

Our Bible Sisters:

Deborah – Responding to God’s Call

Leader’s Guide

This Bible study was written by Marilyn Miller, a staff minister at Abiding Word Lutheran Church in Houston, TX. The theological content was reviewed by Professor Lyle Lange.

Our Bible Sisters is a series of one-hour studies that may be used separately or in any combination. Each looks at a different woman of the Bible, highlighting God’s faithfulness in her life, with applications to the lives of all Christian women today.

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Deborah – Responding to God’s Call

Opening Prayer

“God is faithful! Even in the dismal 350 year period of the Judges, when Israel was pulling away from God, he remained faithful to them. During Joshua’s time Israel saw victory after victory, but in the period of the judges they saw defeat after defeat. God used their trials to call them back to himself. He would always faithfully provide a deliverer.” (Barber, pg 53).

The Setting

1. Scan Judges 2:1–3:6. What cycle do you see during the period of the judges?

2:11-13 – (Apostasy) The people fell away from God and did evil, 2:14-15 – (Oppression) God chastened them by letting other nations defeat them, 2:16– (Deliverance) They cried out for help, God sent someone to rescue them, 2:18 – (Rest) the people enjoyed a period of peace and recovery. And then the cycle repeated itself once the judge died.

2. Read Judges 5:6-8 and 21:25. What was the land of Israel like at the time of Deborah?

Travel was dangerous and travelers had to go around the most dangerous places. “Village life ceased” - no one could even live outside the city gates any longer. The people worshipped pagan gods and then war came but the Israelites were defenseless and without weapons. Deborah lived at a time when there was no royal leader and the head of each family was responsible for faithfulness to God and to the nation. Obviously this faithfulness and national unity was quite broken. They were in deep trouble and had no place to look for help but to God. “Everyone did as he saw fit.”

3. Many of us may have experienced such desperate times in our life or in the life of someone we love. Why would God allow such a horrible situation in our life?

Too often, if we can figure our way out of our problems, we continue to rely upon ourselves and don’t look to God. At times we might not be in such deep trouble if we had been looking to God all along. Could

it be that God has delivered us into the hands of trials to get us to the place where we will cry out to him, to turn from our ways back to lives that reflect his grace? This is one of the ways God teaches us.

4. What valuable life lesson do we learn from verse 7?

God knows when enough is enough; he knows how much we can take and then he provides a way out of our troubles. He knows the type of consequence to put in our lives when we sin; he brings us to the point of broken-ness and repentance, and then in his mercy, delivers us. He does all of this because he is faithful to his promise to preserve us!!

Deborah's Life

5. Read Judges 4:4-5. Besides being a mother in Israel (Judges 5:7), what else do we learn about Deborah?

1) She was a woman through whom God could speak – she was open and receptive to what God wanted to say and she relayed it to the people just as God wanted her to. A prophetess (a female prophet) is a person who receives direct revelation from God about some truth which would otherwise not have been known. A prophet proclaimed God's will to the people, sometimes about the future, but many times about what God had already revealed. 2) She was married to Lappidoth. 3) She was a judge of Israel and people came to her to settle their disputes. A judge was a secular government position, not a spiritual position. Note that "leading" in vs 4 means "judging". 4) God equipped Deborah with the gifts needed to fulfill his purpose in the calling he gave to her along with the respect of God's people. 5) She was a poet, having written the song of chapter 5.

6. Read Judges 4:6-10. What do we learn about the plan for deliverance from Sisera's army?

It was GOD's plan, not Deborah's. She very clearly gave God the credit for the plan and made herself nothing more than a messenger. She relayed exactly what God had said even if a military strategist would consider the plan to be greatly flawed – the Israelites had no/few weapons and yet they were being told to go to war against 10 times more men equipped with 900 iron chariots. She simply trusted that God would be true to his word and deliver the enemy into their hands.

7. Why might Barak have responded as he did in vs 8 and what can we learn from this?

He was most likely afraid but he may also have wanted to be sure God, through Deborah, would be with him as he took on such a formidable task. Following God's commands isn't getting "the word" once and then acting on it, but rather continually seeking God every step of the way. Barak took his eyes off the God who would provide, and instead focused on his weakness.

The Lesson For Us

8. What can we learn about God's calling of men and women from Deborah's response to Barak in vs 9-10 and 14?

Male leadership at this time was desperately weak as we can see from the state of the religious and national faithfulness (question 2 discussion). She didn't lead the troops into battle but rather was God's mouthpiece, prodding Barak to do what was needed. She didn't try to diminish or usurp Barak's position of leadership but rather conveyed God's command without hesitation, showing her strength of character, faithfulness and insight, reminding him of God's promise to be with him. She complemented Barak and helped him carry out his duty and God's will. Today this same situation may happen in families or in congregations. God created and specified a divine order but he also created men and women to complement one another. God's plans will be carried out; if the person who is intended to do the work does not, then God will raise up someone else to accomplish his will. God, speaking through Deborah, made sure that Barak understood no man would get the glory for this victory. By giving the glory to a peasant woman, everyone would know the victory was God's alone. This should be our ultimate goal in all that we do.

The rest of the story: God caused a heavy rain and the enemy army was caught in a great flood. As the chariots got bogged down, the army ran and the Israelites killed them. Sisera stopped at the camp of a friend to rest. Jael, the wife of the friend, drove a stake through his head as he slept. This humiliating death began a cycle of peace and rest for the Israelites. (Judges 4:15-24, 5:4,20-22)

9. Is there or has there been something in your life that feels like 900 iron chariots standing in wait to destroy you?

If Deborah were here, what advice might she give you about:

- Our attitude in times of trial?

All power and wisdom comes from God. We can't figure things out on our own. He will resolve all conflicts and difficulties in his time and in his way and to his glory. The victory is his alone. Whatever the situation is, God is bigger than the situation. Our energy is better spent in prayer, seeking his will, trusting in him.

- Being prepared to respond?

Be faithful in everyday life so that we are available to God when he wishes to use us and we are able to see the opportunities he puts in front of us. Don't just know his Word in your head, but have it deep in your heart. Hone the skills that God has given you and use them to his glory. Deborah was respected because of her faithfulness, her wisdom, her wise counsel and her attitude of "thus says the Lord". She was ready and willing to respond to God's plan for her.

- Responding to his call?

Trust God completely so that we don't question or try to make sense of his messages to us but simply follow his lead. Realize that God doesn't need our help but longs for our trust and obedience. Deborah didn't hesitate to say or do exactly as God told her. It didn't occur to her that it wouldn't make sense to the logistical experts of her day. It was God's plan and that was enough

10. As a New Testament believer, what are some practical applications of this advice?

Doing regular Bible study; asking for God to be active in our life and lead us; at the cross seeing our need for a Savior and the blessing of his grace; being active in the world/church so that we see and take advantage of opportunities to hone new skills and help God's people; teaching our children to put God first ...

Additional Scripture to study: Read Ephesians 6:10-18 (the full armor of God), Psalm 32:5 (confession of sins) 1 John 2:5-6 (obedience to God's Word), Hebrews 13:15-16 (confessing Jesus)

11. Do you see any evidence in your own life of the "sin cycle" we see in Judges? Do you tend to wander and take your relationship with God seriously only when he sends chastening circumstances your way?

Knowing that God will remain faithful, but his will is for us to be faithful servants; standing ready to serve him in any way he desires. He is not pleased when we do things as we see fit (Judges 21:25) Nevertheless he forgives us our many sins, wants to help us turn away from our evil ways, and gives us strength to live lives of thankful praise. In his mighty power, he has already won the victory for us as surely as he delivered the Israelites through Deborah and Barak. Read 1 Corinthians 15:56-58 (Jesus gives us the victory. Stand firm.)

Closing Prayer/Meditation

I Hear the Savior Calling, CW 560, vs. 3

*I hear the Savior calling!
The gospel comes to me.
My eyes once closed in blindness
Are opened now to see
That I myself was helpless
To live eternally,
But, dying, Christ did save me,
And now he calls for me!*

Some thoughts for personal/group prayer:

Thank you for loving and caring for me.

Make me sensitive to your chastening hand.

Help me run to you, not from you

Empower me to be faithful and obedient, ready to follow your calling

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Our Bible Sisters:

Elizabeth – Singing the Songs of Salvation

Leader's Guide

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Elizabeth – Singing the Songs of Salvation

Opening Prayer

Some days it's difficult to sing. Life is tough, circumstances seem overwhelming, and disappointments crowd our minds. As Luke first introduces us to Elizabeth, this might describe her life. Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, were living in Judah under the oppressive Roman rule of the infamous Herod. Elizabeth was about 70 years old and barren. But they remained faithful to their God and filled with the hope of a Savior.

Read Luke 1:5-63.

1. What do we learn about Elizabeth and her husband? (vs. 5-7)

Lived in Judea at the time of Herod; both descendants of Aaron, and Zechariah was a priest; upright in God's sight and kept his laws; "well along in years" and had no children. Not being able to bear children was a disgrace in that culture and Elizabeth most likely had a sense of shame. Note that "blamelessly" in vs 6 does not mean they were sinless but rather that they were faithful and sincere in their walk with God, trusting in him and his ways. What a special commendation to be recorded for posterity!

2. It appears Elizabeth and Zechariah had prayed for a son for many years. At this age, they would have assumed God had said "No" but his answer had really been "Not yet." Now he was answering this deep-seated prayer. (vs. 8-13) Do you feel comfortable sharing a time when you waited patiently, or not so patiently, for God to answer your prayer? Are you still waiting? Have you lost hope?

her heart bursting. The Holy Spirit had connected the dots for her – her son, John, would prepare the way for Mary's Son, the long-awaited Messiah.

7. What do we learn about Elizabeth from vs 45?

Elizabeth had a believing heart and she recognized the same surrendering belief in Mary. She recognized God's hand in all of this and set about humbly obeying, accepting whatever he put in her life.

8. How did Mary respond to Elizabeth's blessing? Think of how Elizabeth's words encouraged this response from Mary. (vs. 46-55)

Mary immediately focused on the Lord. This wasn't about her or Elizabeth but about the fulfillment of God's promise of a Savior for all mankind. With humility and gratitude she recognized the mighty things God was doing for and through her. Mary was a young woman and Elizabeth was well along in years. The intense joy and immediate blessing that came from this mature woman must have helped this young woman put into words the joy and amazement that had been growing in her heart since the day Gabriel came to her. Elizabeth, more than anyone else, could begin to understand Mary's joy.

9. What more do we learn about Elizabeth from her response to the people? (vs. 57-63)

She was emphatic about John's name. For the past 9 months she had been in seclusion, focusing on this great miracle. There was no way she was going to name him anything but what Gabriel had said to name him. Her bold statements weren't accepted by the people and they turned to Zechariah, who agreed with his wife. She wasn't concerned because she knew God wanted the child to be named John.

Read Zechariah's song in vs 68-79.

10. Picture Elizabeth listening to her husband. What might she have been thinking?

The ancient promises must have taken on new meaning for them as the events of the past months unfolded. The first words she heard from her husband in these many months were joy-filled, Spirit-filled praises. What did God now have in mind for her precious John? He was about to accomplish mighty things through this child, the messenger of the Messiah. She certainly shared the words of praise and thanksgiving being sung by Zechariah.

11. Elizabeth was bitterly disappointed as she grew older without a child, and finally to a point where it seemed it would never happen. Yet she accepted her situation and continued to worship and praise God. How can we also be content with our lot in life?

In John 8:12 Jesus tells us to walk in his light and then we will never walk in darkness. We walk in his light when we study and meditate on the Scriptures, when we are strengthened by Christ's body and blood, when we focus on doing God's will, trust in his promises and believe he will always do what is best for us. When he consumes our life, we have no time for bitterness and disappointment.

12. What can hinder us? Read 1 John 1:5-9.

When we choose sin and step out of fellowship with God, we lose the joy of our salvation (though not necessarily our salvation). Not repenting of our sins leads us to discontent and loss of hope. God's forgiveness and cleansing allows us to experience the joy of his light, a fullness of life and a song in our heart.

13. Do you have a song in your heart? Is there something or someone dampening that song, filling you with worry instead of peace, making you fearful instead of confident? Stop, confess your sins and talk to the Lord about these things – let him answer your prayers in his time and in his way.



For further meditation:

On your own, meditate on these passages that will help you keep a song in your heart:

- 1 John 1:9-10
- Colossians 3:16
- Ephesians 5:18-21
- Philippians 4:4-9

Closing Prayer/Meditation

I Will Sing My Maker's Praises CW 253 vs. 1

*I will sing my Maker's praises
And in him most joyful be,
For in all things I see traces
Of his tender love for me.
Nothing else than love could move him
With such deep and tender care
Evermore to raise and bear
All who try to serve and love him.
All things else have but their day;
God's great love abides for aye.*

References:

Barber, Wayne; Rasnake, Eddie; Shepherd, Richard. Life Principles from the Women of the Bible, Book 2

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Prange, Victor H. People's Bible Commentary – Luke

Our Bible Sisters:

Eve—Experiencing God's Forgiveness

Leader's Guide

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Eve—Experiencing God's Forgiveness

Opening Prayer

Read Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:18-25

1. What do we know about how and why Eve came into the world?

She was created on the 6th day, in God's image—perfect: knowing, wanting to do and able to do what pleases God, having an intimate and personal relationship with God.

She was not created as other creatures—especially engineered (2:21-22), the Hebrew words mean much like a potter fashions a special piece of pottery. She was desired by Adam and was provided to Adam by God (not something Adam chose on his own).

She was created because it was not good (same word as was used through chapter 1 for end of each day—"God saw that it was good") for Adam to be alone—he was incomplete (2:18). Man needed a partner to carry out his ministry—ruling over all creatures and working the garden, procreating. He needed a special type of companionship that other men couldn't provide. Only after Eve was made does God say "and it was very good" (1:31).

Read Genesis 3:1-6

2. What do we learn about:

- Satan's approach from 3:1?

His opening question was one designed to question God's command, was designed to drag Eve into a conversation, was crafty

- Eve's response in 3:2-3?

She subtly changed God's command. She minimized the freedom and liberties to eat from all but one tree, and maximized the restrictions by adding "or touch it." She ignored the fact that it is associated with evil. She downplayed God's warning—the certainty and immediacy of death.

- Satan's enticement to sin in 3:4-6?

1) *He focused on self/ego rather than God's will. He wanted her to think God just wanted to keep her under his thumb (as if this is a bad thing), that she'd be on the same level as God if she did this (must be a wonderful thing when in effect knowing evil is not at all a good thing).*

2) *He cast doubt on God's good intentions as well as his promises.*

3) *He focused on self-indulgent pleasure—this forbidden thing is good, pleasing and desirable—with no thought for the consequences. Satan follows the same pattern today because it still works!*

- Adam's role in this first sin?

He was right there beside her and let her disobey, despite his leadership role, and then participated in the sin.

3. From these verses, what 4 or 5 lessons can we apply to our own lives today?

1) *They were perfect and yet they fell, how much more are we vulnerable*

2) *Study God's will and pray for strength to keep it foremost in mind*

3) *Reach out and keep others from sinning in their moment of weakness*

4) *Know that Satan will come to us in the most crafty ways with thoughts that make sense, create doubt, create desire, appear innocent*

5) *Understand that our "little sin" can affect us and many other people for many generations*

6) *God forgives!*

Compare Genesis 3:6 with 1 John 2:16

4. What parallels do we see in Satan's temptations?

Satan comes to us in very human ways. He seeks to fulfill our human craving and makes things look as if they are good for food, a delight for the eyes, creates greed, makes us feel as if we are wise.

5. Compare this also to Jesus' temptation in the wilderness in Matthew 4:1-11. How did Jesus withstand Satan's temptations?



Jesus stayed focused on God's Word and used it to expose the lies. Just as we are told at the end of Ephesians (6:10ff): our defensive weapons come from being in God's Word and our offensive weapon is God's Word itself.

Read Genesis 3:7-8

6. What was Adam and Eve's response to their sin?

They hid from each other, hid from God, and tried to shift the blame.

7. Why is hiding the worst thing we could do when we sin?

We alienate ourselves from God and forfeit his forgiveness. We alienate ourselves from other Christians who could remind us of God's forgiveness and help us put the sin behind us. We cause division and weakness within the family and the church.

Read Genesis 3:9-11

8. How does God confront us when we sin?

1) He comes to us, personally—"where are you?"

2) He gives an invitation to repent

3) He gives us a chance to reflect on what we've done by waiting until "the cool of the day"

4) He demands accountability and doesn't accept the excuses

9. What is God's response when we confess our sins?

1) He shows mercy

2) Puts the sins and the demand for justice on our Savior's shoulders

3) But still allows us to suffer the consequence of those sins so that we are drawn closer to him

10. What is our response to be?

1) He gives us the opportunity to live lives of service in gratitude for his love and mercy

Read Genesis 3:14-19

11. What was the consequence of sin:

- for the serpent?

Crawl on the dust, cursed

- for Satan?

Man would hate (have enmity) him. An example of this is the hostility between believing Christians and the unbelieving world yet today. Christ would eventually destroy him.

- for the woman?

Pain in childbirth, subjection to a husband

- for Adam?

Hard labor just to survive, physical death, expulsion from the Garden, separation from God

- for nature?

Thorns and thistles, imperfections, death (Romans 8:22)

- for all of mankind?

Separation from God and the need for a Savior to bring us back into his favor—Gen 3:15 is the first promise of a Savior, known as Protevangel

12. What are some of the ways we are tempted to doubt God's words and the goodness of his motives?

God couldn't want me to suffer in this relationship, if God is really good how could he let this happen, God can never forgive me...

13. God drove Adam and Eve out of the perfect garden; he made life physically very difficult for them; there must have been emotional pain in their lives as they saw one son kill his

brother and then leave home to wander. Doesn't this lead us to question the goodness of God's motives toward them?

Look at Genesis 3:22: now that man knew sin, God practiced tough love and ensured that they couldn't eat of the tree of life and live forever in their fallen state. Once we are in heaven, we once again can eat of this tree (Rev. 2:7). Life is no longer a paradise but a time of grace, a time for man to find his way back to God through Jesus. Men and women have been given appropriate disciplines to help remind them of the need for a Savior. The rest of the Bible tells us over and over again how much God loves us and how he controls all of history so that those who believe in him will spend eternity with him in heaven. No one can doubt his motives.

14. What have you learned about Eve that you will carry away from this study?

Closing Prayer/Meditation

I Will Sing My Maker's Praises CW 253 vs. 1

*I will sing my Maker's praises
And in him most joyful be,
For in all things I see traces
Of his tender love for me.
Nothing else than love could move him
With such deep and tender care
Evermore to raise and bear
All who try to serve and love him.
All things else have but their day;
God's great love abides for aye.*

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Miriam—Trusting God with Your Position in Life

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Miriam—Trusting God with Your Position in Life

Opening Prayer

Someone once said, “The hardest instrument to play is second fiddle.” This was the assignment that God gave to the woman, Miriam. Though she was the oldest child in the family, Miriam grew up in the shadows of her two younger brothers, Aaron and Moses. She would become one of the most prominent and respected women in Israel, but she would struggle with following the lead of her baby brother... She served as a faithful public servant. But it was also Miriam who became jealous of her brother’s position and publicly voiced her dissent... Her life is an example of how God deals with those who will refuse to trust authority he places in their lives.

(Barber, page 23)

The Scene

Egypt is under a new pharaoh. The Israelites, slaves of the Egyptians, are growing rapidly in number and their masters fear they will become too populous and powerful. Pharaoh orders that all Israelite boys be killed at birth. In this setting Moses is born.

1. From Exodus 2:1-10, what do we learn about Miriam’s role in keeping him safe?

She watched over the baby in his basket in the Nile, approached Pharaoh’s daughter to offer to get someone (her mother) to nurse the child—imagine the bravery this 10-12 year old girl needed to approach this powerful woman with such an offer.

2. Why were Miriam’s actions so important in the young life of Moses?

1) Allowed him to live instead of being killed as other boys at that time

2) Raised by his own mother who taught him to know and love his Lord

3) *As part of the royal family, he was provided the best training and education available in the world at that time*

Miriam's Family

3. What do we know about Miriam's family?

- Her siblings? (1 Chronicles 6:3)

Moses and Aaron, maybe some sisters?

- Her parents? (Exodus 6:20)

Jochobed and Amram, very godly parents who defied the law of the land to save the life of their son

- Her position in the family? (Exodus 7:7)

She was the oldest (maybe 10 when Moses born?) of the three, then Aaron, then Moses 3 years younger than Aaron

- Her husband?

We aren't told about a marriage; being a single woman in these times would have been exceptional

- Family occupation?

Slaves, difficult life filled with hard work

Miriam's Leadership

4. Miriam grew into a role of responsibility and leadership. What did she do after God separated the Red Sea so that the Israelites could escape from Pharaoh? (Exodus 15:19-21)

She led the women in a song of praise and thanksgiving to God, possibly as a chorus to the men's song recorded in the first part of the chapter. She was an exceptional example of godly faithfulness as she helped the people express their praise. It is evident that she was a recognized leader, comfortable with her leadership role and a talented poet.

5. By this time she would have been about 90 years old. Here she is called a prophetess. What is a prophet or prophetess?

A prophet is someone who speaks God's Word to the people, is God's specially appointed spokesperson.

6. Micah 6:4 also tells us she had a special calling from God—note that God says “he sent her” to Israel. Quickly scan 1 Chronicles 6:2-30. Do you see anything significant in the inclusion of Miriam in this list?

She is the only woman. From other lists in the Bible we see that women are included only if they play an exceptional or prominent role. Seeing a woman in such a role in the Bible is rare.

Miriam's Attitude

As the Israelites continued their march through the desert, they quickly forgot about their dismal lives in Egypt and complained. Read Numbers 11:1-4, 11:10-20 and 11:31-33 to see the difficulty Moses had leading the Israelites.

7. What changes in leadership did God make in 11:16-17 and how might this have affected Miriam's attitude?

Did she feel slighted as 70 elders were called to help Moses carry the burden of leadership? Moses sees them as an asset, does she see them as a threat? Was she discontent with her position, jealous of the elders?

8. Read Numbers 12:1-2. What do we learn about Miriam's actions and her motives from these verses?

She instigated the discussion against Moses; she used his marriage as a pretext though this could be a valid concern since a Cushite would probably have been an unbeliever or she might have resented his bringing a foreigner into such a position (first lady) in her country. She appeared jealous of the way God had just used Moses as the primary leader of the people. She (along with Aaron) was bypassed in favor of the 70 elders, who could now also prophesy. This led her to attempt to undermine God's chosen leader.

9. Compare her attitude with that of Moses given us in Numbers 12:3.

She was jealous and full of pride—wanted power for herself; he was humble—knew power and position came from God.

God's Response

10. Read Numbers 12:4-16. When and how does God begin dealing with the controversy?

Immediately the Lord spoke. Brought all 3 together so there would be no misunderstandings and no opportunity to talk behind each other's back (this is always a good way to solve a problem).

11. What is the main point of God's message to Miriam and Aaron?

Remind them he had a different relationship with Moses than with them or any others, even though they had a special relationship with God that most others did not have. He also demanded accountability from them.

12. Why might only Miriam be struck with leprosy?

She instigated the "rebellion"; she was a leader who focused on herself rather than on God's will; she was a prominent woman who tried to usurp the calling of headship that God gives to men, in this case, specifically to her brother.

13. Was there any consequence for Aaron?

God's anger burned against THEM.

Proper Attitude

14. What if Miriam really could have done a better job than the 70 elders that Moses named? Would she then have been justified in her attitude and comments?

No, abilities had nothing to do with it. God had not placed her in that role.

15. What are the proper attitudes to keep in mind when we think about the leaders God places in his church, workplace and home?

Respect, support and encourage them in their leadership; remember that God placed them into those positions and is supporting and guiding them. Pray for them continually.

God-given Roles

16. We can use the word vocation to describe the roles God gives us in life. Martin Luther once said, "Every ox wants a saddle and every horse a plow." What did he mean?

We are often tempted to desire a role other than the one God gives us; in pride we think we could do a better job and covet others' roles; we often despise the roles God gives us rather than serving joyfully and with contentment.

17. Talk about a time when you were tempted to covet another's position or under-appreciate your vocation. How did that affect your attitude?
18. Contrastingly, talk about a time when God blessed you with contentment in your role. How did that impact your contentment?

Repentance

19. Read Numbers 12:11-12. What does this tell us about repentance?

"My lord"—Aaron expresses submission to Moses showing he accepted the Lord's reprimand, recognizes and confesses his sin, he changes his thinking, he takes responsibility for his actions and doesn't blame others, pleads for help.

20. What do we learn about the consequence of Miriam's sin from Numbers 12:13-16?

God required it, her shame was public (can you imagine her calling “unclean!” to those she used to lead?), it was limited in time (did the prayer of her brothers have anything to do with this?), the people waited for her—retained their respect for her. We do well to apply this to our own sins as well as when others sin; God forgives and makes us whole once again.

21. Do you think she was repentant?

Her disease disappeared after 7 days so we could infer from this that she had repented. Biblical history remembers her in honor rather than shame so this also indicates she repented. But, we are not told for sure.

22. Read 1 John 1:8-9. When we repent of our sinful attitudes and actions, what is God's promise to us?

God is faithful and just and will forgive us and cleanse us from our sins.

Lessons from Miriam's Life

23. God shows us the gifts he gave Miriam and her faithfulness in using them. He also shows us her sins. What might we learn from Miriam's story?

1) She loved her Lord and was a great blessing to the people as she used her unique gifts.

2) We wouldn't necessarily expect her to sin in the way she did. She rebelled against her entire life's mission; we so easily do the same.

3) Jealousy and pride can affect even the most faithful and respected of church leaders

4) God forgives...

What God ordains is always good;

His will is just and holy.

As he directs my life for me,

I follow meek and lowly.

My God indeed In ev'ry need

Knows well how he will shield me;

To him, then, I will yield me.

For further thought:

In the coming days, make a list of the various vocations God has given you. Pray that God would strengthen you for faithful service and contentment in those roles. Pray for the leaders in your church, pray for the leaders in your workplace, and if you are married, pray for your husband's leadership in your home.

References:

Lockyer, Herbert. All the Women of the Bible

Barber/Rasnake/Shepherd. Life Principles from the Women of the Bible

Our Bible Sisters:

The Proverbs 31 Woman – Setting God-Pleasing Goals for Your Life

Leader's Guide

This Bible study was written by Marilyn Miller,
a staff minister at Abiding Word Lutheran Church in Houston, TX. The theological
content was reviewed by Professor-emeritus Joel Gerlach.

*Our Bible Sisters is a series of one-hour studies that may be used
separately or in any combination. Each looks at a different woman of the
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The Proverbs 31 Woman – Setting God-Pleasing Goals for Your Life

Opening Prayer

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

Our study today will define this in more detail.

1. Read Proverbs 1:2-4. What is the purpose of the book of Proverbs?

It is a collection of wisdom that sets forth truths of God's will for our lives, often using familiar and easily understood pictures for contrast and comparison. These Proverbs tell us how to apply God's wisdom to specific situations and decisions in our lives. Notice the words “attaining wisdom,” “acquiring a disciple and prudent life,” and “giving prudence... knowledge... discretion.” With this in mind, the wife of noble character in Proverbs 31 is God's ideal woman. Her life isn't a yard stick by which we are to be measured but a goal, defined by God, toward which women should be moving; a goal which we can never fully attain.

2. Read Proverbs 31:1 and 10-31. This portion of Proverbs is attributed to King Lemuel. We do not know for certain who King Lemuel is; however, ancient rabbis considered this to be a pen name taken by Solomon. The description of the ideal woman is a message directed to King Lemuel by his mother, describing what he should look for in a woman he wishes to take as a wife. A woman fitting this description is indeed rare and someone to be greatly treasured. She is a true gift from God.

3. Let's discover some of the things about the character of the Proverbs woman. What do we learn about the source of her strength from vs 25? What impact does this have on her?

She has strength - she's bold and forceful, strong and confident – and this is balanced with dignity. Strength and confidence rooted in self make one proud and aren't usually expressed with dignity. Strength that comes from a solid understanding of God and whom he has made us to be will be tempered by humility. This is what allows her to smile or laugh at the future. Because her strength comes from God, she is free of anxiety and worry. She may not be immune to these emotions, but they do not control her. (Philippians 4:6-7)

4. What do we learn about the way she speaks from vs 26?

She speaks with wisdom, i.e. practical knowledge, but her speech is flavored with kindness. Wisdom without kindness can hurt more than help; it can become an "I told you so" sting. Her approach makes the comments palatable and even welcome.

5. Now let's discover something about the labors of the Proverbs woman. She is both a homemaker and a business woman. The two do not have to be at odds with each other as long as both are surrendered to God. Work is a blessing from God, whether parenting, working in the business world, homemaking or providing a service. What do we learn about:

Her attitude toward work from vs 13?

She works and she does it with eager hands – the picture of someone who faces her tasks with enjoyment and vigor. This work could be for her family as well as for her business since we are told in vs 24 that she makes garments and sells them. What God gives her to do sustains and satisfies her.

The quality of what she does from vs 14?

The picture is of a merchant, loading his ship with the bounty from his country and then sailing from port to port to trade for what he doesn't have at home. This woman is industrious and goes out of her way to get the best she can for her family and her business.

Her preparedness from vs 15, 19, 21?

She rises early so she is ready to meet the needs of the day. This goes beyond preparing meals for the household. It includes her daily chores (sewing in vs 19) as well as preparations for the months ahead (vs 21).

Being an economic asset to her family in vs 16 and 24?

In this 2-income family, she evaluates the opportunities – weighs the cost against the benefits – and then wisely invests the earnings from her business. She makes clothes and sells them. It isn't that she sells but rather that she is innovative and has found a way to use her gifts to meet a need and turn a profit. She could be selling a product such as baked goods or furniture, or providing a service such as health care. This is not to devalue those women who do not have earnings of their own. The thought would be the same if she makes a profit through her business or if she saves money by wisely managing the family budget. Certainly the season of life and individual circumstances have a significant effect on the opportunities that may be available.

How she cares for herself from vs 17 and 22?

She takes care of herself so that she is able to do her tasks well. She makes nice things to decorate her home and she dresses herself with the best she can. In other words, she doesn't sacrifice herself but knows that she has value and is concerned with her appearance and happiness, and that of her family.

6. All women have relationships to manage and our Proverbs woman is no different. God made us to be social and has given us the ability to communicate. Because of her relationship with God, she is able to manage all of the relationships in her life. What do we learn about her:

Relationship with her husband from vs 11-12, 23?

She is absolutely trustworthy and faithful – the very foundation of what is needed for a successful marriage. Trust is built by being transparent, communicating, keeping your word, building up your mate. Building this type of relationship is not done quickly but is the result of consistent behavior “all the days of her life.” Because of their relationship and her support, her husband gains respect. Isn’t that a powerful thought!

Heart for serving from vs 20?

She is compassionate and reaches out to those in need. The “reaching” shows an intentional ministry, going out of her way. She looks for needs and then meets them.

Relationship with God from vs 30?

Charm and beauty are things which many of the women of our world value. Yet they are not the building blocks of meaningful relationships. Only our relationship with God gives us the security to be real and vulnerable in our earthly relationships. It is walking in God’s grace that makes us agents of grace to others. It is God’s forgiveness that allows us to ask for and grant forgiveness in our earthly relationships.

7. From vs 28-31, how could anyone begin to live this type of life? What are the rewards that result?



She is openly praised by her family and community alike. This isn't hollow flattery, or based on a popularity contest. She deserves the praise because of what she has done for her family, her business, her community and her Lord. A solid understanding and deep-seated belief of what God has done for her allows her to always put God and his will foremost in her life. She has an attitude of humble service without self gratification. She works as if it is only God's opinion that matters. Worldly beauty is vain and fleeting; worldly flattery is frequently hollow. The inner beauty that comes from fearing God is not fleeting but lasts a lifetime and beyond.

8. If we look at the Proverbs 31 woman and say there's no way any woman could ever be like this, we're defeating ourselves. If we look at her as what God wants women to develop into, then we can find the grace to begin the journey. The first step in change is not gritting our teeth and trying harder to be perfect. It's not about commitment. It's about surrendering to Christ. Surrendering is admitting that we cannot do this with our own strength; we must have God's help. How can each of these passages help us lean on Christ instead of going it alone?

- Galatians 2:20

My entire life is what it is because of the love God has shown me.

- Isaiah 64:6-8

On our own we are only clay; God is the potter who makes us into something useful and valuable.

- Ephesians 1:3

He has given us every spiritual blessing – from eternity, before time began, God planned to make us part of his family. We are his dear children. Everything he has is, even now, being used for our good and our blessing.

- Philippians 4:13

Absolutely every God-pleasing thing is possible with God, who is the source of all of our strength.

- 1 Thessalonians 5:24

God has defined the woman I am to be and he can make me into that woman!

- 2 Peter 1:3

God has given me everything I need to live the life he wants me to live – there are now no excuses.

You might want to write down one of these passages, or another one, that you feel will help you remember this fundamental truth – that the Proverbs 31 woman is what God wants us to become and we can do this with his help. Post it where you will see it regularly and include it in your prayers.

9. Read Proverbs 31:10-31 again. Looking back over your life, short or long, how can you see God at work in one of these areas? In which would you like to especially grow in the year ahead?

- Development of your character?
- Your labor or work?

- Your relationships?

- Your spiritual life?

For further personal study:

Keeping a journal may be a useful tool. In your personal time over the next days, ask God to lead you as you look at yourself honestly. Use these questions and search the Scriptures to find additional verses to help you grow:

- What do I need to change in my priorities or my attitude?

- Where do I need to ask for forgiveness?

- What should I begin doing or quit doing?

- What changes do I need to make to my worship, devotion and prayer life to be a woman who truly fears the Lord?



Closing Prayer/Meditation

Brothers, Sisters, Let Us Gladly CW 484 vs. 1

Brothers, sisters, let us gladly

Give to God our all, our best—

Service hearty, thorough, honest,

With a living love impressed.

All our duty, all our striving,

All our time to him belong;

Praise him, then, with true devotion;

Come before him with a song.

References:

Barber/Rasnake/Shepherd. Life Principles from the Women of the Bible,

Ehlke, Roland Cap. People's Bible Commentary - Proverbs

Lockyer, Herbert. All the Women of the Bible

Our Bible Sisters:

Sarah – Learning to Wait on God's Timing

Leader's Guide

This Bible study was written by Marilyn Miller, a staff minister at Abiding Word Lutheran Church in Houston, TX. The theological content was reviewed by Professor Lyle Lange.

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Sarah – Learning to Wait on God’s Timing

Opening Prayer

The Setting

1. What do we know about Sarah’s background? Read Genesis 11:27-31, 12:1-3, 15:5-6 and 20:11-12?

Her name was Sarai which means “princess,” wife of Abram (Abraham); she was from Ur of the Chaldeans (modern day Iraq) and moved to Haran (modern day Syria) with Abram’s extended family, and then on to Canaan with her husband and his nephew, Lot. God promised that Abram would be the father of great nations, but Sarai was childless. She was Abram’s half sister; their father was Terah but they had different mothers.

2. Read Genesis 12:10-20. What do we learn about Abram in this episode?

He was so human! His faith was young and he didn’t implicitly trust God to take care of him and his family. He focused on his own safety (might he be killed so that Pharaoh could take his wife as his own?) rather than his God-given responsibility to his wife. He took things into his own hands.

3. How was God’s plan superior to Abram’s?

God kept Sarai and Abram, as well as their worldly possessions, safe and put things back the way they were supposed to be – Sarai was returned to her husband.

4. What can we learn from this short story?

1) Trust that God will protect us 2) focus on God’s promises (Abram to be the father of a great nation) and know that he has a plan for us and it will come to pass 3) praise God that he loves and cares for us in spite

of what we do 4) persevere – God will give those who love him another chance (forgiveness) 5) submit to those God has given us as heads (our husbands) even when they don't appear to have our best interest in mind 6) find our confidence in God's love and promises ...

Sarah's Response

5. Read Genesis 16:1-3. God had promised more offspring than stars in the sky, yet Abram and Sarai were both getting old and had no children. What are some of the things Sarai might have been thinking?

Self-focus: Embarrassment/grief at not having children; thinking that God was not blessing or maybe even was cursing her marriage; feeling empty/unfulfilled; wondering what's wrong with me; giving up - having a child was becoming biologically impossible - was the promise made to her husband never going to happen because of her inability to conceive; what could she do so that God's promise of a great nation could come true ...

6. Was Sarai's plan acceptable in their culture?

Yes, to ensure a male heir, taking a concubine was common.

7. Was it acceptable to God?

One of the reasons God established marriage is to bring children into the world; he had promised to give them children and he keeps his promises without our help; this was a self-focused act of doubt and pride, not of faith. Sarai's plan was also not in harmony with God's original institution of marriage—one man and one woman.

8. What role did Abram play in this sin?

He went along with it rather than reminding his wife of God's providence

9. Discuss a time that you tried to help God with your own plan instead of waiting on his timing.
10. When we take God's plan into our own hands as Sarai did, what attitudes are we displaying toward God?

The Result

11. Read Genesis 16:4-8. What are some of the immediate consequences of Abram's having a child with Hagar?

Chaos! Hagar disrespects her mistress; Sarai and Abram are at odds with each other; Abram walks away from his responsibilities to keep order in his house and to be the spiritual/moral head; Sarai abuses Hagar so badly that she runs away

12. From Genesis 16:9-12 we learn that Hagar's child was named Ishmael and would be a "wild man" who would live in hostility toward his brothers. We see this hostility to this very day. Ishmael is the father of the Arab races and Sarai's son the father of the Jewish races. What lessons can we learn from Sarai's "solution" to her problems?

God's plan is not fulfilled when we take things into our own hands! The end does not justify the means – sin begets sin. Responding to situations in anger and without first consulting God does not bring honor or God-pleasing results. Our sins bring far-reaching consequences. God's will does prevail in spite of what we do...

God Repeats His Promise

13. Years later, God repeats his promises to Abraham and now it is very clear, since Sarai is no longer young enough to have children, that God alone would make this happen. Read Genesis 17:1-7 and 17:15-16. What is the significance of changing their names to Abraham and Sarah?

God marked them in a very personal way to remind them of his promise every time someone called them by name. The meaning of those names also was significant – from “exalted father” (though he had no children) to “father of many nations” for Abraham and from “my princess” to “queen” for Sarah showing that she would be the mother of a huge family

14. Even with the name change, Sarah and Abraham still exhibit doubt. In Genesis 18:10-15, the Lord visits Abraham and once again voices the same promise he has been making for over 25 years. What is the response of both Sarah and her husband?

They both laughed/ doubted because this does not appear to be humanly possible; Sarah lies when accused of laughing

15. What is the significance of the words “at the appointed time” in vs 14?

God’s time is not for us to fathom – our job is to expectantly wait on him

16. What promises can we focus on when we are waiting on God’s timing?

Take turns reading the following verses: Jeremiah 29:11-12 (God has a good plan for us); 2 Peter 3:9 (the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise...he is patient); Numbers 23:19 (Balaam’s oracle – Does he promise and not fulfill?); Romans 8:32 (He did not spare his own Son; he will graciously give us all things)

17. What do we learn from the Lord’s words to Sarah in vs 15?

He knows everything we think and do. He does not change his plans even when we show doubt/disrespect – he remains faithful. Once again Sarah experiences God’s forgiveness.

The Promise is Fulfilled

18. Read Genesis 21:1-7 God keeps his promises! Sarah was 90 years old and Abraham was 100 when Isaac was born. Compare Sarah’s laughter in Genesis 18:12 with that in 21:6.

Laughter of unbelief vs laughter of joy as God blesses her immensely. The laughter in chapter 18 came from Satan’s temptations while the laughter of chapter 21 came from joy and thanksgiving to God.

19. As we read about Sarah and Abraham holding their new son in their arms and reflecting on their years of waiting, it calls to mind other faithful Christians who have been called to lives of waiting. God said in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” How does the act of waiting show us our weakness?

By how quickly we become impatient; by our worry; our selfish behavior expecting instant gratification; perhaps by other outward and inward actions

20. How does the act of waiting show us God’s power and grace?

Ask someone to look up the following: Romans 5:1-11 (rejoice in suffering, hope does not disappoint), Hebrews 11:38-40, 12:3 (consider him who endured) Hebrews 12:10 (God’s discipline is for our good, to share in his holiness...that’s an incredible thought...that God’s intent in our discipline and hardship is to share in his holiness!)

21. Those who believe can trace their heritage back to Abraham and likewise to Sarah. She is mentioned alongside Abraham in Isaiah 51: 2a as well as Romans 9:8-9 as the mother of

the righteous. Their faith is praised in that great chapter of heroes, Hebrews 11 (vs 11). It is clear that we are to look to Sarah as an example for our lives. What can we learn from her?

Our faith comes only from God; Satan makes our doubts seem so “logical;” God keeps his promises to us even when we doubt and sin and really mess things up – he is faithful; God uses us in his plans; repeatedly we all stumble and make mistakes but we may come back to God and beg his forgiveness; God uses us as we are ...

Closing Prayer/Meditation

If You But Trust in God to Guide You CW 444 vs. 1, 3, 4

*If you but trust in God to guide you
And place your confidence in him,
He'll give you strength and stand beside you
When days are dreary, dark, and dim.
For those who trust his changeless love
Build on the rock that does not move.*

*Be patient and await his leisure
In cheerful hope, with heart content;
Then take whate'er your Father's pleasure
And his discerning love have sent.
Doubt not; your inmost wants are known
To him who chose you for his own.*

Sing, pray, and keep his ways unswerving,

Perform your duties faithfully,

And trust his Word; though undeserving,

You'll find his promise true to be.

God never yet forsook in need

The soul that trusted him indeed.

For further study:

- In the days ahead, reflect on the situations in your life right now that require trust in God's promises and God's timing.
- Pray or journal about Genesis 18:14a, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" and 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."
- Like Sarah we doubt, but like Sarah we have the same God who is faithful even when we falter. Read the beautiful picture of how, in the end, God regards his "friend" Abraham (Isaiah 41:8-11) and the fullness of his grace as recorded in Romans 4:16-25— a message of strength and comfort and hope.
- Confess your failure to trust in this great promise and confidently ask God to strengthen you through his Holy Spirit. He will do it!

Additional references:

- Psalm 145:13-14 (for all generations; God is faithful to all his promises; he lifts up all who are bowed down)
- 2 Timothy 2:11-13 (he will remain faithful)
- Hebrews 10:23 (Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful!)

Perhaps there is someone dear to you who also needs to be strengthened in the midst of doubt. Pray for God to open your eyes to others' needs; pray for his guidance holding out the wonderful message of hope and his promises.

References:

Jeske, John C., The People's Bible – Genesis

Lockyer, Herbert, All the Women of the Bible

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