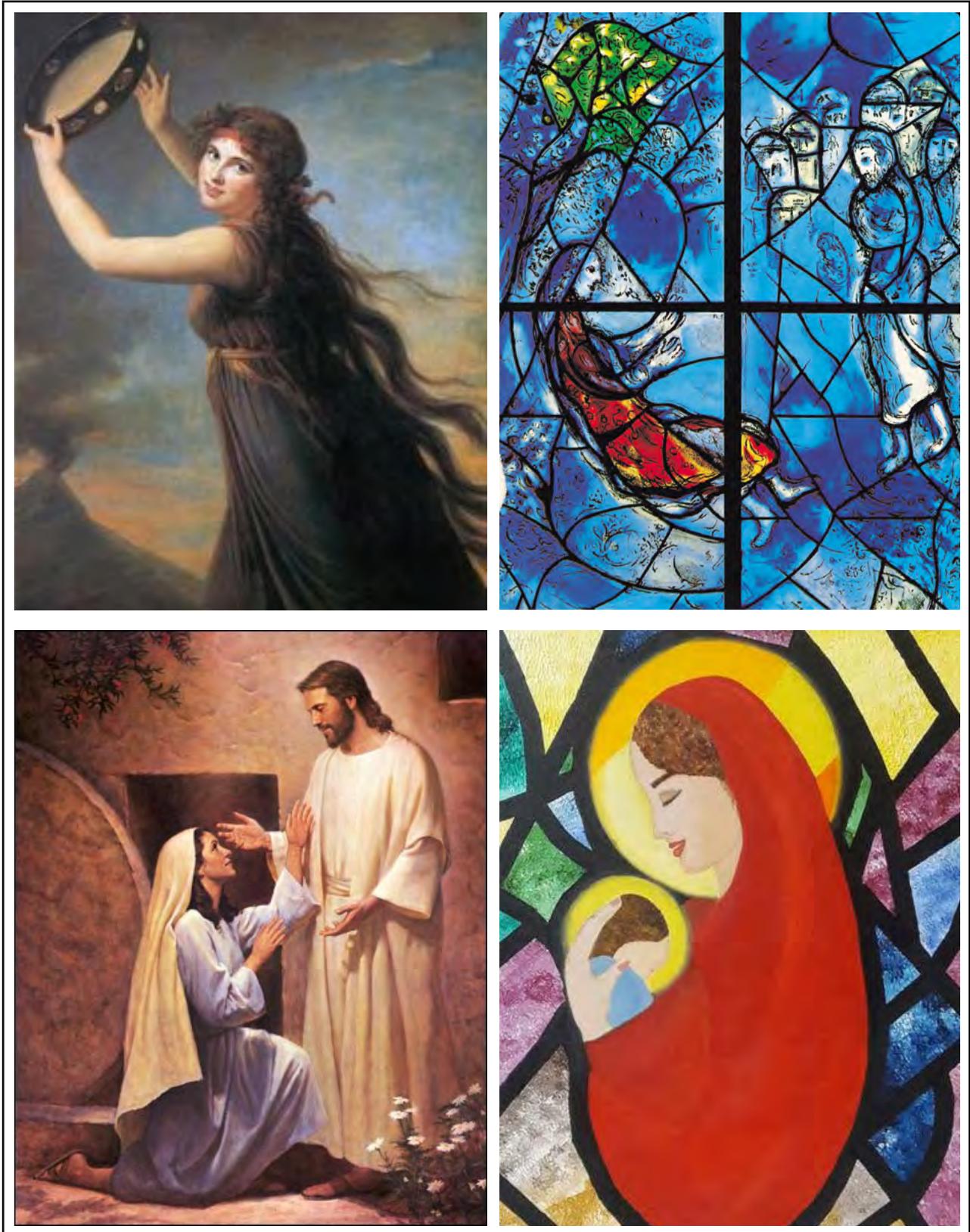


Women of the Bible



MU Sydney Bible Studies 2020

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Suggestions for using these studies

1. Enjoy the studies. There is no test at the end. They are provided to help you grow in your relationship with our great God.
2. Make sure that each person has a copy of the study booklet you are using. Some people have hearing problems and no-one concentrates all the time, so they need a written copy of the questions to take part in the discussions. Copies of the studies can be bought from the MU Office for each person, or you may wish to buy one copy and use your church facilities to photocopy the number you need.
3. If possible it is good to hand out the studies a week or so before the day, so people have time to prepare in advance. Encourage your people to read the Bible passage a couple of times as they prepare. If you do this it is wise to have some extra copies available on the day in case some people forget to bring theirs, or extra people join you.
4. It is essential that the leader has fully prepared the study beforehand. You will find that the background notes are relevant to the answers of the questions.
5. The 'Think About' section is there to help you focus on the big issue of the study. They are hypothetical questions and there is not necessarily a right or wrong answer. Don't stress over this section, enjoy it.
6. You may need to choose a selection of questions to discuss if your group has limited time available for discussion. Choose your selection beforehand, don't simply end when you run out of time. If you don't know which questions to choose then I suggest you select the first four questions and leave the optional questions for people to do if they desire.
7. Where you find multiple questions within the one question read all the questions first and then deal with each individual question separately. This is so you understand the bigger picture before you deal with the simpler breakdown.
8. You can increase participation by asking several people to read the Bible passages aloud for the group. This also provides a variety of voices and helps to keep people engaged with the study. Make sure you ask your potential readers ahead of time to make sure they are comfortable doing this.
9. It is generally better for discussion to sit in a semi-circle than to sit in rows. It is hard to talk to the back of someone's head, and it is generally easier to hear when sitting in semicircles.
10. If you have a large group (twenty or more), consider breaking into smaller groups of about six to ten for the discussion time. The person leading the study could do an introduction, small groups could then discuss the questions with an assigned leader for each group (who has prepared beforehand), and then all could rejoin for a conclusion time directed by the leader.
11. Another alternative for a large group, is choosing several questions that don't just need factual answers but require discussion, and asking the members of the group to discuss those questions with the person next to them. Then, if appropriate, ask if anyone would like to share their thoughts with the rest of the group.
12. You could use the concluding thoughts for the Mary Magdalene study as a prayer.
13. All Bible readings are taken from New International Version, as found on the Bible Gateway website <https://www.biblegateway.com>

Introduction

The 2020 Bible Studies are of Women of the Bible, two from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament.

We will be studying Deborah the Old Testament Judge, Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, Mary Magdalene who was a disciple of Jesus and finally Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Information available on these women is many and varied, some is even ridiculous and some is quite funny. I hope I have selected information that will encourage you in your walk with Jesus as well as challenge you to grow as God's chosen child.

I hope and pray you enjoy these studies and that in studying them they help you to become mature in Christ.

Bible Study 1

Miriam

Background to Bible Study 1: Miriam

Miriam is the Hebrew form of the Greek, Mary.

Miriam is Moses' and Aaron's older sister. She is the daughter of Amram and Jochebed both from the tribe of Levi. (1 Chronicles 6:3)

Miriam, a prophetess, in fact she was the first prophetess of the Old Testament.

Miriam plays an important role in several incidents of Moses and Aaron's lives. She was a significant woman leader of the women of Israel.

We meet her early in the book of Exodus although she isn't actually named there. (Exodus 2:1-10) She is simply Moses' sister watching over him as he has been placed in a basket in the reeds of the Nile in the hope that he would be rescued by one of Pharaoh's daughters as she came down to the river to bathe.

Miriam, who would have been somewhere between seven and twelve at the time, casually introduces herself to Pharaoh's daughter as Moses has been found. She asks if the Princess would like her to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby. This would have been an extremely brave and courageous action on Miriam's part.

Jewish legend has a story that Miriam had had a vision which had shown her that this baby would do great things for Israel so maybe, if there is any truth in the story, she felt it was the way God had planned for Moses to be rescued. We all know the story from this point on. Moses was in fact saved and lived with his own family and learned the ways and laws of the Hebrews and developed a strong link to these people before he had to be returned to Pharaoh's daughter.

The next time we hear of Miriam is at the crossing of the Red Sea when the Israelites celebrate their escape from slavery under Egypt and Pharaoh's army is left behind them, drowned in the water as the sea returned to normal.

Moses leads the men in the Song of the Sea while Miriam leads the women with their tambourines and dance as they respond to the men with the refrain of the song. This is the first song recorded in the Bible. It is a song of praise from a redeemed people.

Singing and dancing in praise and worship was a normal expression of faith in ancient Egypt so it would not have been considered unseemly for the women to be seen dancing their praise and thanks to their God who had rescued them from slavery and oppression.

Miriam it seems was a leader of the women. Here she is called a prophet, Aaron's sister, (Exodus 15:20-21) and the one who led the women with a timbrel in her hand. Ancient Egyptian drawings often show women holding what today we would call a tambourine as they danced. It seemed this was something only the women used to express their worship. It is astounding that they actually had timbrels with them as they had had very little time to pack and move out of Egypt, so little time they barely had enough food. What would have made them take up a timbrel is beyond comprehension. Nevertheless they had them and they used them to express their joy at their salvation.

It is in Numbers 12 that we see more of Miriam's story. Here she and Aaron go up against Moses as they appear to be disgruntled with his choice of 70 elders to assist in the management of Israel while it is on the move.

They have been used to being a three person leadership team and now have been relegated to a place among 70 others.

As is often the case their initial complaint appears to be only the surface problem so they complain about the fact that Moses married a woman outside the tribe of Israel. Moses had in fact not broken any rules in doing this, they just didn't approve.

The real problem however was their displacement in the leadership team so they grumble saying, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Hasn't he also spoken through us?"

Their grumbling was heard by the Lord himself and although Moses chose to say nothing the Lord had a lot to say about it. He called all three of them to the Tent of Meeting and coming down in a pillar of cloud at the entrance to the Tent he brought Miriam and Aaron before him. They are on the mat!

The Lord goes on to explain that Aaron and Miriam are merely prophets who have been spoken to in visions and dreams but Moses has seen the Lord's form. The Lord has spoken to him clearly. Then Lord has spoken to Moses face to face. Moses is in fact the Lord's anointed leader.

He asks them, "Why were you not afraid to speak against Moses?"

The end result of this communication with the Lord is that Miriam is struck down with leprosy. Aaron repents and asks Moses to act as their mediator before the Lord asking that he might heal Miriam so he says to Moses, "Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother's womb with its flesh half eaten away." Moses prays, "Please God, heal her."

The Lord heals Miriam but as with all sin there is a consequence so Miriam has to stay, humiliated, outside the camp for seven days. Yet the people show their love and esteem for Miriam as they stay holed up in Hazeroth for those seven

days. This would have given them much opportunity to contemplate the actions of Moses, Aaron, Miriam and the Lord over this incident.

There is much we can learn from this incident.

Miriam's life up to this point was one of service and faithfulness as one of the Lord's prophets but her act of sin regardless of her status within the community will still cause God to discipline her. None of us are beyond the discipline of God as he works with us to reflect his goodness and mercy and love. Like all fathers God must discipline his people so they learn to choose Godly behaviour over sinful behaviour.

What can we learn from this incident?

1. Jealousy is never a good thing. George Eliot in *Scenes of Clerical Life* says: "One of the torments of jealousy is that it can never turn away its eyes from the thing that pains it." We get caught up in it and it takes control of us.
2. This incident shows us how we can deal with dissension among us by:
 - (a) Identifying the cause of the problem. In this instance the real problem was not Moses marrying an inappropriate women, it was that his leadership position was above that of Aaron and Miriam. They were jealous.
 - (b) Understanding the consequences of the wrong action. In this instance Moses would have been hurt. God was offended that his choice of Moses as leader was being questioned. God's own authority was being questioned. Grumbling amongst a few will lead to grumbling and disunity among many.
 - (c) Act quickly. Don't delay dealing with the issue at hand. The longer you delay the worse the problem becomes. While Moses was silent, God stepped in quickly. Moses' silence at this time was probably good. It was far better that God defended him and put the grumblers in their place. This action saved Israel from internal strife at this time.
 - (d) Understand that there is always a just consequence for sin. Miriam was inflicted with Leprosy. (Possibly because she was the initiator of the grumbling) The people needed to understand that to undermine God's authority was never appropriate behaviour. The people also needed to understand that undermining the authority of God's chosen leader was also never appropriate behaviour. A further consequence here is the despair of Aaron at finding Miriam with leprosy leading to him pleading with Moses to do something for Miriam. The brothers loved their sister so Moses prayed that she be healed.
 - (e) Honest remorse and repentance helps to heal the wounds and leads to forgiveness. God hears the brother's prayers and Miriam is healed but she must still stay outside the camp for seven days. She is disciplined by God just as her earthly father would have disciplined her for wrong actions and behaviour.
 - (f) Reflect on the seriousness and inevitable consequences of the incident. Here the people were given a week to think about what this leadership family's sin meant for them as a community. They learned "the seriousness of sin (vs1-2), the inevitability of judgement (vs10), the necessity of repentance

(vs11-12), the urgency of prayer (vs13) and the miracle of forgiveness (vs14)." (Raymond Brown, p109)

3. It's important to understand how we can begin to heal in the midst of hurt. Again Brown has some very clear points:

(a) We are to value God's servants and those he has placed in leadership over us. While Miriam and Aaron both had received leadership roles they didn't understand Moses' role over them. Moses was God's chosen person for his specific role and God made it clear that Moses was dependable (vs7), humble (vs3), faithful (vs7), prayerful and merciful (vs13).

(b) We need to enter God's presence. God called the offenders into the Tent of Meeting. He met them in the cloud. When we meet God face to face we are humbled and really understand our place before him.

(c) We need to listen to God's words. (vs6) God in this instance had some serious things to say to this family about himself (it is him who speaks and appoints), about Moses (as a faithful servant), about the offenders ("Why were you not afraid?" in other words why did you question Moses' authority as God had appointed him?).

(d) We need to love God's people. Aaron was distressed at his sister's pain. Moses cried out to the Lord to comfort Aaron and to heal Miriam. When we act in love and mercy people see God acting in us.

What then are the lessons learned. Moses learned the importance of being quiet and not springing into self defence. He allowed the Lord to deal with the situation. Aaron learned the importance of repentance and prayer and sometimes we need someone else to pray for us. Miriam learned the generosity of grace and mercy through forgiveness from both the Lord, her family and the people. The people learned the seriousness of sin. (Brown pp109-111)

In Numbers 20: 1 we hear of Miriam's death. She dies in the desert of Zin at Kadesh on the border of the Promised Land. Israel buries her implying that they mourned her death. It is assumed that as it was Israel who buried her and not just Moses and Aaron or her family, she continued to be honoured amongst the tribes of Israel.

Moses mentions Miriam again in Deuteronomy 24: 9 as he writes the law of Israel in reference to leprosy. In Micah 6: 4 Micah reminds the people what the Lord has done for them and reminds them that he chose Moses, Aaron and Miriam to lead them out of Egypt. So even right up to the end of the Old Testament Miriam is recognised as a leader among her people. Her ministry is recognised and appreciated. She was a valued child of God.

Passages

Exodus 2:1-10

1 Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, 2 and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. 3 But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. 4 His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

5 Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it. 6 She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said. 7 Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?"

8 "Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother.

9 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. 10 When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

Exodus 15:20-21

20 Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. 21 Miriam sang to them:

"Sing to the Lord,
for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea."

Numbers 12

1 Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. 2 "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" And the Lord heard this. 3 (Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.)

4 At once the Lord said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out to the tent of meeting, all three of you." So the three of them went out. 5 Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When the two of them stepped forward, 6 he said, "Listen to my words:

"When there is a prophet among you,
I, the Lord, reveal myself to them in visions,
I speak to them in dreams.

7

But this is not true of my servant Moses;
he is faithful in all my house.

8

With him I speak face to face,
clearly and not in riddles;
he sees the form of the Lord.

Why then were you not afraid
to speak against my servant Moses?"

9 The anger of the Lord burned against them, and he left them.

10 When the cloud lifted from above the tent, Miriam's skin was leprous—it became as white as snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had a defiling skin disease, 11 and he said to Moses, "Please, my lord, I ask you not to hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed. 12 Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother's womb with its flesh half eaten away."

13 So Moses cried out to the Lord, "Please, God, heal her!"

14 The Lord replied to Moses, "If her father had spit in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Confine her outside the camp for seven days; after that she can be brought back." 15 So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on till she was brought back.

16 After that, the people left Hazeroth and encamped in the Desert of Paran.

Bible Study 1 Miriam

Think about:

Have you ever been in a position when what you have done is not recognised as yours and others seem to get the benefit of your work? How did you feel and what did you do in this situation?

Bible Study Questions:

1. In her part of the rescue of Moses from the reeds of the Nile Miriam acted with courage and boldness. She was just a child. When have you been required by God to be bold and courageous? What was your response?
2. Miriam led the women in singing and dancing and music as they celebrated their escape from Egypt by the Red Sea. As Anglicans our worship and praise can at times be very sedate and conservative. How can we express our real joy at what God has done for us in church or outside the church?
3. Miriam made a serious error as she grumbled about Moses' leadership. We are often led to behave inappropriately as a result of jealousy or envy. What is your response to this feeling and how do you **morale** it to do good instead of wrong?

4. The real crime of Aaron and Miriam in Numbers 20 was their disregard for the role of God himself in his choosing of Moses to lead the people of Israel. When have you struggled with relating to a leader who you don't agree with even knowing he/she is God's appointed person? How can we handle the situation when we disagree with a Christian leader in a way that please God?

Optional Questions

5. There is always a consequence for sin regardless of what that sin might be. We tend to forget the implications of our sin on those around us and especially on our God. Do you think we underestimate how God feels when we sin and in doing so do we underestimate the consequences of our sin? Discuss.

6. Dancing is generally not considered appropriate within worship in many churches these days. In Exodus 15 Miriam led the women in singing and dancing and playing musical instruments. Why do you think we no longer dance or are more expressive in our worship? Is there some way we could incorporate dance or be more expressive in our worship? Do you think God would approve or disapprove?

7. The fact that Miriam was remembered by Micah almost at the end of the Israelite story as it is contained in the Old Testament indicates her value within the Israelite community. How do you want to be remembered within your Christian community?

Concluding Thoughts

Miriam's life as recorded in the Bible reveals a woman of strong character. She can be bold and courageous as she was when introducing her self to Pharaoh's daughter and suggesting Moses' own mother care for him. She can be joyous and loud and expressive in her worship of her God as she led the women in praise and worship and thankfulness after the parting of the Red Sea.

Miriam also gives a picture of what jealousy can do to a person and we can learn much about appropriate behaviour when jealousy and envy become our focus.

Yet throughout Miriam's life (much like throughout David's life) there remains a strong allegiance to her God. She is valued by her people because of her ministry among them. They waited until her period of cleansing from leprosy was over before leaving Hazeroth. They mourned her death. She was recognised by Micah as a leader of the people of Israel.

Her story makes me hope that at the end of my life I will be remembered as a good and faithful servant of my Lord Jesus Christ. How about you? What will your legacy be to your Christian community?

Bible Study 2

Deborah

Background to Bible Study 2: Deborah

Deborah was a Judge of Israel. The period of the Judges was a time when *"men did as they pleased"* with little reference to the God who had preserved them and saved them.

Deborah was the fourth Judge of Israel. The ones before her were Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar. During the period of the Judges the Israelites lived through cycles: sinning, worshipping idols, being punished, crying out to the Lord, being rescued by a judge sent from God, obeying God while ever the rescuing judge lived then falling back into idolatry to repeat the cycle.

At this time Deborah the Prophetess led the people in her role as Judge. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim.

It is thought that Deborah was an Ephraimite, that she was probably married to Lappidoth. The name Deborah means 'bee' and Lappidoth means 'torches', so she was the wife of torches or a 'fiery woman.' Regardless of this she has been portrayed as a strong woman, a woman able to lead her people into obedience for their God.

Deborah is the first recorded prophetess since the time of Miriam and Moses.

Judges and Prophets performed different roles. The prophets were God's spokesmen or women. They were generally forthright in telling the people where they had gone wrong in their relationship with the Lord followed by their need for repentance and obedience to ensure they enjoy the right relationship with him. They were also quick to tell the people what the consequences of their consistently sinful lives would be.

Judges on the other hand, while also involved in bringing people into right relationships, performed the role of administrators, settling disputes and at times military leadership.

As a Prophet Judge she is a spokesperson for God. So when she calls Barak to gather his troops to prepare for battle she can say with absolute assurance that, "The Lord, the God of Israel commands you," meaning that the Lord will prevail if you are obedient to his command.

At the time of Deborah the people lived under the rule of Jabin king of Canaan. Jabin was a cruel oppressor who ensured the people remained weak and scared by employing the forces of Sisera as the commander of his army.

Sisera's army's strength was multiplied by his command of 900 iron chariots. The Israelites had no such weapon or force of power in fact in her song Deborah says, "Not a shield or spear was seen among 40,000 in Israel." Israel was seriously under equipped.

Under Jabin they were forced to move around on back ways for fear of being overcome by the resident Canaanites. Deborah herself says in her song "the highways were abandoned. Travellers took to winding paths. Villagers in Israel would not fight; they held back..." For twenty years they had lived in fear and oppression.

So after twenty years of oppression under Jabin it appears the people of Israel cried to the Lord for help. In response it appears the Lord spoke to Deborah causing her to call on Barak to lead the Israelite army against Sisera.

It is here that the story gets interesting for Barak doesn't immediately say I will go. His obedience to the Lord's command is not instinctive. Some scholars are quite scathing in their treatment of Barak while others have a much softer approach declaring that Barak in requesting Deborah's presence was assuring himself that God himself would be present in the battle.

It is hard to say what he really thought for he doesn't give a reason. Deborah's prophetic response though indicates that the Lord was probably not pleased with Barak for she says, "But because of the course you are taking, the honour will not be yours, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman."

It is interesting that Deborah responded to Barak's demand by immediately agreeing to go with him. She doesn't hesitate to trust that the Lord will do as he has promised.

The battle takes place in the plain and valley of the Kishon River. Sisera brings his chariots and forty thousand men, Barak brings his under equipped ten thousand men. Barak comes down from Mount Tabor and Sisera comes onto the plain only to be drenched by God sent rain and flash flooding that renders his chariots useless and gives Barak's army the advantage.

It is a point of irony to note that God used thunder and rain and a storm to defeat the Baal worshippers as Baal was considered to be the god of storms. Our God is very clever at teaching people just who is in control in his world. Not only the Baal worshippers discover that Baal is a non god but so do the Israelites whose fascination with Baal brought on the current crisis.

Sisera's men are all destroyed while Sisera himself is left to flee the battle scene only to be destroyed by the subtle charms and care of a woman who he perceived to be his rescuer. Jael was the wife of Heber the Kenite who at some time had entered into a treaty with Jabin causing Sisera to think he was safe with her forgetting that a man who enters the tent of a woman (of the nomadic tribes) who is not his wife would be punished by death (should this become

known by the tribesmen). Jael's hospitality lulls Sisera into a false sense of security as she provides milk and blankets for him. Jael then rather crudely and cruelly kills him.

Again the Lord's choice of a hero is ironic as he not only chooses a woman but a woman who was not even an Israelite. Jael was a Kenite, thought to be the group of people into whom Moses married and who historically were never really at odds with the Israelites.

Barak of course arrives not long after Sisera has died at Jael's hand and so is confronted with the truth of Deborah's prophecy. While he won the battle Jael won the war by killing the commander of the Canaanite army.

While Judges chapter 4 provides a logical report of the story Judges chapter 5 provides us with a poetic emotional account. The Song of Deborah is thought to be, along with Miriam's song, one of the oldest of the Old Testament songs of praise.

The poem moves from a focus on the nation of Israel to the tribes, both participating and non participating, and ends with the women of the story, Jael killing Sisera and Sisera's mother and hand maidens looking forward to the spoils of war while at the same time not questioning the treatment of the women at the hands of their captors. God's hatred of wickedness is clear here. Not only would Sisera be unable to plunder his victims but he would also not be able to humiliate or hurt a single woman in fact a single woman would in fact humiliate and hurt him.

The song ends with a final acclamation of both a curse and a blessing. *"So may all your enemies perish, Lord! But may all who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength."*

God will overcome wickedness and evil. It is abhorrent to him. He hates it. Therefore he will deal with it.

God also loves faithfulness and he will remain forever faithful to those who trust in him.

Deuteronomy 7:9-10 states this ever so clearly:

"Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. But those who hate him he will repay to their face by destruction; he will not be slow to repay to their face those who hate him."

Throughout the poem one hears that all praise and glory for the redemption of Israel goes completely and utterly to the Lord. It was the Lord who initiated their rescue. It was the Lord who organised the defeat of Sisera's army and

ultimately of Jabin. It was the Lord who delivered his people out of oppression. The Lord is sovereign.

These chapters teach us much about how we are live as children of God.

Deborah shows us how to be brave when we know that the Lord is sovereign and will always fulfil his promises to his people.

Barak teaches us that the Lord is looking for willing and available servants, not those who hesitate and question God's sovereignty.

The participating tribes teach us again that God wants his people to want to serve him and to do it with grace and trust and faith.

The non participating tribes show us that there will be consequences for our lack of action. When we don't obey, when we hold back we will be denying ourselves of the gifts that our God has in store for us.

When we are blatantly evil, wicked and worship other gods and therefore sin against the one true God then there will be consequences. There are always consequences for sin and those consequences are never felt only by the sinner but by those they love and are in relationship with.

Let us be like Deborah and be open to the Lord's word. Willingly share that word with those who need to hear it. Remember that it is the Word of the Lord that saves by grace through faith. We just need to be his obedient servants.

Passage

Judges 4 and 5

4 1 Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, now that Ehud was dead. 2 So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Sisera, the commander of his army, was based in Harosheth Haggoyim. 3 Because he had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help.

4 Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. 5 She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. 6 She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. 7 I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'"

8 Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."

9 "Certainly I will go with you," said Deborah. "But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman." So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. 10 There Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand men went up under his command. Deborah also went up with him.

11 Now Heber the Kenite had left the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law, [b] and pitched his tent by the great tree in Zaananim near Kedesh.

12 When they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, 13 Sisera summoned from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River all his men and his nine hundred chariots fitted with iron.

14 Then Deborah said to Barak, "Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" So Barak went down Mount Tabor, with ten thousand men following him. 15 At Barak's advance, the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot.

16 Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim, and all Sisera's troops fell by the sword; not a man was left. 17 Sisera, meanwhile, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was an alliance between Jabin king of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite.

18 Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come, my lord, come right in. Don't be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket.

19 "I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up.

20 "Stand in the doorway of the tent," he told her. "If someone comes by and asks you, 'Is anyone in there?' say 'No.'"

21 But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.

22 Just then Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. "Come," she said, "I will show you the man you're looking for." So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple—dead.

23 On that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan before the Israelites. 24 And the hand of the Israelites pressed harder and harder against Jabin king of Canaan until they destroyed him.

5 1 On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song:

2 "When the princes in Israel take the lead,

when the people willingly offer themselves—praise the Lord!

3 "Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers!

I, even I, will sing to the Lord;

I will praise the Lord, the God of Israel, in song.

4 "When you, Lord, went out from Seir,

when you marched from the land of Edom, the earth shook, the heavens poured, the clouds poured down water.

5 The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai,

before the Lord, the God of Israel.

6 "In the days of Shamgar son of Anath,

in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned;
travellers took to winding paths.

7 Villagers in Israel would not fight;

they held back until I, Deborah, arose,
until I arose, a mother in Israel.

8 God chose new leaders when war came to the city gates, but not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel.

9 My heart is with Israel's princes, with the willing volunteers among the people. Praise the Lord!

10 "You who ride on white donkeys, sitting on your saddle blankets,

and you who walk along the road, consider

11 the voice of the singers at the watering places.

They recite the victories of the Lord,
the victories of his villagers in Israel.

"Then the people of the Lord

went down to the city gates.

12 'Wake up, wake up, Deborah!

Wake up, wake up, break out in song!

Arise, Barak!

Take captive your captives, son of Abinoam.'

13 "The remnant of the nobles came down;

the people of the Lord came down to me against the mighty.

14 Some came from Ephraim, whose roots were in Amalek;

Benjamin was with the people who followed you.

From Makir captains came down,

- from Zebulun those who bear a commander's staff.
- 15 The princes of Issachar were with Deborah;
 yes, Issachar was with Barak, sent under his command into the valley.
 In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart.
- 16 Why did you stay among the sheep pens to hear the whistling for the flocks?
 In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart.
- 17 Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan. And Dan, why did he linger by the ships?
 Asher remained on the coast and stayed in his coves.
- 18 The people of Zebulun risked their very lives;
 so did Naphtali on the terraced fields.
- 19 "Kings came, they fought,
 the kings of Canaan fought.
 At Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo,
 they took no plunder of silver.
- 20 From the heavens the stars fought,
 from their courses they fought against Sisera.
- 21 The river Kishon swept them away,
 the age-old river, the river Kishon.
 March on, my soul; be strong!
- 22 Then thundered the horses' hooves—
 galloping, galloping go his mighty steeds.
- 23 'Curse Meroz,' said the angel of the Lord.
 'Curse its people bitterly, because they did not come to help the Lord,
 to help the Lord against the mighty.'
- 24 "Most blessed of women be Jael,
 the wife of Heber the Kenite,
 most blessed of tent-dwelling women.
- 25 He asked for water, and she gave him milk;
 in a bowl fit for nobles she brought him curdled milk.
- 26 Her hand reached for the tent peg,
 her right hand for the workman's hammer.
 She struck Sisera, she crushed his head,
 she shattered and pierced his temple.
- 27 At her feet he sank, he fell; there he lay.
 At her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell—dead.
- 28 "Through the window peered Sisera's mother; behind the lattice she cried
 out,
 'Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why is the clatter of his chariots
 delayed?'
- 29 The wisest of her ladies answer her; indeed, she keeps saying to herself,
 30 'Are they not finding and dividing the spoils:
 a woman or two for each man, colourful garments as plunder for Sisera,
 colourful garments embroidered, highly embroidered garments for my neck,
 all this as plunder?'
- 31 "So may all your enemies perish, Lord!
 But may all who love you be like the sun
 when it rises in its strength."
 Then the land had peace forty years.

Study 2 Deborah

Think about:

Has God ever spoken directly to you? Have you ever been so completely convinced God wanted you to do something that you never questioned it and just went ahead in complete obedience? What did he ask you to do? How did you know it was the Lord speaking to you?

Bible Study Questions:

1. Deborah is clearly a woman of faith who implicitly trusts her God to do what he says he will do. Because of this she instantly obeys him following his directions to ensure the outcome the Lord has promised. How do you respond to the Lord's leading? He has called you to love and obey him and to do the work he has called you to do. That work is to go and make disciples of Jesus. Are you like Deborah or Barak in this instance? How can you be more like Deborah?
2. Barak appears to have some difficulty in trusting the Lord. Prophets were God's spokespeople. Do you think Barak was just scared or do you think he needed Deborah near him so that he would go into battle at exactly the time God told Deborah to proceed with the battle? Why do we continue to need assurance that God will keep his promises?
3. Sisera and his mother were both wicked. Deuteronomy 7:9-10 tells us that such wickedness will not go unpunished. When we hear of the wickedness that is currently occurring in the world today what encouragement can you draw from Judges 5:31 and Deuteronomy 7:9-10?

4. One commentator said, "Christianity is not a spectator sport." (Younger p165) In Deborah's song the participating tribes were praised for their obedience and willingness to serve and obey. The non participating tribes and especially Meroz, which was clearly cursed for not coming to the aid of the Lord, are ridiculed and humiliated. What lesson can we take away from the actions of the tribes?

Optional Questions

5. God often seems to use the weak and the unexpected to fulfil his purposes. Deborah was a woman as was Jael. Neither of them appeared to bring any special gifts with them to achieve success. From these chapters what do you think God is looking for in his servants?
6. I can see much irony throughout this story e.g. God's use of women in a very patriarchal community, the use of the storm to defeat the Canaanites. It actually makes me smile when I think about it. This makes me think that our God has an amazing sense of humour. What do you think about this?
7. Deborah was a leader in a very patriarchal society. God chose her to be both a prophetess and a judge. What skills do you think she needed to undertake these roles? What do you think this has to say about women in today's world?

8. Jael's action against Sisera was extremely violent. In fact it makes me cringe every time I read this part of the story. Jael was also quite sneaky in the way in which she drew Sisera into her tent. The ten commandments teach us to love God and to love our neighbours as we would love ourselves. How can we as God's people justify Jael's action then, or war of any kind today?

Concluding thoughts:

Deborah has taught me much about myself, other people and about my God.

I do not want to be like Barak and be hesitant in my obedience to God's call.

I do not want to be like the non participating tribes and hide away looking only after myself and my needs.

I certainly don't want to be like Sisera or his mother.

I don't particularly want to have to do anything like what Jael was called to do.

I do want to be like Deborah, a willing and available servant of the Lord. I want to be brave and courageous to do what he is calling me to do. I do want to trust God and I want to have faith to believe that he will always fulfil his promises to his people.

I want to always understand that our God is sovereign, that he is the one true God and that he has everything under the sun under his control at all times.

I can only thank our God for redeeming his people once and for all through allowing Jesus to die for us. I pray that I will repay his loving kindness by being a faithful, willing, available servant.

Bible Study 3

Mary Magdalene

Background to Bible Study 3: Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene was most probably a woman from the town of Magdala. Magdala was a small fishing village situated on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, SW of Capernaum. It was close to Tiberias where the ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas, had his capital.



Magdala was renowned for its fine wools and dyed products, the dye being made from the shellfish found in the Sea of Galilee.

Magdala was thought to have had a population of around 4,000 with the main trades being its woven materials and the sale of pigeons for sacrifices.

The Hebrew name Magdala is associated with the word Migdol which means "watchtower".

The name Mary was the most common name for Jewish women and is derived from Miriam. As there were so many Mary's at this time they were often separated from one another by associating them with the town where they were born. Thus we have Mary, the Magdalene (or Mary Magdalen), Mary from Bethany etc.

Mary Magdalene has had many stories, myths and legends woven around her status as one of Jesus' followers. She has been confused with the unnamed sinful woman (prostitute), from Luke 7: 36-50, Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha and the woman caught in adultery in John 7: 53-8:11.

Mary Magdalene was however the woman who Jesus healed by casting out seven demons. (Luke 8:2 and Mark 16:9) that seven demons were mentioned may mean there were seven actual demons or it may mean there were many demons or it could simply be that when she was taken over by these demons she was completely in their power and they overwhelmed her totally. Jesus drove these demons out and she was healed. Can you imagine her gratitude?

While it is thought that Mary Magdalene was quite wealthy, as she was free to follow Jesus and be one of the many who supported Jesus' ministry with their resources, no amount of wealth was able to free her from demonic possession. Yet Jesus set her free so she chose to follow and support him as she could.

It was not completely unusual in Mary Magdalene's day for women, (although some commentators say that this could be viewed upon as a scandalous situation for that day and age), to choose to follow a teacher or leader as they moved from place to place. However those who did choose to follow Jesus, both men and women, tended to give up everything to follow him.

So these "certain women" gave up their homes, safety, security, relationships and reputations to follow Jesus. Not knowing where you were going to sleep each night and meeting new people, being in different cultural environments, finding food would all have affected members of the group in different ways. The choice to do this would not have been an easy one. Like any missionary journey there would have been some level of stress but their commitment was complete and these women stuck with Jesus throughout his ministry supporting him in any way they could including financially.

To be saved from continuous illness is one thing, to commit yourself to a life of service to the Saviour is quite another. Mary Magdalene's gratitude was expressed in her choice to serve Jesus completely.

What Mary Magdalene is well known for though is her presence at Jesus' crucifixion, his burial and his resurrection. Matthew, Mark and John mention her by name at all three events, while Luke mentions 'the women' who had followed Jesus throughout Galilee were at the cross and the tomb. Luke mentions Mary Magdalene by name as one of the women who was spoken to by the angels at the tomb and who then told the disciples that Jesus had risen just like he said he would.

Mary Magdalene, the woman who was relieved of seven demons, shows her gratitude to Jesus for her salvation from this terrible situation by following him all over Galilee. She hears his stories, she would have been in the crowd as Jesus was mocked as he faced the charges against him presented to Pilate and

later Herod. She was probably with the people who followed Jesus up the hill to Golgotha and was placed on the cross to be crucified.

Mary Magdalene was certainly present at the cross with the other Marys and Salome and the other unnamed women. Mary Magdalene was present as the stone was rolled across the opening of the tomb. Mary Magdalene was present with the women as they came the next morning with spices to anoint Jesus' body for burial only to find the stone rolled away and Jesus not there. The angels instructed them to go tell the disciples that Jesus had risen.

It is also interesting that wherever a list of the women present is made Mary Magdalene is at the beginning of the list suggesting she is a leader among the women.

As the disciples in their disbelief run to the tomb, to find it empty, return to their house of hiding, Mary Magdalene stays and continues to grieve the loss of her saviour. Her grief is so profound she doesn't see Jesus near her. Yet when he calls her by name she recognises him. So it is Mary Magdalene who goes to the disciples to tell them she has seen the risen Lord, that he spoke to her and that he has yet to ascend to his Father.

The language used in John when Jesus talks about going to the father is extremely intimate. Before that he actually called Mary by her name indicating the closeness of their relationship as does the fact that Mary recognised Jesus by his voice alone calling her name. He goes on to say he is going to the Father, my Father and your Father, my God and your God.

This language is indicative of a relationship between them that was very close indeed. If you remember when asked what she is looking for at the tomb Mary replies to the angels and then to the supposed gardener, that they have taken away 'her' Lord. Not 'our' Lord or 'the' Lord but 'her' Lord. This implies a very close relationship.

It is a relationship that we too can enjoy because of Jesus' work on the cross. He has made those who love him feel special. In this instance I'm sure Mary Magdalene through her grief and then excitement would have been overwhelmed so she does what many women do when they see someone they love, she goes to touch or hold him, I imagine to hug him and hold on to him. However Jesus tells her not to touch him as he has not yet gone to his Father.

There is much discussion on why Jesus told Mary not to touch him but the most sensible of these solutions is probably that Jesus is preparing Mary for the changes in their relationship that will occur when he goes to be with his heavenly Father. It may also be to let her know that his work is not yet complete as he still needs to fulfil his promise of the coming Holy Spirit. His permanent return to his people will be in the form of the Holy Spirit, so as yet she is not to touch him.

In saying this it appears that Mary's task to tell the disciples that she has seen the Lord is more than just reporting that she has seen him. She is also preparing them for more to come. That Jesus still has to fulfil his promise that he will never leave them as he fills them with the Holy Spirit. This is still to come so she must only tell them that she has 'seen' him and tell them what he told her to tell them: 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' They are to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. This is the promise Jesus made in John 16:19-22, *"In a little while you will see me no more, and thereafter a little while you will see me."*

It is quite ironic that Jesus should choose women to go and tell the disciples this life saving news. Women who under Jewish law were considered uneducable, whose witness was considered unreliable and were forbidden to give testimony in court.

The fact that women were chosen and Mary Magdalene in particular is indicative of the reality of this story. No Jew would tell it this way unless it was absolutely true. So again Jesus does the unexpected and chooses women to tell men of his resurrection.

Some commentators state that as God allowed women to be the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, a central truth to Christianity itself he is restoring women to their rightful place as equal in value as men and as co-workers in the community of faith, a role they had been assigned from creation (Genesis 1:26-28). (Bock)

Bock (Page 921) delineates a number of other factors that suggest Jesus is restoring women to the place originally bestowed on them in creation:

1. Women were equally worthy of Jesus' saving activity (John 4:142)
2. Women were called to be Jesus' disciples (Matthew 12:48-50)
3. Women received instruction and nurture as Jesus' disciples (Luke 10:38-42)
4. Women were part of his ministry team (Luke 8:1-3)
5. Because of their courageous presence at the cross and the empty tomb, women were designated as the first to testify to the reality of the resurrection (Matthew 28:10; Mark 16:7; John 20:17)

It was a woman, probably Mary Magdalene, unless all the women spoke at once in their excitement, who first presented the good news of the Gospel to the disciples.

Passage

Luke 24:1-12

24 1 On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 5 In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? 6 He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 7 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' " 8 Then they remembered his words. 9 When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. 10 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. 12 Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

John 20:1-18

20 1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. 2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" 3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7 as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. 8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) 10 Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. 11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 13 They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." 14 At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. 15 He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

16 Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

17 Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

The other relevant passages are:

1. **Matthew 27:55 - 28:10**
2. **Mark 15:33 - 16:11**
3. **Luke 8:1-3**
4. **John 19:25 - 30**

Bible Study 3 Mary Magdalene

Think about:

We have all suffered greatly from various things throughout our lives. What has your response been to that suffering and how did you deal with it? What did you learn?

Bible Study Questions:

1. Mary Magdalene's suffering under the power of the demons (Luke 8:1-3) must have been beyond understanding. She is set free of them by Jesus. Her gratitude is expressed outwardly by her service to Jesus. She gave of her resources to him. How have you shown your gratitude to your Lord and Saviour?
2. Mary Magdalene continues to show her gratitude to her Lord by not deserting him at his crucifixion. (Mark 15:40-41) Being present at the cross would have put her in great danger and showing her grief even more so. Romans did not allow mourning at the cross and her presence would have placed her as a follower of Jesus, the one accused of treason. What does this tell us about Mary Magdalene, the person and about Mary Magdalene the saved one?
3. Mary Magdalene was a special woman. She was spoken to by an angel. She was the first to see the risen Lord. She was the first to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel. She now had a new responsibility. Put yourself in her shoes. What would your response to these gifts from God have been?

4. When Mary Magdalene and the other women got to the tomb they saw “two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning” (Luke 24: 1-12) and they were afraid. Luke 24:5b says, “but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”” Is this a question we need to ask ourselves? Do we look for answers regarding our lives from sources other than Jesus? Where do we look? How can we work at only looking to Jesus for the answers we need?

5. What do you think about the fact that it was Mary Magdalene and the other women who were the first to share the Good News of the Gospel with Jesus’ disciples and the 12? What does this cause you to think about the place of women in today’s Christian church?

Optional Questions

6. When Mary Magdalene was sitting outside the tomb two angels asked her why she was crying. She responded with: “They have taken my Lord away.” (John 20: 13-14) She didn’t say, ‘our’ Lord or ‘the’ Lord but ‘my’ Lord. She is expressing the deep level of intimacy she had enjoyed with Jesus. She was close to him. Do you enjoy this same level of intimacy with Jesus because this is what he offers us? How do you ensure you remain close to Jesus?

7. The angels reminded them what Jesus had already told them. How often do we forget what Jesus has taught us and live by truths that are more convenient, easier and less contentious? What are some of the choices you have made that have been based on taking the easier route? What structures can you put in place to encourage you to look to Jesus for guidance and follow his directions?

Concluding thoughts:

Mary Magdalene and the other women disciples have set a great example of service to the Gospel for women today. When I think about their bravery and resolution to serve Jesus it makes me think how I to might be a better servant of the Gospel than I am. My challenge to myself and to you is to look for and take up opportunities for sharing the Gospel as often as I recognise them. It is also my challenge to pray for these opportunities as well as make changes in my life to make these opportunities more possible. Can we broaden our friendship base to include more people who don't know Jesus, then pray for opportunities to share Jesus with them?

Bible Study 4

Mary, the mother of Jesus

Background to Bible Study 4: Mary, the mother of Jesus

Mary, Jesus' mother was a simple village girl from the agricultural region of Galilee. She was from a town called Nazareth. People who lived in this town were generally not wealthy and had to work hard. Mary was betrothed, (engaged) to be married to Joseph a tradesman, a carpenter, also from Nazareth.

It is thought that both Mary and Joseph were descended from David's line.

Parents were involved in the betrothal process which usually had a twelve month time period during which the girl continued to live with her parents. The girl could be as young as 12 years old. However old Mary was she chose to be righteous and responsible and remained a virgin during this period.

It is interesting to note that for someone who played such a significant role in the future lives of Christians that she is mentioned only a few times in the New Testament. While the times she is mentioned are quite significant she is at no time venerated or held up as a leader within the early church.

Six months into Elizabeth, Mary's cousin's pregnancy, the Angel Gabriel comes to Mary to tell her that she is not to be afraid but that she has found favour with God. He goes on to say, *"You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."*

It is one thing to be told you have found favour with God, something we would all delight in being told, but it is quite another to be told that she would miraculously fall pregnant, especially as Mary is still a virgin.

Mary's response is remarkable as she says, *"I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."*

Mary moves from feeling fear to being perplexed, to choosing to be obedient. Her choice is that of a faithful, trusting, obedient servant of God. Throughout Luke's narrative he is careful to portray Mary as faithful and obedient. Mary is not only the mother of our Lord, but she is also an example of faith.

It appears that while Mary has found favour with God it doesn't appear that he has chosen her through any merit of her own but simply because she is his child and he has chosen to display his grace upon her by allowing her to be the

one to conceive his Son. Mary is simply available and willing to do the Lord's work. There is nothing remarkable about her. She has no amazing credentials or experiences behind her. She is simply an obedient, loving, faithful child of God.

This is both a blessing and a concern. A blessing because God has poured out his favour and grace upon Mary. A genuine concern for a Jewish girl to be pregnant out of wedlock brings with it very serious punishment. Jewish law dictated that the punishment could be complete ostracism, ridicule and stoning to death.

For Mary to bravely concede to the pregnancy was a remarkable act. She understands that she is God's servant and that this act of servanthood is of great honour. Mary also knows that the Lord will be with her as she obeys him for hasn't the angel just said, *"The Lord is with you!"*

Mary trusted God to enable her to carry out his request. She understood that he would guide her through the whole process and that he would keep her safe. I imagine she also thought that if she was to deliver this particular Son of God then God would most definitely ensure that everything went according to his plan. She probably knew she would be physically safe but she would have to rely on him to endure the emotional anguish that would come with ridicule and chastisement from her community.

Mary goes to visit Elizabeth who immediately recognises that Mary has been blessed by God. Elizabeth also understands what an example of faith Mary is with her exclamation, *"Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!"*

Mary's response is what is known today as the Magnificat or Mary's Song. It is a song of praise that recognises God's blessings on his children from generation to generation.

Verses 46-49 give Mary's personal praise for the way in which God has blessed her, specifically.

Verses 50-55 praise God's activity throughout the generations noting that he has blessed those who were obedient to him and ensured there were consequences for those who chose to disobey to his will.

In the first part of the song Mary expresses how God has blessed her individually while the second half shows how God has blessed those who fear him from generations past to the present.

She is acknowledging God as the supreme one who has his hand on everything that happens in his world. Mary is reminding us that God is faithful to his people and he will not forget them. Mary shows us how God looks after his

people and that he will continue to do so for *"his mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation."*

Luke continues on with the story here with the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus's birth followed by the visit by the shepherds while they were still in Bethlehem. The text tells us that Mary treasured all these things and pondered in her heart all that she had heard from the shepherds. The shepherds must have shared with Mary and Joseph what the angels told them, *" I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

Mary and Joseph are obedient to Jewish law and take Jesus to be circumcised and consecrated at the temple on the eighth day.

The next time we hear of Mary, Jesus is 12 years old and is found with the teachers in the temple in Jerusalem, where they have been for the Festival of the Passover. His parents are anxious and bewildered and Mary says to him, *"Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."* Jesus replies, *"Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"* Mary again treasured these things in her heart.

From this point on we see very little of Mary. As recorded in John 2 Mary appears beside Jesus at the wedding in Cana and she seems to be instrumental in causing Jesus to perform his first miracle despite the fact that he states that his *"time has not yet come."* What is very interesting at this point is Mary's obvious conviction that Jesus would be able to do something about the lack of wine at the wedding.

Mary's concern for Jesus' physical welfare is shown when she and his brothers try and take charge of him during a busy period in his ministry. (Mark 3 vs 21,22) Jesus' response is to teach that by doing God's will we become part of his spiritual family, an even stronger bond than the one between members of a physical family. (Mark 3 vs 31-35)

Mark, Matthew , Luke and John all record Mary as being present at Jesus' death. She may have been included in the 'certain women' who had ministered to Jesus during his years of ministry. Her presence at the cross certainly indicates that she hadn't lost track of what her son was doing.

Lastly we hear of Mary with the Apostles and other disciples in the Upper Room after Jesus has ascended to be with his heavenly Father. (Acts 1: 14) At the crucifixion Jesus places his mother under the care of John, the disciple whom he loved. John took her to his home. It would appear that she then was able to continue with the other women and disciples so she was present when they gathered together waiting and praying for the Holy Spirit to come upon them.

So we find Mary continuing her ministry at the birth of the early church.

While not a lot is said about her after Jesus' birth she is nevertheless present at all the significant moments of Jesus' ministry and judging by the fact that she is listed among the women in the Upper Room she continues to have an influence on this new community of Christians in Jerusalem, as they pray about what is to come next, as they follow through with the Great Commission that Jesus has put on them when he said, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* (Matthew 28:18-20)

Just as an aside it is interesting to note that in Acts 1:14 we find that all the disciples, "joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers." It would appear that the rift between Jesus and his brothers has now healed. I can't help wondering what influence Mary, (aside from the influence of the Holy Spirit and Jesus himself) as their mother might have had over the brothers' change of heart.

This then is Mary's story, a story of faithful humility, a story of obedience and trust in her God. This very same God who had looked after his people for generation to generation and who she knew would look after her as she chose to be his obedient servant throughout her life.

Passage**Luke 1:26-56**

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail."

38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!"

46 And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful

55 to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."

56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Bible Study 4 Mary, the mother of Jesus

Think about:

Have you ever been asked to do a task that you really believed you were unable to accomplish? What did you do in this situation?

Bible Study Questions:

1. Mary's response to the angel's proclamation reflects the appropriate answer for all of us who are God's children who are called by him to do his work. Regardless of our lack of credentials or experience, when all we have is our availability and a responsive heart our response needs to be "May it be so according to your will, I will do it." Why do we find this so hard to do?
2. What was it about Mary that made the fact that she had been blessed by God so easily recognisable by Elizabeth? Is it easy for people to see we have been blessed by God? Do we need to do something about our outward expression so that the world can see we are God's children?
3. Mary expresses her praise to God with this song: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name." Write your own song of praise acknowledging how good God has been to you.

4. Mary remembers the many blessings God has bestowed on his people. Share with your group the ways in which God has blessed you over the years. Try to express your gratefulness by writing together a prayer of thankfulness.

Optional Questions

5. Put yourself in Mary's shoes as she stands at the cross when Jesus introduces John and his mother to each other as mother and son. How do you think you would have felt at that moment? What would your response have been?
6. Luke appears to ensure that the new respect that Jesus displays for women in the community continues after his ascension. He does this by noting their presence among the disciples in the Upper Room and even mentions Jesus' mother specifically. These women had ministered to Jesus and helped supply his needs throughout his ministry. What do you think you can take from this today?
7. Mary and Joseph are portrayed as typical parents when they discover Jesus is not with them as they return to Bethany from Jerusalem after the Passover Festival. In frustration they ask him why he has done this to them. It is not unlike how a parent might feel when their children choose to pursue a career in Mission or Ministry instead of a 'real profession.' How can we help parents who are experiencing this dilemma?

8. In Luke 2 when Jesus' parents find him in the temple Jesus responds with: "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" Jesus is here making it clear that those who know God have essentially two families, a biological one and a spiritual one. This is a common tension in the family of Christian parents when prioritising between God, family and ministry. How can we manage these tensions without damaging any of these relationships?

Concluding thoughts

I have been challenged while preparing this study on Mary, Jesus' mother. I have never before really taken a long hard look at her as one who had choices to make as she served her God.

I would like to think that I too could be portrayed as a humble faithful and obedient servant of My Lord. I would love to be able to say like Mary, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."

I would like to say I have never been caught up in my inadequacies and lack of experience or professional qualifications when it comes to serving Jesus. I would love to be able to say, "Here I am Lord, use me."

Let us all be challenged to be available and willing whenever the Lord calls us to serve him, whatever that task might be. We know that he has promised to be with us to the end of the age. We know that he will give us the resources we need to serve him. Let us be faithful and trust him to make his will be done through us.

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