

*Fruitful*  
**WOMEN**  
*of*  
**THE BIBLE**



*Fruitful*  
**WOMEN**  
*of*  
**THE BIBLE**

**Featuring Biographies of  
Christian Women Who Embody  
*the Fruit of the Spirit***

**CAMMIE SIMPSON**

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# INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be a “strong woman” in the 21st century?

I know. We’re starting off with a big question, right off the bat. But if I may prompt you to do some deep thinking, let’s explore that question in more detail.

It’s no secret that the Western world’s view of womanhood and femininity have been under close scrutiny in recent years, to put it mildly. Some may uphold what they view as “traditional” values by dedicating their energy to their family and home, while others might prioritize building a career with or without a family. This is often deemed the classic struggle of a “modern” woman today, having to choose between family and work. On top of all that, we might feel like we’re striving for a beauty standard that feels out of reach. All of our efforts are done in order to be the perfect daughter, mother, sister, wife, friend, and colleague, yet the standard of what’s “perfect” seems to shift frequently.

Is it possible to juggle all of these labels? Can someone really “have it all”?

People espouse a vast array of opinions on the matter. I think that women are doing incredible things to honor their God-given gifts, whether or not they view it that way. But I still think it begs the question: What does it actually mean to be a strong woman?

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As an introductory exercise, I did a Google search to investigate what “modern” women believe it means to be strong. These were some of the answers and patterns I retrieved from those responses:

- She is self-sufficient but knows when to ask for help.
- She embraces all of her emotions but knows how to be happy.
- She is resilient and courageous but isn't afraid to show vulnerability.
- She stands by her decisions and faith but pursues a journey of self-improvement.
- She is composed and balanced but unafraid to break the rules.
- She is confident in herself but maintains her humility.
- She isn't defined by other people but knows who she is.

What do you think? Can you blame us for not knowing how to interpret these messages?

Now, I think that there is a lot of potential for good in these points. Our emotions are a gift from God, and learning how to express them is important for our overall health. It's also a good thing to be a woman of conviction while being open-minded enough to know how we can continue to grow. There are many admirable pursuits available in these points, but at the same time, it's overwhelming to think that we need to be all of these things at once. Is it even possible?

It may feel as though these are the struggles of a modern woman, and they certainly can be. However, these are struggles that have existed long before we came into the world. Let's look at what our Creator has to say about the strength of a woman. Before I do that, though, I want to mention that all Bible verses and passages used in this book are pulled from the New International Version (2011/1978). Okay, let's go!

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During the creation account in Genesis 1–2, God carefully crafted the heavens and earth, filling these spaces with the necessities to sustain life. He admired all that He had made, including the man named Adam, and declared it all to be good... with one exception. The only time He said that things were not good happened when He saw Adam by himself and observed, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18a). And His solution was to create Eve.

The term used to refer to Eve being a “helper” or a “suitable helper” in Genesis 2:18 is translated from the Hebrew word *ezer*. However, being called a “helper” in today’s world may sound like Eve was relegated to being Adam’s assistant. While there is certainly dignity in assistance, Eve’s role was much more complex.

For starters, God created Eve using Adam’s rib—not part of his upper body to suggest her authority, nor part of his lower body to suggest his. By forming her from his side, the two of them were to share equal responsibilities in tending to God’s creation.

Moreover, the name “Eve” means “life.” Her biological nature was designed to allow for children to develop in her womb and enter this world. She was created to cultivate life. In fact, a key reason for Satan going after Eve was because she was created to breed life, whereas he is hell-bent on bringing death. She is antithetical to his existence. The enemy may try to rob her of creating life, but she is also a fighter who can defend her position.

Let’s revisit the significance of the term *ezer*. This word is used 21 times in the Bible, all of which occur in the Old Testament. In 16 of these appearances, *ezer* refers to God helping His people, while 3 of those uses are applied to other nations helping Israel in times of war. That makes 19.

Where are the other two?

In Genesis 2:18 and 2:20, referring to Eve.

*Ezer* is not a term for second-class citizens of the Kingdom. There are no such things. God's children are all "heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17), which includes women—a radical statement for the time in which this was written. Instead, an *ezer* is predominantly used in equal respect for God Himself or entire countries that fight to protect His people. She is a suitable helper. That's pretty spectacular.

Women were designed with relationships ingrained in them, but there's often a misconception that their purpose and identity are inextricably tied to these people. For so long, our roles as women seemed to be tied to the husbands we would find and the kids we would raise. There's so much dignity when a woman chooses to serve in these roles, but this was also conflated with the idea that our worth was tied to other people. If women either couldn't find a man or chose not to marry, could they still have value?

As a result, our Western society has veered so far the opposite way, claiming that we can all be the "strong, independent women who don't need no man." How many times have you heard that phrase? Perhaps you've even used it yourself. Be your own girl boss. Smash the patriarchy. Do all the things in the name of female empowerment. Yet, I know I've ridden the emotional roller coaster of being fiercely independent one day and deeply lonely the next.

It's exhausting to believe that we have to pick and choose between serving the needs of others while maintaining our own identity. Instead of believing that we have to select one or the other, I think that both can be true. Women naturally have a gift of connection but have a wholly important role to serve all on their own. Plus, we always have the *ezer* of Jesus Christ helping us throughout our journey. But

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if you're still on the fence about this, we're going to explore the testimonies of women who have demonstrated strength in a multitude of ways.

This book will explore 27 extraordinary women throughout history who have embodied various facets of feminine strength (well, 28 including Eve in this introduction). Womanhood has never been so varied in its presentations as it is today, but it's also valuable to look back on the women who had paved the way before us. For this reason, this book seeks to bring inspiring stories of stunning, brave, and caring women to light. But as we've discussed at length, "strength" can have many connotations and appearances. For this reason, I've decided to organize these women's stories according to the Fruit of the Spirit as discussed in Galatians 5:22–23.

Written by the Apostle Paul, the book of Galatians was directed to early church members who believed that practicing Jewish laws was required for living a Christian life. Seeking to counter this legalistic argument, Paul suggests that hope in Christ transforms our hearts, which subsequently compels us to act. He writes about nine key qualities that should be evident in the life of a Christian who is active in their faith, which he calls the Fruit of the Spirit: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22–23).

While these qualities or "Fruits" aren't exclusive to women, I do think that they provide a helpful way of understanding how stories about women impact us so profoundly. I'm a working woman in my 30s with a husband and two little ones at home, and I often find myself pressed for time. There's so much to do and seemingly no time to do it, and I get tired easily. And it's in those weaker, more tiring moments that I know the enemy will try to sneak his way into my

mind. Sometimes, he succeeds. But I don't want that to become a pattern.

I have become more active in my church community, which has inspired my own self-improvement journey. I have met so many remarkable sisters in Christ who motivate me to take my faith more seriously, starting with spending more time in the Word.

During my personal study time one day, I came across Galatians 5. It was as if God shone His light directly on this passage, illuminating it before my eyes. I couldn't look away. Each Fruit spoke to me with such weight, yet it gave me such rest to see these words. What a life that would be to bear so much Fruit!

But I was puzzled. How could I actually live a life in such a way that produced this Fruit?

Then, it hit me. Stories. Women who allowed God to work in their lives in such a way that changed the world. I began researching a number of different women throughout the Bible and history at large and became awestruck at the amount of courage these women demonstrated. The profiles in this book are stories that spoke to me and have inspired God's love in my life. I hope they do the same for you, too.

Each of the nine chapters will focus on one of the Fruits of the Spirit, exploring the meaning of the word describing each Fruit. Then, it will primarily focus on women of the Bible who have captured different aspects of God's heart. Some of these women may have garnered reputations that cause others to view them in a particular way, but I want to use this opportunity to reflect further on their amazing qualities. We can learn so much from the stories if we maintain an openness to where the Holy Spirit's insight and guidance may lead us.



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In addition, I've added one story of a relatively "modern" woman (at least, compared to Biblical times) whose story applies Christian principles into their circumstances. God called on these women to do remarkable things to further His kingdom in a variety of circumstances and contexts. This will lead us into the conclusion of each chapter, which summarizes the key points and help us determine how we can live in a way that bears similar fruit. Let our lives also serve as examples of the Gospel message leaping off the Bible's pages and into the hearts of others.

To be clear, this book is meant to inspire our own faith journeys. It is not a formal Bible commentary, nor an attempt to stir up controversy over the specific figures. God is the main character of this story as He is for all of our stories. This is merely a collection of stories in which He has revealed Himself in incredible ways, which can help us consider how to invite Him into our lives.

On that note, let's discover the testimonies of these incredible women and the role that God has played in their lives.



## CHAPTER 1

# Love

Ah, love.

I can't help but swoon when I think of the word. Who doesn't love love?

The experience of love, much like the other Fruits in this book, is complex. We can say that we “love” our partners while also saying that we “love” chocolate cake. In English, we use the same word to describe these sensations, although I'd hardly compare my love for my husband to that of some flour, butter, eggs, and sugar. For this reason, I'm going to focus on the specific Greek word that Paul selects for each of the nine Fruits. This will provide us with some rich etymological context to understand each Fruit before diving more deeply into the biographical sections.

In Galatians 5:22, Paul uses the term *agape* (pronounced ah-GAH-pay) to introduce his list of nine Fruits, which translates into “love” in English. Now, this is a far more powerful version of love than loving cake or even our partners. The *agape* version of love is one of self-sacrifice, putting your desires to the side in order to better serve the needs of someone else.

Can you think of a Biblical example where someone demonstrated a self-sacrificial action for the betterment of other people?

Here's a hint: It's the main character.

Of course, Jesus' crucifixion is the perfect example of *agape* love. He knew what had to be done to save humanity, but it cost His life to accomplish it. Thankfully, we worship Jesus as Lord and Savior because of His resurrection that conquered death. Hallelujah!

One of the key attributes to *agape* love is the way it prompts people to act upon their love for others. After Jesus' resurrection, He commanded us to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). *Go*. This small word speaks loud volumes. The disciples took it seriously and traveled to many places to spread the Gospel, even when they knew their lives were at stake. We're meant to celebrate Jesus' victory, yes, but this should compel us to act in such a way that reveals our heart for others to be saved as well.

It's also worth noting that *agape* love shouldn't be about whose displays of love are the "best" or "holiest" gestures. God values a humble heart, not one that seeks its own glory and praise. Loving gestures should honor and serve the recipient rather than the one offering it. Remember, self-sacrifice is the defining characteristic that distinguishes *agape* love from other versions of love.

The beauty of *agape* love is that it can be demonstrated to various kinds of people; we can be an organ donor for a loved one, or we can simply offer our seat on the bus to a complete stranger. Both involve some kind of sacrifice, and both honor God so long as they are done with sincere intentions. Moreover, it strengthens our relationship with other people by showing our love instead of merely telling them about it. Sacrifice requires service.

How do women of faith showcase this kind of love? Let's find out.

# *Jochebed*

## **Love That Freed Her People**

Now, I'll be honest, when I came across the name "Jochebed," I didn't originally know who this was referring to. Although most of her story is contained in Exodus 2, we discover in Exodus 6 that Jochebed is the mother of Moses.

Jochebed was a Levite woman who had given birth to two children and was pregnant with her third during the rule of power-hungry Egyptians. For hundreds of years, the Israelites had been forced into slavery by the Egyptians, as the Pharaoh felt threatened by the massive number of Israelites. As a result, he ordered the midwives to kill every newborn baby boy by throwing them into the Nile River.

Jochebed managed to give birth to a healthy baby boy and hid him for three months. When it became apparent that she couldn't hide him any longer, she concealed him in a papyrus basket and sent him down the river. To see where it ended up, her daughter, Miriam, followed the basket, which landed in front of the Pharaoh's bathing area. Between the Pharaoh's daughter and a Hebrew servant girl, they took in the baby and named him Moses.

I've never been in a position where I've had to give up one of my babies. I couldn't begin to imagine the ache in Jochebed's heart when she made the decision to send her son away. She didn't know if her

boy would live, never mind whether she'd see him again. Heck, she didn't even know if *she* would live, for her life was certainly at risk for choosing to hide her son. Yet, the risk of releasing her son outweighed the present circumstances, which would've almost certainly meant death for her son and potentially her whole family.



*Jochebed with baby Moses*

I'm amazed at Jochebed's decision to make her wants secondary to her family's needs. I love my kids dearly, and there are days when I find it hard to be away from them for even a few moments, especially in their early years of life. Babies need constant attention, whether it be for food, diapers, naps, or simply affection. So the thought of sending my infant child in a basket, a rather humble form of transportation, would scare the daylights out of me. But Jochebed doesn't let her desire to cling to her family unit supersede the responsibility she feels to protect her children. I have such a strong respect for that.

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The choice of using a basket is also a fascinating point of observation in this story. Not only does it successfully keep the child hidden, but baskets are typically places to store the things required for sustenance and protection. Food, clothing, and linens can all be stored in baskets, all of which help to improve our quality of life.

Moreover, the basket was made of papyrus, which typically grows in wetland areas. What makes this material even more significant, though, is that papyrus became a primary material used in the writing world. Scribes often used papyrus paper in their work, which became a key vehicle for writing and sharing early excerpts of the Bible. Hence, Moses' travels in a papyrus basket represents Jochebed's modest but strategic use of the tools she had, becoming a vehicle through which to save God's people.

What also strikes me so poignantly is how the text suggests that she didn't even name her child. Names signify ownership; when we name a person or object, it becomes ours. I wonder if choosing not to name the child beforehand would've made the decision to part with her boy slightly more bearable. By choosing not to name the child herself, she was further entrusting her son to God. It would be His leading that would determine whether or not this boy would survive, and she offered his whole life up to Him. When he eventually received the name Moses, which means "to draw from the water," his name would be a permanent reminder of the miracle that occurred to save his life.

Jochebed's sacrifice represents an early image of God giving up His Son for our salvation. Her son was just three months old at the time, and the number three carries great Biblical significance, often representing completeness. Jesus was about 30 years old when He began His ministry, which lasted for about three years, causing many scholars to speculate that He was about 33 when He died. Moses'

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three months with Jochebed may signify that his time with her was complete, and it was time for his ministry to begin apart from her.

The motherly love of Jochebed did what it needed to do to protect her family, even if it wasn't what she necessarily wanted. She didn't even know if her son would survive, only to have him be saved by Egyptian royalty and lead Israel out of slavery, through God's grace and strength. Her incredible faith in God paved the way for her son to liberate a nation. That's one way to demonstrate selfless love.



# *Martha*

## **Love That Showed Hospitality**

Martha appears a few times in the New Testament, often in reference to her sister, Mary, and her brother, Lazarus. Her reputation is often regarded as a less desirable one compared to that of her sister, but we can stand to learn a lot of positive qualities from the way in which Martha showed love.

At the end of Luke 10, Jesus and His 12 disciples pay these sisters in Bethany a visit. As Jesus spoke to the group, Mary was the one listening at His feet, while Martha stayed focused on tending to the home. She eventually expresses to Jesus that she wants Him to command Mary to help her, but Jesus responds by saying that Mary has picked the superior option. Ouch.

I know this might be a strange example to include in the love chapter, but I think Martha's heart of service is profoundly evident in this passage. First of all, Luke's account suggests that the house belonged to Martha. She was a homeowner doing her darndest to keep the place together. Food that needs cooking here, floors that need cleaning there... It's a lot to take care of, especially for 13 male house guests who travel a lot. And to top it all off, her sister doesn't seem to show any interest in helping her, leaving her to do all the work by herself. I'd probably get a teensy bit annoyed at that as well!

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Ladies, do you resonate with this struggle? As women, we've been raised, either consciously or subconsciously, to concern ourselves with taking care of the home. That's not to say that this is the only responsibility that a woman is suited for because I don't believe that to be true. But traditionally, it was the woman who would be responsible for ensuring that the house was in order and anyone in her home was taken care of. In Biblical times, women didn't have nearly the same amount of choice that we have today, and her reputation may have partially depended on her hosting abilities.

Martha showed love by sacrificing her personal time with the Lord in order to help make a comfortable environment for her guests. There is so much honor in wanting to do her best to serve the people who entered her home. I remember feeling so loved by hosts and hostesses who ensured that I'd had enough to eat along with a blanket or two if I felt chilly. Their organization and steadiness reassured me that my needs would never be overlooked, and I'm sure that Martha's guests felt similarly.



*Martha, standing, with Mary and Jesus*

The reason why Martha's story is often frowned upon isn't that she was trying to serve her guests but that her priorities were out of order.

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She wasn't just serving any old guest but the Messiah Himself. This was a rare and precious time, where Jesus Himself was sitting in her home. Admittedly, I'd probably run around frantically trying to make sure that everything was in order, too. But I've also been in situations where a host or hostess was so particular about their house being in order that it became a distraction. I wanted to enjoy their company more than their decorations.

Jesus isn't interested in our perfection... He's interested in our souls. *Those* are what need saving.

But Jesus also recognizes that our love can reveal itself in many ways. In John 11, Lazarus had died due to illness, and when Jesus came to visit the sisters, Martha went out to greet Him. Martha expressed her belief that He could've saved her brother if He had been present during his illness. The two of them share a back-and-forth dialogue, where Jesus proclaims that those who believe in Him will never die, and Martha states that she believes He is the Son of God.

These accounts suggest that Martha was likely a practical woman who knew that work wasn't just going to get done on its own. She took matters into her own hands and resolved to do whatever needed to get done. She didn't even wait for Jesus to arrive at her house before greeting him, showing an incredible demonstration of hospitality. Furthermore, her exchange with Jesus also reveals that Martha had a fiercely strong belief that He was who He said He was. Her faith was alive and well, and Jesus responded to her claims with such grace.

We could all afford to have a more servant-hearted love like Martha's. We just need to remember who we're actually serving first.

# *Elizabeth Fry*

## **Love That Served the Inmates**

Elizabeth Gurney (1780–1845) was born into a well-to-do Quaker family in England as the third of 13 children. As a young girl, she loved the simple, pretty things that her lifestyle afforded her, but when she gave her life to Christ at 18, she had a renewed desire to help oppressed individuals. Two years later, she married banker Joseph Fry, and they eventually had 11 children together. During her 20s, Fry gave essential resources to homeless individuals and assisted in establishing a nursing school. That alone could be seen as a charitable ministry, but her most prominent and influential work was still to come.



*Elizabeth Fry*

At age 33, Fry visited Newgate prison in London for the first time and was appalled at what she saw. Prison conditions at the time were not concerned with any kind of quality of life for the inmates. Fry would see several women being herded into the same cell, where they would all have to eat, sleep, and relieve themselves, often begging for food

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and alcohol. Many of them were aggressive and violent, causing a great deal of unrest at any hour of the day. When pregnant inmates had children, the babies would be forced to live in the same conditions as their mothers. Inmates simply weren't treated as humans, as the focus remained on punishing them for their actions instead of reforming them to re-enter society. After witnessing this terrible mistreatment, Fry believed a better way was possible.

As a shy but practical woman, Fry would not allow any risk of disease or violence to stand in her way of helping these women. She often stayed overnight with these women in their cells to comfort them. She began advocating for sex-segregated prisons, teaching female inmates basic hygiene and life skills, and preaching the Gospel. She also encouraged these women to help build lives for their children upon leaving prison.

In 1816, she transformed this role into an official Association for the Improvement of the Female Prisoners of Newgate. Her testimony to the House of Commons in 1818 also helped to create the Prisoner Reform Act of 1823. Toward the end of her life in 1840, she also helped train nurses by creating a home for them to live in while taking courses and performing daily services free of charge to poor individuals. A future student of Fry's courses would be Florence Nightingale.

Talk about a life of love.

Fry's story represents a remarkable generosity to those whom the world deemed worthy of being locked away without redemption. She saw those inmates to be just as human as the likes of you and me and wanted to give them the opportunity to be treated as such. Yet, there was no guarantee that these women would respond to her in a positive way, as they could have very easily rejected her or injured her in some

capacity. Every time she stepped into the prison, she sacrificed her own comfort and safety to not only meet up with these women but to cater to their physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs.

It's also worth noting that she came from a position of great wealth and could have simply lived a lavish lifestyle. We're going to feature a woman's use of her finances later in this book, but in Fry's case, she chose to live her life in a very different way. It would have been perfectly acceptable, maybe even expected, that she would indulge in her wealth and enjoy the life of a banker's wife. She even enjoyed these privileges greatly as a young girl. But instead, she was compelled to use her high status to build organizations that would help the disenfranchised instead of herself. It was rare for women of the time to pursue the number of professional endeavors that Fry did, but she didn't do any of it for her own glory. If anything, she made herself less comfortable so that others could pursue a life that they may have only dreamed of in the past.

One final admirable quality of Fry's life highlights yet another way in which she demonstrated a selfless love for these inmates. She built relationships with people who couldn't offer her much in return. Their resources were limited in the prison, as many of them were just concerned about having enough food to make it through to another day. Elizabeth Fry wasn't looking for a mutual exchange of goods but simply a way to let these women know that they were loved, both by her and by Jesus. Her beliefs have undoubtedly helped pave the way for better living conditions for prisoners and helped save several souls in the process.

## Summary

Love prompts us to act for the betterment of other people. It requires a great deal of compassion toward those who are different from us, service to help improve their quality of life, and sacrifice of our own comfort to offer our best to others.

What are a few lessons that we can take away from the lives of Jochebed, Martha, and Elizabeth Fry?

- Love can mean sacrificing your comfort if it improves someone else's quality of life.
- Love can mean serving members of your community to the best of your ability.
- Love can mean tending to the marginalized communities that no one wants to treat.





## CHAPTER 2

# Joy

What does it mean to have the joy of the Lord?

Nehemiah 8:10 tells us that this is a source of strength as the Israelites celebrated a holy day after enduring much hardship in exile. Rend Collective’s song “Joy of the Lord” proclaims this joy as strength in the midst of suffering. While their lyrics always get stuck in my head (and my apologies if I’ve just done that for you as well), it almost seems counterintuitive to live that out. Joy in the middle of difficulty? Many of us would like to believe that joy occurs in the absence of difficulty, but the strongest joy actually appears right in the middle of it.

The Christian life is one that promises hardship. Jesus Himself was the one to say that “[i]n this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33b). But rather than leaving us with a cynical or fearful spirit, He continues by providing us with the ultimate piece of encouragement: “But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33b).

He has overcome our suffering, our heartache, and all of our pain.

Don’t get me wrong, we will still face hardship in this world, but we can rest in the resounding truth that He has defeated our hardship. *This* is why we can rejoice—not to escape difficulty but because we know the victory is won through it. Thank you, God; thank you, Jesus!

So, how do we celebrate this joy in our eternal salvation? Well, when we explore the meaning of the word Paul used to describe joy in Galatians 5:22, we gain even more insight.

“Joy” is translated from the Greek word *chara*, which not only signifies joy but also a gladness that produces joy. It is a transformation that happens from the inside out, not the outside in. The experience of *chara* is one that produces a calming appreciation for our salvation, which changes the attitude of our heart.

It’s also important to acknowledge that *chara* and joy don’t deny that hardship exists. There is such a thing as “toxic positivity” that chooses to look for the bright side of everything while refusing to acknowledge things that are unsavory to think about. Rather, it sees the hardship but takes confidence in knowing that it is a temporary circumstance in a fallen world. Joy suggests that we can delight and find joy in these broken places because we know our future is with God.

However, as the women below exemplify, just because our world is broken doesn’t mean that we can’t try to make it a more hopeful, joyful place. Here are three stellar examples of women who led their lives with joy.

# *Elizabeth*

## **Joy That Celebrated Life**

When we turn to Luke 1, we're often struck by the incredible faith that Mary demonstrated upon hearing the news that she'd carry the Messiah, and rightfully so. This is totally justified. Mary carried a weight that no one else in history will understand and don't worry—we'll get to her story later (spoiler alert). But there's another marvelous lady in Mary's life who helped pave the way for her, perhaps a preview of how her son paved the way for Jesus.

Beginning in verse 5, Luke's Gospel opens by introducing us to a priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. The two of them hadn't been able to conceive a child for decades. While Zechariah was serving in the temple, an angel told him that Elizabeth would conceive a baby boy, whom they would name John. Despite Zechariah's initial incredulousness Elizabeth did become pregnant and spent five months in isolation. The first words out of her mouth? "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people" (Luke 1:25).

Moreover, when a relative of hers named Mary comes for a visit, Elizabeth's baby leapt in her womb. Elizabeth's response involved her speaking a blessing over Mary, wondering why God would give her the privilege of hosting Mary and the Son of God. When Elizabeth

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

gave birth to her baby boy, her neighbors were delighted by her son's arrival, as they had many questions and curiosities about who this child would become.



*Mary and Elizabeth*

First of all, Elizabeth waited for a child for decades, praying to God that she would conceive. I won't stress this point too much for now, as we will uncover more of this with upcoming women. What I do want to mention, though, is how praise-filled Elizabeth's response was to this pregnancy from the start. She wasn't even the one who heard directly from the angel about this miracle child—it was Zechariah who did. Not only that, but the angel took away his voice after telling him this news, so he couldn't even explain what had taken place to his wife. She just knew that she had conceived a child and praised God for it.

Have you ever had difficulty praising God when you didn't have all the answers to your questions? I certainly have. I've had difficulty even talking to God during those times, never mind praising Him for

what He has done. Granted, this was a gift that Elizabeth had wanted for many years, so it was probably pretty easy to get excited about it. But I know I tend to get caught up in the “what does this mean?” of it all. But not Elizabeth. Even if she did have concerns, it never overshadowed her joy. Luke makes no mention of her having any fear or doubts but just unending gratitude and praise for God.

Then, along comes Mary, who also happens to be pregnant. This presents a scenario where Elizabeth could’ve let resentment infiltrate her heart for a number of reasons. First of all, Mary is significantly younger, which could’ve made Elizabeth jealous of her youth. Secondly, Mary hadn’t yet gotten married, which could’ve made Elizabeth judgmental. Finally, when Elizabeth discovers that Mary is carrying the Messiah who will change the course of history, she doesn’t feel inferior nor fall into the trap of comparison. Instead, it was all excitement and anticipation for the miracle of life in Mary’s body.

We could all use and become friends like Elizabeth. She never believed that the miracle of Mary’s pregnancy took away from her own miracle; if anything, Mary’s justified hers. Elizabeth knew from the moment that John moved in her womb that this would be a special pairing. She felt immense privilege to play her role in this story and absolutely made the most of it.

She also hosted Mary while both of them are pregnant, which is already a big enough undertaking when nobody is with child. Instead of harboring resentment, she created a warm and safe space for Mary to feel that she could stay for three months. Hospitality, as we discussed in the last chapter, came so naturally to her because she was focused on the privilege of hosting the guest.

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

Finally, if there was ever any doubt of Elizabeth's joy, her gratitude ended up extending beyond herself. After giving birth, her neighbors also took on her joy. Her celebratory attitude illustrates how true, authentic joy doesn't stay hidden. The thing is, she didn't have to convince people of her joyful attitude because it so naturally oozed out of her. Other people simply couldn't notice her without recognizing her joy. Yet, the reason for this unending joy is because Elizabeth always directs the glory back to God. Because He is the one providing these miracles, there's always a reason to be joyful.

# *Woman at the Well*

## **Joy That Offered New Beginnings**

Have you ever felt like an outcast?

Have you ever felt like you were beyond redemption?

Have you ever felt so far from God's grace that you've wondered how you could ever be forgiven?

If so, then I think it's time to meet the woman at the well.

John's Gospel is the only one that recounts this story of Jesus speaking to a woman from Samaria, beginning in Chapter 4. Jesus sat by a well in the region of Samaria as His disciples went to buy food in town. While He was there, a woman came by to draw water, and He asked her if He could have a drink. Knowing that Jewish people and Samaritans don't interact with each other due to their ancestors' bitter history, she was skeptical about communicating with Him. The two of them engaged in a back-and-forth discussion for a while as she asked questions about Jesus' references to "living water."



*Woman at the Well with Jesus*

Then, the turning point happens when Jesus asks her to call her husband over to the well, to which she responds that she doesn't have a husband. Jesus then reveals that He knows of her past, that she's had five husbands and is living with another man. He further engages with her belief in Him as a prophet, telling her that He is, in fact, the Messiah. Upon hearing this news, the woman goes back into town and tells the townspeople of her interaction with Jesus, saying that He is "a man who told [her] everything [she] ever did" (John 4:29). This caused many people to believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

God can really show up in the most unexpected of places. This woman came to the well to perform her daily chore, just as she has likely done for many years. I know that I have gotten so caught up in the monotony of my daily routine that I find it difficult to see the greater purpose to my chores. Sure, the immediate importance is apparent to me, but nothing seems particularly spectacular about it. Similarly, this woman likely knew that drawing water was her



responsibility, and yet, it was in a humble moment like this that the Savior of the world decided to speak to her.

For context, Jewish and Samaritan people did not interact with each other out of bitter hatred. This relationship goes back centuries, when Samaria was the capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel. The north was invaded and repopulated by the Assyrians, and the southern kingdom of Judah was occupied by the Babylonians. When a Jewish cohort was granted permission to rebuild Jerusalem, the Samaritans despised this movement. And bitter resentment ensued.

In case that wasn't enough reason for the woman at the well to question Jesus' motives, she was also a woman. This was a time when women had many fewer freedoms and privileges than we have in the West today because she would've been considered a lower-class citizen. But then, once the adultery gets factored in, she likely would have been alienated by many in her community.

Enter Jesus.

It's natural that she would be reluctant to interact with a Jewish man, but her curiosity doesn't prevent her from doing so. Over the course of that conversation, Jesus reveals many events of her life to her, not to shame her but to show that He knows her. This woman, a female Samaritan adulterer, is one of the first people to whom Jesus reveals His identity as the Messiah. He bridges the gap between people of different genders and religions and sexual ethos.

Hear me now: You are *never* too far gone. Jesus can use you at any stage in your life to spread His Gospel and further His Kingdom, whether or not you even know Him.

The woman is so overcome with emotion that she doesn't bring her water jug back into town with her. This seems like such a small detail

that can be easily overlooked, yet John felt inclined to include that in verse 28. The joy of that moment completely took over her in that moment as she went back to the very town that marginalized her. She recognized the weight of that moment and could not contain her excitement.

But what's even more incredible about this moment is that her joy actually saves the lives of several more townspeople. Because she couldn't keep this information to herself, she became one of the first messengers in the Bible to spread the Good News of Jesus. He knew that, by telling her about His identity, it would have a profound transformation in her life that couldn't be ignored by her community, causing even more people to turn to Him. Her joy saved lives.

Jesus compels us to act without hesitation for the betterment of those around us, just as He did for this woman. What an incredible display of joy.

# *Fanny Crosby*

## **Joy That Praised the Lord**

When she was just six weeks old, Fanny Crosby (1820–1915) caught an eye infection that required medical attention. Due to poor advice and insufficient treatment, she was cured of her infection but remained blind for the rest of her life.

Crosby was born and raised in New York state, largely brought up by her mother and grandmother after her father passed away when she was six months old. In her Christian household, Crosby developed a deep love of the Bible and poetry from a young age, writing her first poem at age eight. She showed a remarkable ability to memorize scripture, studying five chapters of the Bible per week.

Beginning at age 15, Crosby attended the New York Institution for the Blind. This occurred before Braille had been fully developed, and she continued to write poetry for different events in school despite pushback from her principal. However, a phrenologist (i.e., a pseudoscientific skull doctor) declared her to be a poet and nudged her to keep writing verses. Whatever scientific weight that held, I'm not sure, but it must've been enough for Crosby to keep up her writing, as she became revered throughout the school. She attended the institution for 12 years as a student and stayed for 11 more years

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

as a teacher, later marrying another former student and teacher, Alexander Van Alstyne.

By her early 20s, Crosby was writing poetry for presidents and publishing poetry anthologies. Since her husband was a renowned organ player, he composed much of the music to accompany her lyrics in addition to music that she had composed herself. Many musicians sought out her poems to use as lyrics for their instrumental pieces. Her publisher required her to send in three hymns each week, but she often wrote six or seven per day. In an effort to stay humble, she often wrote under various pseudonyms to suggest that there were more writers on staff than just her. Talk about doing a group project all by yourself!



*Fanny Crosby*

It's estimated that Crosby wrote about 9,000 hymns in her lifetime, many of which earned a considerable amount of popularity. However, it's difficult to track down everything written under about 200 pseudonyms.

I want to acknowledge that I'm writing this section without ever having had a physical impairment. That being said, I think we can all learn from Fanny Crosby that, regardless of what our abilities might be, we can all use our gifts to serve the Lord. The difficulties of our present circumstances aren't inhibitors that prevent us from experiencing God's goodness. Rather, they can allow us to experience Him in deeper, more profound ways that we may not have otherwise been able to realize. I'm sure Fanny Crosby had a much clearer vision of who God was than many people who have the sense of sight.

Thankfully, these talents of hers were nurtured from a young age, as her relatives, academic circles, and husband all encouraged her to dig deeper into these passions. Her mother and grandmother introduced the love of Jesus at home through their faith, which allowed Fanny to realize the joy that comes from the salvation that He brings. In the case of her husband, he actually worked alongside her to help bring her poems and hymns to life.

What influences do you have in your life today? Are they moving you closer to Jesus and encouraging you to use your gifts to serve Him? I think these are worthwhile questions to ask.

Furthermore, Crosby's story not only shows us the great joy she experienced from her work but also that this was followed up with hard work. As a blind woman who never used the Braille system to communicate, she would've had to work incredibly hard to simply interact with other people, never mind make a career for herself. Yes, she had a natural inclination to write all of this poetry, but she still honed her craft by working on it daily. If our God-given talents are not attended to, we can still honor God with them, but they might not reach their fullest potential. Crosby shows us that our joy for God can actually motivate us to want to work harder and produce the best possible product we can for Him.

Crosby's gifts for poetry and songwriting would still be present regardless of her visual capabilities. However, her gifts became even more remarkable—and her joy even more powerful—because of how she refused to be defined by her impairment. Instead, she let her joy in the Lord guide her work, devoting herself in such a way that allowed her artistic legacy to last for over a century.

## **Summary**

Returning to the question at the start of this chapter, I think the joy of the Lord means that we allow God to be the source of our praise, regardless of our present situation. Our joy overflows from a place of overwhelming elation of all that He is and all He has done.

What are a few lessons that we can take away from the lives of Elizabeth, the woman at the well, and Fanny Crosby?

- Joy can mean delighting in others' lives wholeheartedly, knowing that it doesn't take away from your own experience.
- Joy can mean sharing the Good News out of an excitement that cannot be contained inside.
- Joy can mean using our gifts to express our adoration of God.
- Joy can mean showing others with similarly troubled pasts that there is always hope found in Christ.

## CHAPTER 3

# Peace

I think peace is a concept that can be easily misunderstood.

In many of the instances in which we hear the word “peace,” it is used in conjunction with a term that seemingly opposes it. Think of Leo Tolstoy’s epic novel *War and Peace*, contrasting two terms that seem unlikely to coexist. Even in Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, which provides several definitions of “peace,” the first entry is quoted as “a state of tranquility or quiet: such as *freedom from civil disturbance*” (Merriam-Webster, n.d., entry 1a, emphasis added).

Peace seems to be something that exists in the absence of something else. That simplified definition almost makes peace sound like a by-product; as long as we don’t have violence and unrest, we must have peace as a result.

But is it possible to have more agency in living a life of peace? Can it be more than simply omitting conflict, instead choosing to actively make it a part of our lives? Paul thought so.

The word that Paul uses in Galatians 5:22 to represent peace is *eirene* (pronounced eye-REY-ney), which occurs dozens of times throughout the New Testament. Beyond this one word, though, *eirene* suggests that we can experience a well-rounded view of peace that comes from believing in the miracle of Jesus’ life, death, and

resurrection. As a result, we can live our lives in a way that allows us to thrive because of what He did for us.

In the last chapter, I referenced John 16:33 with regards to the joy we can experience in knowing that He has overcome our troubles. But do you know what the first part of that verse says? “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace” (John 16:33a).

We don't have peace in the absence of conflict. We have peace in the presence of Jesus.

Now, I don't want to preach any kind of prosperity gospel here. I'm not saying that believing in Jesus will automatically mean that you'll get whatever you want because that's simply not true. But what I am saying is that our belief in what He has done for us will invite an all-consuming *eirene* into our lives that isn't bound to whatever daily troubles come our way. We can allow our hearts to rest in this truth. Attributing our eternal salvation to Jesus brings us the calming and profound experience of peace.

Let's journey through the lives of a few women who embodied this notion of peace.



# Deborah

## Peace That Created Space

I know I just talked about how *eirene* refers to the peace we have in Jesus, but we're going to start off with a woman who existed before the life of Jesus. Just stay with me, because I think we can learn a lot from this remarkable woman's life.

After God brought the Israelites into the Promised Land and their leader, Joshua, had died, the Israelites pursued a life of debauchery away from God. As a punishment, God had given His people over to a wicked king, and the Israelites cried out to God for help. From this point onward, God introduced a series of judges in an effort to bring His people back to following Him. Some rulers were more successful at this than others.

In Judges 4, we're introduced to the only female judge mentioned in the entire book: Deborah. She was a prophetess who had been called into this position of leadership after the Israelites had turned away from God once again. She pronounced her judgments and held courtroom sessions under a specific palm tree, where Israelites would travel to hear them.

One day, Deborah commissioned a man named Barak to lead 10,000 men into battle against their enemy, Sisera, of which she would ensure the victory. Barak only agreed to do this if she accompanied

him. She agreed but remarked that his actions would cause a woman to have the final honor of killing Sisera.

Deborah continued to lead and command Barak and his army to fight Sisera's army. While this was going on, Sisera tried to escape but got lured into a trap by a woman named Jael. She killed Sisera that night. I won't say how it happened because it was pretty graphic, but let's just say that we won't be visiting Sisera's "temple" anytime soon. Feel free to read Judges 4:21 at your own discretion if you're curious.

Sisera's death fulfilled Deborah's prophecy that he would die at the hand of a woman, and the battle was won. The entirety of Judges 5 is a song that Deborah sings in response to this victory, recounting the wicked ways of their enemies and praising God's love and strength.

So, why do I bring up a story about gruesome battles in a chapter all about peace?

Although Deborah's story is largely known for this battle, I want to revisit the first part of her story. Before she became known as a prominent military leader, she was a wise and judicious voice that served the Lord "under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim" (Judges 4:5).

## PEACE



*Deborah*

There's a reason why tropical locations are such popular tourist destinations. Yes, the warm weather and sandy beaches help, but the image of the palm tree seems reminiscent of calmness and relaxation. On top of that, palm trees bear fruit, as Deborah's court was surrounded by plants that had a peaceful productivity.

The location of her court also had a special significance in this setting. The name "Ramah" in Hebrew translates to "high place," while the meaning of Bethel was "house of God." If we were to combine these meanings, Deborah chose to hold her court at the nexus point between the high place and the house of God. Wow.

Instead of choosing to work under the opulent majesty of human works, Deborah chose to conduct her affairs by the natural majesty of God's works. She sat beneath the palm tree surrounded by God's presence, creating a peaceful environment for herself and her people. This would've allowed her subjects to approach her in a much less intimidating fashion than if she were to have held her courts surrounded by her own wealth. Her constituents could bring their fears and concerns to Deborah while simultaneously presenting their concerns before God as well.

What's also important to note is the order of events in which Deborah acts. Regarding the introduction of this chapter, I speak about how contradictory it seems to claim that peace exists when conflict doesn't. But Deborah, despite her clear military aptitude, doesn't use battle to establish peace. Instead, it's the other way around: She starts from a place of peace, which gives her wisdom to fight the battles ahead of her.

The truth is, as long as we exist on this side of heaven, there will always be conflict and strife as a result of sin. We will never live in a truly peaceful world, but we can think much more clearly when we approach our circumstances with a peaceful attitude. Rather than letting our fickle emotions guide us into violence in an effort to restore peace, we can follow Deborah's model by seeking God's peace before we act. Then, we can wisely discern how to conduct ourselves in a way that honors God, confident in the peace He gives us. In Deborah's case, this meant fighting her enemies and bringing peace to her land and her people for 40 years. Who knows what God can do for you, too.

# *Mary of Bethany*

## **Peace That Brought Vulnerability**

We've talked a little bit about Martha, and we know that she was rebuked for her actions compared to that of her sister.

So, what was it about Mary that drew Jesus' admiration?

In revisiting the same passages, Luke 10 and John 11, we learn a great deal about Mary's personality through her actions. In Luke 10, while Martha is busy taking care of the house and making sure all the arrangements are perfect, Mary doesn't pay any consideration toward those things. Instead, she sat at the feet of Jesus, observing and listening to everything He had to say. This generates a lot of frustration from Martha, but Jesus makes a point to specifically praise Mary for her actions, stating that "only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42).

Jesus is the only thing we need for eternal life, and Mary recognized that. Of course, we need food, water, and shelter to survive on this earth, and Martha attended to these needs very strictly. But without even saying a word, Mary's soft presence brought her close to Jesus' body and His heart.

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

I wasn't a talkative child. I would open up to the people with whom I had a close relationship, but even then, my voice wasn't particularly loud, so people didn't always hear me. It always felt so reassuring to know when someone would be listening to what I had to say by peacefully sitting before me who showed that they cared about me. I wasn't the kind of person who could captivate a room, but when someone like Mary was around, I felt like I had the floor.



*Mary with Jesus*

This is one reason why Mary's story resonates so personally with me because she didn't have to raise her voice to get Jesus' attention. She spoke through her actions, positioning herself in such a way as to show Jesus that He was the object of her focus. She sat before Him like a child sits in front of a parent or teacher as they tell the kids a story. Mary epitomizes the childlike faith that Jesus loves so dearly yet also demonstrates a mature recognition of who He is. Her peaceful demeanor soothes an environment that could've been very stressful if she had been preoccupied by other matters.

However, it's in John 11 that we get to see an even more personal glimpse into Mary's responses to her circumstances. After her brother, Lazarus, had died, Martha is the one to meet up with Jesus and engage in a dialogue with Him. It's not until Martha calls over to Mary that she quickly gets up and presents herself before Jesus.

Have you ever been a little intimidated to present yourself before God? I know I have, but we don't need to be. He understands our pain more deeply than we'll ever understand, and He'll never, ever stop loving us.

Case in point: When she saw Him, she was so overcome with emotion that she cried at His feet, claiming that her brother wouldn't have died if Jesus had been there. Her emotions actually moved Jesus to the point where it troubled His spirit, He asked to see Lazarus, and He wept.

As we learned from Luke's Gospel, Mary isn't going to have all the words right on the tip of her tongue all the time; Martha likely took on that role at home. But if Martha is the head of that duo, Mary is the heart. Her overflowing emotions moved her to simply weep at Jesus' feet because it was the best way that she could show her heart to Him.

I know that we all have different comfort levels with showing emotion, but there is such bravery and beauty in vulnerability. No one could doubt or question exactly what Mary was feeling in that moment, which likely drew Jesus closer to her. It was in seeing her posture and emotion that caused Jesus to feel unsettled to the point of joining in her tears. Mary wore her heart on her sleeve and could have risked causing a scene in front of Jesus. But instead, her incredible reverence for Him actually caused Him to draw closer to her and empathize with her pain.

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

A display of genuine, heartfelt emotion is such a beautiful thing. Mary humbled herself by throwing herself down to His feet, the lowest point of His body, and letting her tears spill on the ground. She turned to God Himself to help comfort her in the midst of her grief, and her peaceful personality allowed Him to share in her experience. She built a peaceful environment by quietly and gently drawing her attention to God, and her childlike faith shone radiantly.



# *Elisabeth Elliot*

## **Peace That Extended Forgiveness**

I promise there won't always be a figure named Elizabeth in each chapter. It just happened to work out that way for Chapters 1–3. Trust me, we've got some more Marys in store, too. Anyways, on to Mrs. Elliot.

Elisabeth Howard (1926–2015) was born of American missionary parents in Belgium, though she spent much of her childhood in the northeastern United States. She studied classical Greek at Wheaton College with the intention of becoming a Bible translator. During that time, she met fellow student Jim Elliot, and the two of them developed feelings for one another. However, Jim and Elisabeth left for Ecuador on separate mission trips and worked apart for five years. They became engaged under the promise that they would both learn the language of the Quichua Ecuadorians and married in 1953.

The couple continued to serve the Quichua tribe, but Jim and four other men were drawn to the unreached Auca tribe. Despite arriving at their camp with gifts and having a civil introduction to a few members, all five men were killed by the tribe in 1956. This left Elisabeth as a widow with a 10-month-old girl in Ecuador.

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

While staying with the Quichua tribe, she met two women from the Auca tribe. She developed a relationship with the two women, who began teaching her their language. Incredibly, this relationship blossomed into Elliot and her daughter living with the very tribe that had killed her husband. The two of them, along with the sister of another man who had been killed with Jim, learned the Auca language so that they could translate the Gospel for them. Given this massive undertaking, she opted to spend more time with the Quichua people before returning to the United States in 1963.

While in Ecuador, she wrote a few different books on her husband's life and both of their experiences in the country. This paved the way for her writing career as her biographies, memoirs, and faith-based books also made her a sought-after speaker. She hosted a radio show for 13 years, married two more times, and captured hearts around the world.



*Elisabeth Elliot*

It gives me chills to think of the life that Elisabeth Elliot lived. She would have faced some of the most horrendous experiences that

anyone could imagine, yet she remained dedicated in her service to the Lord through it all.

Before Elliot's missionary career officially began, the influences she had at home likely primed her for a life of service. With her parents serving in this role, Elliot had various men and women of faith enter her family home. This early parental influence would've initiated the process of developing relationships with people from various backgrounds. While any career can be used to honor God, the path that her parents chose allowed Elliot to understand the active role that peace requires to develop those relationships. Her experiences in Ecuador, however, took that to a whole new level.

How do you tend to react in the midst of a tragic event? Are there certain coping mechanisms that you use to try to numb or distract yourself from the pain of that moment? For me, I find that I throw myself into my work. By focusing on my professional responsibilities, I try to close off my brain from letting in darker thoughts about the upsetting event. I'm not proud of this, but it's a habit of mine that I've observed over the years.

Elisabeth Elliot did not have this luxury of separating her work from her tragedy. She was working in the same country and, for a time, with the same people who had brought on that tragedy. Yet, she didn't just fulfill her duties because it was her job, but she did it with the understanding of who God is through her pain. She knew who God was, even if she didn't know why He allowed these things to happen. But the peace she received in trusting God's plan allowed her heart to open up to the Auca tribe.

One of the most remarkable parts of Elliot's experience with the Auca people is that she came to understand why they killed her husband. They were so protective of their way of life that they had perceived

newcomers as a threat and shut down any opportunity to change their status quo. In one of her books, she even compared this behavior to the celebration that American soldiers receive upon successfully defending their country.

But it was through Elliot's peaceful, relationship-centered approach that she could begin to show them the love and ministry of Jesus. They even gave her a nickname that translates to "woodpecker" in English. Her heart had been filled with so much of God's peace that it allowed her to seek out peace and forgiveness to those who had hurt her the most. Elliot extended tremendous grace and put her life at risk to minister to the tribe, offering them a glimpse of God's eternal love through her words and actions.

## **Summary**

Peace is a calming and caring disposition that allows others to feel safe and valued. It's this soft demeanor that helps clarify our thoughts and prioritize what—or Who—really matters.

What are a few lessons that we can take away from the lives of Deborah, Mary of Bethany, and Elisabeth Elliot?

- Peace can be creating a safe environment for others to feel comfortable with us.
- Peace can be embodying a calm spirit that stays focused on the present situation.
- Peace can be choosing to believe in God's goodness in the midst of our circumstances that allows us to forgive those who hurt us.

## CHAPTER 4

# Forbearance

Nobody likes to wait for things.

Whether it's sitting through a five-second ad on YouTube or standing in a never-ending line behind a chatty customer, waiting tests our patience. I often find myself staring at the timer in my kitchen, turning on the oven light while I watch my food cook (as if that'll make the food cook any faster).

I know these are lighthearted examples, but we're increasingly living in a culture that shares a similar sentiment. Ad blockers can be downloaded as internet browser extensions to prevent audiences from watching ads. Self-checkout machines eliminate the connection we establish with human cashiers. And between fast food companies and food delivery apps, there's never a shortage of quick, cheap meal options to choose from.

We're becoming less inclined to wait for things and can easily grow increasingly irritated, frustrated, and hostile if we don't get what we want right away. This is a dangerous road to walk, as we could easily and mistakenly believe that we're entitled to certain privileges without having to wait for them. I think that turning to Biblical

examples of women who truly had to surrender their timing to God will reveal just how powerful and good He is.

The NIV translation of Galatians 5:22 uses the word “forbearance” to describe the fourth Fruit of the Spirit, which some other translations refer to as “patience.” The original Greek word is *makrothymia*, which not only means forbearance and patience but also “longsuffering.” This is key. The examples I illustrated above could be considered as mild annoyances, but they aren’t examples of true hardship. But looking back at some of the women discussed earlier in this book, we can gain better insight into this word. Sending a child away, dealing with chronic illness, grieving the death of a loved one—there are, unfortunately, plenty of examples of longsuffering.

The Biblical notion of forbearance isn’t just dealing with the monotony of day-to-day life. *Makrothymia* is a kind of patience that endures difficult, challenging, or painful circumstances. And one big reason that someone can hold out through great bouts of suffering is because they are aware of a greater cause or purpose that this pain will bring to light, with God leading the way.

Even if we don’t understand why our hardships are happening (as many of us don’t), forbearance allows us to better accept that this is a temporary circumstance. Our struggles may not end in this lifetime, but they will certainly end in the next, heavenly life, where “[t]here will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4b).

This is an incredibly difficult topic to summarize in such a short space, but I think the women below can better exemplify what this looks like in practice.

# *Sarah*

## **Forbearance That Redeemed Heartache**

For those of you who know Sarah's story, you might be surprised to find her in this section. However, like Martha's inclusion in the Love chapter, I think we can learn a lot from Sarah's story.

Before Sarah had that name, she was known as Sarai, the wife of Abram. God bestowed a great promise unto Abram in Genesis 12, claiming that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. While this was encouraging news, Abram and Sarai were already getting up in years, which made the prospect of bearing children less likely with every passing year.

But they waited.

And waited.

And waited.

And Sarai was losing patience.

In Genesis 16, Sarai has the idea of having Abram sleep with their female servant, Hagar, as a way for Abram to have a child. Sarai believed that her time to bear children had passed, so she gave Abram over to what she figured would be the next best thing.

Have you ever believed that you weren't enough and that someone else was better suited for the job? It's so easy to look around at the women around us and simultaneously delight in their successes but also feel inferior to them in comparison. It seems like there's always someone younger, smarter, more talented, more beautiful, and just more impressive than we believe we are.

My heart hurts for Sarai. By resorting to Hagar, she was basically saying to her husband, "I'm not enough for you, but maybe this woman will satisfy you in ways that I can't." It's devastating, not to mention untrue. God made a promise to Abram, but this promise didn't involve breaking his marriage covenant to Sarai; in fact, it included her. It *needed* her. But after years had passed without the promise being fulfilled, Sarai began to lose hope.

Abram ended up sleeping with Hagar, and she became pregnant. This caused Sarai to seethe with jealousy and rage, accusing Abram of causing the suffering she felt. Abram permitted Sarai to do whatever she wanted with Hagar, and Sarai sent her away.

It's one thing for us to say that we think poorly of ourselves or that other people are better than us. But when an event actually happens that confirms our suspicions, we can get incredibly defensive. We might not actually think that certain thoughts are true about us until someone does something to seemingly prove it. In another act of impatience, Sarai tried to get rid of the problem altogether instead of addressing the issue head-on. It would be much easier (in theory) to just sweep the problem under the rug and not have to deal with it anymore. But God had something else to say.

God found Hagar in the desert and told her to return to Sarai. He warned her that her son and his descendants would face a lot of



## FORBEARANCE

hostility, but she felt seen by God and followed His instructions. She gave birth to Ishmael when Abram was 86 years old.

When Abram was 99, God reiterated His promise to him, renaming him Abraham in the process. This time, though, He included Sarai in the promise explicitly, renaming her Sarah and claiming that “she will be the mother of nations” (Genesis 17:16). God even told an incredulous Abraham that she would give birth to a son, whom they’d name Isaac.

Then, in what could be known as Sarah’s most infamous action, she listened to Abraham speaking with three guests from inside a tent. During that conversation, she heard God say that she would have a child at this time next year. Her response was the laugh heard ‘round the world (or, at least, around the tent). And God called her out on it, asking Abraham why Sarah had laughed. Sarah lied out of nervousness, claiming that she didn’t laugh, but God knew the truth and told her that she did, in fact, laugh.

We’ve all been in situations where we laugh at a joke that other people don’t find funny. But could you imagine laughing before God? Sarah felt scared, understandably, but she had also spent many years as a barren woman. She had grown tired and impatient, not to mention that she was well past childbearing years. But God never wavered on His original promise and made specific mention to include her in it.

Upon this interaction with God, Sarah ultimately stays loyal to Abraham and this promise that God has given to them. Sure enough, she becomes pregnant just as God said she would, and in due time, Isaac is born.

Do you know what the name Isaac means?

Laughter.



*Sarah with Isaac*

In a lot of cases, Sarah’s story almost seems like a “what not to do” guide to forbearance. But despite these lapses in judgment, she shows us that God is bigger and better than our circumstances. Our journeys don’t have to be perfect for God to use us for His purposes, and He will give us more opportunities to come back to Him. His goodness and faithfulness will allow us to play a pivotal role in His story, just as Sarah eventually became a part of the family lineage of Jesus. It’s never too late for us to return to God and trust in the plans He has for us, just as He did for Sarah.

# *Rachel*

## **Forbearance That Superseded Individual Roles**

We don't have to turn very far along in Genesis before we reach the story of Rachel, another woman who had to face a great deal of waiting.

In Genesis 29, we see Isaac's younger son, Jacob, living with his uncle, Laban, along with Laban's two daughters. There was Leah, the older sister, and then there was Rachel, the younger one who captured Jacob's heart.

Jacob proposed to Laban that he would work for him for seven years in order to marry Rachel, to which Laban agreed. However, those seven years "seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her" (Genesis 29:20). Ah, young love.

But Laban had another sinister plan in mind. After Jacob's seven-year term had finished and the day got dark, Laban gave his daughter over to Jacob to sleep with her. When Jacob woke up the next morning, he saw Leah lying next to him. Jacob was more than a little mad, to which Laban said "whoopsies" (paraphrased) and that it's custom for the older daughter to marry first. He promised to give Rachel to Jacob... for another seven years' work. But Jacob did just that, eventually receiving Rachel as his wife.

And then, the babies happened.

God allowed Leah to get pregnant first. She had four sons before Rachel started getting jealous, demanding that Jacob give her children. In retaliation, Rachel gave her female servant, Bilhah, to Jacob, who gave birth to two sons.

Then, Leah caught on, and she gave Jacob *her* female servant, Zilpah, who also had two sons. Jealousy continued brewing between Leah and Rachel, causing Leah to sleep with Jacob again, bearing two more sons and a daughter.

Then, God's Word says that He "remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb" (Genesis 30:22). Rachel gave birth to a son, who became Jacob's pride and joy, since he was born from his favorite wife.

Unfortunately, this rejoicing doesn't last for terribly long. In Genesis 35, Rachel had one more pregnancy, only this time it brought complications. She had a difficult childbirth and ended up dying shortly after her second son—and Jacob's twelfth—was born.

This whole story seems to take the mantra of a "family affair" a bit too literally, which inevitably brought complications and jealousy. But if we study how these actions impacted Rachel, we can see that she demonstrated great strength in the middle of tremendous longsuffering.

## FORBEARANCE



*Rachel*

First of all, she remained patient during her 14-year waiting period to marry Jacob. The love of her life was right in front of her for over a decade, and she couldn't do anything about it. Sure, she had the reassurance of knowing that they were committed to each other, but if her father was willing to deceive her so quickly, it must've been difficult to trust in his promises.

Moreover, those feelings of longing would've been intensified during the latter seven years when Jacob was married to—and having intimate relations with—her sister. The thought of being so close, yet so far away from her future husband while her sister gets to reap all the benefits of marriage must've caused unbearable pain. Yet, Rachel remained patient and loyal during the waiting and courting period.

But her waiting intensified yet again when it came time to have children. Between Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah, Jacob had fathered eleven children before Rachel could mother one (biologically, at least). Bilhah and Zilpah's involvement indicates the jealousy that both sisters shared, which just goes to show how more people can

complicate a marriage. But again, Rachel stuck by her husband, trusting in the union that God brought together. She eventually saw her wish fulfilled through her first son but, unfortunately, didn't live long enough to see her second son grow up.

Rachel's story wounds so deeply because it feels as though there's so much empty space. So much time is marked by waiting and wondering if God is going to allow her to live a dream life with her husband. But it also reveals that hers is a life that showed to have the greatest impact after she left this earth. Her first son, Joseph, had hardships at the hand of his brothers but would triumph to the point of saving all of Israel from a horrible famine. And in order to do so, Rachel's second son, Benjamin, played a key role in Joseph's plot to reveal to his brothers that he could save them from malnutrition.

Rachel's story is simultaneously tragic and noble. She shows us that we might spend a lifetime waiting for something that we'll never get to see, but that doesn't mean that it won't still change the world once we're gone. Because of her loyalty and forbearance, God's people continued to survive.

# *Sojourner Truth*

## **Forbearance That Fought Oppression**

Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) was born into slavery in New York state under the name Isabella Baumfree. She was first sold into slavery at age nine, along with a flock of sheep, for about \$100. She had three owners by the time she was 13, from whom she learned to speak English.

Baumfree fell in love with a man named Robert, who was enslaved in the neighboring farm, and the pair had a daughter together. Baumfree's third owner, John Dumont, prohibited her from marrying Robert in favor of another man Dumont owned named Thomas. There are mixed accounts regarding the number of children Baumfree had and who fathered them, but many purport that she had five children, fathered by Robert, Dumont, and Thomas.

Dumont proposed that Baumfree could be released on Independence Day in 1826, as a New York law had declared that all in-state slaves would be free by that date in 1827. However, when July 4, 1826 arrived, he refused to let her go. Believed to have done her duty, Baumfree escaped Dumont's house with only one of her children, leaving the others behind as they were technically Dumont's property. She went to live freely with Isaac and Maria Van Wagenen.

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

Later, Dumont illegally sold one of Baumfree's sons, and she sued with the Van Wagenens' help. It was the first time where a Black woman sued a White man and won the case, allowing her son to return to her. The Van Wagenens also taught Baumfree about Christianity, which helped in her conversion and set her on a new path with her newfound freedom and religion.

Baumfree moved to New York City to work as a housekeeper for Christian leader Elijah Pierson until he died in 1829. Cult leader Robert Matthews was accused of poisoning Pierson, and two of Matthews' followers tried to frame Baumfree for being involved in the crime. Matthews wasn't charged at the time, but Baumfree later sued the couple for slander and won.

From the 1840s onwards, Baumfree became a huge figure in the abolition movement. She changed her name to Sojourner Truth, believing it to be her duty to win people for Christ by speaking the truth. She published her memoirs from slavery and became a well-known speaker for women's rights. Her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech spoke to her experience as a Black woman in the United States. She continued to be a prominent advocate for Black women's rights for the rest of her life.



*Sojourner Truth*



## FORBEARANCE

Truth's story is one that shows how some of the strongest people emerge from the most devastating, unfathomable, and heinous circumstances. As an enslaved child and young woman, Truth endured abuse that makes me sick to my stomach to talk about. Yet, it's precisely because of this feeling that we need to hear these stories to fully grasp how horrible a time this was, ensuring we never return to this state.

The multiple waiting periods that Truth endured could have been an incredibly discouraging process. Whether or not she knew this at the time, laws were passing around her that could've allowed her to be a free citizen much sooner than what ended up happening. She experienced horrendous treatment that she never needed to endure if she had been released according to the dates allowed by law. Yet, this likely fueled the fire to advocate for herself even more in her later years because she went through so much suffering.

This is a delicate topic, and I want to be sensitive in how I talk about it. I don't fully understand how or why God allows some suffering to take place and steps in to prevent others from happening. But I do know that He is all-loving and perfectly just, and He knows the fate of every person who commits these terrible actions. Furthermore, the tragedy that His afflicted children experience may become an important part of their testimony to pass on a legacy that advocates for change, as it did for Truth.

Truth had to wait for decades before finding freedom from slavery, and she saw noticeable improvement in her personal state and in the rights of fellow Black citizens during her lifetime. Her bravery and courage not only paved the way for others to fight for better rights but also let her life point to Jesus as a result. The forbearance and longsuffering she endured helped her grow in confidence in her lawsuits, speeches, and beliefs that gained the support of many

people. Her life showed that Black women could succeed in a world that repeatedly told them they had little value. She continues to be an inspiring figure for her actions.

## **Summary**

Forbearance involves us putting God's timing ahead of our own. It involves a steadfast approach to our circumstances with the belief that God will use us for His purposes.

What are a few lessons that we can take away from the lives of Sarah, Rachel, and Sojourner Truth?

- Forbearance can be choosing to depend on God's plan each day. Even if we make mistakes or try to jump ahead, we can always turn to His forgiveness.
- Forbearance can be trusting that God will continue to use our story well beyond our time on this earth.
- Forbearance can be using the hardship we've endured to empower our conviction that change is necessary.
- Forbearance can be centering our lives around God, giving us courage to enter new realms and find peace with the outcomes.

## CHAPTER 5

# Kindness

I've often told close people in my life that I thought they were incredibly kind.

I don't mean that as a way to generalize my loved ones, but it's one of the first things I look for in another person, regardless of how well I might know them. Whether or not I realize I'm doing it, I've been instinctively trained to observe how someone treats other people in their life. Granted, we all have our rough days, but generally speaking, I think that our behavior toward other people is a much more revealing way to get to know someone instead of hearing them talk about themselves.

To that point, I think this is what separates kindness from niceness. To be a nice person involves behaving pleasantly, acting in an agreeable way that allows others to feel comfortable. It's certainly a good quality to have; its focus is just different from that of kindness. Whereas niceness focuses on our own behavior and presentation, kindness puts the spotlight on our ability to serve other people. It takes the "nice" quality one step further, not only behaving pleasantly but also ensuring that the needs of others are taken care of. The Biblical definition of "kindness" helps back this up as well.

The word that Paul uses for “kindness” in Galatians 5:22 is *chrestotes* (pronounced khrey-STOH-teys), which comes from the root word *chrestos*. It refers to the notion of kindness, typically with regard to people, not just in terms of their helpfulness but having an upright moral character. Therefore, it’s not just doing good based on what will make another person feel good all the time, but doing what God says is right in a way that will genuinely serve and love them.

Jesus uses the equivalent of *chrestos* when telling His disciples that “[His] yoke is easy and [His] burden is light” (Matthew 11:30). “Easy” in this verse is translated from *chrestos*. Paul also uses this term when writing to the Corinthian church, saying that “[b]ad character corrupts good morals” (1 Corinthians 15:33), with “good” originating from *chrestos*. Those who embody *chrestotes* are not just nice and sweet but honorable and virtuous. Embodying this kindness will grant us a levity that could only come from the love of Christ.

With the heart of a servant and the sweetness of honey, a kind person can make us feel about as warm and fuzzy as a thick blanket. This is true enough in our day-to-day circumstances, but it’s no exaggeration to say that the stories of the kindness shown by these women transformed people’s lives.

# *Rahab*

## **Kindness That Overcame Differences**

The bulk of Rahab's story is found in Joshua 2, not long after the death of Moses and God's appointment of Joshua to lead Israel into the Promised Land. However, after 40 years of wandering through the wilderness, the Israelites couldn't just walk over to a nice, clean patch of empty land, plant a flag in it, and declare that it was theirs. Instead, they had to scope out a place called Jericho, a heavily fortified city filled with enemies of the Israelites.

To help him find his bearings and figure out what he'd be dealing with, Joshua sent two spies into Jericho to investigate the land. During their travels, a prostitute named Rahab invited them into her home and allowed them to stay with her. This alone would've been an incredibly kind gesture, but when the king of Jericho found out that a few Israelites were around and spying on their land, he had hostile intentions toward them.

Instead of ratting them out, Rahab helped the men hide in her house. She told the king's men that the spies did visit her but had since left without her knowing their destination. She urged the king's men to chase after the spies, knowing full well that she was sending the enemy off their scent.



*Rahab*

Rahab confided in the spies, revealing that she had heard about what the Israelite God had done for them to escape Egyptian slavery and that He had promised them this land. In return for her protection and secrecy of their whereabouts, Rahab asked that she and her family would be saved upon Israel's eventual takeover of Jericho. The men agreed to this proposition, and she led them through a discreet escape plan to evade the king's men. Her advice was sound, and the men reported everything that had happened to Joshua.

In Joshua 6, the Israelites followed God's instructions to Jericho under Joshua's command. Joshua declared that only Rahab and her house would be protected, and the spies ensured that this was done.

## KINDNESS

The Israelites claimed and burned Jericho, and not only was Rahab saved, but she also became part of the family lineage of Jesus.

Rahab's story proves to be a humbling lesson that the love of God can come from anywhere, as He can work inside any person. As a prostitute, Rahab led a life that was contrary to the morality that God had outlined for His people in the Old Testament, not to mention that she was an enemy Canaanite. From her perspective, she would've had every reason to shun the Israelite spies upon discovering them in Jericho or even report them to authorities to have them killed.

Could you imagine what would've been running through her mind at the moment she found out that spies were in her town? The Bible just mentions that the spies entered her house and that she went along with hiding them but nothing about what she was thinking at the time. I find that my knee-jerk reaction is to get annoyed at people who think and act differently from me, but going so far as to protect these people takes such an open mind and caring heart.

Rahab likely felt compelled to protect them in large part because of what she had heard about God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. It just goes to show the importance of sharing our testimonies, not because of anything we've done but everything that God did to save us. The testimonies of these spies had prompted Rahab to extend a huge act of kindness to the point where they were truly at her mercy.

While she did ask for something in exchange, Rahab didn't make these terms before she hid the spies, which could've given her the option of backing out of the deal. Instead, she protected the spies with no guarantee that they'd offer her any protection in return. We could all stand to offer more kindness to people who are different from us, not in an immediate attempt to convert them to Christianity, but

simply because it is the right thing to do. Rahab recognized what the best, morally upstanding option was before her, and she took it.

Finally, Rahab's story was one of the earliest examples of how the family of Jesus includes everyone. Even though He wouldn't arrive in this world for several more generations, it likely would've been difficult for anyone to imagine the Messiah coming from the family of a prostitute. It would've made more sense for Him to be born of "morally superior" members of royalty, but in ways such as this, God continues to show us Jesus' humble origins. In fact, Rahab is one of five women mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus during a time when women weren't ever mentioned in those documents. Her kindness was one that stood out for hundreds of years, as her act of salvation for two spies paved the way for Jesus to save all of humankind.



# *Naomi*

## **Kindness That Honored Loyalty**

For those who've studied the book of Ruth, we often understand Naomi's role best in how it relates to Ruth's story; she's the supportive side character to Ruth's protagonist. And while we'll spend some time with Ruth later on, I think we can learn a lot from Naomi's steadfast loyalty and incredible kindness to Ruth. Her role is hardly one of secondary importance.

At the beginning of Ruth 1, the author introduces a family consisting of a father, mother, and two sons. The father dies, and each son takes a wife, only to have both sons also die. This leaves the women of the family alive: mother Naomi and daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth (and no, that isn't meant to say Oprah).

The women were living in Moab at the time, and having heard about God's provisions for His people, they prepared to go back to her home land of Bethlehem. Wanting to ensure that her widowed daughters-in-law still have prospects within their lifetime, Naomi offered to release Orpah and Ruth from any duty to her family. This would grant them the freedom to return to their homes and freely marry any eligible man rather than fulfill any obligations to remain with her. After some tearful deliberation, Naomi insisted that they return

home, and Orpah took her up on that offer. But Ruth refused to leave Naomi, and eventually Naomi relented and brought Ruth back with her to Bethlehem.

Once they arrived in the city, Naomi knew of a relative from her husband's clan named Boaz who managed a field that Naomi's husband had owned. She told Ruth to go into his field and pick up some of the remaining scraps left behind the others' gathering baskets. When Boaz heard that Ruth was related to Naomi, he ensured her protection, but we'll discuss in more detail later.



*Ruth with Naomi*

When Ruth reported this news to her mother-in-law, Naomi explained Boaz's relationship to the family and urged Ruth to stay close to him and his workers. But she took things one step further, trying to get Ruth in such good standing with him that she would be taken care of for all her days. Naomi gave Ruth specific instructions on how to spend time with Boaz that coming night, and when Ruth returned in the morning, she reported that Boaz ensured that she'd be bringing loads of barley back to Naomi. Thanks in large part to Naomi's careful planning, Boaz bought a piece of the field that

## KINDNESS

Naomi's husband owned and, according to the laws of the time, acquired Ruth as his wife (well, isn't that convenient).

Naomi was prepared to release her daughters-in-law back into the world upon her sons' deaths, believing it would give them the best chance at a new life. There's a striking parallel to this action compared to that of Jochebed in Chapter 1, in the sense of letting go of their children for the sake of a better life. Their examples demonstrate just how selfless their love can look like, but in the case of Naomi, she was speaking to her adult daughters-in-law instead of a young child. She had to argue for her decision much more strongly, causing Orpah and Ruth both to see the impact of her kindness. Even though they made different decisions, they both recognized the weight of Naomi's gesture.

Ruth may have chosen to stay with her mother-in-law, but Naomi recognized the opportunity before her upon arriving in Bethlehem. Instead of holding onto Ruth for herself, Naomi encouraged Ruth to stay close to the female servants but also to pursue Boaz so that she could be taken care of going forward. She was a shrewd opportunist who gave Ruth advice on how to strategically and honorably appeal to Boaz. Naomi didn't bother to waste her time with empty promises but actually acted on her intentions to take care of Ruth—a brilliant act of kindness if I ever read of one.

Naomi was persistent in being able to release Ruth into a life that she didn't believe she could provide for her daughter-in-law. As an older, widowed woman, Naomi did have a lower social capital than a young man of higher status. Yet, Naomi always put Ruth's well-being ahead of her own, helping her find a new opportunity to embark upon a new life with a new husband. She didn't cling to Ruth as her only opening out of a dark hole but insisted that she make the most of her youth and her beauty.

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

Having the willingness to let go of something with the trust that God will take care of it takes tremendous courage. Yet, because of Naomi's kindness, she helped Ruth take the necessary actions to become part of Jesus' family lineage.

# *Corrie ten Boom*

## **Kindness That Protected the Vulnerable**

During one of the most horrific events in human history, one family's act of kindness—and the extended actions of one particular woman—saved hundreds of lives in the Netherlands.

Corrie ten Boom (1892–1983) was born into a Dutch Reformed family who was committed to serving the Lord through their work. The ten Boom family, with two parents and four children that survived past infancy, often housed orphan and refugee children and lived in a unit above their watchmaking shop, which their family had owned since the 1830s. In 1922, the year following her mother's death, Corrie became the first licensed female watchmaker in Holland, in addition to teaching Sunday school and running clubs for the orphans.

When the Nazis invaded and occupied the Netherlands in 1940, the ten Boom family hid Jewish people in their home. Members of the Dutch Resistance would smuggle bricks and mortar into the shop by hiding them inside the clocks, which the family would use to build a fake wall in Corrie's room. They also installed a secret buzzer to alert Jewish inhabitants to hide when enemy forces were near. Corrie

helped to run drills so that everyone could successfully conceal themselves in under 90 seconds.

An informant exposed the ten Boom family's activities to the Germans in 1944, and all of the family members were arrested. They were hiding seven people at the time of the arrest, all of whom managed to escape the house alive with six of them surviving through the end of the war.

The ten Booms were all sent to the same prison, where the father died and two of the children were eventually released. Corrie and her sister, Betsie, were transferred to a German concentration camp, and by a miraculous intervention, Corrie was the only person who entered the camp unchecked. This allowed her to smuggle in a New Testament Bible, and the women held secret prayer and worship services.

Betsie died in December of that year, and Corrie was released two weeks later due to an accidental administrative error. About a week after that, the other middle-aged women in Corrie's group were killed in a gas chamber.

She traveled back to the Netherlands to recover for a while before returning to the ten Boom house. She began her ministry work after the war. She set up rehabilitation centers for both concentration camp survivors as well as those who helped the Nazi cause. In addition, she wrote about her wartime experiences, including the 1971 release *The Hiding Place*, which also became a film. The ten Boom House was converted into a museum, and Corrie traveled to over 60 countries to share her testimony, emphasizing the theme of forgiveness.

## KINDNESS



*Corrie ten Boom*

Corrie ten Boom's story is one full of kindness and forgiveness. One thing I find so remarkable is how God used the past experiences of that family to prepare them for housing people during the war. The ten Booms were accustomed to taking in people who weren't members of their biological family. By the time a greater need presented itself in housing people who'd otherwise be killed, there was no question of what they'd do. They sacrificed their safety and security to ensure that it would be granted to other people instead.

That's not to say that the orphans' lives were any less important; rather, the ten Booms used the quieter moments to serve the Lord while no one needed to pay attention to them. But God saw their actions, and He allowed them to take in hundreds of Jewish people during a time when everyone was on high alert. As Jesus Himself said, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much" (Luke 16:10).

God allowed her to share her story even further by writing and speaking about her experiences. This allowed ten Boom's ministry to be known around the world and hold a permanent place in our society through media and her home museum.

Finally, ten Boom had so much compassion for the oppressed Jewish people but also for those who were responsible for the oppression. She saw them as human beings who, like everyone else, could repent of their actions and be granted forgiveness. She recognized that we were all created in the image of God and that He could do unthinkable work in their hearts, too. Her kindness wasn't limited to the people she wanted to protect but to anyone with whom she had crossed paths.

Corrie ten Boom was willing to put her life at risk every day for the protection of others and nearly died for her efforts. To say that this is an act of kindness almost doesn't feel like it does her life justice because of just how much suffering she endured for this cause. Her faith in Christ was a pillar of her life, and thousands of people experienced His love in profound ways because of her.

## **Summary**

Kindness transcends having a “nice” attitude to offer grace and generosity to other people. It looks beyond one's immediate situation to tend to the morally responsible action that best serves the greater, God-honoring good.

What are a few lessons that we can take away from the lives of Rahab, Naomi, and Corrie ten Boom?

- Kindness can be offering refuge, safety, and protection to those in need.
- Kindness can be recognizing someone's value and giftings and helping them find opportunities to develop and nurture these gifts.
- Kindness can be extending forgiveness to those who have wronged you.



## CHAPTER 6

# Goodness

Goodness might be the toughest word to define out of all nine Fruits of the Spirit.

We use the word “good” to describe a lot of things. We might remark that we saw a good play, or we might encounter someone and describe them as a good person. Sometimes, if we say that we had a good meal, that can be a slight insult against the meal, preventing it from receiving our prestigious “great” or “amazing” review. Goodness is hard to explain in plain language, but we can often recognize a good thing when we see it. Arguably, that can be said of any of the nine Fruits, but the versatile applications of “goodness” can make it difficult to pin down an exact explanation of it.

I made a similar observation with the term “love” in Chapter 1, although we can typically understand love as both a noun and a verb. The act of loving someone, while still somewhat subjective in its meaning, can be understood as a series of gestures to show someone what they mean to us. But there’s no such thing as “gooding” someone (not that I’ve heard of, anyway).

But what does the Bible say about goodness? Well, that God is good and, therefore, deserving of our praise. “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever” (Psalms 107:1). It’s essential to

who He is, but God is also loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, and kind. What distinguishes goodness from these terms?

Paul uses the word *agathosune* (pronounced ah-GAH-tho-soon) in Galatians 5:22, which translates to the idea of goodness to an excellent standard that benefits others. To illustrate this concept, think back to your childhood, and specifically a parent, teacher, or other adult you highly respected. Sometimes, they'd celebrate your victories; at other times, they'd let you cry on their shoulder; and at other times still, they'd discipline you to correct a certain behavior.

Why did their actions change? Was it because they loved you more in certain moments than others? No, quite the opposite: Because they loved you so much, they did what was good for you to help you become the best version of yourself. Sometimes, that involved more tough action than others, but it was all in your best interest.

God's love for us as our Father is the perfect version of this goodness. Human adults are far from perfect and often make errors in judgment when determining what they think is good. That's why the notion of "following your heart" can be tricky because our hearts change frequently due to sin's corruption of them. Yet, God always knows what's best for us because He created us in His image. His goodness combines the service demonstrated by kindness with the loving discernment of how to bring us closer to Him, even if it's the less comfortable way.

Goodness, gracious, what a way to start this off. Let's dig into more examples of this.

# *Abigail*

## **Goodness That Recognized Righteousness**

Our view of the world can be largely shaped by the people around us. Sometimes, this can corrupt our way of thinking, but Abigail of Carmel shows us that we don't have to let their wicked thoughts pervade our minds.

In 1 Samuel 25, we meet a successful businessman named Nabal. He had grown quite wealthy to be able to afford a multitude of food and resources, but he had a sour and cruel demeanor as he conducted his business affairs.

During this time, David was on the run from King Saul, who was using his large military to seek him out and kill him. David heard that Nabal was in the middle of the sheep shearing season, which is a significant time for festivities. David recruited a few men to pass on a message to Nabal, explaining that David had always treated Carmelite shepherds kindly and requesting aid during his time in the wilderness. Upon hearing the news, Nabal declined this call for help and intentionally insulted him along the way.

David armed his men in response to Nabal's message, but all hope seemed to be lost for him. That is, until one of Nabal's servants reported these events to Nabal's beautiful and brilliant wife, Abigail.

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

The servant explained how David's men had been kind to them but that Nabal had retaliated in a nasty way while offering them no help. Immediately, Abigail assembled a vast array of food, loaded it up on donkeys, and rode with the servant to meet David, all without her husband's knowledge. She reverently bowed to David and stated her willingness to accept the entirety of the blame for the situation, calling her husband an evil fool in the process. Yikes. Someone give Nabal an ice pack to apply to that burn.



*Abigail*

Abigail gave David the food as a way to make amends while claiming that God would protect him and his people and punish the likes of her husband. She declared that God would bring David success for fighting the battles that honor Him, asking David to remember her when this dispute was over. David praised God for bringing Abigail and her good judgment to him, assuring her that he'd honor her request.

## GOODNESS

Abigail returned home to find Nabal drunk as a skunk, so she held back on telling him everything that had happened until he had sobered up the next day. The Lord caused Nabal's heart to fail, and he died a week and a half later. Upon hearing this news, David praised God and requested that Abigail become his wife, which she accepted.

There's so much to admire about Abigail's story. The Bible doesn't say how or why Abigail and Nabal got married. Perhaps Abigail's parents were intrigued by Nabal's family's wealth, but basing this relationship on character, the two of them were a horrible match. Abigail knew full well that this arrangement was not good and could've easily become an embittered woman that went along with Nabal's wicked ways. Thankfully, Abigail has a mind of her own. She didn't let Nabal's evil nature prevent her from recognizing goodness when she encountered it.

Abigail was trapped in a potentially destructive marriage, and she chose to stay with her husband and honor her marital covenant to stay with him. However, most importantly, she honored God above anyone else. Her duty was first and foremost to the Lord, so she looked for things that would've been pleasing to Him ahead of what would've pleased her husband. Abigail recognized and separated the things that Nabal said were good and the things that God said were good and chose to honor God's ways.

In addition, she didn't just help David from afar, but she used practical means to show her support of his cause. Abigail hurriedly and secretly prepared food for David without Nabal's knowledge, knowing that her husband had expressed strong disapproval of this. It would've been a waste of time to entertain Nabal's evil thoughts when David needed help as soon as possible. Everyone needs food to survive, and she ensured that she personally delivered this to him and stated her approval of his ways.

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

Abigail not only stayed faithful to her husband, but she recognized the morally good cause of David was the preferable choice. God blessed her with freedom from her harmful marriage into one with David, who went on to publicly become a king. While his marriages were far from perfect, he was a man who feared the Lord and saw Abigail's goodness firsthand. In an environment that endorsed evil, she supported and stood for good.

# *Mary Magdalene*

## **Goodness That Obeyed Without Attention**

There's a great deal of fascination around Mary Magdalene, who was one of Jesus' female followers. However, the New Testament doesn't actually contain much information on or about her, but what we do know reveals the goodness that dwelt in her heart.

In Luke 8:2, the author makes a brief mention of Mary as a woman whom Jesus had freed from seven demons. All four Gospels mention her as a follower of Jesus throughout His ministry, one of a handful of women mentioned throughout their accounts. She was also one of the women noted as being present when Jesus was crucified.

Through context provided by Scripture, we can discern that the days following Jesus' death prevented people from visiting Him. He died on the Day of Preparation, which was a day dedicated to making necessary arrangements for the following day's Sabbath, when no Jewish person was allowed to work. This caused Pilate to order that Jesus be removed from the cross and buried in a tomb before these events occurred. This was significant in that it prevented the women from preserving His body with various spices, as was custom. So, Mary Magdalene, along with Jesus' mother, was forced to watch His body's burial, unable to do anything about it.

Following the preparations and Sabbath, Mark 16 notes that both Marys and another woman named Salome brought the necessary spices for Jesus' body. However, when they arrived, they saw that the massive stone that once covered Jesus' tomb had been rolled away.

John 20 claims that Mary Magdalene alerted two of Jesus' disciples, Peter and John, about this rather significant update. The two men ran into the tomb and corroborated Mary's observations, even finding that the linens had been folded. With Jesus nowhere to be found, the disciples went back home.

Mary stayed at the empty tomb, crying that Jesus' body was gone. Although Peter and John's words were good, she must've been curious enough to want to see this evidence for herself. She poked her head into the tomb and encountered two angels sitting where Jesus' body had once laid. They questioned her tears, to which she explained that Jesus was not only gone but had been taken away.

Almost as if it were on cue, Mary turned around and saw someone whom she mistook to be a gardener. He also asked her about her tears and who she was looking for, to which she requested that he bring her to Jesus' body if he had been the one to move it.

Then, he said, "Mary."

It clicked. Jesus was standing before her.

She delighted in His presence, instinctively clinging to Him, but Jesus urged her to spread the news of His resurrection. And she did just that, running to the disciples and telling them that Jesus was, in fact, alive and returning to the Father.

Before He freed her from the seven demons, Mary Magdalene would've lived a life of torment. I couldn't begin to imagine what it would've been like to be constantly invaded with venomous thoughts



## GOODNESS

that she couldn't get rid of on her own or through the medicine of the times.

She had direct experience of what it was like to live with evil, even though it wasn't truly her doing evil things. But Jesus broke her free from these demons, and this likely caused her to completely devote herself to following Him. Because she knew of the potential depths that evil and Satan could bring, she countered by demonstrating such responsible goodness, making the most of every moment that she could squeeze in with Jesus.



*Mary Magdalene*

Even when Jesus wasn't alive to witness her actions, Mary was among the group of women ensuring that His body would be taken care of in a proper, honorable tradition. They knew that He was their Lord and wanted Him to be treated as such. Because His death occurred on days that prevented humans from tending to His body, we can be even more assured of God's resurrection power bringing Him to life.

Yet, Mary still demonstrated a goodness of wanting to serve Him, even though He used her in other ways.

After He was buried, Mary stayed by the tomb as much as she was allowed to do. As a result, she was among the first, if not *the* first, person to discover His disappearance and to whom Jesus appears after His resurrection. He shows a once-possessed woman from the small town of Magdala (from which she gets her name) that He had risen. She wasn't a woman of high status by the world's standards, but her heart was so strongly oriented toward Jesus that it made her priceless to Him.

Mary was compelled to serve the Lord when nobody was watching. She tended to Him as much as possible after His death, recognizing that this would be the good and righteous thing to do and discovered the resurrection as a result. Even though the disciples were incredulous upon hearing her report, Mary became the first person to spread the Gospel—that Jesus, Savior of the world, had conquered the grave.

# *Susanna Wesley*

## **Goodness That Raised Spiritual Leaders**

Rumor has it that we're still trying to learn from the legendary rigor and organizational skills of Susanna Wesley.

As the youngest of 25 children, Susanna Annesley (1669–1742) would've grown up in a household with a lot of activity. Her father was a highly respected minister, and her mother was, well, a mother and stepmother to 25 children, as she was Mr. Annesley's second wife. Annesley received most of her education, spiritual and otherwise, from her father and older siblings. Her father who brought a sense of academic gravitas to the house, which certainly stayed with Annesley for all of her life.

Annesley married minister Samuel Wesley at age 19, which also carried on the tradition of having a male ministerial presence at home. That being said, their marriage and family life was hardly an easy one. Samuel had a difficult time connecting with his congregants, as his academic approach didn't resonate with the needs of small-town lifestyles. He also spent most of his time writing about the book of Job instead of tending to his family's immediate sufferings. Plus, his poor financial management skills were a problem

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

for most of his life, which put a burden on the family both times their house burned down.

In spite of these hardships at home, Susanna played the role of a housewife and mother incredibly seriously. She gave birth to as many as 19 children, although only 10 survived past infancy. She took on the housekeeping duties, both indoor and outdoor, while also raising all 10 of their children. They enforced strict discipline at home to keep their emotions in check and have them admit to their mistakes if they wanted to escape punishment. Even when the family had been in a state of pandemonium after their house burned down, she knew just what to do and say to get the children back in line. That being said, she also cared deeply for their emotional well-being, vowing to spend one uninterrupted hour with each child one-on-one every week.



*Susanna Wesley*

Perhaps most significantly, Susanna also took it upon herself to teach her children. The quality of the education she gave to both her sons and daughters was quite a radical choice for the time period, but she

insisted that they be taught equally. She gave her children chores to complete before their classes, which related to both academic and Biblical subjects. Eventually, the older children could start taking on some teaching roles for the younger children.

Not only was Susanna Wesley a devoted wife and mother, but she ensured that her own relationship with God maintained a top priority. She devoted herself to prayer and worship time with God for at least two hours each day, which helped her become a strong teacher. If her husband was away, she even ran an unofficial Sunday service in her house after the main sermon for as many as 200 people. Her dedicated service to her family and community played a key role in two of her children, John and Charles, becoming the forefathers of Methodism.

Wesley was a woman of strong conviction who prioritized God above all else. While her husband was likely a stronger God-fearing man than the likes of Nabal, his physical and mental absence from the home likely placed a burden on Susanna in the way it did to Abigail. Yet, like Abigail, Susanna leaned into her traditionally feminine roles and served with all of her heart, soul, mind, and strength. She took care of every kind of need for her children, from preparing their food to challenging their intellect to fostering a love of Scripture. She treated her children as well-rounded individuals, and her disciplinary nature allowed them to prioritize their faith and service. John and Charles Wesley had a strong foundation to work from as they developed their belief system.

On top of serving with a high sense of responsibility, Wesley refused to let anything interfere with her time with God. She actually made a promise not to let herself spend more time indulging in personal matters than she'd spend with God and in prayer. In this way, she wasn't just demanding that her children love and follow God, but they

could witness her living that out every single day. She practiced what she preached, which likely helped in passing on a love of the Lord to them. She dutifully embodied the goodness of Christ to her family and inspired hundreds of believers outside of her home.

## **Summary**

Goodness is a sense of pure, moral excellence that chooses to honor God in all circumstances. Sometimes, this can mean making difficult decisions that don't feel good in the moment or that might not attract any kind of attention. However, God sees every decision we make and the heart with which we make it, and whether it's in this life or the next, He won't let that go unnoticed.

What are a few lessons that we can take away from the lives of Abigail, Mary Magdalene, and Susanna Wesley?

- Goodness can be pursuing righteous people and causes instead of what is evil and harmful, even if it takes us out of our regular circumstances.
- Goodness can be fulfilling duties and callings when no one is watching, allowing you to see Jesus in all situations.
- Goodness can be leading a life of service to God that could potentially inspire people well beyond your immediate reach.

## CHAPTER 7

# Faithfulness

I love the hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.”

The lyrics stir up a special gratitude in my heart that’s a bit difficult to explain. The melody and rhythm of the song are both beautiful, but the lyrics also carry a special significance in my own journey of faith.

I often think about the concept of faithfulness in relation to how I can best demonstrate my faith in God. But, let’s be real, trying to be a “perfect Christian” with a perfect faith isn’t just difficult, it’s impossible. I wish that I could have an unshakeable faith in all circumstances that allows me to totally depend on God for all of my needs, but I stumble frequently in this area. I can be a bit of an anxious wreck at times.

But the thing I like about the lyrics of “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” is how they turn the focus onto God’s faithfulness to us. He loves us, without fail, and will forever call us His children. In spite of all the sin we have committed, He renews His mercies to us each day. We can forever place our hope in Him. I can’t get over how beautiful that is, and I think that, by understanding the meaning of the word “faithfulness,” we can better appreciate that sentiment.

As the last Fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22 (the other two fall in the next verse), Paul uses the word *pistis*. It translates to

having great faith, with other synonymous terms including belief, trust, assurance, and confidence. This means that a sign of our spiritual maturity will be letting our belief in God take precedence over whatever factors may be present in any given situation. We may not always know the outcome, but we know the One who will be with us every step of the way.

*Pistis* can also be used in reference to “the faith” in Jesus, as in “I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). This not only understands faith in terms of our internal decision to believe in Him but also recognizes it as an external movement that encompasses all believers. Our faith is something that begins in our heart and compels us to act in a way that defends and protects it. The field of apologetics is entirely dedicated to doing just that.

Referring back to the lyrics, the song is a worshipful praise of how incredible God is for faithfully taking care of us, even and especially when we don’t deserve it. As for our part, every day presents a new opportunity to appreciate all that He has done for us. When we can finally recognize the weight of His actions and how Jesus did what He did so that we could spend eternity—yes, all of eternity—with Him. What an incredible time that will be.

While we’re still here, though, we take inspiration from three women who demonstrated this faith in remarkable ways.



# *Ruth*

## **Faithfulness That Entered Unknown Territory**

As a heads up, Ruth's story is going to cover a lot of the same ground as Naomi's story. Both women are featured in each of the four chapters in the Book of Ruth and are often found in the same place at the same time. However, I'm going to retell those events while leaning more toward Ruth's perspective, especially in her meetings with Boaz.

Following the deaths of all three men in her husband's family, Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, proposed that Ruth and Orpah, the other widow, return to their original homes and families. Although Orpah took her up on that offer, Ruth refused to leave Naomi's side. She vowed to go wherever Naomi went, even adopting the God that Naomi worshiped as her own God, too. Eventually, Naomi relented, and she and Ruth made the trek to Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem.

As a way to earn money for her and her aging mother-in-law, Ruth insisted on working in the grain fields, picking up whatever remains others had dropped from their baskets. With Naomi's permission, Ruth worked in a field run by a kind and wealthy man named Boaz. He took notice of Ruth's diligent working style, and Boaz told her to stay in his field and follow the paths of the male harvesters, whom he

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

instructed not to touch her. Ruth bowed to him in gratitude, to which Boaz declared that God shall reward Ruth for her actions.

When everyone sat down for a meal, Boaz offered Ruth some of his bread and vinegar. When she left, he told the other men to intentionally put up and leave some stalks of grain specifically for Ruth to collect. By the time Ruth returned to Naomi, she had gathered roughly 30 pounds of grain.

Sheesh. Tell me that Boaz liked Ruth without telling me that Boaz liked Ruth.



*Ruth*

Naturally, Naomi was pretty excited about this prospect. But she had another idea to take this relationship to the next level, giving Ruth a set of instructions that she followed to a tee.

That night, Ruth got herself all done up before sneaking into Boaz's sleeping chambers after he had gone to bed. Then, she uncovered his feet and laid herself down there. When Boaz woke up in the middle

of the night, he was startled to see a woman there (understandably), to which Ruth revealed her identity.

His response? To proclaim blessings over her because she didn't go chasing after younger men but sought to honor him, specifically. He took her shawl and filled it with six portions of barley to bring back to Naomi, to whom Ruth relayed everything that had taken place. Following this encounter, Boaz arranged to purchase the plot of land owned by Naomi so that he could inherit Ruth as his wife. The two married, and over time, they became the great-grandparents of King David.

The Book of Ruth is the closest thing we have to a Biblical romcom. But on top of giving us warm, cozy feelings of Happily Ever After, we can glean a lot of sound wisdom through Ruth's faithfulness.

I can often forget that Ruth wasn't always a member of God's people. She was from Moab, which was considered an enemy nation of the Israelites. Yet, due to her loyalty to Naomi, she chose to lead with love and honor, abandoning her former people's ways in favor of living with God's people. It's unclear just how much faith she had in God before this moment, but she must have seen and heard enough about Him to willingly put all her faith in Him. She may have seen Naomi's faith and decided that this was something she wanted to adopt for herself.

Then, when they arrive in Bethlehem, she throws herself into her work. I imagine that a grain harvester would need great faith to believe that they could accrue a good haul, one scrap at a time. Yet, she maintains a quietly persistent approach to her task, not trying to seek anyone's attention but simply provide for her small family. It just so happens that, in trying not to attract a man, she ended up attracting

a man—and a God-fearing man, at that, in whom she also places her faith to protect her.

When things start getting potentially serious between her and Boaz, Ruth also places enormous trust in Naomi's plans to have her sneak into Boaz's room. Ruth had no idea how this was going to turn out, but she held on to faith in her mother-in-law and the God they serve. Things worked out pretty well for them, I'd say.

Ruth's faith revealed itself in a number of ways to a number of people. Even when there was no guarantee that she and Naomi would survive, she was determined to honor her commitment to her family. God recognized and rewarded this loyalty with the gift of being a direct ancestor to Christ.

# *Lydia*

## **Faithfulness That Paved a New Way**

Lydia played a brief but important role in Acts 16. Before we tell her story, let's establish a bit of context to show how God worked in her life.

After the resurrection of Jesus, His disciples began preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles, or non-Jewish people, across the Mediterranean region. One of the newer converts was named Paul, a highly educated Roman citizen once committed to killing Christians. Paul had a literal “come to Jesus” moment in Acts 9 that involved a spell of blindness, but by God’s mercy, he received full sight and the Holy Spirit, thus beginning his incredible ministry.

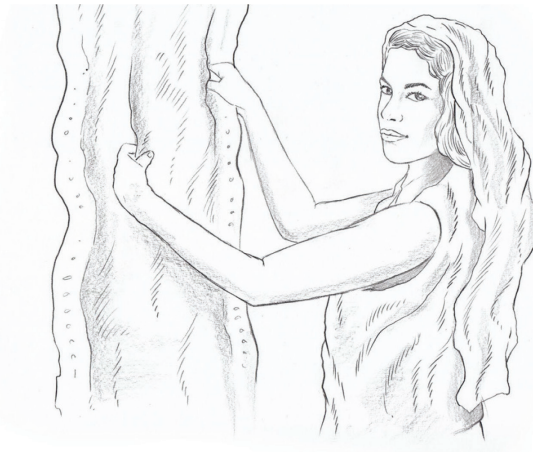
During Paul’s second big missionary trip, he had a stop in Philippi, a major city in Macedonia. He encountered a group of women upon his arrival, one of whom was a purple cloth dealer named Lydia. As Paul spoke to them, Lydia, a God-fearing woman, clung to his words and allowed Paul to baptize her. She then swiftly invited him and his associates into her home.

This was all fine—okay, this was amazing—until Paul and another disciple, Silas, commanded an evil spirit out of a slave girl proclaiming to be a fortune teller. Her owners became enraged that

they couldn't make money off of her and had Paul and Silas imprisoned. While in their cells, Paul and Silas sang for a while when a sudden earthquake freed all of the prisoners from their chains. The jailer was terrified, but Paul and Silas helped bring him and his family to Jesus. He led everyone out of the prison in secret. When Roman leaders requested that Paul and Silas leave their city, the pair spent a few more days with Lydia before going on their way.

On the surface, this story might sound like it's more about Paul than Lydia, and he certainly has a central role to this narrative. But Paul couldn't have done what he did if he didn't have *ezer*-like help along the way, and Lydia performed a lot of those duties.

Before Paul visited Macedonia, Lydia was doing quite well for herself. Only citizens of higher status could afford purple garments, as the ingredients needed to create that color of dye were quite expensive. If the Bible even bothered to mention her in relation to her job, she must've been a smart and capable businesswoman in her own right. It was rare for women to work outside the home, let alone be successful at it.



*Lydia*

Of course, none of this matters to God if one's heart doesn't belong to Him, but this wasn't the case with Lydia. She already believed in God before she heard from Paul, which would've already been a huge sign of her faith. Lydia would've been surrounded by people who either believed in or entertained many other gods or spirits, like the owners of the slave girl had done. But her faith in God remained through this noise, allowing her to recognize the merit of Paul's words when she heard them.

Lydia became transformed by these words and was among Paul's first converts and Gentile baptisms to occur post-resurrection. Yet, her faith didn't end with just her, as her family members were also baptized as a result of Paul's teachings. Her desire to grow in her faith didn't just sit as an inward transformation but compelled her to want to serve Paul and his colleagues. She offered them one of the greatest resources she had in her house, which was significant for a number of reasons.

First of all, Lydia owned her own house. This was already a big deal for a woman in the first century. However, she also owned one large enough to host several people at a time, given that her family members lived with her. We don't know who or how many of Lydia's family stayed there, but she could still bring at least four more grown men inside on short notice: Paul, Silas, their younger associate Timothy, and Luke, the author of the Book of Acts. She must've had a decently sized property to have these men and family members eat, sleep, and live there for a few days at a time. An impressive résumé, to say the least.

Their first stay with her was a celebratory visit, but the second stay was a way to escape Roman authorities. If the Romans had caught Lydia hiding Paul and Silas, she could've very well been killed, punished, or professionally ruined. But she took on this risk knowing

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that she was endangering her and her family's life, all for the protection of her spiritual family. Her faith understood that these were good, God-honoring men, and she offered her resources to protect and sustain them.

God laid the foundation down in Lydia's heart to readily receive His message when it arrived to her. Paul's experience there was so positive that he states his love of the Philippian church in his letter to them, which all began with Lydia's step of faith to accept the Gospel message.



# *Bilquis Sheikh*

## **Faithfulness That Converted to Jesus**

Bilquis Sheikh's (1912–1997) life is one that helps us better understand the weight of the decision to follow Christ. For many people reading this, it might be a relatively straightforward choice that we can make on our own time. For Ms. Sheikh, however, it meant potentially losing all earthly possessions in favor of a life with Jesus.

Sheikh was born to a Muslim family of high rank and status in Pakistan, with many immediate and extended family members of high esteem in their communities. She married a Pakistani general and politician, which fostered her own involvement in sociopolitical activities. During this time, Sheikh's feelings toward Islam were neutral, neither favoring nor disapproving of it, but she preferred placing her belief in things she could see. However, things took a turn when Sheikh and her husband divorced when she was 48 years old. Sheikh retreated to her family's property by herself, and while she enjoyed the gardens and the property, she was lonely and isolated from the life she once knew.

As she walked through her garden one night, Sheikh experienced a divine encounter, feeling as though someone touched her hand. However, given her nonreligious lifestyle, she refused to seek out external help until her grandson fell ill. She received an Islamic

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

blessing and her grandson recovered, leading her to read the Quran. She noticed that it mentioned other religions, including Christianity, and decided to read the Bible as well.

Sheikh felt uncomfortable with some of the passages, but her curiosity led her to continue studying both the Quran and the Bible. As she read, she was appalled at the Bible's claims to refer to Jesus as Lord in order to be saved, which would've meant renouncing Islam. She proceeded to have several dreams of Christian figures that pointed her to Jesus, compelling her to keep learning.

Sheikh interacted with more Christians and discovered the power of praying to God as her Father. She felt a sense of peace with the Bible that she had never felt with the Quran. After a few more years of these Christ-oriented experiences, Sheikh decided to become a Christian, and she was baptized at 55 years old.



*Bilquis Sheikh*

While she was certain that she wanted to pursue her Christian faith, she knew she would face consequences. Her friends and family initially isolated her in great anger, an anonymous person tried to

burn down her house, and several people made death threats on her and her grandson. Yet, she continued to trust God and stayed in the country until it became apparent that she wouldn't be safe there anymore.

Abandoning everything she ever knew, Sheikh moved to the US in 1973. While living in the West, she shared her life story and the lessons she learned about trusting God in the acclaimed book *I Dared to Call Him Father*. Her remarkable testimony allowed her to share her story in many speaking engagements. After some health complications, she moved back to Pakistan in 1987, living with her grandson and then her daughter for the rest of her life.

Sheikh's story demonstrates unbelievable courage in the face of adversity. Before she began her spiritual exploration, Sheikh was already in a difficult position as a divorcée living by herself. The isolation would've been a terribly lonely place to be, but it also allowed her to see and look for God without interruption. By clearing out the potentially distracting voices and influences that may have discouraged her from learning about Jesus, Sheikh had an unlimited amount of time and access to the Gospel.

What particularly strikes me about Sheikh's journey is how she continues to explore the meaning of Christianity and the Bible after reading passages that didn't sit well with her. It can be a nerve-racking experience for anyone to question or doubt their faith, but she listened to the urges she felt to keep learning more. By the time she decided to become a Christian and put her life at stake, Sheikh had built up such a strong foundation that prevented her faith from wavering. Instead, she determined a course of action that would best allow her to use her gifts and live out her faith in a more active way.

Some individuals come to Christianity in one fell swoop, as was the case for Lydia, but Bilquis Sheikh's conversion story was a longer journey of a hundred little actions. Sheikh's pursuit of Christianity occurred in small gestures that gradually involved her requiring a greater step of faith to keep going deeper. As someone who didn't care for supernatural occurrences, God precisely appeared to her through a divine interaction to grab her attention. It totally threw her off guard, and following the healing of her grandson, she actually turned to something other than Jesus by reading the Quran. Yet, God used this opportunity to point out the uniqueness of Jesus' ministry and how desperately we need Him for eternal life. By God's grace, Sheikh fully accepted the Gospel and enlightened readers the world over about how significant it is to become a believer.

## **Summary**

Faithfulness involves placing our hope in God, even when we don't always understand what He is doing. By believing that He is who He says He is, we can confidently act in a way that boldly illustrates how God is at work in our lives.

What are a few lessons that we can take away from the lives of Ruth, Lydia, and Bilquis Sheikh?

- Faithfulness can be showing loyalty to the people that bring you closer to God.
- Faithfulness can be taking a step into unknown territory when you believe that God is calling you closer to Him.
- Faithfulness can be listening for God's voice in your life, even in the face of threats and risks.

## CHAPTER 8

# Gentleness

I think the concept of gentleness can get a bad rap, or at least an underrated one.

Gentleness isn't really a quality that's endorsed in many spaces today. We're typically told that we need to fight our way to the top of whatever standard we're trying to reach, whether that be at work or at home. To do this, we might feel the need to be more aggressive to try to get our voices heard. Gentleness, we might believe, is a submissive quality that suggests our insecurity or internalized inferiority to those who are less afraid of putting themselves out there.

I'd like to make a different argument.

Some of the strongest women I've ever met have been incredibly gentle people. They weren't the loudest voices in the room, nor did they ensure that everyone knew their opinions about everything. But they held deep convictions and stood up for themselves and their loved ones when their backs were against the wall. They had a soft exterior, with an unassuming presence that wouldn't harm a fly. But lying beneath this gentle shell, they "put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, [they] may be able to stand [their] ground, and after [they] have done everything, to stand" (Ephesians 6:13). They'll fight the good fight when it matters.

Gentleness does not indicate weakness. It's a quiet, inner strength that chooses to nurture her soft and tender heart when the world is trying to harden it.

To build on this, Paul uses the word *prautes* in Galatians 5:23, which translates to gentleness, mildness, and humility in English. The gentle woman doesn't seek the spotlight for herself and may even try to rope in another person to illuminate her good works. But she holds firm beliefs and values that allow her to live in assurance of God's love and control. As a result, she allows for God's light to shine through her as a presence that reflects His good works.

In other Bible translations, *prautes* may be translated to meekness, which follows along similar lines to gentleness. It indicates that someone has the capacity to wield a sword but is wise and discerning enough to know when to leave it in its sheath. Meekness suggests that someone defers to the ways of Jesus, acting out of His will instead of their own.

Again, I'll say that gentleness does *not* mean weakness because I think this is an important distinction that needs to be made. As further proof of this, we'll explore a few women who used their gentle qualities to make incredible differences in the world.

# *Esther*

## **Gentleness That Saved a Nation**

Esther is one of two women with an entire Bible book dedicated to her story, and hers is the longer story. That's not to suggest that Esther is more important than Ruth, but I do think it's significant how a gentler female presence was honored with 10 chapters worth of content in the Bible. Let's dive in.

The Book of Esther begins with the expulsion of Queen Vashti. Her husband, King Xerxes, called his seven eunuchs to present her to his banquet guests in her crown, but she refused his request. With Vashti no longer around, Xerxes yearned to find another wife and had his attendants request young virgins to come to the palace for wife tryouts.

This is where we meet a young, beautiful orphan named Esther, who lived with her cousin Mordecai. She was among the young women taken to Xerxes' palace, and all seemed to be taken care of. However, there was one crucial detail: Esther was Jewish, and her people were in exile. If Xerxes discovered her nationality, she could have a similar fate to Vashti—or worse. For this reason, Mordecai insisted that she keep her heritage a secret.

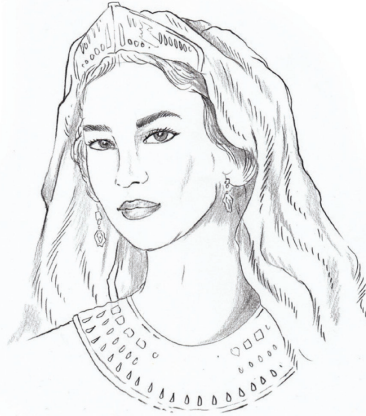
Esther earned the favor of her designated attendant, who gave her all the beauty services she needed, as well as that of everyone who saw her beauty and demeanor. After 10 months, Xerxes summoned her to his quarters and was more pleased with Esther than anyone else. He chose her to be his bride, and no one other than Mordecai knew about Esther's true heritage.

Mordecai overheard two men discussing a plot to assassinate the king. Upon further investigation, his testimony proved to be true and the men were killed, gaining Mordecai favor with Xerxes. But there was another man who had earned Xerxes' honors named Haman, whom Xerxes had elevated to the highest-ranking nobleman. But Mordecai refused to honor or bow to Haman, making Haman furious. When Haman learned that Mordecai was a Jewish man, Haman vowed to kill all of Mordecai's people in Xerxes' kingdom.

Mordecai informed Esther of these dealings and encouraged her to use her position as a way to protect the Jewish people. She was initially hesitant but eventually took it upon herself to request a meeting and banquet with the king and Haman. Xerxes honored this offer, and while they ate, Esther pleaded with Xerxes to spare her people—the Jewish people—from massacre.



## GENTLENESS



*Esther*

When Xerxes asked who was in charge of such a plot, Esther exposed Haman, and Xerxes was furious. Haman was hanged for his conspiracy, and Xerxes decreed that the Jewish people could defend themselves from enemies, which they eventually did. These events helped establish the Jewish festival of Purim, and the nation was saved.

Esther starts out as an orphan girl who only had her beauty and her loyalty. However, these were the exact two qualities that she needed to save the Jewish people.

The Bible discusses Esther's physical beauty several times, but she also had a beautiful personality. Both of these qualities helped her gain and maintain the attention of her attendant and fellow houseguests, earning their favor and guidance through her gentleness. Xerxes also praised her beauty, which played a huge role in her becoming queen and ultimately saving her people. While I certainly don't want to promote vanity, it's also not a bad thing to care about the way in which we present ourselves. Esther's physical beauty was enhanced

by her gentle presence, which caused a girl who wouldn't have been used to the spotlight to suddenly be in a position of royalty.

Then, there's Esther's loyalty. She didn't abandon Mordecai after she became queen and gained access to the latest and greatest royal resources. Instead, she continued to fully trust Mordecai's guidance, as he tried to stay present in her life and the king's court. When his life was in danger, which would be extended to the lives of all Jewish people, Esther maintained her loyalty to all of Israel. Her need to stick up for her people superseded her personal comfort, and she gained the courage to speak to the king about the matter.

It's also important to note that Esther was scared of doing this. Vashti was discarded for refusing a single command, and the Jewish people were no friends of Persia. Esther could've been killed for requesting a meeting with the king if he was in a bad mood. It's totally understandable that she would've been scared, but again, her loyalty to Mordecai's encouragement ultimately came through. Moreover, Xerxes fully listened to Esther and complied with her requests to hold a banquet and protect the Jewish people. She could appeal to Xerxes in a way that no other woman could—through her beauty and loyalty, both to her people and her husband.

Esther's gentleness allowed her to build important relationships and gain her leverage in a kingdom that threatened to persecute the Jewish people. Because of her actions, the Jewish people were not only saved but also equipped to take whatever positions and actions were necessary to secure their nation for centuries to come.

# *Mary, Mother of Jesus*

## **Gentleness That Bore a Savior**

Okay, *now* we have an equal number of Marys and Elizabeths in our book. Told you there were more Marys in store.

While Mary of Nazareth's name is sprinkled throughout the Gospels, the bulk of her story is contained in Luke 1-2, during her road to becoming a mother. Six months after her relative, Elizabeth (from Chapter 2), became pregnant, an angel of the Lord named Gabriel appeared to Mary and proclaimed how God approved of her.

In a totally relatable reaction, Mary was a little spooked. An angel was talking to her, for crying out loud. This was hardly an everyday occurrence for anyone, let alone a young woman from Nazareth. But Gabriel tried to ease her fears, explaining how God had selected her to bear His Son, who was to be named Jesus.

Mary then asked how this would be possible, given her status as a virgin. Gabriel again explained how the Holy Spirit would impregnate her, allowing her to honor her engagement to Joseph. He also revealed that Elizabeth was six months pregnant as proof of God's ability to do anything, and Mary accepted that she would do as God willed to have done. And Mary became pregnant. Later, Mary went to visit Elizabeth for a while, and we discussed how Mary's presence caused Elizabeth's son, John the Baptist, to jump in her womb. This

led to Mary singing a profound song of praise to God, glorifying His name and how He will be using her in His grand narrative.

Meanwhile, Joseph had to work through the news of Mary's pregnancy as well. Upon discovering her pregnancy as told in Matthew 1, Joseph had been planning to quietly divorce Mary in an attempt to allow both of them to maintain their dignity. However, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and caught him up to speed, letting him know that it was still acceptable to marry her. So, as a man of his word, Joseph obeyed this angel's direction.

And then, there's the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph were traveling to Bethlehem to register for the Roman census when she was ready to pop. Despite their best efforts, they couldn't find any available rooms at the inn, so Mary gave birth to her Son in a stable. Luke records shepherds finding Jesus after an angel told them about His birth, and the shepherds relayed the incredible message. But Mary simply gathered these precious words and thoughts in her mind and heart, delighting at what was transpiring. At the appropriate time, she and Joseph took Jesus to the necessary temples to follow Jewish customs. Later, Matthew records three Magi or wise men finding Jesus through a remarkable star in the sky that appeared at His birth and honoring Him with wealthy gifts. The Magi warn the family of King Herod's pursuit of Jesus, so Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt.

Mary was among the lowest members of her society: She was poor, she was young, and she was a woman. By the standards of the day, there wasn't much lower that she could've gone in the ranks. Yet, she is the one selected by God to carry His Son, perhaps the most unassuming and unpredictable choice to do so. Isn't that so characteristic of God, though—to choose the people we least expect to do some of the most remarkable things?

## GENTLENESS

And Mary would've had every reason to turn this down. I already mentioned her lack of status markers, but those are bad enough in the best of circumstances. But if she was spotted as an unmarried pregnant woman, it could've caused an enormous scandal to break out, with her and Joseph's reputations being tarnished. But instead of turning Gabriel down or trying to run away from this command, Mary embraced it. She asked one question to figure out the logistics of the situation, and upon receiving an answer, she simply accepted it.



*Mary, mother of Jesus*

I considered putting Mary in a few other chapters in this book, but I landed on gentleness because of how quietly and gracefully she agrees to this humongous undertaking. Nobody else is around to watch her accept this request other than Gabriel, giving her an intimate space to grasp this moment. She didn't make a huge fuss about the situation but trusted Who was giving her the direction to do this. Mary turned to God in praise when she was with Elizabeth, and she assumed a humble attitude when the Magi and shepherds marveled at Jesus' birth. She gently stored up these memories for herself, recognizing

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

the miracle of this moment rather than seeking her own glory or touting her role in the story.

Mary embraced God's calling for her life with an open mind, even when she didn't fully understand how it would all play out. She put her obedience to God above all else, which allowed her to cherish the beauty of Jesus' birth with an even more gentle and joyous heart.

# *Saint Olympias the Deaconess*

## **Gentleness That Gave Without Reservation**

Olympias (368–408) was born into a wealthy, aristocratic family in Constantinople, the capital of the Roman Empire. Her family's status began with her grandfather, a senator, as well as her father, a count, both of whom had a tremendous fortune. Her father and mother were members of a pagan religion, and they died during Olympias' youth. She was subsequently raised by her devoutly Christian uncle as well as her governess Theodosia. While both of these parental figures modeled Christian values, Olympias particularly gravitated toward Theodosia's sweet, responsible, and caring demeanor. This inspired Olympias to adopt these values in her own life.

Olympias' uncle was a good friend of St. Gregory the Theologian, and she began supporting his ministry when she was just 17. At age 21, she married a treasurer of high status, and although St. Gregory came down with an illness that prevented him from attending the wedding, he wrote her a kind letter. Unfortunately, Olympias' husband died after somewhere between 20 days and 2 years of marriage, leaving her with an even larger fortune to manage.

While others in her social circles looked for new romantic suitors for her, Olympias committed to a life of celibacy and service. Her peers

even made specific suggestions to her, but every time, she pushed back with her own flair, insisting that it wasn't the path she wanted. She instead developed strong relationships with various members of the clergy and established a monastery on one of her properties, which she lived in with her servants. She vowed to use her vast wealth, education, and resources to give to underprivileged individuals and the church.

Olympias was given the title of deaconess when she turned 30. She vowed to live a modest lifestyle in spite of her wealth; for example, she refused to use a bath regularly and also put herself on a restrictive diet—both of which were seen as privileged luxuries. Olympias was more concerned with renouncing any hint of self-indulgence or vanity in favor of a life of prayerful decision-making as to how to allocate her wealth. She turned to building relationships with members of all corners of the church, and through her letters to various saints, we can learn about her gentle approach to serving the Lord.



*Saint Olympias the Deaconess*

Olympias lived a meek (not weak!) lifestyle, submitting to God's will rather than indulging in her own wealth. Although her upbringing



was probably as comfortable as it gets for the fourth century, she still endured her fair share of tragedy. Losing her mother, father, and husband before reaching her mid-20s would've caused her to endure a significant amount of heartbreak. This is no small detail to overlook.

In spite of this string of deaths, Olympias didn't use this as an excuse to drown herself in material possessions or more shallow forms of consolation. Instead, she allowed her eyes to be opened to the powerful love of Christ that she witnessed through her loved ones, and let this inspire her for the rest of her life. This seems so radical compared to a lot of messaging these days, telling us to treat ourselves with anything our heart desires. But as a woman who could have almost anything at her disposal, having inherited the wealth of three powerful men, she chose to give it all to God.

As a deaconess, Olympias would've needed prayerful discernment to help her allocate her many resources in a way that honored God—the church would've required this of her. Through her intentional time with the Lord, she didn't simply give a church money and go about her days. Instead, she vowed to live modestly with hundreds of servants and gently created environments that allowed them to further the Gospel.

Olympias met these people where they were and used her vast wealth to share with those who could benefit from it. Her gentle nature embodied the heart of a servant, learning this from her governess and carrying it out for the rest of her life.

## **Summary**

Gentleness is a soft demeanor that is supported by a firm strength of character. Its tender approach should not be confused with weakness

but rather a reflection of God's caring and considerate nature that far surpasses what we deserve.

What are a few lessons that we can take away from the lives of Esther, Mary, and Saint Olympias?

- Gentleness can be embracing your (feminine) beauty and giftings to protect others' interests.
- Gentleness can be opening your heart to God's calling in your life, submitting to the direction He lays out before you.
- Gentleness can be praying fervently and passionately about every thought and decision you make.
- Gentleness can be offering yourself to the needs of others, ready to serve them in whatever capacity they require.

## CHAPTER 9

# Self-Control

For our final Fruit of the Spirit, we come to a topic that might appear like a black sheep compared to the rest.

When I think of the previous eight Fruits, they stir up a great deal of whimsy or contentment. I like to bask in the flurry of positivity when studying concepts like faithfulness, kindness, or even forbearance, as difficult as that last one can be at times. But self-control? It sounds restrictive, like I have to give something up more explicitly. The idea of having to control myself doesn't naturally appeal to me in the same way that goodness or peace does at first glance.

But I think it's important to remember that these nine Fruits are meant to be produced as a result of our habits. These Fruits emerge *after* being transformed by Christ; we're not supposed to nail these qualities before we receive Him. Rather, by learning more about who He is, we're more naturally inclined to exercise more restraint out of a desire to be more like Him.

Paul writes that “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). Yet, James also says that “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 3:17), so we can't deny that we need to do some work on our part, too.

We simply have to remember the order of events, here: God saves us as a result of our belief in Jesus Christ first, and then, through continued dedication to learning about Him, we can develop more control over our habits.

With this in mind, we can better grasp the intention of Paul's use of the word *enkrateia* in Galatians 5:23, which pertains to the control, restraint, or mastery of the self. It's also closely related to the Greek word for governance, meaning that we are to manage the abundance of roles and responsibilities expected of us. By maintaining this order over our lives through willful discipline, we can more effectively serve God in prioritizing His ways over our desires.

This is an incredibly difficult fruit to bear. It's not easy to submit our wants and desires to just anyone, but when we remember Who we're submitting to, we can take heart that He knows what's best for us. Let's explore the lives of three women who embodied this self-control in inspiring ways.

# *Hannah*

## **Self-Control That Persevered Through Grief**

My early 20s were a difficult time for me. It felt like everyone was moving forward with their lives, getting married and buying houses and what not, and I was just stuck in the same place. I so badly wanted what they had, but it felt like God was holding me back. Now, I understand how to trust His timing better, but it makes me feel so deeply for the beautiful self-control that Hannah demonstrated.

We first meet Hannah in 1 Samuel 1 as one of the two wives married to a man named Elkanah. His other wife, Peninnah, was a fertile woman birthing multiple children, but Hannah couldn't conceive. This hurt Elkanah, not out of rage or frustration, but because he loved Hannah so deeply. Whenever Elkanah sacrificed at the temple and returned back home with meat, he doubled the portion he gave to Hannah versus that of Peninnah and her children. Unfortunately, Hannah wasn't able to provide children for him in the same way that Peninnah could.

To make matters worse, Peninnah would mock Hannah's infertility when they visited the temple. This caused Hannah to cry out to God in tremendous pain. Elkanah tried to console her, asking if he was

worth more to her than birthing sons, but Hannah's heart still ached from her barren womb.

After one particular meal, Hannah prayed fervently before God, asking for a son that she would then vow to give to God for the rest of his life. The temple's priest, Eli, witnessed Hannah and thought she might've been drunk, which Hannah denied and said that she was heavily burdened. Eli blessed Hannah, who returned home with her family the next day after they worshiped God one more time. Not long thereafter, Hannah and Elkanah conceived and gave birth to a boy, whom they named Samuel.

Upon her son's birth, Hannah committed herself to nurse Samuel for a time before presenting him to the temple. When the time came, she brought many items for sacrifice along with Samuel and presented him before Eli. She proclaimed that she prayed over her child and that he'd be given to a life in service of the Lord, praying one more time before she and Elkanah headed home.

Hannah demonstrates a remarkable amount of courage in the midst of her heartache. We've explored a few Biblical women who were barren for many years, but we haven't discussed how significant this was for the time period. One of a woman's key offerings during these days centered around her ability to birth children, and a woman who couldn't do such a thing had inherently less value in the world's eyes. And in this particular struggle, I know that many of my Christian sisters have faced similar situations—not being able to conceive the child you've always wanted. My heart breaks for those of you, dear sisters, who have endured this struggle. But please remember that our God, your Father, also sees your struggle and loves you more than you'll ever know.



*Hannah*

Returning to Hannah's case, Peninnah's presence only made the situation more hurtful. Not only was Peninnah right there, having kids, but she made Hannah feel badly for being barren. First of all, this just goes to show why God designed a one-spouse maximum at any given time. These complications could've easily been avoided if Elkanah had just married one woman. But I think Hannah is an incredible woman for not trying to get even with Peninnah. Hannah had every reason to want to retaliate against Peninnah's vicious words if she wanted to, but instead of vengeance, she pursued God. She had her priority of faith in the right place ahead of any potential desire to get back at Peninnah.

Hannah shows us how valuable it is to direct our emotions toward the One who can actually understand and do something about it. She exercised self-control toward arguing with Peninnah, which wouldn't have gotten her anywhere, in favor of spending more time in prayer

with God. The tremendous discipline that Hannah shows here can teach us how valuable it is to express our genuine emotions in a healthy and productive way. This directed all of the attention onto God instead of anyone else.

But then, Hannah would've had to do one of the most difficult things a mother could ever do: give her baby away. Yet, that's exactly what she did.

When Hannah prayed to God, she didn't just fill the time with empty promises to get what she wanted, only to forget her promise as soon as she made it. After Samuel's birth, Hannah honored her commitment to give him over to God instead of fully raising him in her home. I couldn't imagine how difficult it must've been to give her baby boy over to God after waiting for so long to have him. But on top of that, she did so while praying over Samuel and worshiping God, not out of bitter resentment that she had to do this. Hannah showed immense trust and self-control in placing God's plan above her wants, and God made Samuel into a great prophet after having raised him up in the temple.



# *Anna*

## **Self -Control That Recognized Jesus**

As an aside, I love how these two Biblical women's names rhyme. Plus, there's a continuation in themes due to our final Biblical woman, Anna, working in a temple after seeing where Hannah spent so much time herself. You're welcome.

Anyways, Anna's role in the Biblical narrative only explicitly lasts for three verses in Luke 2, but she had been busy at work for much longer than that. As a young woman, Anna had gotten married, but her husband died only seven years after their union. Afterwards, she became a prophetess and dedicated all of her time to living and praying in the temple of Jerusalem. Luke's account suggested that Anna could've either been 84 years old at the time of writing, or she could've been a widow for 84 years by this point. Either way, she was well on in years.

While she was going about her duties, she came across a young couple by the name of Joseph and Mary. They had gone to the temple after the birth of their son, as was custom, to officially name and circumcise Jesus. Joseph and Mary had also just seen a holy man named Simeon, who had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would see the Messiah before his death.

## FRUITFUL WOMEN OF BIBLE

After seeing Jesus, Simeon praised God and gave Him permission to take him away, for he knew that he had seen Christ. Simeon blessed Mary around the time that Anna also approached the young family. Anna thanked God and proclaimed that He would be part of Jerusalem's redemption. Joseph and Mary left the temple shortly thereafter and returned to Nazareth.

On the surface, there isn't much to glean from the physical words written about Anna, although they have certainly given us insight as to what her life may have looked like.

First of all, there's the tragedy of becoming a widow at such a young age. Seven years isn't a long time to be married, and she and her husband wouldn't have been able to see so many of their dreams come true. But instead of refusing to leave this state of grief, Anna decided to devote her life to serving God. The turmoil that many Christians face about losing a loved one is the dichotomy of missing them on earth while anticipating a reunion with them in heaven. I don't want to read into the situation too deeply nor project my own ideas of Anna's mental state here, but I could imagine the lingering sadness she might have felt for the rest of her life.



*Anna*

## SELF-CONTROL

Anna served diligently in the temple for several decades. She refused to marry again, instead committing herself to praying and fasting for her own relationship with God. Plus, she played a significant role in the spiritual lives of other people as a prophetess, needing to align her will extra closely to God's in order to hear Him clearly. Her job required her to work dutifully so as to not inject her own ideas into her prophecies and truly honor what God reveals to her.

To top it all off, Anna lived at the office, to use modern terms. She remained in the temple day and night, surrounding herself with God's presence at all hours of the day. She threw herself wholeheartedly into seeking God and abiding by His will.

Honestly, that sounds amazing. Could you imagine being so close to God at all times? For me, I try to develop these great ideas of how to spend more time with God. I'd set my alarm super early to get everything set up for a morning worship time. I'd get the coffee ready and drape a cozy blanket over my lap, open His word, and get ready to pray.

This sounded really great in theory, but I bought way more prayer journals than I needed and fell out of this habit after about a week.

Anna's habits lasted for roughly *80 years*.

Let that sink in for a moment. Eight decades worth of routines.

Don't get me wrong, I try to ensure that I get my quiet time with God every day, but this particular method didn't land with me (I'm a night owl, I've discovered). Anna's routine may have changed over time as well, but she remained so diligent during that time to maintain strong routines for so long.

But I don't mention these things to try to suggest that any one habit is better than another. I bring this up because it's precisely these

habits that helped Anna recognize the Messiah when He was in her midst.

*This* is why it's important to spend time with God each day, not because He'll love us any more for doing it, but because it'll help us discover more of who He is. We can better understand His loving character that'll allow us to see His presence in our broken world. Anna understood this, as her loyal service in the temple caused her to more readily grasp the significance of Jesus' presence when she came upon it.

Anna chose a life of controlled service to God above anything else. This gave her the clarity of mind she needed to see her Redeemer and recognize the weight of that moment.

# *Katherine Johnson*

## **Self-Control That Broke Through Barriers**

Katherine Coleman (1918–2020) was born a bright child in West Virginia, starting high school at age 13 on West Virginia State University's campus. She graduated from her undergraduate program summa cum laude at just 19 years old, specializing in both French and math. She started a teaching job for Black students shortly after finishing her degree but soon began graduate studies in math. She was one of three Black students, and the only female of the bunch, chosen to attend West Virginia University's graduate programs as part of their integration initiative in 1939.

She eventually left the program after choosing to begin her life with first husband James Goble, and the pair had three daughters together. She returned to teaching for a while before taking up a post to work in the all-Black computing division of National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) in 1953. She spent four years performing calculations and interpreting results of flight patterns and crashes before her husband died of cancer in 1956.

In the following years, Katherine provided some of the calculations for NACA's Space Task Group, which sought to enter the US into the Space Race. When NACA ended its segregation policy and became

the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in 1958, Katherine was invited into this group. The following year, she married James Johnson and adopted his surname.

In the 1960s, Katherine (now Johnson) helped calculate flight paths for several pioneering voyages for American astronauts. She became the first woman in her department to coauthor a paper on flight positions and equations in 1960. Then, she played a crucial role in calculating the trajectory for the *Freedom 7* initiative, which was the mission that first launched an American into space. Then, Johnson would become best known for her flight calculations surrounding the *Apollo 11* mission to the moon. Astronaut John Glenn personally asked for her confirmed calculations on the trajectory before agreeing to the flight, which became a successful mission.

Johnson was a member of many successful endeavors at NASA before her retirement in 1986. She received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2015 at age 97 and had a building named after her in 2016. Also in 2016, the movie *Hidden Figures* was released, detailing the lives of Johnson and her colleagues leading up to the *Apollo 11* mission (which is a fabulous movie, if I do say so myself).

Johnson may have been a naturally smart child, but she worked incredibly hard to back up her God-given gifts. She pursued her education for as long as it made sense for her to do so. Although she could've gotten her graduate degree (or degrees) if she had wanted to, she also managed to strike a balance between her professional and personal lives. She prioritized the needs of her growing family alongside, or even ahead of, her work at the relevant times, which allowed her to take on the job at NASA when it became available.



*Katherine Johnson*

Johnson certainly applied herself in academic and professional realms, but this doesn't even account for her starting point. Once we factor in the cultural setting of the United States in the 1950s and 60s, Johnson had to work extra hard as both a Black American and a woman in her field. It was exceedingly rare to find anyone outside of a White male in the math and engineering departments in NASA outside of the formerly segregated corners of the organization.

Yet, Johnson didn't let this deter her from pursuing her work, demonstrating tremendous discipline in incredibly stressful situations. With the Soviet Union having launched *Sputnik* into space in 1957, the Americans certainly felt pressure to try to compete with their Soviet counterparts. Johnson not only did her due diligence but also became a cornerstone that helped send astronauts into space, orbit the earth, and land on the moon.

Johnson shows us how to exercise control over one's responsibilities and conduct with incredible tolerance and persistence. On top of needing strong willpower to calculate the correct solutions, she faced an uphill battle of being underestimated based on her race and sex. Under the immense pressures of her environment, she pursued her work diligently and became a key piece of American history because of it.

## **Summary**

Self-control is the restraint of doing what we want in favor of knowing what we need. It involves us sacrificing some temporary pleasures in order to play our necessary role in the eternal Kingdom of God.

What are a few lessons that we can take away from the lives of Hannah, Anna, and Katherine Johnson?

- Self-control can be turning your attention toward God's goodness instead of others' wickedness in the face of hardship.
- Self-control can be choosing a life of discipline and service that minimizes worldly distractions and points you to Jesus.
- Self-control can be focusing on your positive contributions to the world instead of the negative connotations others might associate with you.



# CONCLUSION

God has done some pretty remarkable things through the lives of His daughters.

This journey has illustrated women from all backgrounds and corners of the world, showing how God can use anyone to further the mission of the Gospel. Let's review a few ways in which He's done this.

First of all, He has used women with a variety of faith backgrounds, from those who devoutly feared the Lord to those who didn't believe in Him. Women like Mary Magdalene had an unwavering loyalty to Christ for most of His ministry, and the reason for Elizabeth's joy was that she recognized the Lord was in her presence. Meanwhile, Ruth grew up as a Moabite, the woman at the well was a Samaritan, and Bilquis Sheikh was a Muslim before they discovered the love of God.

God also showed the priceless value of women from all socioeconomic backgrounds, from the richest royal to the poorest peasant. Saint Olympias used her wealth and privilege to offer resources to the church, while Esther rose to the occasion upon being appointed as Queen of Persia. On the other hand, God chose a poor, engaged, teenage girl in Mary of Nazareth to be the one to carry His Son.

The relationship status of the women involved also showed how God can use us at any season of our life. The likes of Abigail was a married woman but she recognized which man was truly honoring God in his work. Some women like Fanny Crosby married after they began their

career, although her husband aided her professional success. But the likes of Corrie ten Boom never married, which allowed her the freedom to travel as necessary to show compassion to those of all backgrounds.

A big theme in many of these women's lives was the presence or absence of children, especially in the Biblical stories. Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah all struggled to conceive, but they all eventually bore sons who would rise up to become some of the most notable figures in the Old Testament in Isaac, Joseph, and Samuel. In addition, Hannah along with Jochebed willingly offered up their children to God, trusting that He would guide Samuel and Moses to help guide His people. Plus, Naomi redefined the nature of her relationship with her daughter-in-law, inviting Ruth into her world as if she were her own daughter.

There were also women who conducted their affairs either within the home or outside of it. There's the fierce devotion of Susanna Wesley to raise such strong leaders of the faith, along with the organized hospitality of Martha to comfort so many houseguests. Meanwhile, women like Lydia made a living outside the home as a businesswoman, and Deborah judged an entire nation from the natural beauty of her courtyard.

The nature of the work that these women completed had a great range as well. Women like Anna lived in the religious walls of the temple, while Elisabeth Elliot led a missionary life that explicitly brought the message of Christ to other people. But there were women like Katherine Johnson, who worked in a high-pressure astronomy lab, or Elizabeth Fry, who served inmates that most people wouldn't dare to encounter. Then, there was Rahab, who worked as a prostitute, yet her belief in God allowed her to enter His family.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, we encounter women of all kinds of temperaments as they go about their lives. Sojourner Truth boldly and outspokenly advocated for the advancement of Black women to have a place in a post-slavery world. And finally, Mary of Bethany quietly and softly observed all that Jesus had to say, revealing the priorities of her heart.

All 27 women discussed in this book represent strength to me. Their lives bore so much fruit that writers and historians from all eras felt the need to write down their stories so that they don't get washed away into oblivion. Of course, everyone's life has a significant role to play, regardless of whether or not it gets written down, but I'm so thankful that these women's lives have been preserved. They show us that the definition of "strength" is truly multifaceted and can take on many appearances based on one's personality and skill set.

On that note, let's return to the question that opened this book: What does it mean to be a strong woman in the 21st century?

How would you answer this question now compared to your initial answer at the start of this journey? Is it clearer to you now or, perhaps, more confusing? I'll share some of my thoughts on this topic to close us out.

I don't think that being a strong woman means that we need to have it all together, because that's an impossible standard. But if these women above have shown us anything, it's that we can certainly become stronger versions of ourselves by trusting God for who He is, who He made us to be, and how He's going to get us there. We might not fully understand what that looks like, but if we believe that God is who He says He is, we can have the courage to take those steps of faith.

I think that's a key component—just like these women, we shouldn't let our journeys end here. They were women of conviction whose

firm beliefs led them to take to concrete actions revealing the extent of their strength. It would've been impossible for them to know just how impactful those actions would become, but their inclusion in this book is a testament to the fact that they helped change history. And, as we discussed, we can take heart in how wonderfully versatile these women were in displaying these acts of strength. Yet, every single woman embodied the heart of God through their lives and ministries.

Can we “have it all” here on earth? No. But can we invite God into our hearts and use this time on earth to honor the lives that He has given us? Absolutely.

I've been immensely inspired by this content, and I hope you have been, too. If you feel led to do so, please leave a review on Amazon. Your reviews mean so much to me and will help make this book visible to other readers who may also be moved by the stories of these Biblical and historical Christian women. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for going on this journey with me to discover the incredible lives of these God-fearing women. I pray that these stories resonate in your heart and that you may lead a life that bears much Fruit.

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