 (NLT)

But Sarai, Abram's wife, had no children. So Sarai took her servant, an Egyptian woman named Hagar, [2] and gave her to Abram so she could bear his children. "The Lord has kept me from having any children," Sarai said to Abram. "Go and sleep with my servant. Perhaps I can have children through her." And Abram agreed. [3] So Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian servant and gave her to Abram as a wife.

Sarai gave Hagar to Abram as a substitute wife, a common practice of that time. A married woman who could not have children was shamed by her peers and was often required to give a female servant to her husband in order to produce heirs. The children born to the servant woman were considered the children of the wife. Abram was acting in line with the custom of the day, but his action showed a lack of faith that God would fulfill his promise.

Sarai took matters into her own hands by giving Hagar to Abram. Like Abram she had trouble believing God's promise that was apparently directed specifically toward Abram and Sarai. Out of this lack of faith came a series of problems. This invariably happens when we take over for God, trying to make his promise come true through efforts that are not in line with his specific directions. In this case, time was the greatest test of Abram and Sarai's willingness to let God work in their lives. Sometimes we too must simply wait. When we ask God for something and have to wait, it is a temptation to take matters into our own hands and interfere with God's plans.

[4] So Abram slept with Hagar, and she became pregnant. When Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to treat her mistress Sarai with contempt. [5] Then Sarai said to Abram, "It's all your fault! Now this servant of mine is pregnant, and she despises me, though I myself gave her the privilege of sleeping with you. The Lord will make you pay for doing this to me!"

Although Sarai arranged for Hagar to have a child by Abram, she later blamed Abram for the results. It is often easier to strike out in frustration and accuse someone else than to admit an error and ask forgiveness. (Adam and Eve did the same thing in Genesis 3:12-13.)

[6] Abram replied, "Since she is your servant, you may deal with her as you see fit." So Sarai treated her harshly, and Hagar ran away.

Sarai took out her anger against Abram and herself on Hagar, and her treatment was harsh enough to cause Hagar to run away. Anger, especially when it arises from our own shortcomings, can be dangerous.

[7] The angel of the Lord found Hagar beside a desert spring along the road to Shur. [8] The angel said to her, "Hagar, Sarai's servant, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I am running away from my mistress," she replied.

Hagar was running away from her mistress and her problem. The angel of the Lord gave her this advice: (1) to return and face Sarai, the cause of her problem, and (2) to submit to her. Hagar needed to work on her attitude toward Sarai, no matter how justified it may have been. Running away from our problems rarely solves them. It is wise to return to our problems, face them squarely, accept God's promise of help, correct our attitudes, and act as we should.

[9] Then the angel of the Lord said, "Return to your mistress and submit to her authority." [10] The angel added, "I will give you more descendants than you can count." [11] And the angel also said, "You are now pregnant and will give birth to a son. You are to name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard about your misery. [12] This son of yours will be a wild one—free and untamed as a wild donkey! He will be against everyone, and everyone will be against him. Yes, he will live at odds with the rest of his brothers."

God renewed his promise to Abraham that he would have a son through Sarah.

Genesis 17:19-21 (NLT)

But God replied, "Sarah, your wife, will bear you a son. You will name him Isaac, and I will confirm my everlasting covenant with him and his descendants. [20] As for Ishmael, I will bless him also, just as you have asked. I will cause him to multiply and become a great nation. Twelve princes will be among his descendants. [21] But my covenant is with Isaac, who will be born to you and Sarah about this time next year."

How could Abraham doubt God? It seemed incredible that he and Sarah in their advanced years could have a child. Abraham, the man God considered righteous because of his faith, had trouble believing God's promise to him. Despite his doubts, however, he

followed God's commands (Genesis 17:22-27). Even people of great faith may have doubts. When God seems to want the impossible and you begin to doubt his leading, be like Abraham. Focus on God's commitment to fulfill his promises to you, and then continue to obey.

Heavenly visitors came to visit Abraham to again confirm the fulfillment of God's promise of a son through Sarah.

Genesis 18:10-19 (NLT)

Then one of them said, "About this time next year I will return, and your wife Sarah will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening to this conversation from the tent nearby. [11] And since Abraham and Sarah were both very old, and Sarah was long past the age of having children, [12] she laughed silently to herself. "How could a worn-out woman like me have a baby?" she thought. "And when my master—my husband—is also so old?"

[13] Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh? Why did she say, 'Can an old woman like me have a baby?' [14] Is anything too hard for the Lord? About a year from now, just as I told you, I will return, and Sarah will have a son."

"Is anything too hard for the LORD?" The obvious answer is, "Of course not!" This question reveals much about God. Make it a habit to insert your specific needs into the question. "Is this day in my life too hard for the Lord?" "Is this habit I'm trying to break too hard for him?" "Is the communication problem I'm having too hard for him?" Asking the question this way reminds you that God is personally involved in your life and nudges you to ask for his power to help you.

[15] Sarah was afraid, so she denied that she had laughed. But he said, "That is not true. You did laugh."

Sarah lied because she was afraid of being discovered. Fear is the most common motive for lying. We are afraid that our inner thoughts and emotions will be exposed or our wrongdoings discovered. But lying causes greater complications than telling the truth and brings even more problems. If God can't be trusted with our innermost thoughts and fears, we are in greater trouble than we first imagined.

Genesis 23:1-4 (NLT)

When Sarah was 127 years old, [2] she died at Kiriath-arba (now called Hebron) in the land of Canaan. Their Abraham mourned and wept for her. [3] Then,

leaving her body, he went to the Hittite elders and said, [4] "Here I am, a stranger in a foreign land, with no place to bury my wife. Please let me have a piece of land for a burial plot."

In Abraham's day, death and burial were steeped in ritual and traditions. Failing to honor a dead person demonstrated the greatest possible lack of respect. An improper burial was the equivalent of a curse. Mourning was an essential part of the death ritual. Friends and relatives let out loud cries for the whole neighborhood to hear. Because there were no funeral homes or undertakers, these same friends and relatives helped prepare the body for burial, which usually took place on the same day because of the warm climate.

Abraham was in a foreign land looking for a place to bury his wife. Strangers offered to help him because he was "a mighty prince," and they respected him. Although Abraham had not established roots in the area, his reputation was above reproach. Those who invest their time and money in serving God often earn a pleasant return on their investment—a good reputation and the respect of other

We remember Sarah for her strengths and accomplishments. She was intensely loyal to her own child. She became the mother of a nation and an ancestor of Jesus. Sarah was a woman of faith, the first woman listed in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11.

From the study of Sarah's life, we learn to respond to faith, even in the midst of failure. God is not bound by what usually happens. He can stretch the limits and cause unheard-of events to occur.

There probably isn't anything harder to do than wait, whether we are expecting something good, something bad, or an unknown.

One way we often cope with a long wait (or even a short one) is to begin helping God get his plan into action.

Sarah tried this approach. She was too old to expect to have a child of her own, so she thought God must have something else in mind. From Sarah's limited point of view this could only be to give Abraham a son through another woman—a common practice in her day.

The plan seemed harmless enough. Abraham would sleep with Sarah's maidservant, who would then give birth to a child. Sarah would take the child as her own.

The plan worked beautifully—at first. But as you read about the events that followed,

you will be struck by how often Sarah must have regretted the day she decided to push God's timetable ahead.

Another way we cope with a long wait is to gradually conclude that what we're waiting for is never going to happen. Sarah waited 90 years for a baby! When God told her she would finally have one of her own, she laughed, not so much from a lack of faith in what God could do, but from doubt about what he could do through her.

Chapter 3

Rebekah, a Woman of Prayer

Rebekah was a woman of godly character but not without her human weaknesses. Isaac's father, Abraham, had sent his trusted servant back to his country and people to choose a wife for his son. Remember Abraham was now living in the land of Canaan.

Genesis 24:1-4 (NLT)

Abraham was now a very old man, and the Lord had blessed him in every way. [2] One day Abraham said to the man in charge of his household, who was his oldest servant, [3] "Swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not let my son marry one of these local Canaanite women. [4] Go instead to my homeland, to my relatives, and find a wife there for my son Isaac."

Abraham wanted Isaac to marry within the family. This was a common and acceptable practice at this time that had the added advantage of avoiding intermarriage with pagan neighbors. The parents usually chose a son's wife. It was common for a woman to be married in her early teens although Rebekah was probably older.

Abraham's servant asked God for guidance in this very important task. Obviously Eliezer had learned much about faith and about God from his master. What are your family members, friends, and associates learning about God from watching you? Be like Abraham, setting an example of dependent faith. And be like Eliezer, asking God for guidance before any venture.

Rebekah, inspired by nothing more than a caring heart, drew water, not only for the servant but also for his camels. Supplying water for thirsty camels is a very demanding job. Rebekah, who was described as very beautiful, put her self through a lot of hard work for no apparent gain. She was a woman of godly character that is something of great worth in God's sight (1 Peter 3:3-4).

As soon as Abraham's servant knew that God had answered his prayer, he prayed and thanked God for his goodness and guidance. God will also use and lead us if we are available like Eliezer. And our first response should be praise and thanksgiving that God would choose to work in and through us.

Genesis 24:63-67 (NLT)

One evening as he (Isaac) was taking a walk out in the fields, meditating, he

looked up and saw the camels coming. [64] When Rebekah looked up and saw him, she quickly dismounted. [65] "Who is that man walking through the fields to meet us?" she asked the servant.

And he replied, "It is my master." So Rebekah covered her face with her veil. [66] Then the servant told Isaac the whole story. [67] And Isaac brought Rebekah into his mother's tent, and she became his wife. He loved her very much, and she was a special comfort to him after the death of his mother.

When Rebekah learned that the man coming to greet them was Isaac, her husband-to-be, she followed two customs: she dismounted from her camel to show respect, and she placed a veil over her face as a bride.

Isaac inherited everything from his father, including God's promise to make his descendants into a great nation. As a boy, Isaac did not resist as his father prepared to sacrifice him, and as a man, he gladly accepted the wife that others chose for him. Through Isaac, we learn how to let God guide our life and place his will ahead of our own.

It was Rebekah who pushed Jacob, her son, into deceiving his father and stealing his brothers blessing (Genesis 27:2-13). This resulted in great conflict in the home (Genesis 27:41-43).

When Rebekah learned that Isaac was preparing to bless Esau, she quickly devised a plan to trick him into blessing Jacob instead. Although God had already told her that Jacob would become the family leader (Genesis 25:23-26), Rebekah took matters into her own hands. She resorted to doing something wrong to try to bring about what God had already said would happen. For Rebekah, the end justified the means. No matter how good we think our goals are, we should not attempt to achieve them by doing what is wrong. Would God approve of the methods you are using to accomplish your goals?

Jacob hesitated when he heard Rebekah's deceitful plan. Although he questioned it for the wrong reason (fear of getting caught), he protested and thus gave her one last chance to reconsider. But Rebekah had become so wrapped up in her plan that she no longer saw clearly what she was doing. Sin had trapped her and was degrading her character. Correcting yourself in the middle of doing wrong may bring hurt and disappointment, but it also will bring freedom from sin's control.

Rebekah was aware that God's plan would be channeled through Jacob, not Esau (Genesis 25:23). So not only did Jacob become her favorite; she actually planned ways to ensure that he would overshadow his older twin. Meanwhile, Isaac preferred Esau.

This created a conflict between the couple. She felt justified in deceiving her husband when the time came to bless the sons, and her ingenious plan was carried out to perfection.

Most of the time we try to justify the things we choose to do. Often we attempt to add God's approval to our actions. While it is true that our actions will not spoil God's plan, it is also true that we are responsible for what we do and must always be cautious about our motives.

When thinking about a course of action, are you simply seeking God's stamp of approval on something you've already decided to do? Or are you willing to set the plan aside if the principles and commands of God's Word are against the action?

Initiative and action are admirable and right when they are controlled by God's wisdom. God's Word must guide our actions. God makes use of even our mistakes in his plan.

Chapter 4

Rachel and Leah

Rachel's story is told in Genesis 29:1-35:20. She is also mentioned in Ruth 4:11.

Genesis 29:15-18

Laban said to him, "You shouldn't work for me without pay just because we are relatives. How much do you want?" [16] Now Laban had two daughters: Leah, who was the oldest, and her younger sister, Rachel. [17] Leah had pretty eyes, but Rachel was beautiful in every way, with a lovely face and shapely figure. [18] Since Jacob was in love with Rachel, he told her father, "I'll work for you seven years if you'll give me Rachel, your younger daughter, as my wife."

Rachel and Leah were the wives of Jacob. After running away from his sins (Genesis 27) Jacob arrived at Laban, his mother's brother place. Rachel and Leah were the daughters of Laban. Rachel was more beautiful than Leah. Jacob fell in love with Rachel and agreed to work for Laban for seven years in exchange for marrying her.

It was the custom of the day for a man to present a dowry, or substantial gift, to the family of his future wife. This was to compensate the family for the loss of the girl. Jacob's dowry was not a material possession, for he had none to offer. Instead he agreed to work seven years for Laban. But there was another custom of the land that Laban did not tell Jacob. The older daughter had to be married first. By giving Jacob Leah and not Rachel, Laban tricked him into promising another seven years of hard work.

This was the beginning of Rachel's problems. Laban, her father, was not a trust worthy man and after seven years he deceived Jacob into marrying Leah instead of Rachel as promised.

Genesis 29:21-28 (NLT)

Finally, the time came for him to marry her. "I have fulfilled my contract," Jacob said to Laban. "Now give me my wife so we can be married."
[22] So Laban invited everyone in the neighborhood to celebrate with Jacob at a wedding feast. [23] That night, when it was dark, Laban took Leah to Jacob, and he slept with her. [24] And Laban gave Leah a servant, Zilpah, to be her maid. [25] But when Jacob woke up in the morning—it was Leah! "What sort of trick is this?" Jacob raged at Laban. "I worked seven years for Rachel. What do you mean by this trickery?"

[26] "It's not our custom to marry off a younger daughter ahead of the firstborn," Laban replied. [27] "Wait until the bridal week is over, and you can have Rachel, too—that is, if you promise to work another seven years for me."

[28] So Jacob agreed to work seven more years. A week after Jacob had married Leah, Laban gave him Rachel, too.

Rachel and Jacob were very much in love but the deception of Rachel's father had hurt her badly. It produced hurt and bitterness in her heart that she never really overcame. Bitterness is like poison to the soul. It destroys a person. Women of God need to be careful of the hurts and emotional wounds that may follow them from their backgrounds and childhood. These need to be dealt with. Only Jesus can heal these kinds of ailments.

Laban's dowry from Jacob (14 years of labor) was quite expensive. Rachel rightly thought that she had been exploited and sold. She never forgave her father for this (Genesis 31: 4 -18). The same can be said of Leah. Because of her father's actions in deceiving Jacob into marrying Leah, Rachel had to share her husband with her sister. Her father's sins affected her life. There was constant trouble in the home. Both sisters struggling for the attention of Jacob. Childbirth was used as the main weapon (Genesis 30).

Rachel had problems in bearing children and Leah used this to her advantage. Maybe the bitterness in Rachel's heart contributed to her problem in childbirth. God eventually gave her a child (Genesis 30:22) After Leah had given birth to four sons, Rachel remained unable to conceive. She became jealous of Leah and gave Jacob her maidservant, Bilhah, to be a surrogate mother for her. Bilhah gave birth to two sons that Rachel named and raised (Dan and Naphtali). Leah responds by offering her handmaid Zilpah to Jacob, and names and raises the two sons (Gad and Asher) that Zilpah bears. After Leah conceived again, Rachel was finally blessed with a son, Joseph, who would become Jacob's favorite child.

Although Jacob was tricked by Laban, he kept his part of the bargain. There was more at stake than just Jacob's hurt. There was Rachel to think about, as well as God's plan for his life. When we are tricked by others, keeping our part of the bargain may still be wise. Nursing our wounds or plotting revenge makes us unable to see from God's perspective. The lesson we learn from here is that we cannot afford to harbor unforgiveness in our hearts. It will only destroy us.

The remarks of Rachel and Leah in Genesis 31: 14 - 16 and the actions of Rachel in Genesis 31: 19, 35 showed the disgust she had for her father right to the very end. This again could have been the reason for the tragedy that befell her in Genesis 35: 16-19.

Rachel had every cause to be annoyed with her father. He had done her wrong. She and Jacob were very much in love and could have made a wonderful couple. Her father's actions destroyed this.

However, things did not have to go the way they did. Rachel's life stands out as an example and warning of how generation curses can affect us. God can turn these kind of situations around for us today if we serve Him and love Him with all our heart (Romans 8:28). If you love God you will forgive those that have hurt you and refuse to harbor bitterness in your heart against them. Bitterness destroys (Hebrews 12:15). It is in your own interest that you forgive. By God's grace and your will power you can forgive.

After getting your heart right with God, you can then pray and break the curses that might have been let lose in your life. It might be helpful to ask other believers to pray with you. Ask God for healing and a restoration of all the things that Satan has caused.

Remember, many times curses are let lose in our lives due to no reason on our behalf. Nevertheless it is within our authority to break them once we get our hearts right with God. Let Rachel's life be an example to your life and not a mirror of it.

God tells Jacob that it is time for him to return to his homeland.

Genesis 31:3-5 (NLT)

Then the Lord said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your father and grandfather and to your relatives there, and I will be with you."

[4] Jacob called Rachel and Leah out to the field where he was watching the flocks, [5] so he could talk things over with them. "Your father has turned against me and is not treating me like he used to," he told them. "But the God of my father has been with me.

Although Laban treated Jacob unfairly, God still increased Jacob's prosperity. God's power is not limited by lack of fair play. He has the ability to meet our needs and make us thrive even though others mistreat us. To give in and respond unfairly is to be no different from your enemies.

Jacob decided to return to the land of Canaan with his family. Fearing that Laban would deter him, he fled with his two wives, Leah and Rachel, and children without informing his father-in-law.

Leaving home was not difficult for Rachel and Leah because their father had treated them as poorly as he had Jacob. According to custom, they were supposed to receive the

benefits of the dowry Jacob paid for them, which was 14 years of hard work. When Laban did not give them what was rightfully theirs, they knew they would never inherit anything from their father. Thus they wholeheartedly approved of Jacob's plan to take the wealth he had gained and leave.

Laban followed him and accused him of stealing his idols. Rachel had taken her father's idols, hidden them inside her camel's seat cushion, and sat upon them. Not knowing that the idols were in his wife's possession, Jacob pronounced a curse on whoever had them: "With whoever you will find your gods, he will not live" (Genesis 31:32).

Laban searched the tents of Jacob and his wives, but when he came to Rachel's tent, she told her father, "Let not my lord be angered that I cannot rise up before you, for the way of women is upon me" (Genesis 31:35). Laban left her alone, but the curse Jacob had pronounced came true shortly thereafter. Rachael died while giving birth to her second son, Benjamin.

Do you remember feeling absolutely sure about something? Jacob was so sure that no one had stolen Laban's idols that he vowed to kill the offender. Because Rachel took them, this statement put her safety in serious jeopardy. Even when you are absolutely sure about a matter, it is safer to avoid rash statements. Someone may hold you to them.

Chapter 5

Rahab, From Sinner to Saint

Rahab's story is told in Joshua 2 and Joshua 6:22-23. She is also mentioned in Matthew 1:5; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25.

Joshua 2:1-9 (NLT)

Then Joshua secretly sent out two spies from the Israelite camp at Acacia. He instructed them, "Spy out the land on the other side of the Jordan River, especially around Jericho." So the two men set out and came to the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there that night.

Why would the spies stop at the house of Rahab, a prostitute? (1) It was a good place to gather information and have no questions asked in return. (2) Rahab's house was in an ideal location for a quick escape because it was built into the city wall (Joshua 2:15). (3) God directed the spies to Rahab's house because he knew her heart was open to him and that she would be instrumental in the Israelite victory over Jericho.

God often uses people with simple faith to accomplish his great purposes, no matter what kind of past they have had or how insignificant they seem to be.

[2] But someone told the king of Jericho, "Some Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land." [3] So the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab: "Bring out the men who have come into your house. They are spies sent here to discover the best way to attack us."

[4] Rahab, who had hidden the two men, replied, "The men were here earlier, but I didn't know where they were from. [5] They left the city at dusk, as the city gates were about to close, and I don't know where they went. If you hurry, you can probably catch up with them."

Was Rahab justified in lying to save the lives of the spies? Although the Bible does not speak negatively about her lie, it is clear that lying is sin. In Hebrews 11:31, however, Rahab is commended for her faith in God. Her lie is not mentioned. Several explanations have been offered: (1) God forgave Rahab's lie because of her faith; (2) Rahab was simply deceiving the enemy, a normal and acceptable practice in wartime; (3) because Rahab was not a Jew, she could not be held responsible for keeping the moral standards set forth in God's law; (4) Rahab broke a lesser principle—telling the truth—to uphold a higher principle—protecting God's people.

There may have been another way to save the lives of the Israelite spies. But under the pressure of the moment, Rahab had to make a choice. Most of us will face dilemmas at one time or another. We may feel that there is no perfect solution to our problem.

Fortunately, God does not demand that our judgment be perfect in all situations. He simply asks us to put our trust in him and to do the best we know how. Rahab did that and was commended for her faith.

Flax was harvested in the fields and piled high on the rooftops to dry. It was then made into yarn that was used to make linen cloth. Flax grows to a height of three or four feet. Stacked on the roof, it made an excellent hiding place for the spies.

[7] So the king's men went looking for the spies along the road leading to the shallow crossing places of the Jordan River. And as soon as the king's men had left, the city gate was shut.

[8] Before the spies went to sleep that night, Rahab went up on the roof to talk with them. [9] "I know the Lord has given you this land," she told them. "We are all afraid of you. Everyone is living in terror."

Many would assume that Rahab—a pagan, a Canaanite, and a prostitute—would never be interested in God. Yet Rahab was willing to risk everything she had for a God she barely knew. We must not gauge a person's interest in God by his or her background, life-style, or appearance. We should let nothing get in the way of our telling people about God.

Rahab recognized something that many of the Israelites did not—the God of heaven is not an ordinary god! He is all-powerful. The people of Jericho were afraid because they had heard the news of God's extraordinary power in defeating the armies across the Jordan River.

Today we can worship this same powerful, miracle-working God. He is powerful enough to destroy mighty, wicked armies, as he did in Jericho. He is also powerful enough to save us from certain death, as he did with Rahab.

Rahab knew her position was dangerous; she could have been killed if she were caught harboring the Israelites. Rahab took the risk, however, because she sensed that the Israelites relied on a God worth trusting. And God rewarded Rahab by promising safety for her and her family.

God works through people—like Rahab—whom we are inclined to reject. God remembers her because of her faith, not her profession. If at times you feel like a failure, remember that Rahab rose above her situation through her trust in God. You can do the same!

Rahab was a relative of Boaz, and thus an ancestor of David and of Jesus. She is one of only two women listed in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11. She was resourceful and willing to help others at great cost to herself.

She did not let fear affect her faith in God's ability to deliver. He is forever able to deliver his people.

Chapter 6

Ruth and Naomi

Their story is told in the book of Ruth. Ruth is also mentioned in Matthew 1:5.

The story of Ruth takes place sometime during the period of the rule of the judges. These were dark days for Israel, when “everyone did as he saw fit” (Judges 17:6; Judges 21:25). But during those dark and evil times, there were still some who followed God. Naomi and Ruth are beautiful examples of loyalty, friendship, and commitment—to God and to each other.

Moab was the land east of the Dead Sea. It was one of the nations that oppressed Israel during the period of the judges (Judges 3:12), so there was hostility between the two nations. The famine must have been quite severe in Israel for Elimelech to move his family here. They were called Ephrathites because Ephrath was an earlier name for Bethlehem. Even if Israel had already defeated Moab, there still would have been tensions between them.

In the beginning of the book of Ruth, we’re introduced to Naomi and her husband Elimelech. They are from Bethlehem, where a terrible famine has made it impossible to find food. So, they take their two sons and move to Moab, a foreign land where they believe they’ll be able to survive. Unfortunately, Elimelech dies shortly after arriving in Moab. Several years pass, and Naomi’s sons marry Ruth and Orpah, two women from the surrounding country. But before they can have children, the sons also die. Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah are left alone with no husbands and no sons.

There was almost nothing worse than being a widow in the ancient world. Widows were taken advantage of or ignored. They were almost always poverty stricken. God’s law, therefore, provided that the nearest relative of the dead husband should care for the widow; but Naomi had no relatives in Moab, and she did not know if any of her relatives were alive in Israel.

Even in her desperate situation, Naomi had a selfless attitude. Although she had decided to return to Israel, she encouraged Ruth and Orpah to stay in Moab and start their lives over, even though this would mean hardship for her. Like Naomi, we must consider the needs of others and not just our own. As Naomi discovered, when you act selflessly, others are encouraged to follow your example.

Ruth was a Moabitess, but that didn't stop her from worshiping the true God, nor did it stop God from accepting her worship and blessing her greatly. The Jews were not the only people God loved. God chose the Jews to be the people through whom the rest of the world would come to know him. This was fulfilled when Jesus Christ was born as a Jew. Through him, the entire world can come to know God. Acts 10:35 says that "(God) accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right." God accepts all who worship him; he works through people regardless of their race, sex, or nationality.

The book of Ruth is a perfect example of God's impartiality. Although Ruth belonged to a race often despised by Israel, she was blessed because of her faithfulness. She became a great-grandmother of King David and a direct ancestor of Jesus. No one should feel disqualified to serve God because of race, gender, or national background. And God can use every circumstance to build his kingdom.

When Naomi told Ruth and Orpah to go back to their own families, Ruth spoke the incredible words "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die — there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" (Ruth 1:16-17)

Naomi had experienced severe hardships. She had left Israel married and secure; she returned widowed and poor. Naomi changed her name to express the bitterness and pain she felt. Naomi was not rejecting God by openly expressing her pain. However, she seems to have lost sight of the tremendous resources she had in her relationship with Ruth and with God. When you face bitter times, God welcomes your honest prayers, but be careful not to overlook the love, strength, and resources that he provides in your present relationships. And don't allow bitterness and disappointment to blind you to your opportunities.

Bethlehem was about five miles southwest of Jerusalem. Lush fields and olive groves surrounded the town. Its harvests were abundant.

Ruth and Naomi's return to Bethlehem was certainly part of God's plan because in this town David would be born (1 Samuel 16:1), and, as predicted by the prophet Micah (Micah 5:2), Jesus Christ would also be born there. This move, then, was more than merely convenient for Ruth and Naomi. It led to the fulfillment of Scripture.

When the wheat and barley were ready to be harvested, reapers were hired to cut down the stalks and tie them into bundles. Israelite law demanded that the corners of the fields

not be harvested. In addition, any grain that was dropped was to be left for poor people who picked it up (this was called gleaning) and used it for food (Leviticus 19:9; Leviticus 23:22; Deut. 24:19). The purpose of this law was to feed the poor and to prevent the owners from hoarding. This law served as a type of welfare program in Israel. Because she was a widow with no means of providing for herself, Ruth went into the fields to glean the grain.

Ruth made her home in a foreign land. Instead of depending on Naomi or waiting for good fortune to happen, she took the initiative. She went to work. She was not afraid of admitting her need or working hard to supply it. When Ruth went out to the fields, God provided for her. If you are waiting for God to provide, consider this: He may be waiting for you to take the first step to demonstrate just how important your need is.

As Ruth works in the fields, she is seen by the owner who was named Boaz. Boaz was related to Naomi. He tells Ruth to remain in his fields to work.

Ruth 2:3-16 (NLT)

So Ruth went out to gather grain behind the harvesters. And as it happened, she found herself working in a field that belonged to Boaz, the relative of her father-in-law, Elimelech. [4] While she was there, Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters. "The Lord be with you!" he said. "The Lord bless you!" the harvesters replied.

[5] Then Boaz asked his foreman, "Who is that girl over there?"

[6] And the foreman replied, "She is the young woman from Moab who came back with Naomi. [7] She asked me this morning if she could gather grain behind the harvesters. She has been hard at work ever since, except for a few minutes' rest over there in the shelter."

[8] Boaz went over and said to Ruth, "Listen, my daughter. Stay right here with us when you gather grain; don't go to any other fields. Stay right behind the women working in my field. [9] See which part of the field they are harvesting, and then follow them. I have warned the young men not to bother you. And when you are thirsty, help yourself to the water they have drawn from the well."

[10] Ruth fell at his feet and thanked him warmly. "Why are you being so kind to me?" she asked. "I am only a foreigner." [11] "Yes, I know," Boaz replied. "But I also know about the love and kindness you have shown your mother-in-law since the death of your husband. I have heard how you left your father and mother and your own land to live here among complete strangers. [12] May the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully."

[13] "I hope I continue to please you, sir," she replied. "You have comforted me by speaking so kindly to me, even though I am not as worthy as your workers."

[14] At lunchtime Boaz called to her, "Come over here and help yourself to some of our food. You can dip your bread in the wine if you like." So she sat with his harvesters, and Boaz gave her food—more than she could eat

[15] When Ruth went back to work again, Boaz ordered his young men, "Let her gather grain right among the sheaves without stopping her. [16] And pull out some heads of barley from the bundles and drop them on purpose for her. Let her pick them up, and don't give her a hard time!"

The characters in the book of Ruth are classic examples of good people in action. Boaz went far beyond the intent of the gleaners' law in demonstrating his kindness and generosity. Not only did he let Ruth glean in his field, he also told his workers to let some of the grain fall in her path. Out of his abundance, he provided for the needy. How often do you go beyond the accepted patterns of providing for those less fortunate? Do more than the minimum for others.

Ruth proposes marriage to Boaz (Ruth 3).

Ruth approached Boaz during the night, at the threshing floor,. The next morning, Ruth suggested that they marry, reminding Boaz of his obligation to her as her nearest male kin. Boaz promised to do all he could.

Ruth and Boaz marry (Ruth 4) - the happy ending.

Boaz proved as good as his word, and he and Ruth were married. She had a son called Obed, and Naomi cared for the child, who would grow up to be the grandfather of King David.

God brought great blessings out of Naomi's tragedy, even greater than "seven sons," or an abundance of heirs. Throughout her tough times, Naomi continued to trust God. And God, in his time, blessed her greatly. Even in our sorrow and calamity, God can bring great blessings. Be like Naomi, and don't turn your back on God when tragedy strikes. Instead of asking "How can God allow this to happen to me?" trust him. He will be with you in the hard times.

Chapter 7

Delilah

Delilah's story is told in Judges 16.

Judges 16:4-21 (NLT)

Later Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah, who lived in the valley of Sorek. [5] The leaders of the Philistines went to her and said, "Find out from Samson what makes him so strong and how he can be overpowered and tied up securely. Then each of us will give you eleven hundred pieces of silver."

The Philistines were ruled by five rulers, not just one. Each ruler ruled from a different city—Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath, or Gaza. Each of these cities was an important center for trade and commerce. Given Delilah's character, it is little wonder that she betrayed Samson when these rich and powerful men paid her a personal visit.

[6] So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me what makes you so strong and what it would take to tie you up securely."

[7] Samson replied, "If I am tied up with seven new bowstrings that have not yet been dried, I will be as weak as anyone else."

[8] So the Philistine leaders brought Delilah seven new bowstrings, and she tied Samson up with them. [9] She had hidden some men in one of the rooms of her house, and she cried out, "Samson! The Philistines have come to capture you!" But Samson snapped the bowstrings as if they were string that had been burned in a fire. So the secret of his strength was not discovered.

[10] Afterward Delilah said to him, "You made fun of me and told me a lie! Now please tell me how you can be tied up securely."

[11] Samson replied, "If I am tied up with brand-new ropes that have never been used, I will be as weak as anyone else."

[12] So Delilah took new ropes and tied him up with them. The men were hiding in the room as before, and again Delilah cried out, "Samson! The Philistines have come to capture you!" But Samson snapped the ropes from his arms as if they were thread.

[13] Then Delilah said, "You have been making fun of me and telling me lies! Won't you please tell me how you can be tied up securely?" Samson replied, "If you weave the seven braids of my hair into the fabric on your loom and tighten it with the loom shuttle, I will be as weak as anyone else."

So while he slept, Delilah wove the seven braids of his hair into the fabric [14]

and tightened it with the loom shuttle. Again she cried out, "Samson! The Philistines have come to capture you!" But Samson woke up, pulled back the loom shuttle, and yanked his hair away from the loom and the fabric.

[15] Then Delilah pouted, "How can you say you love me when you don't confide in me? You've made fun of me three times now, and you still haven't told me what makes you so strong!"

Samson was deceived because he wanted to believe Delilah's lies. Although he could strangle a lion, he could not smother his burning lust and see Delilah for who she really was.

[16] So day after day she nagged him until he couldn't stand it any longer. [17] Finally, Samson told her his secret. "My hair has never been cut," he confessed, "for I was dedicated to God as a Nazirite from birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as anyone else."

Delilah kept asking Samson for the secret of his strength until he finally grew tired of hearing her nagging and gave in. This was the second time that Samson allowed himself to be worn down by persistent nagging (Judges 14:17). Don't allow anyone, no matter how attractive or persuasive, to talk you into doing wrong.

[18] Delilah realized he had finally told her the truth, so she sent for the Philistine leaders. "Come back one more time," she said, "for he has told me everything." So the Philistine leaders returned and brought the money with them. [19] Delilah lulled Samson to sleep with his head in her lap, and she called in a man to shave off his hair, making his capture certain. And his strength left him.

Delilah was a deceitful woman with honey on her lips and poison in her heart. Cold and calculating, she toyed with Samson, pretending to love him while looking for personal gain. How could Samson be so foolish? Four times Delilah took advantage of him. If he didn't realize what was happening after the first or second experience, surely he should have understood the situation by the fourth time! We think Samson is foolish, but how many times do we allow ourselves to be deceived by flattery and give in to temptation and wrong beliefs? Avoid falling prey to deceit by asking God to help you distinguish between deception and truth.

[20] Then she cried out, "Samson! The Philistines have come to capture you!" When he woke up, he thought, "I will do as before and shake myself free." But he didn't realize the Lord had left him. [21] So the Philistines captured him and gouged out his eyes. They took him to Gaza, where he was bound with bronze

chains and made to grind grain in the prison.

Samson, the mighty warrior, became a slave. Rather than kill him, the Philistines preferred to humiliate him by gouging out his eyes and making him grind grain. Samson now had plenty of time to wonder if Delilah's charms were worth spending the rest of his life in humiliation.

Although God did not completely abandon Samson (Judges 16:28-30), he allowed Samson's decision to stand, and the consequences of his decision followed naturally. We may choose to be close to God or to go our own way, but there are consequences resulting from our choice. Samson didn't choose to be captured, but he chose to be with Delilah, and he could not escape the consequences of his decision.

Blinded and without strength, Samson was taken to Gaza where he would spend the rest of his short life. Gaza was one of the five capital cities of the Philistines. Known for its many wells, Gaza was a vital stop along a great caravan route that connected Egypt to the south with Aram to the north. The Philistines probably showed off their prize captive, Samson, to many dignitaries passing through.

Ironically, it was in Gaza that Samson had earlier demonstrated his great strength by uprooting the city gates (Judges 16:1-3). Now he was an example of weakness.

A person's greatest accomplishment may well be helping others accomplish great things. Likewise, a person's greatest failure may be preventing others from achieving greatness.

Delilah played a minor role in Samson's life, but her effect was devastating, for she influenced him to betray his special calling from God. Motivated by greed, Delilah used her persistence to wear down Samson. His infatuation with her made Samson a vulnerable target. For all his physical strength, he was no match for her, and he paid a great price for giving in to her. Delilah is never mentioned again in the Bible. Her unfaithfulness to Samson brought ruin to him and to her people.

Delilah was persistent when faced with obstacles, yet she valued money more than relationships and betrayed the man who trusted her. We need to be careful to place our trust only in people who are trustworthy

Chapter 8

The Story of Hannah

Judges had ruled Israel for over 200 years. Eli and Samuel are the last of those judges. Samuel is born near the end of Eli's life. He grows up in the tabernacle as a priest-in-training under Eli and is well qualified to serve Israel as both a priest and a judge. Although the nation has fallen away from God, it is clear that God is preparing Samuel from the very beginning to lead the nation back to right living. God is always in control; he is able to bring his people back to him.

The book of 1 Samuel begins in the days when the judges still ruled Israel, possibly during the closing years of Samson's life. Samuel was Israel's last judge and the first priest and prophet to serve during the time of a king. He was the best example of what a good judge should be, governing the people by God's word and not by his own impulses. Samuel was the man who anointed Saul as Israel's first king.

Hannah's story is told in 1 Samuel 1-2

1 Samuel 1:1-6 (NLT)

There was a man named Elkanah who lived in Ramah in the hill country of Ephraim. He was the son of Jeroham and grandson of Elihu, from the family of Tohu and the clan of Zuph. [2] Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah had children, while Hannah did not.

[3] Each year Elkanah and his family would travel to Shiloh to worship and sacrifice to the Lord Almighty at the Tabernacle. The priests of the Lord at that time were the two sons of Eli—Hophni and Phinehas.

The tabernacle (Tent of Meeting) was located at Shiloh, the religious center of the nation (see Joshua 18:1). Three times a year all Israelite men were required to attend a religious feast held at the tabernacle: the Passover with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 16:16). Elkanah made this pilgrimage regularly to fulfill God's commands. (See Exodus 23:14-17 for the regulations concerning the pilgrimage.)

[4] On the day Elkanah presented his sacrifice, he would give portions of the sacrifice to Peninnah and each of her children. [5] But he gave Hannah a special portion because he loved her very much, even though the Lord had given her no children. [6] But Peninnah made fun of Hannah because the Lord had closed her

womb.

Hannah had been unable to conceive children, and in Old Testament times, a childless woman was considered a failure. Her barrenness was a social embarrassment for her husband. Children were a very important part of the society's economic structure. They were a source of labor for the family, and it was their duty to care for their parents in their old age. If a wife could not bear children she was often obligated, by ancient Middle Eastern custom, to give one of her servant girls to her husband to bear children for her. Although Elkanah could have left Hannah (a husband was permitted to divorce a barren wife), he remained lovingly devoted to her despite social criticism and his rights under civil law.

Year after year it was the same—Peninnah would taunt Hannah as they went to the Tabernacle. Hannah would finally be reduced to tears and would not even eat.

Part of God's plan for Hannah involved postponing her years of childbearing. While Peninnah and Elkanah looked at Hannah's outward circumstances, God was moving ahead with his plan. Think of those in your world who are struggling with God's timing in answering their prayers and who need your love and help. By supporting those who are struggling, you may help them remain steadfast in their faith and confident in his timing to bring fulfillment to their lives.

[8] "What's the matter, Hannah?" Elkanah would ask. "Why aren't you eating? Why be so sad just because you have no children? You have me—isn't that better than having ten sons?"

Hannah knew her husband loved her, but even his encouragement could not comfort her. She could not keep from listening to Peninnah's jeers and letting Peninnah's words erode her self-confidence. Although we cannot keep others from unjustly criticizing us, we can choose how we will react to their hurtful words. Rather than dwelling upon our problems, we can enjoy the loving relationships God has given us. By so doing, we can exchange self-pity for hope.

[9] Once when they were at Shiloh, Hannah went over to the Tabernacle after supper to pray to the Lord. Eli the priest was sitting at his customary place beside the entrance. [10] Hannah was in deep anguish, crying bitterly as she prayed to the Lord.

Hannah had good reason to feel discouraged and bitter. She was unable to bear children; she shared her husband with a woman who ridiculed her (1 Samuel 1:7); her loving

husband could not solve her problem (1 Samuel 1:8); and even the high priest misunderstood her motives (1 Samuel 1:14). But instead of retaliating or giving up hope, Hannah prayed. She brought her problem honestly before God.

Each of us may face times of barrenness when nothing “comes to birth” in our work, service, or relationships. It is difficult to pray in faith when we feel so ineffective. But, as Hannah discovered, prayer opens the way for God to work (1 Samuel 1:19-20).

[11] And she made this vow: "O Lord Almighty, if you will look down upon my sorrow and answer my prayer and give me a son, then I will give him back to you. He will be yours for his entire lifetime, and as a sign that he has been dedicated to the Lord, his hair will never be cut."

Be careful what you promise in prayer because God may take you up on it. Hannah so desperately wanted a child that she was willing to strike a bargain with God. God took her up on her promise, and to Hannah's credit, she did her part, even though it was painful (1 Samuel 1:27-28).

Although we are not in a position to barter with God, he may still choose to answer a prayer that has an attached promise. When you pray, ask yourself, “Will I follow through on any promises I make to God if he grants my request?” It is dishonest and dangerous to ignore a promise, especially to God. God keeps his promises, and he expects you to keep yours.

[12] As she was praying to the Lord, Eli watched her. [13] Seeing her lips moving but hearing no sound, he thought she had been drinking. [14] "Must you come here drunk?" he demanded. "Throw away your wine!"

[15] "Oh no, sir!" she replied, "I'm not drunk! But I am very sad, and I was pouring out my heart to the Lord. [16] Please don't think I am a wicked woman! For I have been praying out of great anguish and sorrow."

[17] "In that case," Eli said, "cheer up! May the God of Israel grant the request you have asked of him."

[18] "Oh, thank you, sir!" she exclaimed. Then she went back and began to eat again, and she was no longer sad.

Earlier Hannah had been discouraged to the point of being physically sick and unable to eat. At this point, she returned home well and happy. The change in her attitude may be attributed to three factors: (1) she honestly prayed to God (1 Samuel 1:11); (2) she received encouragement from Eli (1 Samuel 1:17); (3) she resolved to leave the problem with God (1 Samuel 1:18). This is the antidote for discouragement: tell God how you

really feel and leave your problems with him. Then rely upon the support of good friends and counselors.

[19] The entire family got up early the next morning and went to worship the Lord once more. Then they returned home to Ramah. When Elkanah slept with Hannah, the Lord remembered her request, [20] and in due time she gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I asked the Lord for him."

[21] The next year Elkanah, Peninnah, and their children went on their annual trip to offer a sacrifice to the Lord. [22] But Hannah did not go. She told her husband, "Wait until the baby is weaned. Then I will take him to the Tabernacle and leave him there with the Lord permanently."

[23] "Whatever you think is best," Elkanah agreed. "Stay here for now, and may the Lord help you keep your promise." So she stayed home and nursed the baby.

[24] When the child was weaned, Hannah took him to the Tabernacle in Shiloh. They brought along a three-year-old bull for the sacrifice and half a bushel of flour and some wine. [25] After sacrificing the bull, they took the child to Eli. [26] "Sir, do you remember me?" Hannah asked. "I am the woman who stood here several years ago praying to the Lord. [27] I asked the Lord to give me this child, and he has given me my request. [28] Now I am giving him to the Lord, and he will belong to the Lord his whole life." And they worshiped the Lord there.

To do what she promised (1 Samuel 1:11), Hannah gave up what she wanted most—her son—and presented him to Eli to serve in the house of the Lord. In dedicating her only son to God, Hannah was dedicating her entire life and future to God. Because Samuel's life was from God, Hannah was not really giving him up. Rather, she was returning him to God who had given Samuel to Hannah in the first place. These verses illustrate the kind of gifts we should give to God. Do your gifts cost you little (Sunday mornings, a comfortable tithe), or are they gifts of sacrifice? Are you presenting God with tokens, or are you presenting him with your entire life?

Samuel was probably three years old—the customary age for weaning—when his mother left him at the tabernacle. By saying, "I give him to the LORD," Hannah meant that she was dedicating Samuel to God for lifetime service. She did not, of course, forget her much-wanted son. She visited him regularly. And each year she brought him a robe just like Eli's (1 Samuel 2:19). In later years, Samuel lived in Ramah (1 Samuel 7:17), his parents' hometown (1 Samuel 1:19-20).

1 Samuel 2:11 (NLT)

Then Elkanah and Hannah returned home to Ramah without Samuel. And the boy became the Lord's helper, for he assisted Eli the priest.

Hannah praised God for his answer to her prayer for a son. The theme of her poetic prayer is her confidence in God's sovereignty and her thankfulness for everything he had done. Mary, the mother of Jesus, modeled her own praise song, called the Magnificat, after Hannah's prayer (Luke 1:46-55). Like Hannah and Mary, we should be confident of God's ultimate control over the events in our lives, and we should be thankful for the ways God has blessed us. By praising God for all good gifts, we acknowledge his ultimate control over all the affairs of life.

Hannah praised God for being a Rock—firm, strong, and unchanging. In our fast-paced world, friends come and go, and circumstances change. It's difficult to find a solid foundation that will not change. Those who devote their lives to achievements, causes, or possessions have as their security that which is finite and changeable. The possessions that we work so hard to obtain will all pass away. But God is always present. Hope in him. He will never fail.

Hannah's prayer shows us that all we have and receive is on loan from God. Hannah might have had many excuses for being a possessive mother. But when God answered her prayer, she followed through on her promise to dedicate Samuel to God's service.

She discovered that the greatest joy in having a child is to give that child fully and freely back to God. She entered motherhood prepared to do what all mothers must eventually do—trust their children in the hands of God.

Chapter 9

Abigail, a Woman of Integrity

The story of Abigail is told in 1 Samuel 25-2 and Samuel 2. She is also mentioned in 1 Chronicles 3:1.

1 Samuel 25:1-42 (NLT)

Now Samuel died, and all Israel gathered for his funeral. They buried him near his home at Ramah.

Then David moved down to the wilderness of Maon. [2] There was a wealthy man from Maon who owned property near the village of Carmel. He had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats, and it was sheep-shearing time. [3] This man's name was Nabal, and his wife, Abigail, was a sensible and beautiful woman. But Nabal, a descendant of Caleb, was mean and dishonest in all his dealings.

[4] When David heard that Nabal was shearing his sheep, [5] he sent ten of his young men to Carmel. He told them to deliver this message: [6] "Peace and prosperity to you, your family, and everything you own! [7] I am told that you are shearing your sheep and goats. While your shepherds stayed among us near Carmel, we never harmed them, and nothing was ever stolen from them. [8] Ask your own servants, and they will tell you this is true. So would you please be kind to us, since we have come at a time of celebration? Please give us any provisions you might have on hand." [9] David's young men gave this message to Nabal and waited for his reply.

[10] "Who is this fellow David?" Nabal sneered. "Who does this son of Jesse think he is? There are lots of servants these days who run away from their masters. [11] Should I take my bread and water and the meat I've slaughtered for my shearers and give it to a band of outlaws who come from who knows where?"

Nabal rudely refused David's request to feed his 600 men. If we sympathize with Nabal, it is because customs are so different today. First, simple hospitality demanded that travelers—any number of them—be fed. Nabal was very rich and could have easily afforded to meet David's request. Second, David wasn't asking for a handout. He and his men had been protecting Nabal's work force, and part of Nabal's prosperity was due to David's vigilance. We should be generous with those who protect us and help us prosper, even if we are not obligated to do so by law or custom.

[12] So David's messengers returned and told him what Nabal had said.

[13] "Get your swords!" was David's reply as he strapped on his own. Four hundred men started off with David, and two hundred remained behind to guard their equipment.

[14] Meanwhile, one of Nabal's servants went to Abigail and told her, "David sent men from the wilderness to talk to our master, and he insulted them. [15] But David's men were very good to us, and we never suffered any harm from them. Nothing was stolen from us the whole time they were with us. [16] In fact, day and night they were like a wall of protection to us and the sheep. [17] You'd better think fast, for there is going to be trouble for our master and his whole family. He's so ill-tempered that no one can even talk to him!"

[18] Abigail lost no time. She quickly gathered two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five dressed sheep, nearly a bushel of roasted grain, one hundred raisin cakes, and two hundred fig cakes. She packed them on donkeys and said to her servants, [19] "Go on ahead. I will follow you shortly." But she didn't tell her husband what she was doing.

[20] As she was riding her donkey into a mountain ravine, she saw David and his men coming toward her. [21] David had just been saying, "A lot of good it did to help this fellow. We protected his flocks in the wilderness, and nothing he owned was lost or stolen. But he has repaid me evil for good. [22] May God deal with me severely if even one man of his household is still alive tomorrow morning!"

[23] When Abigail saw David, she quickly got off her donkey and bowed low before him. [24] She fell at his feet and said, "I accept all blame in this matter, my lord. Please listen to what I have to say.

David was in no mood to listen when he set out for Nabal's property (1 Samuel 25:13, 22). Nevertheless, he stopped to hear what Abigail had to say. If he had ignored her, he would have been guilty of taking vengeance into his own hands. No matter how right we think we are, we must always be careful to stop and listen to others. The extra time and effort can save us pain and trouble in the long run.

[25] I know Nabal is a wicked and ill-tempered man; please don't pay any attention to him. He is a fool, just as his name suggests. But I never even saw the messengers you sent.

[26] "Now, my lord, as surely as the Lord lives and you yourself live, since the Lord has kept you from murdering and taking vengeance into your own hands, let all your enemies be as cursed as Nabal is. [27] And here is a present I have brought to you and your young men. [28] Please forgive me if I have offended in any way. The Lord will surely reward you with a lasting dynasty, for you are fighting the Lord's battles. And you have not done wrong throughout your entire

life.

[29] "Even when you are chased by those who seek your life, you are safe in the care of the Lord your God, secure in his treasure pouch! But the lives of your enemies will disappear like stones shot from a sling! [30] When the Lord has done all he promised and has made you leader of Israel, [31] don't let this be a blemish on your record. Then you won't have to carry on your conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed and vengeance. And when the Lord has done these great things for you, please remember me!"

[32] David replied to Abigail, "Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you to meet me today! [33] Thank God for your good sense! Bless you for keeping me from murdering the man and carrying out vengeance with my own hands. [34] For I swear by the Lord, the God of Israel, who has kept me from hurting you, that if you had not hurried out to meet me, not one of Nabal's men would be alive tomorrow morning." [35] Then David accepted her gifts and told her, "Return home in peace. We will not kill your husband."

[36] When Abigail arrived home, she found that Nabal had thrown a big party and was celebrating like a king. He was very drunk, so she didn't tell him anything about her meeting with David until the next morning.

Because Nabal was drunk, Abigail waited until morning to tell him what she had done. Abigail knew that Nabal, in his drunkenness, may not have understood her or may have reacted foolishly. When discussing difficult matters with people, especially family members, timing is everything. Ask God for wisdom to know the best time for confrontation and for bringing up touchy subjects.

[37] The next morning when he was sober, she told him what had happened. As a result he had a stroke, and he lay on his bed paralyzed. [38] About ten days later, the Lord struck him and he died.

[39] When David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, "Praise the Lord, who has paid back Nabal and kept me from doing it myself. Nabal has received the punishment for his sin." Then David wasted no time in sending messengers to Abigail to ask her to become his wife.

[40] When the messengers arrived at Carmel, they told Abigail, "David has sent us to ask if you will marry him."

[41] She bowed low to the ground and responded, "Yes, I am even willing to become a slave to David's servants!" [42] Quickly getting ready, she took along five of her servant girls as attendants, mounted her donkey, and went with David's messengers. And so she became his wife.

Abigail was an effective counselor to both of the men in her life, working hard to

prevent them from making rash moves. By her swift action and skillful negotiation, she kept David from taking vengeance upon Nabal. She saw the big picture and left plenty of room for God to get involved.

Do you, like Abigail, look beyond the present crisis to the big picture? Do you use your skills to promote peace? Are you loyal without being blind? What challenge or responsibility do you face today that needs a person under God's control? She was sensible and capable and able to see beyond herself.

Chapter 10

Remember Lot's Wife

Two angels in the guise of men arrived in nefarious Sodom one evening, determined to lead Lot's family to safety before wiping the ancient city off the planet, since "the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord" (Genesis 13:13).

When Lot still hesitated, the angels seized his hand and the hands of his wife and two daughters and rushed them to safety outside the city, for the Lord was merciful.

Genesis 19:15-26 (NLT)

At dawn the next morning the angels became insistent. "Hurry," they said to Lot. "Take your wife and your two daughters who are here. Get out of here right now, or you will be caught in the destruction of the city."

[16] When Lot still hesitated, the angels seized his hand and the hands of his wife and two daughters and rushed them to safety outside the city, for the Lord was merciful. [17] "Run for your lives!" the angels warned. "Do not stop anywhere in the valley. And don't look back! Escape to the mountains, or you will die."

[18] "Oh no, my lords, please," Lot begged. [19] "You have been so kind to me and saved my life, and you have granted me such mercy. But I cannot go to the mountains. Disaster would catch up to me there, and I would soon die. [20] See, there is a small village nearby. Please let me go there instead; don't you see how small it is? Then my life will be saved."

[21] "All right," the angel said, "I will grant your request. I will not destroy that little village. [22] But hurry! For I can do nothing until you are there." From that time on, that village was known as Zoar.

[23] The sun was rising as Lot reached the village. [24] Then the Lord rained down fire and burning sulfur from the heavens on Sodom and Gomorrah. [25] He utterly destroyed them, along with the other cities and villages of the plain, eliminating all life—people, plants, and animals alike. [26] But Lot's wife looked back as she was following along behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.

Notice how God's mercy toward Abraham extended to Lot and his family. Because Abraham pleaded for Lot, God was merciful and saved Lot from the fiery destruction of Sodom. A righteous person can often affect others for good. James says that the prayers of a righteous person are powerful (see James 5:16). All Christians should follow Abraham's example and pray for others to be saved.

In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, we see two facets of God's character: his great patience (agreeing to spare a wicked city for ten good people) and his fierce anger (destroying both cities). As we grow spiritually, we should find ourselves developing a deeper respect for God because of his anger toward sin, and also a deeper love for God because of his patience when we sin.

Lot's wife turned back to look at the smoldering city of Sodom. Clinging to the past, she was unwilling to turn completely away. Are you looking back longingly at sin while trying to move forward with God? You can't make progress with God as long as you are holding on to pieces of your old life. Jesus said it this way in Matthew 6:24: "No one can serve two masters."

Chapter 11

The Widow Receives a Miracle

2 Kings 4:1-7:

One day the widow of one of Elisha's fellow prophets came to Elisha and cried out to him, "My husband who served you is dead, and you know how he feared the Lord. But now a creditor has come, threatening to take my two sons as slaves."

[2] "What can I do to help you?" Elisha asked. "Tell me, what do you have in the house?" [3] And Elisha said, "Borrow as many empty jars as you can from your friends and neighbors. [4] Then go into your house with your sons and shut the door behind you. Pour olive oil from your flask into the jars, setting the jars aside as they are filled."

[5] So she did as she was told. Her sons brought many jars to her, and she filled one after another. [6] Soon every container was full to the brim!

"Bring me another jar," she said to one of her sons. "There aren't any more!" he told her. And then the olive oil stopped flowing. [7] When she told the man of God what had happened, he said to her, "Now sell the olive oil and pay your debts, and there will be enough money left over to support you and your sons."

Poor people and debtors were allowed to pay their debts by selling themselves or their children as slaves. God ordered rich people and creditors not to take advantage of these people during their time of extreme need (see Deut. 15:1-18 for an explanation of these practices). This woman's creditor was not acting in the spirit of God's law. Elisha's kind deed demonstrates that God wants us to go beyond simply keeping the law. We must also show compassion.

The woman and her sons collected jars from their neighbors, pouring oil into them from their one pot. The oil was probably olive oil and was used for cooking, for lamps, and for fuel. The oil stopped pouring only when they ran out of containers.

The miracle was given according to the measure of her previous faith in borrowing vessels. She did not borrow enough so the excess oil was sold and provided money to pay the debt to the creditor and to provide for the future. Had she borrowed more, more would have been provided; had she gathered less, less would have been provided.

"If she borrowed few vessels, she would have but little oil; if she borrowed many vessels they should all be filled, and she should have much oil. She was herself to measure out what she should have; and I believe that you and I, in the matter of spiritual blessings

from God, have more to do with the measurement of our mercies than we think. We make our blessings little, because our prayers are little.” (Spurgeon)

The oil did not pour out on the ground or simply flow about. It was intended for a prepared vessel. Each vessel had to be prepared by being gathered, by being assembled, by being emptied, by being put in the right position and by staying in the right position. When there were no more prepared vessels, the oil stopped.

The principle of this miracle was the same as the principle of the ditches dug in the previous chapter of 2 Kings. The amount of man’s work with the miracle determined the amount of blessing and provision actually received. God’s powerful provision invites our hard work and never excuses laziness.

Chapter 12

The Woman Who Cared for Elijah During the Famine

2 Kings 4:8-37

One day Elisha went to the town of Shunem. A wealthy woman lived there, and she invited him to eat some food. From then on, whenever he passed that way, he would stop there to eat.

She said to her husband, "I am sure this man who stops in from time to time is a holy man of God. Let's make a little room for him on the roof and furnish it with a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp. Then he will have a place to stay whenever he comes by."

Lessons to learn:

- Showing kindness is something every believer should do. (Romans 12:13, Galatians 5:13, Galatians 6:10, 1 Peter 4:9)
- That God rewards those who serve others.
- God can bring good out of our difficulties.

The Shunemmite woman realized that Elisha was a man of God, and so she prepared a room for him to use whenever he was in town. She did this out of kindness and because she sensed a need, not for any selfish motives. Soon, however, her kindness would be rewarded far beyond her wildest dreams.

How sensitive are you to those who pass by your home and flow through your life—especially those who teach and preach God's Word?

One day Elisha returned to Shunem, and he went up to his room to rest. He said to his servant Gehazi, "Tell the woman I want to speak to her." When she arrived, Elisha said to Gehazi, "Tell her that we appreciate the kind concern she has shown us. Now ask her what we can do for her. Does she want me to put in a good word for her to the king or to the commander of the army?"

"No," she replied, "my family takes good care of me." Later Elisha asked Gehazi, "What do you think we can do for her?" He suggested, "She doesn't have a son, and her husband is an old man." "Call her back again," Elisha told him. When the woman returned, Elisha said to her as she stood in the doorway, "Next year at about this time

you will be holding a son in your arms!"

"No, my lord!" she protested. "Please don't lie to me like that, O man of God." But sure enough, the woman soon became pregnant. And at that time the following year she had a son, just as Elisha had said.

One day when her child was older, he went out to visit his father, who was working with the harvesters. Suddenly he complained, "My head hurts! My head hurts!" His father said to one of the servants, "Carry him home to his mother."

So the servant took him home, and his mother held him on her lap. But around noontime he died. She carried him up to the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and left him there. She sent a message to her husband: "Send one of the servants and a donkey so that I can hurry to the man of God and come right back."

"Why today?" he asked. "It is neither a new moon festival nor a Sabbath." But she said, "It's all right." So she saddled the donkey and said to the servant, "Hurry! Don't slow down on my account unless I tell you to." As she approached the man of God at Mount Carmel, Elisha saw her in the distance. He said to Gehazi, "Look, the woman from Shunem is coming. Run out to meet her and ask her, 'Is everything all right with you, with your husband, and with your child?' "

"Yes," the woman told Gehazi, "everything is fine." But when she came to the man of God at the mountain, she fell to the ground before him and caught hold of his feet. Gehazi began to push her away, but the man of God said, "Leave her alone. Something is troubling her deeply, and the Lord has not told me what it is." Then she said, "It was you, my lord, who said I would have a son. And didn't I tell you not to raise my hopes?"

Then Elisha said to Gehazi, "Get ready to travel; take my staff and go! Don't talk to anyone along the way. Go quickly and lay the staff on the child's face."

But the boy's mother said, "As surely as the Lord lives and you yourself live, I won't go home unless you go with me." So Elisha returned with her. Gehazi hurried on ahead and laid the staff on the child's face, but nothing happened. There was no sign of life. He returned to meet Elisha and told him, "The child is still dead."

When Elisha arrived, the child was indeed dead, lying there on the prophet's bed. [33] He went in alone and shut the door behind him and prayed to the Lord. Then he lay down on the child's body, placing his mouth on the child's mouth, his eyes on the child's eyes, and his hands on the child's hands. And the child's body began to grow warm

again! Elisha got up and walked back and forth in the room a few times. Then he stretched himself out again on the child. This time the boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes!

Then Elisha summoned Gehazi. "Call the child's mother!" he said. And when she came in, Elisha said, "Here, take your son!" She fell at his feet, overwhelmed with gratitude. Then she picked up her son and carried him downstairs.

Elisha's prayer and method of raising the dead boy show God's personal care for hurting people. We must express genuine concern for others as we carry God's message to them. Only then will we faithfully represent our Father in heaven.

Chapter 13

Esther the Queen

Esther's story begins in 483 B.C., 103 years after Nebuchadnezzar had taken the Jews into captivity (2 Kings 25), 54 years after Zerubbabel led the first group of exiles back to Jerusalem (Ezra 1-2), and 25 years before Ezra led the second group to Jerusalem (Ezra 7). Esther lived in the kingdom of Persia, the dominant kingdom in the Middle East after Babylon's fall in 539 B.C. Esther's parents must have been among those exiles who chose not to return to Jerusalem, even though Cyrus, the Persian king, had issued a decree allowing them to do so. The Jewish exiles had great freedom in Persia, and many remained because they had established themselves there or were fearful of the dangerous journey back to their homeland.

Xerxes the Great was Persia's fifth king (486-465 B.C.). He was proud and impulsive, as we see from the events in Esther 1. His winter palace was in Susa, where he held the banquet described in Esther 1:3-7. Persian kings often held great banquets before going to war. In 481, Xerxes launched an attack against Greece. After his fleet won a great victory at Thermopylae, he was defeated at Salamis in 480 and had to return to Persia. Esther became queen in 479.

The celebration lasted 180 days (about six months) because its real purpose was to plan the battle strategy for invading Greece and to demonstrate that the king had sufficient wealth to carry it out. Waging war was not only for survival; it was a means of acquiring more wealth, territory, and power.

Esther's beauty and character won Xerxes' heart, and he made her his queen. Even in her favored position, however, she would risk her life by attempting to see the king when he had not requested her presence. There was no guarantee that the king would even see her. Although she was queen, she was still not secure. But, cautiously and courageously, Esther decided to risk her life by approaching the king on behalf of her people.

She made her plans carefully. The Jews were asked to fast and pray with her before she went to the king. Then on the chosen day she went before him, and he did ask her to come forward and speak. But instead of issuing her request directly, she invited him and Haman to a banquet. He was astute enough to realize she had something on her mind, yet she conveyed the importance of the matter by insisting on a second banquet.

In the meantime, God was working behind the scenes. He caused Xerxes to read the

historical records of the kingdom late one night, and the king discovered that Mordecai had once saved his life. Xerxes lost no time in honoring Mordecai for that act. During the second banquet, Esther told the king of Haman's plot against the Jews, and Haman was doomed. There is grim justice in Haman's death on the gallows he had built for Mordecai, and it seems fitting that the day on which the Jews were to be slaughtered became the day their enemies died. Esther's risk confirmed that God was the source of her security.

God placed Esther on the throne even before the Jews faced the possibility of complete destruction (Esther 3:5ff), so that when trouble came, a person would already be in the position to help. No human effort could thwart God's plan to send the Messiah to earth as a Jew. If you are changing jobs, position, or location and can't see God's purpose in your situation, understand that God is in control. He may be placing you in a position so you can help when the need arises.

Mordecai refused to kneel down before Haman. Jews did bow down to government authorities, at times, as a sign of respect (Genesis 23:7; 1 Samuel 24:8), but Haman's ancestors were ancient enemies of the Jews. Israel had been commanded by God to "blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven" (Deut. 25:17-19; see also Exodus 17:16). Mordecai was not about to kneel before wicked Haman and, by his act, acknowledge Haman as a god. Daniel's three friends had the same convictions (Daniel 3). We must worship God alone. We should never let any person, institution, or government take God's place. When people demand loyalties or duties from you that do not honor God, don't give in. It may be time to take a stand.

Mordecai's determination came from his faith in God. He did not take a poll first to determine the safest or most popular course of action; he had the courage to stand-alone. Doing what is right will not always make you popular. Those who do right will be in the minority, but to obey God is more important than to obey people (Acts 5:29).

Haman enjoyed the power and prestige of his position, and he was enraged when Mordecai did not respond with the expected reverential bow. Haman's anger was not directed just toward Mordecai, but toward what Mordecai stood for—the Jews' dedication to God as the only authority worthy of reverence. Haman's attitude was prejudiced: he hated a group of people because of a difference in belief or culture. Prejudice grows out of personal pride—considering oneself better than others. In the end, Haman was punished for his arrogant attitude (Esther 7:9-10). God will harshly judge those who are prejudiced or whose pride causes them to look down on others.

Esther risked her life by coming before the king. Her courageous act gives us a model to

follow in approaching a difficult or dangerous task. Like Esther, we can: (1) Calculate the cost. Esther realized her life was at stake. (2) Set priorities. She believed that the safety of the Jewish race was more important than her life. (3) Prepare. She gathered support and fasted. (4) Determine a course of action and move ahead boldly. She didn't think too long about it, allowing the interlude to lessen her commitment to what she had to do.

Although Esther was the queen and shared some of the king's power and wealth, she still needed God's protection and wisdom. No one is secure in his or her own strength in any political system. It is foolish to believe that wealth or position can make us impervious to danger. Deliverance only comes from God.

God is not specifically mentioned in the book of Esther, but it is obvious that Mordecai expected God to deliver his people. While the book of Esther does not mention God directly, his presence fills the pages. Esther and Mordecai believed in God's care, and because they acted at the right time, God used them to save his people. She was more concerned for others than for her own security

Serving God often demands that we risk our own security. God has a purpose for the situations in which he places us. Courage, while often vital, does not replace careful planning.

Chapter 14

Bathsheba

Bathsheba's story is told in 2 Samuel 11-12 and 1 Kings 1-2. A related passage is Psalm 51.

As David looked from the roof of the palace, he saw a beautiful woman bathing, and he was filled with lust. David should have left the roof and fled the temptation. Instead, he entertained the temptation by inquiring about Bathsheba. The results were devastating.

2 Samuel 11:15 (NLT)

The letter instructed Joab, "Station Uriah on the front lines where the battle is fiercest. Then pull back so that he will be killed."

David put both Bathsheba and Joab in difficult situations. Bathsheba knew it was wrong to commit adultery, but to refuse a king's request could mean punishment or death. Joab did not know why Uriah had to die, but it was obvious the king wanted him killed. We sometimes face situations with only two apparent choices, and both seem wrong. When that happens, we must not lose sight of what God wants. The answer may be to seek out more choices. By doing this, we are likely to find a choice that honors God.

2 Samuel 11:25

"Well, tell Joab not to be discouraged," David said. "The sword kills one as well as another! Fight harder next time, and conquer the city!"

David's response to Uriah's death seems flippant and insensitive. While he grieved deeply for Saul and Abner, his rivals (2 Samuel 1; 2 Samuel 3:31-39), he showed no grief for Uriah, a good man with strong spiritual character. Why? David had become callous to his own sin. The only way he could cover up his first sin (adultery) was to sin again, and soon he no longer felt guilty for what he had done. Feelings are not reliable guides for determining right and wrong. Deliberate, repeated sinning had dulled David's sensitivity to God's laws and others' rights. The more you try to cover up a sin, the more insensitive you become toward it. Don't become hardened to sin, as David did. Confess your wrong actions to God before you forget they are sins.

2 Samuel 12:10-14

From this time on, the sword will be a constant threat to your family, because you have despised me by taking Uriah's wife to be your own.

[11] " 'Because of what you have done, I, the Lord, will cause your own household to rebel against you. I will give your wives to another man, and he will go to bed with them in public view. [12] You did it secretly, but I will do this to you openly in the sight of all Israel.' "

[13] Then David confessed to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." Nathan replied, "Yes, but the Lord has forgiven you, and you won't die for this sin. [14] But you have given the enemies of the Lord great opportunity to despise and blaspheme him, so your child will die."

The predictions in these verses came true. Because David murdered Uriah and stole his wife, (1) murder was a constant threat in his family (2 Samuel 13:26-30; 2 Samuel 18:14-15; 1 Kings 2:23-25); (2) his household rebelled against him (2 Samuel 15:13); (3) his wives were given to another in public view (2 Samuel 16:20-23); (4) his first child by Bathsheba died (2 Samuel 12:18). If David had known the painful consequences of his sin, he might not have pursued the pleasures of the moment.

During this incident, David wrote Psalm 51, giving valuable insight into his character and offering hope for us as well. No matter how miserable guilt makes you feel or how terribly you have sinned, you can pour out your heart to God and seek his forgiveness as David did. There is forgiveness for us when we sin. David also wrote Psalm 32 to express the joy he felt after he was forgiven.

David confessed and repented of his sin (2 Samuel 12:13), but God's judgment was that his child would die. The consequences of David's sin were irreversible. Sometimes an apology isn't enough. When God forgives us and restores our relationship with him, he doesn't eliminate all the consequences of our wrongdoing. We may be tempted to say, "If this is wrong, I can always apologize to God," but we must remember that we may set into motion events with irreversible consequences.

Why did this child have to die? This was not a judgment on the child for being conceived out of wedlock, but a judgment on David for his sin. David and Bathsheba deserved to die, but God spared their lives and took the child instead. God still had work for David to do in building the kingdom. Perhaps the child's death was a greater punishment for David than his own death would have been.

It is also possible that had the child lived, God's name would have been dishonored among Israel's pagan neighbors. What would they have thought of a God who rewards murder and adultery by giving a king a new heir? A baby's death is tragic, but despising God brings death to entire nations. While God readily forgave David's sin, he did not negate all its consequences.

To flee temptation, (1) ask God in earnest prayer to help you stay away from people, places, and situations that may tempt you. (2) Memorize and meditate on portions of Scripture that combat your specific weaknesses. At the root of most temptation is a real need or desire that God can fill, but we must trust in his timing. (3) Find another believer with whom you can openly share your struggles, and call this person for help when temptation strikes.

Chapter 15

Jezebel, the Most Evil Woman in the Bible

Jezebel's story is told in 1 Kings 16:31-2 Kings 9:37. Her name is used as a synonym for great evil in Rev. 2:20.

The Bible is as honest about the lives of its heroes as it is about those who rejected God. Some Bible characters found out what God can do with failures when they turned to him. Many, however, neither admitted their failures nor turned to God.

Jezebel ranks as the most evil woman in the Bible. The Bible even uses her name as an example of people who completely reject God (Rev. 2:20, 21). Many pagan women married into Israel without acknowledging the God their husbands worshiped. They brought their religions with them. No one was as determined as Jezebel to make all Israel worship her gods.

To the prophet Elijah, she seemed to have succeeded. He felt he was the only one still faithful to God until God told him there were still 7,000 who had not turned from the faith. Jezebel's one outstanding "success" was in contributing to the cause of the eventual downfall of the northern kingdom—idolatry. God punished the northern tribes for their idolatry by having them carried off into captivity.

Jezebel held great power. She not only managed her husband, Ahab, but she also had eight hundred and fifty assorted pagan priests under her control. She was committed to her gods and to getting what she wanted. She believed that the king had the right to possess anything he wanted.

When Naboth refused to sell Ahab his vineyard, Jezebel ruthlessly had Naboth killed and took ownership of the land. Jezebel's plan to wipe out worship of God in Israel led to painful consequences. Before she died, Jezebel suffered the loss of her husband in combat and her son at the hand of Jehu, who took the throne by force. She died in the defiant and scornful way she had lived.

The big difference was to whom they were committed. Jezebel was committed to herself and her false gods; Elijah was totally committed to the one true God. In the end, God proved Elijah right. To what or to whom are you most committed? How would God evaluate your commitment?

Jezebel systematically eliminated the representatives of God in Israel. She promoted and funded Baal worship. And threatened to have Elijah killed. kings and queens could rightfully do or have anything they wanted. Jezebel used her strong convictions to get her own way.

It is not enough to be committed or sincere. Where our commitment lies makes a great difference. rejecting God, always leads to disaster.

New Testament Women

Chapter 16

Mary, the Mother of Jesus

Mary's story is told throughout the Gospels. She is also mentioned in Acts 1:14.

Motherhood is a painful privilege. Young Mary of Nazareth had the unique privilege of being mother to the very Son of God. Yet mothers everywhere can understand the pains and pleasures of her motherhood. Mary was the only human present at Jesus' birth that also witnessed his death. She saw him arrive as her baby son, and she watched him die as her Savior.

Mary was fearful and troubled in the presence of the angel. She could never have expected to hear the most incredible news — that she would have a child, and her son would be the Messiah. Although she could not comprehend how she would conceive the Savior, she responded to God with belief and obedience.

The angel told Mary in Luke 1:28 that she was highly favored by God. This phrase simply meant that Mary had been given much grace or "unmerited favor" from God. Even with God's favor, Mary would still suffer much. Though she would one day be highly honored as the mother of the Savior, she would first know disgrace as an unwed mother. She would nearly lose her fiancé. Her beloved son would be rejected and cruelly murdered. Mary's submission to God's plan would cost her dearly, yet she was willing to be God's servant.

God knew that Mary was a woman of rare strength and obedience. She was the only human being to be with Jesus throughout his entire life — from his birth until his death. She gave birth to him as her baby and watched him die as her Savior. Mary also knew the Scriptures. When the angel appeared and told her the baby would be God's Son, Mary replied, "I am the Lord's servant ... may it be to me as you have said." (Luke 1:38). She knew of the Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah.

Although Mary's life held great honor, her calling would demand great suffering as well. Just as there is pain in childbirth and motherhood, there would be much pain in the privilege of being the mother of the Messiah.

Until Gabriel's unexpected visit, Mary's life was quite satisfactory. She had recently

become engaged to a carpenter, Joseph, and was anticipating married life. But her life was about to change forever.

Angels don't usually make appointments before visiting. As if she were being congratulated for winning the grand prize in a contest she had never entered, Mary found the angel's greeting puzzling and his presence frightening. What she heard next was the news almost every woman in Israel hoped to hear—that her child would be the Messiah, God's promised Savior. Mary did not doubt the message, but rather asked how pregnancy would be possible. Gabriel told her the baby would be God's Son. Her answer was the one God waits in vain to hear from so many other people: "I am the Lord's servant. . . . May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38). Later, her song of joy shows us how well she knew God, for her thoughts were filled with his words from the Old Testament.

Within a few weeks of his birth, Jesus was taken to the temple to be dedicated to God. Two devout people, Simeon and Anna, who recognized the child as the Messiah and praised God, met Joseph and Mary. Simeon directed some words to Mary that must have come to her mind many times in the years that followed: "A sword will pierce your own soul" (Luke 2:35). A big part of her painful privilege of motherhood would be to see her son rejected and crucified by the people he came to save.

We can imagine that even if she had known all she would suffer as Jesus' mother, Mary would still have given the same response. Are you, like Mary, available to be used by God?

- God's best servants are often ordinary people available to him.
- God's plans involve extraordinary events in ordinary people's lives.
- A person's character is revealed by his or her response to the unexpected.

Chapter 17

Elizabeth, the Mother of John the Baptist

Elizabeth's story is told in Luke 1:5-80.

Luke 1:5 (NLT)

It all begins with a Jewish priest, Zechariah, who lived when Herod was king of Judea. Zechariah was a member of the priestly order of Abijah. His wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron.

Zechariah was a member of the Abijah division, on duty this particular week. Each morning a priest was to enter the Holy Place in the temple and burn incense. Lots were cast to decide who would enter the sacred room, and one day the lot fell to Zechariah. But it was not by chance that Zechariah was on duty and that he was chosen that day to enter the Holy Place—perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. God was guiding the events of history to prepare the way for Jesus to come to earth.

Luke 1:11-12 (NLT)

While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. [12] Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him

Angels are spirit beings who live in God's presence and do his will. Only two angels are mentioned by name in Scripture—Michael and Gabriel—but there are many who act as God's messengers. Here, Gabriel (Luke 1:19) delivered a special message to Zechariah. This was not a dream or a vision. The angel appeared in visible form and spoke audible words to the priest.

Luke 1:13 (NLT)

But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! For God has heard your prayer, and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son! And you are to name him John.

Zechariah, while burning incense on the altar, was also praying, perhaps for a son or for the coming of the Messiah. In either case, his prayer was answered. He would soon have a son, who would prepare the way for the Messiah. God answers prayer in his own way and in his own time.

He worked in an "impossible" situation—Zechariah's wife was barren—to bring about

the fulfillment of all the prophecies concerning the Messiah.

John means “the LORD is gracious,” and Jesus means “the LORD saves.” Both names were prescribed by God, and not chosen by human parents. Throughout the Gospels, God acts graciously and saves his people. He will not withhold salvation from anyone who sincerely comes to him.

John was set apart for special service to God. He may have been forbidden to drink wine as part of the Nazirite vow, an ancient vow of consecration to God (see Numbers 6:1-8). Samson (Judges 13) was under the Nazirite vow, and Samuel may have been also (1 Samuel 1:11).

In societies like Israel, in which a woman’s value was largely measured by her ability to bear children, to be aging and without children often led to personal hardship and public shame. For Elizabeth, a childless old age was a painful and lonely time during which she remained faithful to God.

Both Elizabeth and Zechariah came from priestly families. For two weeks each year, Zechariah had to go to the temple in Jerusalem to attend to his priestly duties. After one of those trips, Zechariah returned home excited, but speechless. He had to write down his good news, because he couldn’t give it any other way. And what a wonderful surprise he had for his wife—their faded dream would become an exciting reality! Soon Elizabeth became pregnant, and she knew her child was a long-hoped-for gift from God.

News traveled fast among the family. Seventy miles to the north, in Nazareth, Elizabeth’s relative, Mary, also unexpectedly became pregnant. Within days after the angel’s message that she would bear the Messiah, Mary went to visit Elizabeth. They were instantly bound together by the unique gifts God had given them. Elizabeth knew that Mary’s son would be even greater than her own, for John would be the messenger for Mary’s son.

When the baby was born, Elizabeth insisted on his God-given name: John. Zechariah’s written agreement freed his tongue, and everyone in town wondered what would become of this obviously special child.

Elizabeth whispered her praise as she cared for God’s gift. Knowing about Mary must have made her marvel at God’s timing. Things had worked out even better than she could have planned.

We too need to remember that God is in control of every situation. When did you last

pause to recognize God's timing in the events of your life?

John's role was to be almost identical to that of an Old Testament prophet—to encourage people to turn away from sin and back to God. John is often compared to the great prophet Elijah, who was known for standing up to evil rulers (Malachi 4:5; Matthew 11:14; Matthew 17:10-13)

Like her kinswoman Mary of Nazareth, Elizabeth must have pondered all this in her heart.

Lessons from her life:

- God does not forget those who have been faithful to him.
- God's timetable and methods do not have to conform to what we expect.

Chapter 18

Anna the Prophetess

"There was also a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old, having been married to her husband for seven years until his death. She had lived as a widow since then for eighty-four years. She never left the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment, she came up to them and began to give thanks to God and to speak about the child to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:36-38).

About six weeks after the birth of Jesus, his family had traveled from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to present the offerings prescribed in Lev. 12 (Luke 2:22-24). In this scene Jesus and his parents are joined by Simeon, an old man who blesses God for the coming of the Messiah and prophesies about the implications of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:25-35); and by Anna, an elderly widow who also rejoices in the birth of the Messiah.

From the fact that Joseph and Mary made the trip to Jerusalem, we learn that they were observant Jews, careful to carry out the requirements of the Torah. From the fact that they could not afford a lamb for the offering (Luke 2:24; Lev. 12:8), we find out that they were not wealthy. Simeon's prophecy highlights the importance of the birth of the Messiah as well as the trials and challenges that Jews in general – and Mary in particular – would face as a result of that birth.

Although Simeon and Anna were very old, they had never lost their hope that they would see the Messiah. Led by the Holy Spirit, they were among the first to bear witness to Jesus. In the Jewish culture, elders were respected, so because of Simeon's and Anna's age, their prophecies carried extra weight. Our society, however, values youthfulness over wisdom, and potential contributions by the elderly are often ignored.

As Christians, we should reverse those values wherever we can. Encourage older people to share their wisdom and experience. Listen carefully when they speak. Offer them your friendship and help them find ways to continue to serve God.

Anna was called a prophetess, indicating that she was unusually close to God. Prophets did not necessarily predict the future. Their main role was to speak for God, proclaiming his truth.

Chapter 19

The Woman Who Touched the Fringe of Jesus' Garment

Luke 8:43-48 (NLT)

And there was a woman in the crowd who had had a hemorrhage for twelve years. She had spent everything she had on doctors and still could find no cure. [44] She came up behind Jesus and touched the fringe of his robe. Immediately, the bleeding stopped.

[45] "Who touched me?" Jesus asked. Everyone denied it, and Peter said, "Master, this whole crowd is pressing up against you." [46] But Jesus told him, "No, someone deliberately touched me, for I felt healing power go out from me." [47] When the woman realized that Jesus knew, she began to tremble and fell to her knees before him. The whole crowd heard her explain why she had touched him and that she had been immediately healed. [48] "Daughter," he said to her, "your faith has made you well. Go in peace."

Many people surrounded Jesus as he made his way toward Jairus's house. It was virtually impossible to get through the multitude, but one woman fought her way desperately through the crowd in order to touch Jesus. As soon as she did so, she was healed. What a difference there is between the crowds that are curious about Jesus and the few who reach out and touch him! Today, many people are vaguely familiar with Jesus, but nothing in their lives is changed or bettered by this passing acquaintance. It is only faith that releases God's healing power. Are you just curious about God, or do you reach out to him in faith, knowing that his mercy will bring healing to your body, soul, and spirit?

It isn't that Jesus didn't know who had touched him; it's that he wanted the woman to step forward and identify herself. Jesus wanted to teach her that his cloak did not contain magical properties, but that her faith in him had healed her. He may also have wanted to teach the crowds a lesson. According to Jewish law, a man who touched a menstruating woman became ceremonially unclean (Leviticus 15:19-28). This was true whether her bleeding was normal or, as in this woman's case, the result of illness. To protect themselves from such defilement, Jewish men carefully avoided touching, speaking to, or even looking at women. By contrast, Jesus proclaimed to hundreds of people that this "unclean" woman had touched him—and then he healed her. In Jesus' mind, this suffering woman was not to be overlooked. As God's creation, she deserved attention and respect.

Mark says that immediately "she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease" (Mark 5:29). Jesus feels it too. Though the press of the crowds against him are jostling and bumping him constantly, their touch doesn't have any effect. But when the woman touches him, Jesus is suddenly aware of it: "I know that power has gone out from me" (8:46).

The irony of this story is that dozens of people had been touching Jesus in these few minutes of moving towards Jairus' house, but only one had touched Jesus with faith that released saving power -- a sick but determined woman. It is quite possible to be in the immediate vicinity of Jesus without receiving his salvation through faith.

Jesus is teaching us to trust him, and he says to you, "Your faith has made you whole."

Chapter 20

The Woman at the Well

John 4:1-3 (NLT)

Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is baptizing and making more disciples than John" [2] (though Jesus himself didn't baptize them—his disciples did). [3] So he left Judea to return to Galilee.

Already opposition was rising against Jesus, especially from the Pharisees. They resented Jesus' popularity as well as his message, which challenged much of their teachings. Because Jesus was just beginning his ministry, it wasn't yet time to confront these leaders openly; so he left Jerusalem and traveled north toward Galilee.

John 4:5-7 (NLT)

Eventually he came to the Samaritan village of Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. [6] Jacob's well was there; and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noontime. [7] Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink."

Jacob's well was on the property originally owned by Jacob (Genesis 33:18-19). It was not a spring-fed well, but a well into which water seeped from rain and dew, collecting at the bottom. Wells were almost always located outside the city along the main road.

Twice each day, morning and evening, women came to draw water. This woman came at noon, however, probably to avoid meeting people who knew her reputation. Jesus gave this woman an extraordinary message about fresh and pure water that would quench her spiritual thirst forever.

John 4:8-9 (NLT)

He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food. [9] The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?"

This woman (1) was a Samaritan, a member of the hated mixed race, (2) was known to be living in sin, and (3) was in a public place. No respectable Jewish man would talk to a woman under such circumstances. But Jesus did. The gospel is for every person, no matter what his or her race, social position, or past sins. We must be prepared to share

this gospel at any time and in any place. Jesus crossed all barriers to share the gospel, and we who follow him must do no less.

John 4:10 (NLT)

Jesus replied, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who I am, you would ask me, and I would give you living water."

What did Jesus mean by "living water?" In the Old Testament, many verses speak of thirsting after God as one thirsts for water (Psalm 42:1; Isaiah 55:1; Jeremiah 2:13; Zech. 13:1). God is called the fountain of life (Psalm 36:9) and the spring of living water (Jeremiah 17:13). In saying he would bring living water that could forever quench a person's thirst for God, Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah. Only the Messiah could give this gift that satisfies the soul's desire.

John 4:13-15 (NLT)

Jesus replied, "People soon become thirsty again after drinking this water. [14] But the water I give them takes away thirst altogether. It becomes a perpetual spring within them, giving them eternal life." [15] "Please, sir," the woman said, "give me some of that water! Then I'll never be thirsty again, and I won't have to come here to haul water."

Many spiritual functions parallel physical functions. As our bodies hunger and thirst, so do our souls. But our souls need spiritual food and water. The woman confused the two kinds of water, perhaps because no one had ever talked with her about her spiritual hunger and thirst before. We would not think of depriving our bodies of food and water when they hunger or thirst. Why then should we deprive our souls? The living Word, Jesus Christ, and the written Word, the Bible, can satisfy our hungry and thirsty souls.

The woman mistakenly believed that if she received the water Jesus offered, she would not have to return to the well each day. She was interested in Jesus' message because she thought it could make her life easier. But if that were always the case, people would accept Christ's message for the wrong reasons. Christ did not come to take away challenges, but to change us on the inside and to empower us to deal with problems from God's perspective.

The woman did not immediately understand what Jesus was talking about. It takes time to accept something that changes the very foundations of your life. Jesus allowed the woman time to ask questions to understand.

Sharing the gospel will not always have immediate results. When you ask people to let

Jesus change their lives, give them time to weigh the matter.

John 4:16-20 (NLT)

"Go and get your husband," Jesus told her. [17] "I don't have a husband," the woman replied. Jesus said, "You're right! You don't have a husband— [18] for you have had five husbands, and you aren't even married to the man you're living with now. You certainly spoke the truth!" [19] "Sir," the woman said, "you must be a prophet. [20] So tell me, why is it that you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place of worship, while we Samaritans claim it is here at Mount Gerizim, where our ancestors worshiped?"

When this woman discovered that Jesus knew all about her private life, she quickly changed the subject. Often people become uncomfortable when the conversation is too close to home, and they try to talk about something else. As we witness, we should gently guide the conversation back to Christ. His presence exposes sin and makes people squirm, but only Christ can forgive sins and give new life.

John 4:21-22 (NLT)

Jesus replied, "Believe me, the time is coming when it will no longer matter whether you worship the Father here or in Jerusalem. [22] You Samaritans know so little about the one you worship, while we Jews know all about him, for salvation comes through the Jews.

When Jesus said, "salvation is from the Jews," he meant that only through the Jewish Messiah would the whole world find salvation. God had promised that through the Jewish race the whole earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). The Old Testament prophets had called the Jews to be a light to the other nations of the world, bringing them to a knowledge of God; and they had predicted the Messiah's coming. The woman at the well may have known of these passages and was expecting the Messiah, but she didn't realize that she was talking to him!

John 4:23-24 (NLT)

But the time is coming and is already here when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for anyone who will worship him that way. [24] For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth."

"God is Spirit" means he is not a physical being limited to one place. He is present everywhere and he can be worshiped anywhere, at any time. It is not where we worship that counts, but how we worship. Is your worship genuine and true? Do you have the

Holy Spirit's help? How does the Holy Spirit help us worship? The Holy Spirit prays for us (Romans 8:26), teaches us the words of Christ (John 14:26), and tells us we are loved (Romans 5:5).

John 4:25-29 (NLT)

The woman said, "I know the Messiah will come—the one who is called Christ. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

[26] Then Jesus told her, "I am the Messiah!"

[27] Just then his disciples arrived. They were astonished to find him talking to a woman, but none of them asked him why he was doing it or what they had been discussing. [28] The woman left her water jar beside the well and went back to the village and told everyone, [29] "Come and meet a man who told me everything I ever did! Can this be the Messiah?"

So the people came streaming from the village to see him.

By reaching out to the Samaritans, Jesus showed that his mission was to the entire earth, not just the Jews. In the book of Acts, after Jesus' ascension into heaven, his apostles carried on his work in Samaria and to the Gentile world. Ironically, while the High Priest and Sanhedrin rejected Jesus as the Messiah, the outcast Samaritans recognized him and accepted him for who he truly was: the Savior of the world

Our human tendency is to judge others because of stereotypes, customs or prejudices. Jesus treats people as individuals, accepting them with love and compassion. Do you dismiss certain people as lost causes, or do you see them as valuable in their own right, worthy of knowing about the gospel?

Chapter 21

The Adulterous Woman Brought Before Jesus

John 8:1-11 (NLT)

Jesus returned to the Mount of Olives, [2] but early the next morning he was back again at the Temple. A crowd soon gathered, and he sat down and taught them. [3] As he was speaking, the teachers of religious law and Pharisees brought a woman they had caught in the act of adultery. They put her in front of the crowd.

[4]"Teacher," they said to Jesus, "this woman was caught in the very act of adultery. [5] The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?" [6] They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger.

The Jewish leaders had already disregarded the law by arresting the woman without the man. The law required that both parties to adultery be stoned (Leviticus 20:10; Deut. 22:22). The leaders were using the woman as a trap so they could trick Jesus. If Jesus said the woman should not be stoned, they would accuse him of violating Moses' law. If he urged them to execute her, they would report him to the Romans, who did not permit the Jews to carry out their own executions (John 18:31).

[7] They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, "All right, stone her. But let those who have never sinned throw the first stones!" [8] Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust.

This is a significant statement about judging others. Because Jesus upheld the legal penalty for adultery, stoning, he could not be accused of being against the law. But by saying that only a sinless person could throw the first stone, he highlighted the importance of compassion and forgiveness. When others are caught in sin, are you quick to pass judgment? To do so is to act as though you have never sinned. It is God's role to judge, not ours. Our role is to show forgiveness and compassion.

[9] When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman.

When Jesus said that only someone who had not sinned should throw the first stone, the leaders slipped quietly away, from oldest to youngest. Evidently the older men were more aware of their sins than the younger. Age and experience often temper youthful self-righteousness. But whatever your age, take an honest look at your life. Recognize

your sinful nature, and look for ways to help others rather than hurt them.

[10] Then Jesus stood up again and said to her, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" [11] "No, Lord," she said. And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

Jesus didn't condemn the woman accused of adultery, but neither did he ignore or condone her sin. He told her to leave her life of sin. Jesus stands ready to forgive any sin in your life, but confession and repentance mean a change of heart. With God's help we can accept Christ's forgiveness and stop our wrongdoing.

The Gospel of John says no more about the woman. She may have decided to follow Jesus' advice to live more virtuously after coming so close to death in her quest for sensual pleasure. The story is both a morality lesson and also an example of how Jesus viewed women differently than the way other men saw them in first-century Palestine. He showed a more egalitarian, loving, and respectful way of treating them than they were generally treated with in their society. Not surprisingly, all types of women chose to follow him, among them the outcasts of society, widows, the lame and sick, and others who were in need of a redeemer.

Chapter 22

Peter's Mother-in-Law

Matthew 8:14-15 (NLT)

When Jesus arrived at Peter's house, Peter's mother-in-law was in bed with a high fever. [15] But when Jesus touched her hand, the fever left her. Then she got up and prepared a meal for him.

Peter's mother-in-law gives us a beautiful example to follow. Her response to Jesus' touch was to serve Jesus and his disciples—immediately. Has God ever helped you through a dangerous or difficult situation? If so, you should ask, “How can I express my gratitude to him?” Because God has promised us all the rewards of his kingdom, we should look for ways to serve him and his followers now.

The synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the miracle healing of Peter's mother-in-law. In Matthew 8:14, the text states that when Jesus entered the house, he saw Peter's mother-in-law lying sick with fever. Mark and Luke state that Jesus left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew with two other disciples (James and John), and they told Jesus that Simon Peter's mother-in-law was sick with fever. Matthew states that Jesus took her hand, and the fever left her and she rose and served him (Matthew 8:15).

Chapter 23

Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene's story is told in Matthew 27-28; Mark 15-16; Luke 23-24; John 19-20. She is also mentioned in Luke 8:2.

The absence of women among the 12 disciples has bothered some people, but it is clear that there were many women among Jesus' followers. It is also clear that Jesus did not treat women as others in his culture did; he treated them with dignity, as people with worth.

Mary of Magdala was an early follower of Jesus who certainly deserves to be called a disciple. An energetic, impulsive, caring woman, she not only traveled with Jesus, but also contributed to the needs of the group. She was present at the crucifixion and was on her way to anoint Jesus' body on Sunday morning when she discovered the empty tomb. Mary was the first to see Jesus after his resurrection.

Mary Magdalene is a heartwarming example of thankful living. Jesus miraculously freed her life when he drove seven demons out of her. In every glimpse we have of her, she was acting out her appreciation for the freedom Christ had given her. That freedom allowed her to stand under Christ's cross when all the disciples except John were hiding in fear. After Jesus' death, she intended to give his body every respect. Like the rest of Jesus' followers, she never expected his bodily resurrection—but she was overjoyed to discover it.

Mary's faith was not complicated, but it was direct and genuine. She was more eager to believe and obey than to understand everything. Jesus honored her childlike faith by appearing to her first and by entrusting her with the first message of his resurrection.

Nowhere in scripture is Mary of Magdala identified as a public sinner or a prostitute. Instead, scripture shows her as the primary witness to the most central events of Christian faith, named in exactly the same way (Maria e Magdalena) in each of four gospels written for diverse communities throughout the Mediterranean world. It was impossible to relate the story of the Resurrection without including "Mary, the one from Magdala."

Luke 8,1-3 tells us that Mary traveled with Jesus in the Galilean discipleship and, with Joanna and Susanna, supported his mission from her own financial resources. In the

synoptic gospels, Mary leads the group of women who witness Jesus' death, burial, the empty tomb, and His Resurrection. The contrast Jesus' abandonment by the male disciples with the faithful strength of the women disciples who, led by Mary, accompany him to his death. John's gospel names Mary of Magdala as the first to discover the empty tomb and shows the Risen Christ sending her to announce the Good News of his resurrection to the other disciples. This prompted early church fathers to name her "the Apostle to the Apostles."

Scripture scholars regard that the message of the resurrection was first entrusted to women as strong proof for the historicity of the resurrection accounts. Had accounts of Jesus' resurrection been fabricated, women would never have been chosen as witnesses, since Jewish law did not acknowledge the testimony of women.

Chapter 24

Martha and Mary (Lazarus' Sisters)

Mary and Martha's story is told in Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 10:38-42; John 11:17-45; John 12:1-11.

The Profile of Martha:

Many older brothers and sisters have an irritating tendency to take charge, a habit developed while growing up. We can easily see this pattern in Martha, the older sister of Mary and Lazarus. She was used to being in control.

The fact that Martha, Mary, and Lazarus are remembered for their hospitality takes on added significance when we note that hospitality was a social requirement in their culture. It was considered shameful to turn anyone away from your door. Apparently Martha's family met this requirement very well.

Martha worried about details. She wished to please, to serve, to do the right thing—but she often succeeded in making everyone around her uncomfortable. Perhaps as the oldest she feared shame if her home did not measure up to expectations. She tried to do everything she could to make sure that wouldn't happen. As a result, she found it hard to relax and enjoy her guests, and even harder to accept Mary's lack of cooperation in all the preparations. Martha's frustration was so intense that she finally asked Jesus to settle the matter. He gently corrected her attitude and showed her that her priorities, though good, were not the best. The personal attention she gave her guests should be more important than the comforts she tried to provide for them.

Later, following her brother Lazarus's death, Martha could hardly help being herself. When she heard Jesus was finally coming, she rushed out to meet him and expressed her inner conflict of disappointment and hope. Jesus pointed out that her hope was too limited. He was not only Lord beyond death, he was Lord over death—the resurrection and the life! Moments later, Martha again spoke without thinking, pointing out that four-day-old corpses are well on their way to decomposition. Her awareness of details sometimes kept her from seeing the whole picture, but Jesus was consistently patient with her.

In our last picture of Martha, she is once again serving a meal to Jesus and his disciples. She has not stopped serving. But the Bible records her silence this time. She has begun

to learn what her younger sister already knew—that worship begins with silence and listening.

The Profile of Mary:

Hospitality is an art. Making sure a guest is welcomed, warmed, and well fed requires creativity, organization, and teamwork. Their ability to accomplish these goals makes Mary and her sister Martha one of the best hospitality teams in the Bible. Their frequent guest was Jesus Christ.

For Mary, hospitality meant giving more attention to the guest himself than to the needs he might have. She would rather talk than cook. She was more interested in her guest's words than in the cleanliness of her home or the timeliness of her meals. She let her older sister Martha take care of those details. Mary's approach to events shows her to be mainly a "responder." She did little preparation—her role was participation. Unlike her sister, who had to learn to stop and listen, Mary needed to learn that action is often appropriate and necessary.

We first meet Mary during a visit Jesus paid to her home. She simply sat at his feet and listened. When Martha became irritated at her sister's lack of help, Jesus stated that Mary's choice to enjoy his company was the most appropriate response at the time. Our last glimpse of Mary shows her to have become a woman of thoughtful and worshipful action. Again she was at Jesus' feet, washing them with perfume and wiping them with her hair. She seemed to understand, better even than the disciples, why Jesus was going to die. Jesus said her act of worship would be told everywhere, along with the gospel, as an example of costly service.

What kind of hospitality does Jesus receive in your life? Are you so busy planning and running your life that you neglect precious time with him? Or do you respond to him by listening to his Word, then finding ways to worship him with your life? It is that kind of hospitality he longs for from each of us.

Chapter 25

The Ministry of Aquila and Priscilla

Their story is told in Acts 18. They are also mentioned in Romans 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19.

Acts 18:1-3 (NLT)

Then Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. [2] There he became acquainted with a Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently arrived from Italy with his wife, Priscilla. They had been expelled from Italy as a result of Claudius Caesar's order to deport all Jews from Rome. [3] Paul lived and worked with them, for they were tentmakers just as he was.

Corinth was the political and commercial center of Greece, surpassing Athens in importance. It had a reputation for great wickedness and immorality. A temple to Aphrodite—goddess of love and war—had been built on the large hill behind the city. In this popular religion, people worshiped the goddess by giving money to the temple and taking part in sexual acts with male and female temple prostitutes. Paul found Corinth a challenge and a great ministry opportunity. Later, he would write a series of letters to the Corinthians dealing in part with the problems of immorality. First and Second Corinthians are two of those letters.

Each Jewish boy learned a trade and tried to earn his living with it. Paul and Aquila had been trained in tent making, cutting and sewing the woven cloth of goats' hair into tents. Tents were used to house soldiers, and so these tents may have been sold to the Roman army. As a tentmaker, Paul was able to go wherever God led him, carrying his livelihood with him. The word "tentmaker" in Greek was also used to describe a leather worker. Some believe, he was a maker of prayer shawls

For an overall review of Priscilla and Aquila we look at their portrait.

Some couples know how to make the most of life. They complement each other, capitalize on each other's strengths, and form an effective team. Their united efforts affect those around them. Aquila and Priscilla were such a couple. They are never mentioned separately in the Bible. In marriage and ministry, they were together.

Priscilla and Aquila met Paul in Corinth during his second missionary journey. They had just been expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius's decree against Jews. Their home

was as movable as the tents they made to support themselves. They opened their home to Paul, and he joined them in tent making. He shared with them his wealth of spiritual wisdom.

Priscilla and Aquila made the most of their spiritual education. They listened carefully to sermons and evaluated what they heard. When they heard Apollos speak, they were impressed by his ability, but realized that his information was not complete. Instead of open confrontation, the couple quietly took Apollos home and shared with him what he needed to know. Until then, Apollos had only John the Baptist's message about Christ. Priscilla and Aquila told him about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and the reality of God's indwelling Spirit. He continued to preach powerfully—but now with the full story.

As for Priscilla and Aquila, they went on using their home as a warm place for training and worship. Back in Rome years later, they hosted one of the house churches that developed.

In an age when the focus is mostly on what happens between husband and wife, Aquila and Priscilla are an example of what can happen through husband and wife. Their effectiveness together speaks about their relationship with each other. Their hospitality opened the doorway of salvation to many. The Christian home is still one of the best tools for spreading the gospel. Do guests find Christ in your home?

As ministers seek to spread the gospel of Christ, their ministry will be greatly heightened by the help of a wife and companion such as Priscilla.

Chapter 26

Lydia

Acts 16:12-15 (NLT)

From there we reached Philippi, a major city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony; we stayed there several days.

[13] On the Sabbath we went a little way outside the city to a riverbank, where we supposed that some people met for prayer, and we sat down to speak with some women who had come together. [14] One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. As she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying.

Inscribed on the arches outside the city of Philippi was a prohibition against bringing an unrecognized religion into the city; therefore, this prayer meeting was held outside the city, beside the river.

After following the Holy Spirit's leading into Macedonia, Paul made his first evangelistic contact with a small group of women. Paul never allowed gender or cultural boundaries to keep him from preaching the gospel. He preached to these women, and Lydia, an influential merchant, believed. This opened the way for ministry in that region. God often worked in and through women in the early church.

[15] She was baptized along with other members of her household, and she asked us to be her guests. "If you agree that I am faithful to the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my home." And she urged us until we did.

Why was Lydia's household baptized after Lydia responded in faith to the gospel? Baptism was a public sign of identification with Christ and the Christian community. Although all members of her household may not have chosen to follow Christ (we don't know), it was now a Christian home.

Lydia was a dealer of purple cloth. Purple cloth was expensive and valuable as a sign of nobility or royalty so she was probably a wealthy businesswoman.

She was from the city of Thyatira. This small city was known for its commerce in Asia Minor. It was in an area noted for its abundant crops and the manufacture of purple dye.

Lydia was a worshiper of God. This term was used for Gentiles who believed in the

Jewish God, Yahweh. Although they believed in God, they were not yet believers in Christ.

She was a woman whose heart God opened. Paul shared the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ and through God's divine work, she believed. She apparently was baptized right away along with the members of her household. Since her husband was not mentioned, she may have been a widow. Lydia's household probably included children and servants. Whether the entire household believed or not, they now lived in a Christian home.

Lydia was a willing servant. She invited Paul and his companions to stay at her house. When God opened her heart, she believed wholeheartedly. She became a servant, tending to the needs of the missionaries. Later in Paul's mission, he returned to Lydia's home where he met with believers. Lydia had apparently become an active member of the church.

As soon as Lydia believed, she went to work for Christ. She shared her faith with her family and servants. She opened her home to God's people and continued being of service to the church.

Chapter 27

Phoebe

Romans 16:1-2 (NLT)

Our sister Phoebe, a deacon in the church in Cenchrea, will be coming to see you soon. [2] Receive her in the Lord, as one who is worthy of high honor. Help her in every way you can, for she has helped many in their needs, including me.

Phoebe was known as a servant (the Greek word used here is often translated “deaconess”) and a helper. Apparently she was a wealthy person who helped support Paul’s ministry. Phoebe was highly regarded in the church, and she may have delivered this letter from Corinth to Rome. This provides evidence that women had important roles in the early church. Cenchrea, the town where Phoebe lived, was the eastern port of Corinth, six miles from the city center.

Paul identified Phoebe’s hometown as Cenchrea, which is located just seven miles from Corinth. Like Corinth, Cenchrea was a Roman city permeated with pagan practices. Describing Gentile behavior in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul pulled no punches:

They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more (Eph. 4:18-19).

Phoebe probably became a Christian during Paul’s extended ministry in Corinth (see Acts 18:1-18). Interestingly, her name is the feminine form of “Phoibos,” a name given to the god Apollo. In other words, Phoebe had been converted from a pagan lifestyle, although like many Gentiles, she may have initially become God-fearing because of her association with God-fearing Jews.

At some point in time, Phoebe traveled to Rome and when Paul wrote his letter to the Christians living in this imperial city and extended a series of greetings, Phoebe was literally at the top of the list (see Rom. 16:1). In fact, some believe that Phoebe actually carried Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians, demonstrating how much Paul trusted this godly woman. This indeed would have been an awesome responsibility.

References:

The Image of Woman in Scripture; Copyright 2004 Montgomery Paul Webb
Holy Bible. (NLT)
Life Application notes