



International Women's Day

March 8 2021

#ChoosetoChallenge
#IWD2021

Overview – Four studies on women (Rahab; Ruth; Mary Magdalene;

Lydia) *Note to leaders: This study could be used over a few weeks focusing on one story per session, or you can pick a couple of stories that best suit your group. We recommend all four stories as they tell the stories of very different women with varying influences but use what works for you and your group.*

We hear it spoken about, and preached on, all the time – We are ALL made in the image of God and we are all “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). Therefore, as bearers of God’s image we all share the same inherent dignity, value and worth.

So why then is there so much discussion within the church about gender roles and stereotypes? Even within a church such as The Salvation Army, who from inception welcomed female officers, there are at times issues that arise that make it clear gender equality cannot be taken for granted.

The Bible weaves together the stories of ancient peoples whose life, faith, and experiences have shaped how we know and relate to our Creator for thousands of years including those of some extraordinary women. Some of their stories are shocking, some mundane, and some speak of great sadness and turmoil, but each and every one speaks of a faithful God who sees us all and uses us to build the Kingdom of God on earth.

We want to look at four women in the Bible and their stories of choice and challenge as we observe International Women’s Day and all that it means. These and other women in Scripture serve to remind us that God loves, accepts and uses women for God’s purposes.

Dear Church,
Jesus protected women.
Empowered women.
Honoured women publicly.





Released the voice of women.
Confided in women.
Was funded by women.
Celebrated women by name.
Learned from women.
Respected women.
And spoke of women as examples to follow.
Your turn.

(Carlos A Rodriguez)



Rahab

Read: Joshua 2:1-24 and Joshua 6:15-25

A woman who is referred to three times as a “harlot” (the Hebrew term *zoonah* and the Greek word *porne* both translate as a woman who yields herself indiscriminately to every man approaching her, although many people have suggested she was an “inn-keeper”) is here seen helping Joshua’s spies and assisting in the fall of Jericho. Surely God could have found someone better? A reputable town elder’s wife perhaps? Or a soldier with the keys to the city?

And yet, Rahab is put in the two spies’ path, and stands between them and capture.

Questions

- How did God use Rahab to challenge the accepted cultural norms and practices at the time and further the Kingdom of God?
- What do we know about what happens next for Rahab? (Hint: Read Matthew’s Genealogy in Matthew 1)
- What does this story tell us about God’s view of women?

Think about the way these strong and thoughtful women are described in the text itself.

- What does that tell us about the difference between how God views women and how the people who wrote the story viewed women?
- How can we challenge our own beliefs and behaviours to make sure our views are more in alignment with God’s view?”
 - For example: Rahab could be seen in this passage as just a harlot. Do we understand and define a woman by her profession, or her outward appearance, or do we take the time understand the parts of her that reflect the image of God? Think of some practical ways you could incorporate this into your ministry/life. How can we challenge this rhetoric and view these women differently?



Ruth

Read: Ruth 1:1-18 and Ruth 2:1-23

Ruth's story seems quite small in the grand scheme of the bible. Isn't she simply a woman who showed kindness and loyalty to her mother-in-law? A wealthy and influential man in Bethlehem sees her and shows her mercy, providing grain from his field for her to pick up, but why does this make it our religious text? And how is this choosing to challenge society?

Simply put, Ruth's choices were pretty limited. After the death of her husband she would have been left without material resources or support and would face poverty, as many widows did (and still do) when the breadwinner passed away. On the other hand, her mother-in-law had become bitter and sad with the death of her husband and sons, declaring "...Don't call me Naomi any longer! Call me Mara because God has made my life so hard? I had everything when I left, but the Lord has brought me back with nothing. How can you still call me Naomi, when God has turned against me and made my life so hard?" (Ruth 1:20-21)

This young woman chose, against the norm, to stay and help. That takes guts! And it was rewarded.

Questions

- How did God use Ruth to challenge the accepted cultural norms and practices at the time and to further the Kingdom of God?
- What do we know about what happens next for Ruth?
- What does this story tell us about God's view of women?

Think about the way these strong and thoughtful women are described in the text itself.

- What does that tell us about the difference between how God views women and how the people who wrote the story viewed women?
- How can we challenge our own beliefs and behaviours to make sure our views are more in alignment with God's view?"
 - For example: Ruth was just doing her duty as a wife and mother-in-law, or so it could be said. Today, the bulk of caring responsibilities for children and elderly parents still falls to women, women continue to experience family and domestic violence at reprehensible rates, and women over the age of 55 are deemed the most 'at-risk' group experiencing homelessness. In many ways, the vulnerability experienced by Naomi and Ruth continues for women in Australia, and around the world. How many times do you, or the women you know, ever say "oh, I am not working today, I am just at home taking care of the kids/doing the laundry/preparing dinner/checking in on my parents"? These things we do in our homes are important, and valued by



God, so how do we change the rhetoric and see everyone's value in and out of the home and beyond what they "should be doing"?



Mary Magdalene

Read: Luke 8:1-3, John 20:1-18

Mary Magdalene's name is mentioned 14 times in the gospels, five of which are during the death and resurrection of Jesus alongside Mary, mother of Jesus, and the disciples, which in itself speaks of her place in the story. Yet when we think of Mary Magdalene we mostly think of her as "impure" and a sinner. We are told she was afflicted with seven demons, seven being a mystic number suggesting "completeness," implying that when the evil spirits dominated Mary the suffering was extremely severe. Afflicted with nervousness, she may have been the victim of violent epilepsy, but that doesn't make her a "sinner" and regardless, it is implied that Jesus healed her.

After Jesus' death we are told Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, saw it empty and alerted the disciples (who, upon hearing this shocking news, had a running race to get there). It is to Mary Magdalene the resurrected Jesus first appears, and it is she that he uses to convey a message to the disciples.

The woman whose name that has been used for thousands of years to name institutions such as Magdalene House for Fallen Women, was the first person to see Jesus after the resurrection! Take that wannabe Olympian disciples!

Questions

- How did God use Mary to challenge the accepted cultural norms and practices at the time and to further the Kingdom of God?
- What do we know about what happens next for Mary?
- What does this story tell us about God's view of women?

Think about the way these strong and thoughtful women are described in the text itself.

- What does that tell us about the difference between how God views women and how the people who wrote the story viewed women?
- How can we challenge our own beliefs and behaviours to make sure our views are more in alignment with God's view?"
 - For example: Mary Magdalene could very easily be seen just as a woman who is "being bossy" telling the disciples what she has seen and what they should do. Jesus shows very clearly in these passages that this woman's place is not just what the men tell her to do or be, but she is at the very front – the first person to see the resurrected Christ. How do we challenge the cultural rhetoric that woman who speak up are bossy? How can we make sure we are hearing everyone's voices?



Lydia

Read: Acts 16:4-5 and 16:11-15, 40

We don't know that much about Lydia, her background or what happens to her after Paul and Silas left Philippi, but what we do know speaks of a woman with great faith who showed hospitality and encouragement.

It is suggested that Lydia was a religious woman who “worshipped God” but that she accepted what Paul was saying about Jesus and had herself and her family baptized. She welcomed Paul and Silas into her home, where they would return after spending time in prison and meet with “the Lord’s followers” suggesting that her home had become one of refuge and community for the community of believers developing under the teaching of the apostles.

It is also important to note that many scholars mark Lydia as the original convert to the gospel in Europe. She is seen as the first person on record to respond to Paul’s missionary journey into Europe and her conversion is seen as the start of Christianity in the continent that would become the hub of Christianity worldwide.

Questions

- How did God use Lydia to challenge the accepted cultural norms and practices at the time and to further the Kingdom of God?
- What do we know about what happens next for Lydia? (Hint: It is thought that Philippians 1:1-10 may have been written with Lydia in mind though this is disputed)
- What does this story tell us about God’s view of women?

Think about the way these strong and thoughtful women are described in the text itself.

- What does that tell us about the difference between how God views women and how the people who wrote the story viewed women?
 - For example: In spite of recent gains for women in leadership, the Reykjavik Index continues to demonstrate that the public opinion remains ‘uncomfortable’ with the idea of women holding very senior positions of leadership. Can you think of times when women in leadership have been discredited as leaders? Maybe comments or questions about their hair/clothes/parenting/singleness/pitch of their voice. What are your views on the suitability of women for leadership? Where do these views come from? What practical steps could we take to challenge our own beliefs and behaviours, and to make sure our views are more in alignment with God’s view?” How can we challenge the rhetoric that women are somehow less capable and just let those who are called to lead, lead?



A prayer

Creator of life,

God of all,

God of hope.

We pray for women and girls today,

That they will be all that they can be,

And all that they dream of being.

Help us to challenge and reset the patterns of inequality we see in our world,

Making way for our daughters to find joy in your creation,

And our sons sceptical of the norms that bind us.

Give us courage to speak and work

For equality and justice

Until we see God's Kingdom come on Earth.

In the name of the triune God who is able to do immeasurably more than we could hope or imagine,

We pray.

Amen.