



CHURCH OF THE  
NAZARENE

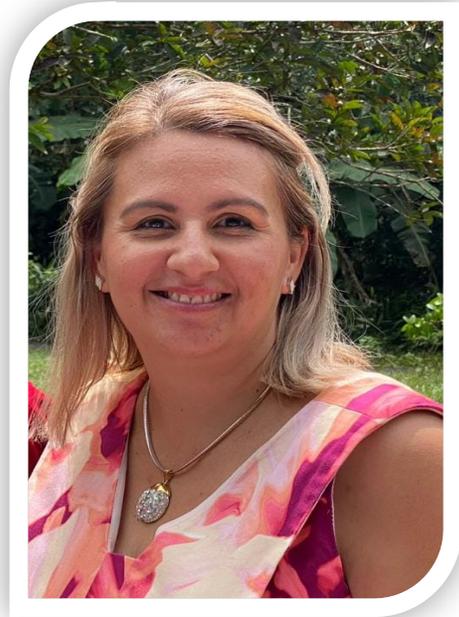


BIBLE STUDIES SERIES FOR  
**WOMEN'S MINISTRY**



2021-2022









Hello friends!

For me, relationships with my friends are very important. One of the main reasons is because we disciple each other. I have a group of five very close friends who stick with one another

through thick and thin, always faithful. Because of this faithfulness, our friendship has lasted for more than 30 years, growing as women of the Word and of power.

We met when we were all facing the most difficult times in our lives, and we were very vulnerable. During that time, by God's grace, He visited us, united us through His Church, and comforted us through His Word and the communion shared between sisters. We call our group of friends: Las Palomas – the Doves. When we talk we call each other Dove or Little Dove. Sometimes we joke and call ourselves Carrier Dove or Mountain Dove, even Bold Dove, but all in good fun.

There are several reasons why we call ourselves The Doves, but the main reason is because of what is written in the Bible about doves. The dove symbolizes the message of peace after the flood. It is also a symbol of meekness, being used by the Spirit of God who descended as a dove at the baptism of Jesus. On the other hand, it represents humility, since Jesus' parents offered two doves (because of their poor economic situation) when they had him dedicated in the temple in Jerusalem. But the key text for us can be found in:

Song of Solomon 2:14

*My dove in the clefts of the rock,  
in the hiding places on the mountainside,  
show me your face,  
let me hear your voice;*

*for your voice is sweet,  
and your face is lovely.*

The dove referred to here is the common rock dove . . . the dove is a common symbol of love.<sup>1</sup> The Beloved calls his beloved "my dove" as an expression of affection and intimacy. He seeks her, he calls her, he invites her, he makes her beautiful and perfect.

Jesus is the Beloved who, by his grace, seeks us all. God's grace calls us and invites us to come and take refuge in Him. To come to him by his grace is to be in his presence, to begin to walk along the Journey of Grace, where we can find a completely new life, full of hope. His grace finds us where we are, in whatever situation we're in. It directs us to the Truth, but it doesn't leave us the same. His grace makes us more and more like Jesus, sanctifying us.

Call your friends, have coffee together, tell each other about your situations, cry and pray together, come together, united, on this beautiful path that is life in Jesus. Share among yourselves and with others the powerful and refreshing word of God. I will be praying that, like my friends, God will connect you to one another in a relationship of Christian discipleship, growth in grace, and friendship, through Jesus Christ, that will endure throughout your life.

God bless you!

In the love and grace of Jesus,

*Marta*

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<sup>1</sup> Guzik, D. (21 Feb, 2017). Study Guide for Song of Songs 2 by David Guzik. Retrieved from [https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik\\_david/StudyGuide2017-Sgs/Sgs-2.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik_david/StudyGuide2017-Sgs/Sgs-2.cfm).



Today, as a little messenger dove, I want to show you the journey you are going to travel as you seek God together.





## CONTENT

The following 12 Bible studies can be used for women at any stage of life. I have focused them in these three stages: Preventive Grace, Saving Grace, and Sanctifying Grace so that we can connect the grace and mission of the Church to our walk.



### I. Preventive Grace

1. The Young Jewish Woman in Syria
2. God's Love Seems Absurd: Gomer
3. Esther
4. The Grace of God that seeks us



### II. Saving Grace

1. Mary and Elisabeth
2. Ruth
3. Rizpah
4. The Untimely Widow



### III. Sanctifying Grace

1. Deborah
2. Phoebe
3. Abigail
4. On the Path of Possibilities

# STUDY METHODS: Guided and Inductive

We will share (12) guided studies. We will also show you the Inductive Bible Study method which is an alternative way of learning more from the Scripture. Please feel free to share this with your group.

The Inductive Bible Study method is take time to read and analyze the text very carefully, underline the things that catch your attention... what can we learn from these verses?

Use the chart below to implement the Inductive Bible Study Method by studying the Word carefully.

What is the context of the passage?	List the characters and their characteristics.
How do we see God in the story?	Which theme stands out? Any questions, any answers?

Choose a Bible passage...

What are is the key principle(s)?	What applies to your current circumstances?
What does the Word invite us to do (an action)?	Who can we share this passage with? When?

## THE YOUNG JEWISH WOMAN IN SYRIA

**Key Verse:** Psalm 37:5

*“Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this.”*

**Key Passage:** 2 Kings 5:1-14

**Purpose:** God's grace goes before us and can use us to help others.

### **Introduction:**

The situation in Israel was critical. On one hand, the rulers continued to worship the false god, the Baal. God sent Israel prophets, including Elijah and Elisha, warning them against these practices. Through these prophets, God displayed His power and gave the nation of Israel the opportunity to correct its ways, but Israel ignored God and his messengers. The nation continued in its evil ways and didn't repent wholeheartedly to worship Jehovah alone, the only true God. To make matters worse, the Moabites rebelled against having to pay high taxes after the death of King Ahab. Finally, Ben-Hadad II, king of Syria caused a lot of inconvenience to Israel because it bordered Israel to the north.

The Syrians had caused trouble since the time of King David. Periodically, they invaded, stealing and destroying crops and taking captives back to their land. In one of these raids, the Syrians took a young woman captive and sold her into slavery to the home of a powerful Syrian army commander named Naaman.

How do you think this young woman felt about being taken captive by a gang of thieves who kidnapped her and took her to a strange land? Possibly she ran away, tried to escape, screamed, but she couldn't fight the strength of her kidnappers. It seemed that there was no hope left for her and that God had abandoned her. Her family, her land, her language, everything had been left behind, she had lost it all. But she never forgot her God.

She was taken to the house where she was going to live and serve and to her surprise, her new master, Naaman, was a leper. In Israel, a man with leprosy, like Naaman would have been separated from society, he would never have been allowed to live freely among others! Now it was her job to serve a person like him, a person with leprosy! This was a very drastic additional change for her.

### **Hypothesis:**

Trust in the Lord beyond your limitations and you will see transformation in the lives of those around you.

**Reflection:**

Can you describe some changes that the young Israelite woman experienced in Syria? How do you think the young woman reacted? Can you describe some challenges or changes you've experienced lately? How did you react to the changes you experienced?

The Bible does not indicate exactly how long the young woman served Naaman's wife before gaining her trust and having the courage to approach her with a possible health solution to Naaman's terrible affliction. What we do see clearly is that the young woman had a supernatural confidence in the work that God did through his prophets. Perhaps she had grown up listening to the stories of Elijah and Elisha, or perhaps she knew people who had benefited from their miracles. Perhaps her father was one of the prophets who refused to kneel to Baal (1 Kings 18). We don't know. But she had so much confidence and hope in the living God that she wanted to share it. She said to Naaman's wife, *"If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."* (2 Kings 5:3)

**Reflection:**

What motivated the young woman to speak up in this situation? Can you share about how you think God used this young woman to display his grace? How have you seen his grace displayed in your life?

Naaman brought the information given by the young woman to the king of Syria and the king of Syria sent a letter requesting the collaboration of the king of Israel so that Naaman would be healed. 2 Kings 5:6 says: *"With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."* Naaman departed soon after on his journey to Israel, taking the royal letter along with 10 silver talents, 6000 gold shekels and 10 sets of clothing, gifts suitable for honoring a king. When King Joram read Ben-Hadad's letter, he tore his clothes and shouted, *"Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy?"* (verse 7). Only God could heal Naaman! When Elisha learned of the king's distress, he offered a solution: *"Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel."* (verse 8).

When Naaman arrived in his chariot at Elisha's house, the prophet's messenger was waiting with instructions: *"Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."* (verse 10). But instead of being hopeful and willing, the leper was furious! He rejected the very idea that the prophet would not come before him and cure him immediately. And he certainly didn't intend to wash in the Jordan River. Weren't the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? The commander left Elisha in a fit of rage.

**Reflection:**

Why was Naaman so angry? How would you describe Naaman's attitude and his heart?

Naaman's servants reasoned with him: "... if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it?" (verse 13).

Their efforts paid off and Naaman agreed to follow the prophet's instructions: "So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy" (verse 14). The brave man of Syria had just experienced the unparalleled power of the God of Israel.

The next time Naaman appeared before Elisha, he made an astonishing statement: "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel" (verse 15).

**Reflection:**

How did Naaman feel after being healed/saved? What do you think of God's love and grace that seeks the lost? How did God use the young woman to achieve his goal? Was Naaman's nationality or condition an obstacle for the young woman? For God?

Characteristics of the young woman:

- A young woman captive in another land.
- She was an example of how we can act as a courageous and cooperative servant, even when facing challenges beyond our control.
- She was disciplined at home from childhood and was very aware of the love and power of the God of Israel.
- What she learned as a child impacted her in such a way that she could share it with others.
- She was a young evangelist who trusted God to heal and restore lives.
- She embodied God's grace that seeks, that interrupts, that pursues, that insists.
- This young woman knew that God would do something. God's grace doesn't leave people the same, but works in their lives.
- Through her faithfulness and example a very influential man was reached by the love of God.

**Conclusion:**

We can learn many lessons from this passage. For example, the importance of discipling children so that when life's tests come, they're prepared. Our circumstances don't limit the power of God. Any circumstance is a good time to talk about the greatness of God. When we place our trust in Jesus Christ, He will work. God's grace went before Naaman to save him. The power of God's prevenient grace persistently seeks us out and frees us despite life's many obstacles.

**Questions:**

- I. Content:
  1. Who was the leper commander?
  2. How many times did he have to wash in the Jordan River?
  3. Who trusted God in this story? Who was an evangelist?
  
- II. Understanding:
  1. What were the young woman's biggest challenges?
  2. Do you think Naaman's heart changed? What did the change look like?
  
- III. Connection:
  1. How was the young Israelite woman a channel of God's grace?
  2. Do you think God can use you in the same manner?
  3. Discuss which situations stop you from talking about God and which situations encourage you to share the gospel?
  4. What do you suppose was the young woman's source of faith and courage to dare to speak of God in the midst of her captivity?
  5. What do you admire about this young woman?

**Activities:**

- I. NEWS INTERVIEW FOR "WOMEN'S NEWS" - As a group, create a TV newsreel. Distribute the tasks of cameramen, producers, assistants, news anchors, interviewers and interviewees.

**Story:** A reporter conducts an interview from Syrian (remember it's a game) to present both sides of the story; both the story of the young woman, as well as the story of Naaman and the results. Conclude the program with lessons on the young woman's example. Use your imagination to "interview" those who were at the "scene" and who knew the characters.

- II. CHOOSE THE ANSWER - Circle the correct answers in the following story:

In this Bible story, we have learned several things about an [old/young woman] [Israelite/Syrian] who [volunteered/was commanded] to serve as a slave [in a foreign land/in the Peace Corps]. She [served diligently/took many coffee breaks] and [gained the trust/caused despair] of her captors. She [cared little/was really worried] about Naaman, even though he was her [master/pastor] and an enemy of her people, Israel. Because of her [faith in the power of God/abilities as a servant], this young woman convincingly proposed a remedy for the army commander's affliction. His actions led to [a promotion/a wonderful miracle] preserved in the pages of the Bible for all to read.

## GOD'S LOVE SEEMS ABSURD: GOMER

**Key Verse:** Hosea 1:2

*“When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him,  
“Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an  
adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD.”*

**Key Verse:** Hosea 2:14

*“Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the  
wilderness and speak tenderly to her.”*

**Key Passage:** Hosea 1-2

**Introduction:**

The Lord tells Hosea to take a prostitute as his wife. This symbolizes God's relationship with the people of Israel. Even though they are unfaithful (like a prostitute to her husband), God still loves and forgives them. Hosea, through his marriage to and love for Gomer, symbolizes God's longing for the people of Israel.

**Grace In the Lesson:** God loves his chosen ones, not because of their worthiness and despite their betrayal. His grace seeks to save and restore them completely.

**Context:**

The Covenant the Lord made with Israel called them to honor Him as the only God. However, the chosen people forgot about Jehovah their God and mingled with the beliefs of the nations that dwelt around and among them. They also made improper alliances with foreign kings, thinking that their might would save them from dangers which threatened their national existence, all of which showed that they no longer trusted in God's absolute care. So, God raised up the prophet Hosea and spoke to Israel through Hosea using metaphors of prostitution and adultery through which he described himself as the aggrieved husband of an unfaithful wife. In addition, through Hosea's prophecy, God proclaimed the punishment that would put an end to the nation's promiscuity. But since our God is love, surprisingly, Hosea saw that behind God's wrath was a love that would not allow his people to be annihilated, and that judgment itself would bring a new beginning. God was going to make a new covenant with Israel, he would bring new reconciliation and regeneration for all.

Hosea is a very complicated book in many ways. It's also quite graphic and bold. Above all, the book reveals the important message that God was telling the ancient kingdom of Israel, and Hosea. Hosea's name means salvation and comes from the same Hebrew root (*hoshea*) as the name "Jesus" and "Joshua". Throughout the book, Hosea will show us that salvation is found by returning to Jehovah, and by turning away from our sin.

In the story of Hosea we see God's grace illustrated in a very pure way, it shows us the character of the God of all grace and love for the unworthy, for sinners.

**Reflection:**

In what ways did Israelite society mix with pagan people? What do you think this has in common with today's society? In what sense should God's people turn away from the world? And to what extent, if any, do you believe they should draw closer to the world?

Hosea's message is extraordinary. God tells him to marry a prostitute and to have children with her, the motive God gives Hosea for this is "... *for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord.*" So, Hosea marries a prostitute named Gomer. I imagine God saying to Hosea, "This is how we are going to get their attention, Hosea. You're going to look for a prostitute and you're going to marry her." And then, God tells Hosea to love her. The thing that is so impressive about Hosea is that he obeyed. Hosea did what no worthy and respectable man would have done. He was willing to make a fool of himself for God. God used the lives of the prophets as living parables to speak to His people.

As our story unfolds, we see how God uses the strong and terrible image of prostitution to show Israel what they had become and what God would do to restore them. Prostitution has two meanings in this story. The Israelites had become contaminated with pagan religions. Many had been tempted to participate a religion where people practiced prostitution to please the god called Baal. The second meaning of prostitution is that it symbolizes a spirit of infidelity that breaks the covenant with God and breaks God's heart.

According to God's instructions, Hosea finds a promiscuous woman, Gomer and marries her. He doesn't just marry her, he treats her like a wife, like a queen. He shows her love, takes care of her and they have a son. The names that Hosea gives his children represent the Lord's prevenient grace. And God says, "*Call him Jezreel,*" (which means "God sows") "*because I will soon punish the house of Jehu ...*" for some things they had done. In other words, God is going to punish Israel. Then Hosea and Gomer have a second child. In verse 6 it says: "*Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the Lord said to Hosea, "Call her Lo-Ruhamah (which means "not loved"), for I will no longer show love to Israel, that I should at all forgive them*". This second baby was called "Not Loved"

because she represents who Israel is and God isn't going to show Israel mercy. But to Israel's ears, and to our ears, the names seem absurdly crazy.

**Reflection:**

Compare Hosea with Ezekiel 16 (a fairly graphic chapter).

But God's grace is at work before the problem, during the problem, and for the future of the nation. Verse 10 says, *"Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted."* Basically, God is saying, "I will punish you, but you will survive my punishment." Verse 10 continues: *"In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'children of the living God.'"* Here we have a pattern that appears five times in the book of Hosea. God says, "I'm upset. I have given you all this, I have taken care of you, and yet you continue with these horrible and vulgar religious practices."

The book of Hosea is dealing with a society that's very similar to ours today, it's amazing. God's message is given to the tribes of the north, mostly in Samaria and its surroundings, places that are at a very notable moment in their history. Most historians will say that Hosea's prophetic message lasted from approximately 760 to 720 B.C., during the divided monarchy (Israel to the north and Judah to the south). Currently, this was one of the greatest economic and prosperous revivals in Israel's history. They hadn't had such a moment since Solomon, more than 200 years earlier.

Jeroboam II, one of the kings during this period succeeded in his conquests, so Israel was in the mist of one of its largest expansions in size. Israel was also, during this period of time, playing a very, very dangerous political game. They had become agents of power on the world stage, with Egypt, with Assyria, and with other nations. They were constantly changing alliances with different countries. They had large tracts of land, a strong middle- and upper-class population, they were trading partners with the entire known world, and were at a pivotal moment in their history. It was a time when they thought God had to bless them because they were making money and expanding the kingdom.

**Reflection:**

Do you think the prosperity and being extremely busy affected the people's covenant relationship with Jehovah? How do circumstances affect the lives of believers, their fellowship with God, and their participation in Jesus' mission?

Now Hosea says, "God is going to punish you." This didn't make him a very popular guy. On the contrary, the Israelites felt that they were blessed because they were wealthy, but Hosea comes with a different message. He tells them: "You're not pleasing God at all."

Gradually, however, the country collapses into chaos. They experience the murders of their kings, and everything begins to spiral out of control. Their situation really reflected their society, it was becoming more and more chaotic.

Hosea's relationship with Gomer deteriorated and Gomer left Hosea's house. God tells Hosea to find her and bring her home. Hosea pays a man to get her back, what a tragic and painful situation. You may wonder; "Why does God want Hosea to show love to Gomer? Isn't that cruel? Hasn't Gomer broken the law?" God is showing us that He is willing to do anything to find us and bring us to Himself. God doesn't skimp on the price he has to pay. It's a tragic love story, but it's a hopeful love story because God keeps saying, "I'll fix this". Hosea 2: 16-17 says: *"In that day," declares the Lord, "you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master.' I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked."*

This book presents us with an unfaithful wife who has a faithful husband and contrasts their story with an unfaithful nation that has a faithful God. Hosea is faithful, he is sincere, he is patient, he is loving, he is a provider, he is a redeemer, he is a liberator, he is reliable, he is firm and true. While Gomer is insincere, inconstant, adulterous, weak, poor and a slave in urgent need of rescue.

**Reflection:**

According to Hosea's message, describe the character of the Israelites and then compare it to God's prevenient grace that's reflected in the passage. How do you see Jesus' later actions and message reflected in our story?

**Activities**

- **ROLE PLAY** - Make cards that have the names: Gomer, Hosea, Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, Lo-Ammi, Jezreel, Ruhamah, Ammi (the original names and the new names given to the children). Distribute the cards anonymously among the group. Ask participants to stand up and move based on the following statement: "In our Bible story, some of you are wrong before God and some of you are righteous before God. Those who are righteous go to the right and those who are wrong go to the left." Now discuss the following questions from your character's point of view.

Discuss: Was it hard to know where to go? Why? Do you understand God as a rejected husband? How did you feel in the role that you played and how can you change the situation of the character? What's good about this understanding? What is potentially dangerous about this understanding? (We could abuse God's mercy.) Can a person have only one true love? Can a person have more than one "god"? Why or why not?

## JOURNEY OF GRACE- PREVENIENT GRACE

- VOWS - Distribute paper and pens. Have you participants write a letter to God. The letter should include "marriage vows", things which they are willing to promise God. The letter may also include a request for forgiveness and a renewal of love.
- DISCUSS: Talk about the pain a person who has been rejected feels. Divide the class into two parts and have them analyze the following applications to cases of marriage. Each group will defend a statement:
  1. You should try to get your spouse back. Why?
  2. You should not try to get your spouse back. Why not?

### Questions:

- I. Content:
  1. What was the meaning of the names of the children of Hosea?
  2. Who chose the names of their children?
  3. Why did God command Hosea to take a "promiscuous wife"?
  4. What do we learn from these verses about Israel's relationship with God at this time in history?
- II. Discussion:
  1. How can we interpret God's command to Hosea in light of the fact that God is holy?
  2. How is God's grace expressed in this story?

## ESTHER

**Key Verse:** Esther 4:14b

*“And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”*

**Key Verse:** Galatians 6:7

*“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.”*

### **Prayer:**

As you begin this lesson, invite the Lord to meet you, to open your heart to know His prevenient grace. Ask God to bring salvation to your life, your family, and your community.

### **Introduction:**

This lesson is a condensed version of Esther's story in which we see God's hand at work in mysterious ways. In this story, in which the name of God does not appear, God's actions constantly drive and guide the characters to fulfill their purpose, even in the midst of strong adversities. This story also illustrates the principle of sowing and harvesting. The Bible tells the full story beautifully. You can enjoy reading the full, dramatic biblical account with all its interesting details, in the book that bears her name – Esther.

### **Context:**

When Hadassah's parents died, she went to live with her cousin Mordecai in Susa, the royal city of Xerxes, king of Persia. Mordecai and Hadassah were Jews. Their ancestors arrived in Persia as captives long before Hadassah was born. At the time of this story, Jews and Persians lived together pleasantly. Hadassah was also known as Esther, the Persian word for star.

### **A New Queen**

King Xerxes was a stern man and was known to call himself king of all other kings. He ruled with authority and expected complete obedience from all. He once became so angry at his wife, Queen Vashti, for disobeying him that he dismissed her from his presence with sinister threats. He would *“...give her royal position to someone else who is better than she.”* (Esther 1:19b). He would select a new queen to replace her.

His advisors advised him to *“... appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women (virgins) into the harem at the citadel of Susa... Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.”* (Esther 2:3-

4). Xerxes thought it was an excellent plan, so his officers brought the most beautiful young women of the land to the palace.

**Reflection:**

Scripture says that women were brought to the citadel of Susa and placed in the care of Hegai – one of the king’s eunuchs. They did not volunteer. There’s no indication that these young women were asked if they wanted to be on the list of the King's potential wife. Basically, all the eligible young women were brought to the palace whether they wanted to or not. How do you think these young women felt?

Esther was one of the young women who was taken to the palace to undergo 12 months of beauty treatments before being presented to the King. When the time came for Esther to appear before the king, "... *Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her.*" (verse 15). But would King Xerxes be pleased?

**Reflection:**

Think about this “beauty contest”. If you were a young woman, would you have wanted to be on the King's list?

It might be nice to live in a beautiful palace, but it would be dangerous to upset the King in any way. All her life, the Queen had to be very careful about what she said and did. What about women who were not chosen to be queen? Could they go home, get married, and have a family? Probably not. Do you know why? They were owned by the King and probably had to spend the rest of their lives in the King's harem, confined.

**Hidden Identity**

Mordecai believed that Esther had a good chance of becoming queen, but he also warned her not to say she was Jewish (verse 10). The Bible doesn’t explain why Mordecai forbid Esther to reveal her background, but we can see God's prevenient grace, a grace that is quietly at work. Some people think that Xerxes should marry a Persian woman and not a woman of another ethnicity. Would the king marry Esther if he knew she was Jewish? It was better not to take any chances, so Esther was silent about her identity.

Finally, it was Esther’s turn to appear before the King. Now the king "*was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.*" (verse 17). They married and lived in peace for several years. But a problem arose between Mordecai and the king's chief minister, a man named Haman.

Haman was an important man with a very high position in the palace, *"All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor."* (Esther 3:2). The royal officials asked Mordecai why he was disobeying the king's command, but he continued to refuse to comply. Haman became enraged and turned his anger against all the Jews of Persia.

**Reflection:**

Why do you think that Mordecai refused to bow to Haman? Can you recite the Ten Commandments from memory? What truth from the Ten Commandments did Mordecai know, which would be broken if he bowed and worshipped the king or anyone else?

Enraged, *"Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes."* (verse 6). With lying words, Haman persuaded Xerxes to destroy the Jews because *"they do not obey the king's laws;"* (verse 8). Without checking the truthfulness of Haman's words, King Xerxes sent an order to kill the Jews.

**Reflection:**

What do you think was Haman's real motive for all wanting to kill all the Jews?

When Mordecai learned of this terrible order, he wept loudly and bitterly. He told Esther to plead with the king for mercy and for the safety and deliverance of the Jews. In addition, Mordecai told Esther not to naively believe *"... that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape."* (Esther 4:13). Mordecai said she was the only person who could do anything to save her people. He asked rhetorically, *"And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"* (verse 14b).

Mordecai's request frightened Esther. First of all, she was Jewish. How long could she hide her identity from an evil man like Haman? When he found out she was Jewish, he would make sure she died with all the other Jews.

Secondly, it was a rule in Persia that no one could see the king unless he summoned them. Anyone who entered the royal court without the king's invitation or permission was put to death. The king had not summoned Esther for over 30 days. How could she go to see him without his summons?

Esther sent a message to Mordecai, telling him to gather all the Jews in Susa and fast for her for three days. During the fast, Esther thought about her people and the terrible danger they faced. She thought about the risk to her own life. At the end of the fast, she knew that saving her people was more important than saving her own life. She decided, *"I*

*will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish!"* (verse 16). She found grace in the eyes of the king and *"he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand."* Prevenient grace placed Esther as queen in the palace; she was given the right position, with the right king at the right time.

**Reflection:**

What is fasting? Why do you think Esther asked for the Jewish people to fast at this time? Look at Isaiah 58:3-7 for a clue as to what God intended for fasting to be. Plan a day of fasting with your friends to seek the face of God in a special way.

Esther's bravery was blessed: *"On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. <sup>2</sup> When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter."* (Esther 5:1-2). Esther didn't make a request to the king for her people at this time. Instead, she invited the king and Haman to a banquet where she entertained them with such kindness that the king was happy to grant her anything she requested. He asked, *"Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."* (verse 6). Esther then invited the king and Haman to come to a banquet the next day, promising to answer the king's question then. Esther then revealed Haman's evil plot and asked the king to grant her her life and spare the lives of her people.

**Reflection:**

Why do you think Esther didn't make her request right away? Would you say she was being wise? Why? Do you believe that God uses people to quietly show His grace?

**Conclusion:**

- Esther experienced isolation from her loved ones, but she knew how to make and value friendships in her new environment.
- She listened to counsel and remained faithful to God.
- Esther had to obey and recognize the truth.
- She was confronted with her true identity.
- She participated in the plan of her cousin Mordecai even though she didn't understand everything he asked her to do.
- Haman reaped what he sowed, Mordecai and Esther also reaped what they sowed.

It often happens that when people do something wrong, they get what they “deserve”. The Bible says: *“Whoever leads the upright along an evil path will fall into their own trap,...”* (Proverbs 28:10a).

Haman conspired to kill the Jews and erected a pole to impale Mordecai. This would be quite ironic, because *“...when the plot came to the king’s attention, he issued written orders that the evil scheme Haman had devised against the Jews should come back onto his own head, and that he and his sons should be impaled on poles.”* (Esther 9:25). Haman received the same punishment he had planned for Mordecai.

After Esther bravely went to the king, he gave her Haman’s estate, appointed Mordecai his second in command and Esther appointed Mordecai over Haman’s estate. (Esther 8:2, 10:3). King Xerxes also allowed the Jews to protect themselves and their property by making another proclamation: *“In every province and in every city to which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating.”* (verse 17). Jews commemorate this event even today in a celebration they call Purim.

**Questions:**

1. Content:
  1. Why did Esther live with her cousin Mordecai?
  2. What does her Persian name mean?
  3. Who was Haman?
  
2. Understanding:
  1. What did Mordecai mean when he said to Esther, *“Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape.”* (Esther 4:13)?
  2. What truth did Esther have to confront?
  
3. Connection:
  1. Can you think of someone else who showed great courage as a young shepherd by protecting his father's flocks and then by fighting a giant enemy of Israel?
  2. Explain God's prevenient grace in this story and connect it to your current life.

**Discussion:**

1. Esther's brave actions saved her people and produced good rewards. Haman's bad deeds produced swift punishment.

The Bible says that behavior works like planting seeds. If you plant tomato seeds, you will have tomatoes to eat. If you plant pumpkin seeds, you will harvest pumpkins. The type of seeds you plant ("sow") in your garden will produce the same type of fruit for you to harvest.

It works the same way with us. Hosea 8:7 says: *"They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind."*

What do you think would happen if, for a whole day, you were in a bad mood, irritable and complaining about everything? Would your family like that? How would you be treated? Do you think the atmosphere around you would be productive and peaceful? What is the atmosphere like in your home?

2. Can you remember a time when you had to do something difficult that you didn't want to do? Maybe you went to the dentist. Maybe it was traveling by bus or plane? Perhaps it was telling the truth or accepting a mistake? Why is it hard to do the right thing? Is it better to do the right thing even if it's difficult?

**Activities**

1. SECRET EXPERIMENT

- Without telling anyone, spend a whole day trying to "sow good seeds". Try to be like Jesus. Talk about pleasant things, especially of the Word of God. Be kind. Don't complain or quarrel. Say "thank you" often. At the end of the day, think about how you did. Was it a good day? Did people thank you or say nice thing to you? Did you see smiles? What changes did you notice in yourself and others? How did you see quiet grace act?

2. GOOD KINGS AND QUEENS

- As a group discuss people who are in leadership positions who set good examples for you. Do they live lives of truth? What principles govern them?

## THE GRACE OF GOD WHO SEEKS US

**Key Passage:** Hebrews 1:1-3

**Purpose:**

May people receive Jesus Christ as Savior and  
may believers turn to Him wholeheartedly to be transformed.

**Introduction:**

All the philosophies and religions of the world try to explain the fundamental question of our fragile and short life: Is there a god? If there is a god, how can we know Him? Why do people suffer, why do people die? Does it really matter what we believe, or is it just enough to be sincere in what you do believe? The letter to the Hebrews answers these questions, but its answer goes against the popular current of its time. Now days, being tolerant of everything and not being judgmental are considered primary virtues. Truth is considered to be something that is personal, it's not universal, it's not absolute. To the current generation, truth is subjective—it's what you personally believe. According to this view, if Buddhist beliefs fill and satisfy you, who are we to tell you that it's wrong? Or if you believe in Islam, or Hinduism or even Judaism, which is fashionable right now, or any other religion or combination of them, as long as you don't hurt anyone, love everyone, and live well, we can't judge you and say that what you believe is not the truth.

This is the mindset that prevails in our culture and that has taken firm root globally. A culture of "tolerance". I put tolerance in quotation marks because this tolerance does not tolerate those who don't agree with their position. And above all else, they don't tolerate anyone who says that their point of view is the only truth.

But in the Word of God, the letter to the Hebrews cuts straight to the heart of the modern mindset and affirms that God has spoken and that his Son, who is the very image of who God is, God's most accurate revelation, is supreme above all things. Christ is limitless! Christ demands complete commitment; Jesus doesn't tolerate rivals. His grace is constantly looking for ways to demonstrate itself to each and every person on earth. Therefore, to turn away from Him, to follow any other person, religion, or way of thinking is to seek judgment. Only in Jesus can we see the meaning of the trials we are going through, only to the Lord must we submit, only in him must we trust and only he can rescue us and restore us from our situation. His grace seeks us and brings us closer to His blessing.

In the New Living Translation, Hebrews 1:1-3 says: *"Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. <sup>2</sup> And now in these final days, he has*

*spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe.<sup>3</sup> The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven."*

**Hypothesis:**

Jesus Christ is God's final and supreme revelation to the world.

In other words, people may believe that they have the truth of life, but the author of Hebrews tells us, Jesus is the ultimate truth. Often children will say, "My dad is better than your dad!" Actually, my dad is the best! He's going to turn 90 soon and he still tells me every day that I'm his "baby". However, God is even better, and He says that Jesus is the best. Jesus Christ is supreme. There is no other truth, Jesus is absolute. Jesus is not a religion, Jesus Christ is a person, Jesus is God. God has done everything necessary for our well-being and he continues to seek people so that they can enjoy his blessings.

**Reflection:**

Can you think of ways in which your earthly parents looked for you in a special circumstance, or perhaps you can share a situation in which they did not look for you?

**JESUS IS SUPREME – let's look at three ways that today's key passage shows us the supremacy of Jesus**

- I. **Jesus communicates with God - (v.1-2)** This text reminds us of Genesis 1:1, where it says, *"In the beginning God. . ."*. This is a declaration that God Is. Period. The Word of God begins with this fact. God exists. We don't have to prove it. God is central. The book of Hebrews uses the word "God" 95 times. It is one of the books that speaks most about God. And to whoever says "I'm an agnostic and I'm not sure if God exists or not" and to whoever says "I'm an atheist, I don't believe in God". I say to you all, the Bible tells us that your doubts or beliefs do not affect the fact that God Is.

The Bible strongly throws the fact of God's existence as a primary reality in your face. Anyone who rejects or ignores the fact that God's existence is a primary reality does so at their own risk and destruction. However, there are people who say they don't believe in God, that doesn't take away the fact that God is still looking for them. His purpose is to reach every person with His immense love. Unbelief is not a fact of rationalization or logic, unbelief is a sin. It is a sin before God, no matter how much you think about it. Not believing in God is sin. The Bible

establishes God's existence, and that God communicates with us. This has been revealed from the beginning.

Psalm 68:8 says, *"...the earth shook, the heavens poured down rain, before God, the One of Sinai, before God, the God of Israel."* And verse 11 says: *"The Lord announces the word, and the women who proclaim it are a mighty throng."*

God has not been, nor is He silent! And we see that the scriptures reveal this to us in two sections:

- A. First, we can see that God spoke in the past; *"In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets."* (v.1)
1. "God spoke . . . at many times" — There are 39 books of the Old Testament that confirm this. We can read throughout the scriptures passage such as: *"the Lord said to Cain"*, *"God said to Noah"*, *"the Lord called Samuel"*, *"the Lord promised David"*, *"because the LORD loved him, he sent word through Nathan"*, *"the Lord said to Isaiah"*, etc. Many times, in the scriptures, God spoke to and through people, he even spoke through a donkey to try to stop Balaam from cursing Israel. God spoke many times.
  2. "God spoke . . . in various ways" — through visions given to prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, . . .; through his angels to men like Abraham, Moses, Jacob . . .; through dreams, visions, natural events, such as plagues; through miracles, through a burning bush, through thunder, earthquakes, on the mountain, in the river, in the valley, in the cloud, through parables, and in so many different ways.
  3. God speaks progressively — There is an order, there is a progression in the revelation of God, it is not stagnant, it's always revealing more to us. God's revelation is completely true, but sometimes the truth we know or see is incomplete and it must progress to its fullness. God does this a little at a time so that we can see his wisdom and mercy in everything. The Old Testament was the beginning, it's the inspired Word of God. The whole Bible is inspired by God. And everything in the Bible unfolds and points to Christ. It always points to Jesus. Like a mosaic that is being created, each piece is added to the frame until the last piece is added and the figure of Christ is clearly seen. That is what God is doing in the Old Testament. With each promise and word given the picture becomes clearer, but it's not

complete until Jesus Christ is revealed to us in the New Testament. As the history of mankind unfolds, God unfolds more of Himself.

4. So that we can know Him — If God had not revealed Himself, we would never have been able to know Him, but he took the initiative and revealed Himself to us. We can even see him in creation. God has revealed Himself to us progressively, we learn more and more about Him throughout human history.

- B. Secondly, we see that God speaks to us through his Son; *"...he has spoken to us by his Son."* (v. 2)

On the Mount of Transfiguration they heard, *"This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."* (Luke 9:35) The phrase, "in these last days" (Hebrews 1:2), refers to the day of the Messiah. At this time. This is the fulfillment of all promises and beyond this time there will be no more new revelations. This is God's supreme and ultimate revelation. We cannot invent anything else, Christ is the ultimate. From the time of Genesis when man sinned, God revealed to the world the promise of Christ. Genesis 3:15 says: *"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."* And so, throughout the Old Testament there is the promise of a Messiah who will come to earth and of the work he will do.

1. Jesus is the final revelation of God's promises — 2 Corinthians 1:20 says: *"For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God."*
2. Jesus completes God's revelation — Revelation 22:18 says that no one can add to the prophecy of this book. Jesus is the embodiment of God's revelation, having continuity with the revelation of the Old Testament. While the revelation of the Old Testament was revealed in many fragments through the prophets, in Christ it is complete. The prophets were subject to passions like ours and sinned, but Jesus was sinless. The prophecy was preparatory, but Jesus is the final fulfillment. The prophets were men. God spoke prophetically through them. But now it is through the Son, that he speaks to us daughters, as children, as family. For Jesus – the Son of God is eternal, one with the Father, God incarnate, born of a virgin, the one who took on human nature, without leaving his Divine essence, he did not sin, and he is God's supreme revelation to us.

## II. Jesus is God's agent in creation (v. 2)

- A. Jesus is the power of God in creation — Who created the world? The universe? The answer is Jesus. John 1:3 says, *“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”* And Colossians 1:15-16 says, *“The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup>For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.”*
- B. Jesus preserves creation — *“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”* (v. 3) *“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together”* Colossians 1:17. It’s as if Jesus were the glue that sustains life itself, every moment, every minute every day. Creation is his possession. He is the heir of everything. The Word say that we, as part of creation, are his. We belong to him. That is why He wants us to come to him, so that each one of us can live with him eternally. We are his, twice over because he created us, and he redeemed us. He won’t let you get lost. His prevenient grace (seeking grace) continues to search for us because he doesn’t want anyone to be lost. He *“came to seek and to save the lost.”* Luke 19:10.

## III. Jesus is the very image of God — *“The Son is the image of the invisible God.”* (Colossians 1:15a) *“God is light”* (1 John 1:5) and he sent his light into the world, *“In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.”* (John 1:4). When Christ reaches out to people, He brings light into the darkness of their situation. His blazing light immerses our hearts in His love. His love floods our hearts. Christ is the expression of the person of God. Colossians 1:19 says, *“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.”* Christ is the redeemer (savior) of humanity because of his sacrifice. The Word says in Hebrews 1:3b *“After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”*

Christ began the work of seeking people and he provided a way for salvation (this is our faith). Jesus died the death we deserved and consequently freed us from the penalty of our sin, which is death. He purified us, there was no one else who could do it, because Christ is pure. He paid the price for us so that we could be pure. Like that. And he is exalted, he reigns, he sits at the right hand of the Father, he is worthy of all honor and glory, and he has all authority. What’s more, he intercedes for us. Romans 8:34 says, *“Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ*

*Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”* That is our Lord. He is supreme. He is ultimate.

**Conclusion:** Jesus Christ is the complete revelation of God's Word. All the prophecies, all the accounts and images are about Him. Whoever talks about another kind of revelation is speaking falsely. Christianity is a relationship with Christ from beginning to end. God's prevenient grace seeks us so that we can be in his presence. Grace is a person, and that person is Jesus. We must serve him constantly, have an intimate relationship with him and let him be our Lord.

Before, we served sin, we were slaves to sin. But Jesus freed us to serve Him. He makes Himself present in our lives through his Spirit, pouring out His immense love on us. May you fall in love with your supreme king.

The one who created the world with the power of his Words, has the power to create what you need today. His grace seeks women like you, to give new life to your home, to your family, in your relationship with your boss at the office. He who breathed the breath of life into human beings, can give new life to your husband, to your struggling marriage, to your downcast mood and to your children. Not only that, but he also preserves life every moment. We said that he is like a heavenly glue. Maybe someone feels like their life is broken, falling apart, or you know someone who is feeling this way.

Today, can you believe that he can protect you, he can mend that situation, he can support you, he can fix what's broken, he can repair it perfectly? Can you believe in Him and what He can do?

And finally, God's grace that seeks us is Jesus. Jesus is the heir of creation; at the end of time everything will be resolved, and he will gather all his followers to be with him forever. But for now, He has redeemed us before God and all creation. He has already purchased us through his blood, and he invites us to give ourselves completely to Him. He is waiting for you to give yourself completely to him. He wants to occupy your life and your heart. He wants to revitalize your life, to give you a new heart, to purify you. This year, may walking in his presence be your priority. If there is any area of your life that you have not surrendered to Him, today is the day.

**Activity:**

Plan and implement an Evangelistic Worship Service.

## MARY AND ELIZABETH

**Key Verse:** Luke 1:46-47

*"And Mary said: 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ...'"*

**Key Passage:** Luke 1:39-56

**Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, as we open your Word to study the story of Mary, open our eyes to see you, our ears to hear you, and our hearts to understand the ways you are working, saving us and the world. Amen.

**Introduction:**

When Mary goes to Elizabeth, the Spirit inspires them to understand God's actions more fully in their lives and in the world. Their encouragement and mutual support leads to some of the most beautiful words of praise to the Lord in Mary's Magnificat (Mary's Song). This Bible study explores the parallel stories of Elizabeth and Mary, as told in Luke 1:39-56.

In Luke's opening chapter, not one, but two women of faith experience miraculous pregnancies. We meet Elizabeth first. She is the wife of Zechariah, a priest, and we are told that *"Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly."* (Luke 1:6). However, they were childless, until the Lord intervened.

Around the same time, unbeknownst to Elizabeth, her young relative Mary also became pregnant through the Lord's intervention. The angel Gabriel visits Mary and tells her that she is highly favored by God and explains the Lord's plan for her and the son she will give birth to. Mary is understandably amazed. The angel also tells Mary about the unexpected pregnancy of her relative Elizabeth, presumably to reassure her and/or confirm the possibility of such a miracle. To this news, she replies: *"I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled"* (Luke 1:38). Then the angel leaves and Mary immediately sets out to see Elizabeth.

**Reflection:**

The news of pregnancy must have impacted both women in a very special way. Discuss in what ways each woman may have been impacted. How does infertility affect people and, on the other hand, how do unwanted pregnancies affect people?

**Looking Deeper:**

It's unclear how well Mary and Elizabeth knew each other prior to this recorded meeting in Luke 1:39-56. Mary lived in Nazareth and Elizabeth lived near Jerusalem, where her husband worked in the temple. But whether their relationship was close or more distant, their shared experience seems to bring them together quickly. Elizabeth knows instantly and prophetically what has happened to Mary. As soon as Mary greets her, she is filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaims, "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!*" Elizabeth blesses Mary with the same blessing that Deborah, judge, and prophet, once pronounced over the brave and daring Jael (Judges 5). Mary is blessed for believe in the promises of the Lord. So, Elizabeth's words anticipate the blessing of God's saving grace through Jesus for those who hear the word of God and obey it. (Luke 11:28).

Elizabeth encourages Mary by celebrating her faith and her role as mother of Jesus.

At the same time, Elizabeth speaks of the child who is still in Mary's womb as "Lord". This is the first Christological confession (claim that Jesus is the Christ) of the Bible! Before any of his miracles or teachings (or even seeing Jesus in the flesh), Elizabeth answers the question that Jesus Himself will later ask His disciples: "*Who do you say I am?*" (Luke 9:20). Elizabeth calls him "Lord", the same word she just used to talk about God. In her womb, the child, who will grow up to become John the Baptist, jumps for joy. Then Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and is the first to point out the identity of Jesus as the Lord, the God who saves. She makes a prophetic exclamation even before she sees the Savior's miracles, before she hears his teachings, and before she sees Jesus in person (in the flesh). Elizabeth is a joyful witness of the truth.

While Elizabeth encourages Mary on her journey to be a mother, Mary prepares to be the "*the Lord's servant*" (Luke 1:38). Others who have had this Honorary title of "the Lord's servant" include Moses, Joshua, Abraham, David, and many prophets, including Hannah. (According to Jewish teaching, Hannah is considered one of the seven prophetesses of the Hebrew Bible, i.e., the Old Testament.) Mary speaks/sings in poetic verse (as many prophets do), a song reminiscent of Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. We often refer to this song/prayer as "The Magnificat" because it begins with the words, "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior*" (Luke 1:46-47 NRSV). Prayer magnifies God in all his truth. He is the Savior. In response to what the angel told her and encouraged by Elizabeth's prophetic recognition, Mary celebrates what God has done and will do "*from generation to generation*".

**Reflection:**

Can you imagine the energy and excitement that filled the room when these two women share this Spirit-filled inspiring moment together?

The Lord is at work in the lives of these women, and they name Him aloud for each other, like sparks flying back and forth. *"Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"* (Luke 1:45). These two women have faithfully believed and now help each other recognize God's action in their lives through the shared experience of pregnancy. And in that moment of encouragement, the Spirit inspires them even more to declare the lordship of Christ and to celebrate God's good works for all of God's people! These magnificent words resonate through the generations to inspire and encourage us all.

God called Mary and Elizabeth and he calls us. We often hear the different parts of this story separately. Perhaps during Advent, we hear the Magnificat sung or read, or probably more often we are likely to hear the angel's announcement to Mary and her response, *"I am the Lord's servant, . . ."* However, it's important to remember that the Magnificat does not immediately follow Mary's response to the angel's visit. Rather, it comes after she goes to see Elizabeth who, by the power of the Spirit, sees the meaning of what is happening to Mary and recognizes God's truth and celebrates Mary's faithfulness. Elizabeth's prophetic role evokes Mary's song of praise, which in turn echoes the prophecies of yesteryear. In this short passage, these two women are called to speak God's truth, and when they do, they encourage and inspire each other, other women throughout the centuries, and us today.

Although, of course, we don't know all the details of their relationship, this story invites us to imagine Mary was going to Elizabeth to offer her help and support during her pregnancy and in doing so found assurance of the truth of the words the angel said to her. We can imagine Elizabeth taking on the role of a wise mentor who sees God at work in the life of her young relative. She reminds Mary that she has been blessed, not only because she will give birth to this son, but because she is a faithful young woman. Mary receives this encouragement and has the power to declare the Word of the Lord with courage and beauty, living out her call as *"the Lord's servant."*

**Reflection:**

What truth did Mary recognize in the face of the events that happened her? Find the prophecies in Isaiah about the birth of the Messiah and share them with the group.

How can we help and support each other, identifying God's work in each other's lives, encouraging one another, and allowing each other's encouragement to inspire courage in our own faith?

**Conclusion:**

Although Mary declares herself the Lord's servant after the angel announces the birth of Jesus, the prophetic words of Elizabeth seem to further confirm this miracle and inspire her to celebrate it. Mary responds with, "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...*" This story reminds us that God's truth is immutable (it can't be changed). May God's grace save us. He teaches us that His Word is fulfilled and that He is the Savior. We see from this story that the encouragement we give to one another is a Spirit-inspired gift that we can offer to other women. It prompts us to contemplate how our encouragement to others could bring them to salvation and bring praise to the Lord.

**I. Content:**

1. Which cities were these two women from?
2. Describe the situation of each of these new pregnancies, what was so special about them?
3. What was Elizabeth's husband's name and what was his job?

**Discussion:**

1. Who in your life can you encourage or empower in their service to the Lord by naming their gifts and contributions to the kingdom?
2. From whom in your life can you seek support, guidance, and encouragement as you explore your place in the world?
3. How do you value God's saving grace in this story?
4. What surprised you in this Bible study lesson?
5. What do you hear the Spirit saying to you/your family/your church/your community?

**Activities:**

1. Share with us your testimony of how you came to follow Christ and emphasize a significant truth from God's Word that confronted you.
2. Write a short "poem" of praise to the Lord for what He has done or is going to do in your life.

(Please keep in mind that this lesson is based on Luke 1-2 with some liberties taken. My intention was to stick as closely as possible to the Scriptures as they were written.)

3. Mary and Elizabeth Game/Left and Right (Based on Luke 1-2)

Group size: 5 or more; it can be done in a large circle or in several smaller circles (if the group has more than 30 people).

Time needed: 20 minutes.

Supplies: A gift for each person (This activity is ideal for a gift exchange, you can provide gifts (or have each person bring a gift) that are economical such as small notebooks, bookmarks, a cupcake, pens, or any other economical gifts. (If each person is bringing a gift, you can put a price limit on it so that every gift has about the same value.)

Game Instructions: Have everyone take their gift and form a circle or circles, either standing or sitting. Say: "I have a special story to read to you tonight (today). You will need to pay attention to know when you should act. When I read the word RIGHT, you will pass your gift to the RIGHT. When you read the word LEFT, you will pass your gift to the LEFT. When the story ends, whichever gift you have in your possession is yours."

Notes: You will need to read the story VERY slowly and out loud (use a microphone if necessary). It helps if you emphasize the words "left" and "right" while reading. If you see that the gifts are going to end up with the same person that it started with, skip some part of the story or say, "And that's all that's left of our story!" Have some extra gifts on hand in case someone forgets to bring theirs so that no one is left out. You can also use this story to distribute various door prizes; just distribute them around the circle before you start.

The leader/reader needs a copy of the story below:

The angel Gabriel was sent by God RIGHT to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary, who was engaged to a man named Joseph, who was from the house of David.

Appearing before Mary with his hands firmly placed on his LEFT and RIGHT hips, the angel declared, "*Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.*" Mary, greatly troubled by this statement, tapped her LEFT foot with trepidation, wondering what kind of greeting this might be. The angel, feeling Mary's anxiety, said to her, "*Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his*

*father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."*

Mary looked RIGHT into the angel's eyes and asked, "How will this be?"

The angel responded by looking at her and raising his RIGHT hand to her: "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

"I am the lord's servant," Mary said. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel LEFT her. Shortly after the angel LEFT through the RIGHT door, Mary set out to pack for her journey to visit her relative Elizabeth, who, by the grace of the Lord, had become pregnant in her old age. RIGHT as Mary greeted Elizabeth, the baby jumped inside of her and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Putting her LEFT hand on Mary's womb, Elizabeth exclaimed with a loud cry: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting [LEFT your mouth], the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months, staying on the RIGHT side of the house, then she LEFT and returned home.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman empire. So, everyone LEFT what they were doing and went to register, each to their own village. Joseph and Mary LEFT the city of Nazareth in Galilee and went to Judea, to the town of Bethlehem in the city of David, to register. While they were there, it became the RIGHT time for Mary to give birth. She gave birth to her firstborn Son, wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

In nearby fields, there were shepherds who stayed RIGHT through the night to keep watch, LEFT and RIGHT, over their flocks. Assuming they were alone in the fields, the shepherds were terrified when an angel of the Lord stood RIGHT in front of them. But the angel said to them: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying [RIGHT] in a manger."

Suddenly there was a great company of the heavenly host who appeared to the LEFT and RIGHT of the angel, praising God and saying: *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests!”*

When the angels LEFT them and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, *“Let’s go [RIGHT now] to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”*

They rushed RIGHT away and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying just to the LEFT of them in the manger. After seeing him, they spread the word concerning what they had been told about this child, and everyone who heard them was amazed at what the shepherds were telling them. But Mary treasured all these things and pondered them RIGHT in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God, some went to the LEFT and others to the RIGHT to share the precious news, that the Savior had been born, the one who would make RIGHT the path of all of us.

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## A WOMAN WHO IMPACTED THE STORY OF GOD'S PEOPLE: NAOMI

**Key verse:** Ruth 1:16

*"But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."*

**Key Passage:** Ruth 1-5

### **The Book of Ruth**

The author of Ruth is unknown, but Jewish tradition attributes it to Samuel. Its title is derived from the name of its main character Ruth, the Moabite. Ruth was the great-grandmother of King David.

### **Theme:**

The intervention of God's grace brings redemption.

### **Hypothesis:**

God always takes care of His children, even when we go through trials, He will always be present and sustain us for as long as it lasts.

### **I. Testing Time:** "The Exit" (Ruth chapters 1-5)

During the time when the judges ruled, there was great famine in the land; so Elimelek and Naomi, along with their sons, Mahlon and Kilion, immigrated from Bethlehem in Judea to the country of Moab. They lived in Moab for ten years. (Ruth 1:1-4) It was a difficult time for them, because they lived as foreigners, in an idolatrous village.

Elimelek died and Naomi was left alone with her two sons, who took Moabite women for wives; Mahlon took Ruth and Kilion took Orpah. (Ruth 1:3-4)

Then both of Naomi's sons also died and Naomi was left without her sons and husband; she only had her two daughters-in-law. (Ruth 1:5)

During this time of pain and poverty, a period of "Discipleship" begins for this family. In a foreign country, in poverty and scarcity, without economic resources because they were alone, these daughters-in-law begin to be impacted by the testimony of FAITH (Personal Grace and Sustaining Grace) in Naomi's life. It was simple but effective discipleship, and the fruit was impressive.

Naomi projected around her, her trust in the Almighty and faithful God, who sustained her every day. The circumstances around her didn't lead her to give up, even though she was sometimes tempted to blame God for her misfortune (Ruth 1:20-21). Her submissive attitude in the face of adversity is comparable to that of Job (Job 1:21).

## II. Time of Decisions: "The Arrival" (Ruth 1:6-22)

When Naomi heard that the famine in Israel had passed, that the LORD had come to the aid of his people, she decided to return to her home. (Ruth 1:6-7) She urged her daughters-in-law to return to their homes in Moab and look for new husbands in the village of their family. (Ruth 1:8-10) She knew that returning to Bethlehem would be difficult, but she remained hopeful in her loving God, who had always been faithful to his people (God's Sustaining Grace).

In verses 11-13 Naomi alludes to the "levirate", which was a law that stated that if a man dies and his brother lived and worked with him, the brother of the deceased man was to marry the widow of his brother. This only applied if the dead brother had no children, and it was to prevent the loss of family property. (Deuteronomy 25:5-6) See also Genesis 38:8-11 in relation to Judah and Tamar.

After their farewells, Orpah returns to her family (Ruth 1:14), but Ruth decides to stay with Naomi (Ruth 1:16). Naomi urged Ruth to return as Orpah did, (Ruth 1:15) but the young woman remained steadfast. Her response is one of the most memorable displays of devotion and love found in the Bible.

*"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."* (Ruth 1:16) We see this same attitude of devotion between David and Jonathan (I Samuel 20:17, 41) and between Christ and his Disciples. (John 15:9, 15).

This relationship between Naomi and Ruth is a reflection of a firm religious determination. It is the result of a life transformed by the power of God, having lived 10 years with a courageous woman, determined and faithful to her convictions.

What would be the result in our families, communities, churches, countries, world be if each of us would decide to "touch the lives of those around us," living our "Journey of Grace," with determination and being committed to purpose of fulfilling Christ's Great Commission? (Matthew 28:19-20).

Ruth's daily life is the clearest evidence of Naomi's discipleship process in her daughter-in-law's life. Naomi was a woman who decidedly walked faithfully along the "Journey of

Grace." There was no temple, no pastor, no services, no special programs, no resources, not even a "Bible" to guide her; all she had were her convictions and her commitment, which she put at the service of Jehovah. Here we see the result of the strong influence of a life, which lived what it professed, without discriminating for any reason, neither race nor religion.

### III. Harvest Time: "The Results" (Ruth chapters 2-4)

Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Ruth asked Naomi for permission to go to the fields to collect leftover grain for their food and Naomi allowed her to go. (Ruth 1:22 and 2:2). Collecting leftover grain was a privilege that the law gave to the poor. (Deuteronomy 24:19-20) While Ruth was collecting grain in the field, she met Boaz, a rich man and relative of Elimelek. (Ruth 2:1) Ruth not only found grace in God's eyes, (Ruth begins to walk along the Journey of Grace), but she also found grace in the eyes of Boaz, who invited her to continue to gather grain behind the women who worked for him, whose job it was to tie the sheaves, after the harvesters passed through the field. (Ruth 2:8-9).

Boaz outlines Ruth's decision to leave her people and their gods (Ruth 2:11-12) and he makes her his wife (Ruth 4:13), following a plan that her mother-in-law, Naomi, had devised and that Ruth followed to the letter. (Ruth 3:1-5). Then Boaz continued with the plan, which he devised, to make Ruth his wife. (Ruth 4:1-10). They were all part of and had a hand in God's plan for His people. After all, God's saving grace works its purpose in the lives of everyone.

Ruth gave birth to a son, and respecting the law of "levirate", she gave him to Naomi to raise. (Ruth 4:13) Her son was named Obed and he became the grandfather of King David. (Ruth 4:16-17)

### Conclusion:

Thanks to Naomi, to her life of constant faithfulness to God, and to her good example of life (Discipleship Project: Journey of Grace), Ruth knew God personally, the one who redeemed her and used her for his purposes.

The path of the righteous is like dawn's light, which increases until the day is perfect. Let us continue to walk with determination along the Journey of Grace, encouraging those around us to choose to move from darkness into the Kingdom of God. (Colossians 1:13)

## RIZPAH

**Key Verse:** 2 Samuel 21:10

*"Rizpah daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it out for herself on a rock. From the beginning of the harvest till the rain poured down from the heavens on the bodies, she did not let the birds touch them by day or the wild animals by night."*

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord, open our eyes to the life and story of Rizpah. Take away any unclear ideologies, ideas, and identities that keep this story from coming to life during this Bible study. Show us how the power of silence can serve as a countercultural protest in our efforts to build your church. Empower each of us to understand this woman's story as we learn, grow, and are challenged in our own lives of faith. In the name of Christ, we pray! Amen.

**Key Passage:** 2 Samuel 21:1-14:**Introduction:**

A three-year famine has caused King David to "consult the Lord" about the cause of the famine. The problem, according to the Lord, was that King Saul (now deceased) had *"put the Gibeonites to death"* (2 Samuel 21:1). King David summoned the Gibeonites and asked them what he could do for them? *"How shall I make atonement so that you will bless the Lord's inheritance?"* (2 Samuel 21:3). This was with regard to blessing David, the land, and the people of Judah. The Gibeonites (who were not part of Israel, according to 2 Samuel 21:2) take advantage of the Levitical law of retributive justice (Leviticus 24:17-22) against Saul and since Saul is no longer alive, against his descendants. (2 Samuel 21:5-6)

Against this backdrop of revenge and retribution, Rizpah enters our picture. She was a concubine of the dethroned and deceased Saul, and with whom Saul had fathered two sons: Armoni and Mephibosheth. Although she's mentioned twice in general in the biblical narrative (2 Samuel 3 and 2 Samuel 21), she makes a physical appearance only once, in this story. In 2 Samuel 3, she is the subject of the accusation of Ish-Bosheth (son of Saul and Ahinoam) against Abner for sexual assault. Although it is unclear whether Abner violates Rizpah or not, the text gives voice to the vulnerability and tenuousness of her situation.

Rizpah's troubles intensify when her children, along with five of Saul's grandchildren, are ritually sacrificed in a shocking and tragic incident.

**Looking Deeper:**

The execution of Saul's seven sons (sons and grandsons) by the Gibeonites is violent in its presentation and in its proclamation. However, the violent nature of the narrative is interrupted by the actions of a grieving mother. Rizpah does for her children in death what she could not do for them in life; she protects them. Here, we witness a grieving mother performing a silent vigil over the corpses of her children, which had been left exposed on a hill (2 Samuel 21:9-10).

Rizpah couldn't stop David from taking her children, she couldn't stop the Gibeonites from killing them. So, she does the one thing she can do. The text says that she stands guard *"From the beginning of the harvest till the rain poured down from the heavens on the bodies, she did not let the birds touch them by day or the wild animals by night."* (2 Samuel 21:10). She carried out her vigil for months!

Imagine that, a mother watching her children's corpses harden, soften, swell and sink into the stench of decay... she fights with predators that have wings, claws and teeth... night and day. She is there from the spring harvest to the autumn rains, sleeping, eating, going to the bathroom right there, but protecting and being faithful.

Rizpah's silent vigil over the corpses of these children is evidence of her grief and becomes a visible response to the traumatic and tragic conditions that accompany their deaths and her powerlessness to protect them from violence. For her, the question of justice remains elusive, yet despite appearances of helplessness, her truth (and the justice it demands) shames the most powerful person of her day, King David, to act on behalf of the dead (2 Samuel 21:11). In a narrative twist of fate, her vigil becomes both a lament and a memory that attracts the audience's attention and appeal. Rizpah needs salvation.

**Reflection:**

Discuss the texts of Deuteronomy 21:23 and Galatians 3:13.

King David does the right thing for this suffering woman. The story tells us that after David recovers and buries the remains of the dead, these "seven sons" of Saul as well as the remains of King Saul and Jonathan, *"... God answered prayer in behalf of the land."* (2 Samuel 21:14). These words serve as a final commentary on this tragic story in which we see that God not only remains with us in the midst of our tragic and traumatic moments but allows us to succeed when we persevere. Saving grace is demonstrated not only in Rizpah through David's actions, but also in the King David himself, who, by God's grace, was able to see the need of Rizpah.

**Illustration:**

On a hot summer night in August 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till was dragged from his family's home in Mississippi by two white men. They took him to a barn, stripped him naked, whipped him with a pistol, shot him in the head and his lifeless body was thrown into the Tallahatchie River. Emmett Till's body was returned to his mother in Chicago and witnessing the extent of the brutality exerted on her son's swollen and unrecognizable corpse, she refused attempts to bury him quietly. Insisting on an open casket ceremony, she said, "I wanted the world to see what they did to my baby." Emmett Till's disfigured body would mark the beginning of the fight for Civil Rights in the United States.

As these mother's bear witness to the memory of their loved ones, we are called to bear witness by "being with them" as they struggle with the pain of loss. In essence, we are called to remain with the traumatized in the most uncomfortable spaces, providing the ministry of presence where there are no right answers and no simple solutions. This is not just the pastor's job or the work of pastoral care; but it's the work of the church and of those who have been called to Christian service. Seen from this perspective, it becomes not only a triumph for one woman, but a triumph for all. In Christ's words, ". . . *whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*" (Matthew 25:40). What a wonderful truth of Jesus!

**Reflection:**

In our countries many women suffer on behalf of their children or other loved ones, how can we be part of the solution, provide hope and show them Jesus? Can any sisters in the group share their testimony with us?

God draws near to the weak and the vulnerable to work his grace in their lives. Rizpah, in her pain and vulnerability, finally received mercy and the nation was restored. God's mercy pursues us until we receive salvation.

Rizpah's act could be understood as an act that results in a small display of restorative justice. Some Christian theologians read the vigil of Rizpah as a demonstration of the gift of helplessness, sprinkled with the grace of surrender. This understanding makes it possible to see their vigil as an act of resistance where restoration is a feasible outcome, in other words, it ultimately triumphs. However, in this narrative, it's important that we ask who and what is being restored. Yes, Rizpah's vigil is powerful, but not redemptive. Her grief and the trauma of the deaths of her children remain an open wound. She still needed inner healing.

Today's Rizpah can be ministered to the shadow of the cross. Traumatized people don't need to be ministered to through biblical trivia that we sometimes tell them in church.

People need healing dialogue that allows them to reach out, that touches them. The impact of this healing dialogue will help them be able to give a new and different testimony of their experience. People need the real hope that Christ offers. He is our peace. In him we find rest. He is our real comfort. How do we explain it to others if it's only words? If we think we have a lot of problems and the storm just won't stop, then the church must be prepared to serve as lifeboats of redemption rooted in the Spirit and love of Christ.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How can patience and waiting in Christ become a mechanism to promote healing within us?
2. Discuss the importance of "being with" or "staying with" a person during times of tragedy.
3. What image of God is depicted in this story? Does this picture of God make you feel comfortable or uncomfortable? Why?
4. How do you respond to the statement that "Rizpah's vigil is powerful, but not redemptive"?
5. How do you see God's saving grace in this story?
6. What surprised you in this Bible study lesson?
7. What do you hear the Spirit say to you/your family/your church/your community?

**Activities:**

- Musical chairs- Rizpah is the last to sit watching.
- Hot potato: Have your participants draw on small pieces of papers different emotions such as anguish, hopelessness, revenge, hope, rest, comfort, etc. Then have them pass the papers, one at a time, like a hot potato around the circle and whoever ends up with it opens it and gives their reaction to that emotion, or they can interpret it, or give some testimony of how it feels and what God is doing about it.

## THE WIDOW MATTERS

**Key Verse:** Luke 18:5

*" . . . yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!"*

**Key Passage:** Luke 18:1-8

**Prayer:**

Holy Father, please listen to our requests and encourage our faith. Help us to persevere and be consistent in our prayers and service to you.

**Introduction:**

According to the text, Jesus and his disciples are near the end of a long journey to Jerusalem, a walk that takes up nearly a third of Luke's gospel (9:51 - 19:44). The parable comes immediately after Jesus' speech about his return as the Son of Man (Luke 17:20-37). Unlike other parables in Luke's gospel, the parable of the persistent widow is preceded by a statement of purpose: *" . . . to show them that they should always pray and not give up."* The general plot of the parable is quite simple: a widow persistently pleads with a pagan judge to grant her justice.

Most of the details in the parable are vague; we know nothing about why or how the widow was wronged, nothing about her "adversary", and nothing about where this happened except "in a certain town" (Luke 18:2). But we learn something about the nature of the judge, he *" . . . neither feared God nor cared what people thought."* (Luke 18:2). We get the impression that the judge may not have supported the law that he was supposed to uphold, but due to the insistence of the widow, he ultimately rendered her a favorable verdict (Luke 18:5).

The parable revolves around two key themes: justice and perseverance. First, Luke does his best to highlight the judge's condition of disbelief. Why? The idea is that if an unfair judge renders a favorable verdict because of someone's perseverance, how much more will a fair judge do?

On the other hand, Jesus relates the parable expecting a reaction from the spectators. Today, we are the spectators, and we are called to continuous, constant active participation in a life of faith and in God's justice. The widow persevered, she was insistent. We need to persevere, like the persistent widow did, so that our lives reflect Jesus' vision for this earth.

**Hypothesis:** Don't Give Up — God Has Your Back

**Looking Deeper:**

**Principle #1: Persistent prayer is central to the daily life of all believers.**

The church of Luke's day, the first audience to see his writings, is experiencing persecution and longing for the second coming. The people are waiting to be vindicated, they expect God to put an end to their suffering, yet the second coming doesn't happen as quickly as they expected, and the disciples find it increasingly difficult to maintain their faith. In Luke 18:1 Jesus tells his disciples a parable that suggests that they should always pray and not give up. God will sustain them. He has their back.

**Reflection:**

Jesus initiated a new era with his arrival on earth, what is the main role of his people in this time between "times"?

Jesus reveals the purpose of the parable in verse 1, but more importantly, the parable also tells us about God's character. God is better than the judge. God is holy, God is faithful, the Spirit of God is the guarantor of our inheritance until Jesus comes.

**Reflection:**

Is the purpose of prayer only to bring our hearts in line with God's will or can it also change God's mind?

There is no doubt that persistent prayer, continued communion with God, reconfigures our hearts to God's original design and cleanses us so we can receive God's mercies. Of course, we prefer to use prayer to ask God to give us what we want, quickly. Immediately, like fast food. We look forward to instant relief. Everything instantaneously. We expect movies to prompt joy or sadness instantly. We expect technology to provide instant communication. But God doesn't promise instant answers to prayer, even if things are bad. God promises to listen, to respond, and invites us not to give up because He has our back. Don't give up.

This parable seems to teach us that God's will, which is always good, is influenced by persistent prayer. A burning and holy heart can move God's hand to action. Persistent prayer, with faith in God, makes a difference.

**Principle #2: What God can do for us is unmatched.**

The judge and the widow represent opposite ends of the social spectrum. The judge is the epitome of power, subject neither to the decisions of the jury nor to the courts of appeal, and the widow is the epitome of weakness, of the marginalized, of uselessness. (Luke

18:3). Widows were symbols of vulnerability. With no means of support, they depended on their adult children or on charity. Because of their vulnerability, scripture demands protection for widows: God has a special affection for widows, orphans, and foreigners (Deuteronomy 10:18-19). Moses charged the judges to make fair and honest decisions regardless of the petitioner's wealth or social standing (Deuteronomy 1:16-17), but we can't expect justice from this judge, who doesn't fear God or respect people.

Fearing God is a positive attribute in both the Old and New Testaments. When Jehoshaphat appointed judges over Judah, he counseled them, *"Now let the fear of the Lord be on you. Judge carefully, for with the Lord our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery."* (2 Chronicles 19:7). Luke records these words from Mary's Song that say: *"His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation."* (Luke 1:50). When Jesus tells us that this judge doesn't fear God, we know that the judge cannot be trusted.

The Greek word "entrepomenos" is translated "not respected" and has to do with shame and pride. In this passage it should be translated as "had no shame". He was a scoundrel, a person without conscience or compassion. This widow, like the man who demanded bread from his neighbor in the middle of the night (Luke 11:5-8), persisted in asking for help and had her request answered. Her combative character is unusual for a woman in a society controlled by men, but she has the strength of Scripture (the Law) and justice on her side. She lives on high moral ground, and everyone knows it.

Some say that the judge was slow to respond because he was corrupt, and he was waiting for a bribe. (Luke 18:4-5) The Bible often presents widows and orphans as deserving of much-needed protection. However, this widow is active, even aggressive, similar to some other notable widows in the Bible, such as Tamar and Ruth.

### **Reflection:**

Many times we think that if we constantly make the same request, we disrespect God because he has already listened to us and knows our need. How does this compare with the insistence of the persistent widow?

In the end, because of the woman's search for justice, the judge who doesn't fear God apparently begins to fear the widow; he even says *"so that she will not beat me down"* Luke 18:5 (ESV) to describe what she might do to him. The judge wouldn't tolerate this annoying behavior from a man, but although he does not fear people, he may remember that the widow enjoys the protection of the scriptures and the sympathy of the community.

To understand this parable, it doesn't really matter why this judge gives the woman what she wants. This judge is not an "example" of God. Instead, this parable contrasts this evil judge with our loving God who comes, not as a roaring lion but, as a triumphant lion in defense of his own. Nothing and no one in the world will act as God does on your behalf.

**Principle #3: Connection with Christ guarantees our vindication - (Luke 18:6-8).**

Won't God avenge His elect (chosen)? In these verses Jesus uses a literary tool in which he contrasts from least to greatest. For example, he makes a contrast between the human and the divine, between the corrupt judge and God the father, the unjust judge with the holy God. In other words, if the unjust judge does the right thing for this widow, how much more will the holy God do for us? Don't give up! Pray, have faith, God has your back.

The idea of the elect is found in both the Old and New Testaments. God chose Abram/Abraham's descendants, leading them into a covenant relationship that made Israel known as God's chosen people (Genesis 12:1-3; Deuteronomy 7:6). The New Testament continues this understanding. Jesus is God's chosen one, the redeeming Messiah who shares his identity with the Church. Therefore, all who are in Christ are the new people of God, the new elect (Colossians 3:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:4; 2 Timothy 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1-2; 2:9).

It wasn't that we loved him and chose to serve him, John says, it was because he loved us first. God loved us and saved us through Christ's sacrifice, to show His glory to the world. We are the youngest, he is the oldest. The focus isn't that whether this person or that person is chosen, but on Christ who dwells in us.

In verse 7 we see the phrase: ". . . *who cry out to him day and night?*" This is referring to continuous connection with Jesus, a continuous and persevering communion. Perseverance is an ongoing effort to do or achieve something despite difficulties, failure, or opposition. The passion of those who cry out to God day and night reminds us of Jesus' prayer just before his death. "*And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.*" (Luke 22:44). Christ didn't drop the cup given to him. He asks God to take the cup from him, but also prays that God's will be done. He didn't set aside the cup and the father didn't respond by taking the cup of suffering from Christ, but he redeemed it.

Christ represented all of mankind at Calvary and Christ paid the price and suffered for the sins of all men. It seems to us that it is taking a long time, but Jesus assures us that he will soon do us justice. ". . . *he will see that they get justice, and quickly.*" (v. 8a). Being connected to Christ and with God's chosen people guarantees us that he will defend us. Jesus will champion our cause.

**Reflection:**

Read Romans 12:19. What does the apostle Paul say about vengeance? Share your opinions?

The widow insisted on asking for justice until the judge granted it. However, this is not the general form of "justice." The term "justice" here speaks of acts of retribution or revenge: justice for a person who has been victimized. For example, in Acts 7:24, Stephen recounts an event in Moses' life: *"He (Moses) saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian."* (See Exodus 2:11–12). The words here for "mistreated" and "avenged" are derived from the same words we find in Luke 18:3 (see also Romans 12:19; 13:4; Hebrews 10:30; 1 Peter 2:14; Revelation 6:10).

The widow in the parable, then, seeks retribution and vindication. She wants the judge to punish the one who has wronged her unjustly.

**Reflection:**

How does this parable fit into the larger context of Luke 17-18.

In the previous passages, much of what Jesus teaches refers to the perseverance of believers before His second coming (Luke 17:22–37). As the story unfolds, hostility increases between God's people and the world.

**Reflection:**

What do you think of the phrase: "We live in the 'last days'"?

Participation in the kingdom of God inevitably results in great hardship and persecution. True believers must be willing to lose their lives for the kingdom of heaven (Luke 17:33). Christians will be wronged, and the world will do its worst. But because the widow persevered, the judge avenged her. Because true believers move forward in faith, God promises to avenge them.

As we continue to persevere in prayer, our will also conforms to God's redemptive purposes. We can be sure that God will vindicate His people. This parable teaches us that prayer is a meaningful remedy that uses the power of God and makes everything possible.

**Principle #4: Persistent faith is possible where there is persistent prayer.**

*"However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"* (Luke 18:8b) At this point in the parable, Jesus wonders if he will find faith when he returns at the end of time. Prayer increases our faith.

**Testimony:**

For more than 24 years I have been praying for two little cousins of mine, since absolutely nothing was known about their whereabouts. They lived in California, and we lived in Puerto Rico. In the 1980's they left for New York with their mother and neither their father nor the rest of the family ever heard from them again.

I've spent years quietly praying to God to let me know if they were okay. The last time I saw them, one was months old and the other was about 5 years old. With the arrival of the internet, and with patience, I kept praying and began to use the internet to aid my search. In 1997 my uncle, the boys' father passed away in Puerto Rico and we were never able to contact them to let them know.

Last Saturday, after so many years of petitioning God, I was finally able to talk to the older cousin via Zoom. I found him on Facebook. He couldn't believe it. We were so happy to have found each other. I gave him the news about his dad and although he was sad he thanked me because they had experienced a lot of uncertainty. I gave him my testimony of persevering prayer and told him that the most important thing to me was that they know that God loves them and never abandoned them. I only found them because of the grace of God. I was able to pray for him and he told me that after so many years of uncertainty he finally felt at peace.

**Conclusion:**

In rediscovering this radical message from Jesus' parable, we must recognize the widow as causing "good problems" and it calls us to remain hopeful during the darkest days. It tells us that discipleship is not an easy journey, but it reminds us that God will vindicate faithful disciples. Faith is truly a gift from God, an act of pure grace (Ephesians 2:8–9), prayer increases faith, and faith prompts us to live righteously with the help of the Spirit of God. Don't give up, God has your back. Soon he will vindicate you.

**Questions:**

- I. Content:
  1. Share three characteristics of the judge and three characteristics of the widow.
  2. What is the purpose of this parable?

II. Discussion:

1. The parable hints that there is a delay between the request of the widow and the response of the judge; do you think that is always the case or are there exceptions? Why would there be delays in the response?
2. What should be the attitude and responsibility of believers in the face of a "delay" in the answer to prayer?
3. In what ways do believers grow as they wait on Christ?
4. What does "justice" have to do with prayer, according to the parable? How can we apply this to our lives?
5. How do you see God's grace in the passage?
6. See: 1 Samuel 2:23; 2 Peter 3:8-9; Ephesians 6:18-19.

**Activities:**

- PRAYER CHAIN -

Materials: construction paper, glue, and scissors. Cut strips of construction paper to the desired size. Each participant will write their prayer request on one of the strips. Place the chain in a visible place (a Sunday school room or the room where you meet) where everyone can see it and pray constantly for the requests. Then, over time, remember to bear witness to the answered prayers as God responds to each request.



- PRAYER JOURNAL-

Materials: You will need: construction paper and plain paper, a stapler and colored markers or pens. Each participant will make a mini-journal. Use the construction paper to make the cover and have participants decorate their cover with one of the verses from the parable. Use the regular paper for the inside pages of the journal. Staple the cover and pages together. Have participants write their prayer requests on the pages, making sure to leave room to record the answers to their requests.

## DEBORAH

**Key Verse:** Judges 5: 6-7, 12

*" In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned; travelers took to winding paths. Villagers in Israel would not fight; they held back until I, Deborah, arose, until I arose, a mother in Israel. ... Wake up, wake up, Deborah! Wake up, wake up, break out in song! Arise, Barak! Take captive your captives, son of Abinoam."*

**Prayer:**

Thank you, Lord, that you love to do extraordinary things through ordinary people like us. Teach us to give ourselves faithfully to your will. Free us from any limitations that we, others, or the enemy has placed on our lives that have kept us from the great plans you have for us, so that we can wake up and rise to reflect the glory of the Lord! Amen.

**Introduction:**

The story of Deborah in the Bible shows us that the Lord calls ordinary people to do extraordinary things that can only be accomplished with his help. It also shows us that God is faithful to his promises and saves his people by his grace and love.

**Context:**

The Israelites sinned against the Lord, and he handed them over to King Jabin of Canaan. King Jabin cruelly oppressed the Israelites for 20 years until they cried out to the Lord for help. At the time, Deborah was leading Israel as judge. She sent for Barak, a commander of Israel's army, and told him that the Lord was commanding him to go fight the Army of Jabin led by Sisera. Barak said he would only go if Deborah went with him. Deborah agreed but told Barak that the honor would not be his, because the Lord would deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman. When Barak's army advances, the Lord defeats Sisera's army and Sisera flees on foot. Sisera goes to the tent of Jael, Heber's wife, because there was an alliance between King Jabin and Heber's family.

**Reflection:**

How did Deborah become a leader?

Perhaps the most surprising verse from Judges 4 is verse 6, the Bible says that Deborah sends for a man named Barak. She doesn't ask him to come, she doesn't beg. She simply sends for him with authority. Her authority didn't come from herself, from her ability, from her reputation, from her job titles, but from the God she served.

When God calls you to something, when He puts something in your heart, it doesn't matter what people think, it doesn't matter if you have the perfect skills or the words to say. Your authority comes from God. By yourself, you may not be able to do what God has called you to do, but with Him you can do all things, you don't have to be enough because He is.

**Reflection:**

What oppresses us? Over what should we take authority? Who guides our actions?

We may not be physically at war, but spiritually and emotionally we are fighting a war that we feel we simply cannot win. The war is against the self, against sin, against the influence of this world. Don't settle (Romans 12:1-2). Your authority comes from God, the enemy's attacks come from a retreating army that has already lost the war. Your victory has already been won. Trust your God, adjust your thinking, and accept the authority God has given you. Allow your mind to be "reprogrammed" by walking daily with the Spirit of God (Romans 8).

Jael invited Sisera to come in and she served him refreshments, she was assertive and determined, she saw an opportunity and she didn't let it escape. Sisera was so exhausted that he fell asleep. Jael took a hammer and drove a stake into Sisera's temple, killing him. This woman literally risked her life to save her family and her people, Israel. Then the Israelites fought King Jabin until they destroyed him. Deborah and Barak sang a song of praise and Israel had peace for 40 years.

**Looking Deeper:**

- Deborah was a prophet of God.
- She is the fourth judge mentioned in the book of Judges, and the only female judge mentioned in the Bible.
- She was a leader of Israel.
- Deborah was LappiDeborahdoth's wife.
- She became a military leader.
- She was a composer and singer who led her people in worship after victory had been won.

Deborah was a busy, hard-working woman. Judges 4:5 says, *"She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided."* Deborah was a woman of great wisdom, insight, and discernment. She also had a prophetic gift, which included knowing

the times and seasons of the Lord. She clearly heard the voice of the Lord. However, Judges 5:12 says, "*Wake up, wake up, Deborah! Wake up, wake up, break out in song! Arise, Barak! Take captive your captives, son of Abinoam.*" Deborah and Barak needed to "wake up and rise" to a new approach with God. The Lord was telling them to be alert and pay attention, to allow themselves to be led, because he was about to move in an extraordinary way.

**Reflection:**

Have you ever found yourself in an overwhelming situation? Have you ever feel ill-equipped to take on a new role?

Judges 5:7 says, "*Villagers in Israel would not fight; they held back until I, Deborah, arose, until I arose, a mother in Israel.*" Of all the things Deborah could have accurately called herself: judge, prophetess, deliverer, intercessor, worshipper, she chose to call herself mother. She was first and foremost a mother. This seems clear. But it is not clear who her children were: she was a mother "in Israel", but also a mother "over Israel" (it can be translated both ways). She saw all of Israel as her children and longed for all her children (literally and figuratively) to experience peace and security.

Notice that the verse says that no one in Israel would fight until Deborah "arose." The Israelites were defeated by 20 years of slavery. They were too tired and discouraged to fight. They needed someone to inspire them, and the Lord chose Deborah. If she had not been obedient to act according to what the Lord told her to do, nothing would have changed. She used the place of trust and authority she had been given as a judge to inspire Barak to raise an army.

Deborah was an adoring warrior. She found courage and strength in worship that prepared her to be obedient to all that the Lord asked her to do. On the other hand, her job as a prophet was to proclaim the way of the Lord to the people. If Deborah had not had God's love for her people in her heart, or the willingness to serve God in whatever way he asked, she would not have had all the experiences that led her to be used by the Lord to liberate Israel. She would not have had wisdom and insight to judge disputes. She would not have listened to the Lord's strategic battle plans as an intercessor. She would not have extended the compassionate heart of a mother beyond her own family to all of Israel. She would not have brought restoration and empowerment to an entire nation. Deborah illustrates the sanctifying grace of God. A grace that transforms our lives and directs us toward the best that God has for us and for others.

**Reflection:**

Do we sometimes think that by raising children and caring for our family we can't devote time to ministry and service to God? Share your opinions. Many people have asked me, how can you serve God in so many different capacities and still have time to care for your family and take time to rest? Do you think Deborah was able to lead a balanced life even with her multiple occupations?

Barak was told to "*Arise, . . . Take captive your captives, . . .*" (Judges 5:12). He was reluctant to go to war without Deborah, but in the end, he was obedient to raise an army and go where Deborah ordered him. This step of obedience was also necessary to fulfill the Lord's plans.

Deborah's story wouldn't be complete without acknowledging Jael, another woman who stepped forward to literally stake her claim in history. Jael was in the right place at the right time and did what she knew she had to do. Deborah called Jael "*. . . most blessed of tent-dwelling women.*" (Judges 5:24). Jael was a homemaker who was invaluable in winning the war.

I've had many experiences in my life. Before becoming a pastor, I had a very unusual job: I was a funeral director. Don't be scared sisters! Among the experiences I've had, I think being a mom has been the most beautiful. Looking back, I see the hand of the Lord in many of my experiences, at my previous job and also with my family. The sanctifying grace of the Lord was working in special ways in day to day life and with my children, preparing me for today.

Let me encourage you. Too often we are afraid of stepping out of our comfort zone and becoming all that the Lord has called us to be. It's a blessing that the Lord doesn't give us the complete plan for our lives beforehand, because most of us would respond with a resounding "No"! However, don't let the enemy get into your head and tell you that God will never use you to do great things. Don't let your fear of what others might think get in your way of being obedient to God and being used to doing extraordinary things.

The Lord prepared Deborah in the secret place of her worship, helping her grow in confidence to hear God's voice. Her intentional connection with God through worship gave her confidence in discerning when to go to war. The Lord will do the same with us. As our relationship with God deepens, God will guide us toward clarity around our calling for this season of kingdom work. There is a diversity of ministries and gifts (1 Corinthians 12:5-7). Let me confidently tell you that the list of gifts of the Spirit that the apostle Paul gives in his epistles are only examples of some of the gifts because God's grace is multifaceted (1 Peter 4:10-11). There are as many gifts as there are needs and God's grace

supplies those gifts. He said, *"My grace is sufficient for you"* (2 Corinthians 12:9), God supplies what we need. God uses many ways to confirm it. Therefore, as followers of Christ, we embark on an exciting journey of service to the Lord here on earth.

**Conclusion:**

Ladies, it's time for you to be bold and courageous and do the unique and amazing things God is calling you to do. His Spirit will help you. Wherever the Lord has placed you, will you accept the challenge to be a light in the darkness for the Kingdom of God? Will you encourage others to do it too? Wake up and arise to reflect the glory of God wherever you go! You carry the hope that this world needs, the hope of Jesus Christ. An dying and desperate world is waiting for you to be obedient. Believe and trust that God has the best plan for you and follow Him.

**Questions:**

- I. Content
  1. What did Deborah do? Was Deborah married with children?
  2. What was her job and what does that mean?
  
- II. Discussion
  1. What kind of prayer habits have been helpful to you as you seek to draw closer to God?
  2. Describe a time when God helped clarify something you were called to do.
  3. What surprised you in this Bible study lesson?
  4. Where do you see sanctifying grace in this story? In your own story?
  5. What do you hear the Spirit say to you/your family/your church/your community?
  6. What roles do women play inside and outside the Church today?

**Activities:**

- Search the Bible for other women prophets and talk about what you learn. Describe women leaders in today's Church.
  
- If you have a refreshment time, use these examples as possible entrées: Deborah's palm tree (use fruit that you can get easily)



## PHOEBE

**Key Verse:** Romans 16:1-2

*"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me."*

**Context:**

Paul sends this letter to the believers in Rome from Corinth, an important commercial city in Greece. Strategically located between Asia and Europe, Corinth was the "third largest city" of the entire Roman Empire and had a reputation for two things; money and debauchery. One of the main features of the city was the temple of the goddess Aphrodite, with its hundreds of prostitutes who worked in the sanctuary. The city was frequented by merchants, sailors, and travelers from various pagan cultures, which provided a mixture of every imaginable kind of immorality. In ancient plays, the Corinthians were always pictured as drunkards and, despite its wealth and influence, Corinth was a dark place spiritually. Cenchreae (where Phoebe was from) was one of the two ports of this mighty city, with all the trouble you could associate with a port, but apparently, with a lively Christian congregation and a woman whose praise from Paul has lasted for millennia.

Priscilla and Aquila, who accompanied the apostle Paul on one of his missionary journeys, were also from this region, but at the time that this epistle was written, the couple had returned to Rome. In fact, by the greeting Paul sends them (Romans 16:3-5), we can be sure that their house was one of the home churches where the believers in Rome met. It is unknown whether Priscilla and Aquila knew Phoebe personally, although it's possible that they may have met while living in Corinth.

The name Phoebe means "pure, radiant, bright", but nowadays the name Phoebe is almost never used. Do you know someone named Phoebe? I had an aunt named Phoebe; she was a special woman. A creative servant and a very sweet woman, she was also a music prodigy and piano teacher. Remember Phoebe Palmer, the Nazarene woman who was a great leader of the holiness movement during America's holiness revival in the 19th century?

**Reflection:**

Why was Phoebe commended?

Phoebe was described as “διακονος” of the “ekklēsia” in Cenchreae. Ekklēsia is a Greek word which translates to Church or congregation. The Greek word διακονος means servant: one who renders service and helps others; or deacon: a trusted officer of helps and service in the local church: or messenger: one who runs errands. A deaconess could also teach in the church, although she would only be able to teach women.

**Reflection:**

Different traditions of the modern church understand the word "deacon" differently. What does it mean to you?

It is clear in the New Testament that there were women in the church known as deaconesses. Reference is made to women whose duty it was to teach other women (Titus 2:3-5). They were generally elderly and experienced widows, reputable and qualified to guide and instruct the young and inexperienced (1 Timothy 5:9-10).

**Reflection:**

Who else among his acquaintances does Paul praise like this and what conclusions can we draw about Phoebe from the fact that he praises her like this? (You can check the following texts: Philippians 2:25-30, Colossians 4:7-9, Colossians 4:10.) Why does Paul praise people in his letters?

Women were separated from men, for the most part, and were not allowed to mix in society with men, like we do now. Therefore, it became necessary to appoint elderly and experienced women to instruct the young women, visit the sick, care for them and perform the services that male deacons could not perform. By understanding a little more about the position of the deaconess in the early church, we can conclude that Phoebe was probably an older woman, a mother, and also a widow.

Paul entrusted a very important task to Phoebe and that is why he praises her. Phoebe, by the grace of God, would be in charge of delivering the Epistle to the Romans in all the house churches in Rome. She had the responsibility of a person called to be a "deacon" and whose work took her to Rome. She was a woman transformed by God's grace (sanctifying grace) and was ready for the mission. It turns out that the bearer of a letter would normally be the one to read it to the recipients and explain its contents. Therefore, the first spokesperson of the most important letter of the apostle Paul was an ordained businesswoman! She was to interpret Paul's theology to others since she had been in direct contact with the writer.

**Reflection:**

What would Phoebe's spiritual life look like for her to have been chosen for such a

responsibility? What do you think of the phrase “led by the Spirit” from Romans 8:14? What do you think of women’s ministry?

Paul refers to Phoebe as a "sister." This is not a blood relationship, but a spiritual one. I have had the privilege of visiting many churches both in my country and in other parts of the world, and the only thing I find, regardless of the culture, is that I always feel at home. Music may vary, preaching style may vary, the order of service may vary, but the fellowship remains the same. And very often our connection between other believers is closer than our connection with relatives. Why? Because our common bond is Jesus Christ. We are joint heirs with Jesus and children of the heavenly Father. That makes us brothers and sisters.

Paul entrusted his sister Phoebe with a key letter in which the next phase of his ministry depended. The wording of Romans 16:1–3 makes it clear that she fulfilled the usual role of postman and, as such, would have had an important role in answering questions and making sure the letter was understood correctly, so a better title might be 'authorized interpreter'. So, Phoebe, by her presence, actually embodies the message of the letter. By addressing the Christians of Rome as one, Paul constitutes them as a church, and in his response to Phoebe he gives them the opportunity to realize his invitation to live in unity in Christ. In my opinion, all of this makes it difficult, if not impossible, to imagine Paul as someone who did not allow women to teach or exercise authority.

Phoebe is a controversial figure; she presents a theological problem for those who want to argue that the church should ban all women from leadership. Despite some of the "challenging passages" Paul wrote about women and their roles, here is a woman he praises in a leadership role. How do we make sense of that? Is Paul a hypocrite?

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### **What does Phoebe have to do with me?**

Too often we dismiss our “older sisters” and when they offer advice, we say, "What do you know about this? We live in different times." Let’s not allow our older sisters to be treated like this. How sad! Our older sisters have a lot to contribute. Let's open our ears and listen to what they have to say. They can still be active in serving God in various ways.

As a woman, do you want to be used by God in your church and community? Are you an older woman, like Phoebe, and have the desire to be needed? Look for ways you can help. Find out what ministries are needed in your church that you can be part of. Older women are often the greatest contributors when it comes to counseling, teaching, praying, and much more.

As an “older sister” you can visit other women in their homes, hospitals, and nursing homes.

Do you like to cook? You could provide a meal to a woman who has just had a baby or is recovering from an injury or illness.

Do you love children? Maybe there's a Sunday school class that needs a teacher. Or there may be a young mother who needs some "time for me" or a date night with her husband who would appreciate reliable help.

Have you noticed the tragic increase in divorces, even among Christians? Maybe it's time for you to start a Bible study for younger wives to teach them how to love and respect their husbands and avoid becoming just one more statistic.

Do you live in a university community? You can reach out to college students who may feel a little homesick and offer them personalized support, a home cooked meal, time away from campus life, etc.

Are you confined to your home? Then you can write articles, make videos, and pray. I didn't leave this for last because it's the least important, but because it's the most important.

**Conclusion:**

Sanctifying grace guides us and helps us to walk a life of complete surrender to God. His grace invites us to a life of growth and constant service to Him. God calls and uses women. So, get closer. Younger women reach out to older women for help and advice. Older women, don't accumulate all the experience that God has given you, share it. Your experiences are a gift. Give it to those around you. Be like Phoebe: Be available to do whatever God asks, no matter how big or small. God isn't looking for talent. The only skill you need to serve him is availability.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How would you describe Phoebe and which of her qualities inspires or challenges you personally?
2. Who has Phoebe been in your life? In your congregation?
3. How does the story of Phoebe encourage you in your own story of faith?
4. What surprised you in this Bible study lesson?
5. What do you hear the Spirit say to you, to your family, to your church, to your community?

**Activities:**

1. PRAYER

Do you have a prayer list? Many of those on the front lines of gospel work depend on those who, like Phoebe, pray for them. See Ephesians 6:18-20. How about making a list of six friends and/or loved ones whom you most desire to find salvation and for whom you will pray regularly?

MY SIX REQUESTS

- 1 .....
- 2 .....
- 3 .....
- 4 .....
- 5 .....
- 6 .....

Look up Jeremiah 33:3; John 14:13-14; 1 John 3:18-24 and 1 John 5:14-15.

2. BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION:

Find a Bible passage in Romans and take turns reading a short section, then briefly explain the contents, as Phoebe would have done with the original letter. How does your personality and knowledge influence your explanation of the Bible passage?

## ABIGAIL

**Key Verse:** Proverbs 25:11 (EHV)

*“A word spoken at the right time is like golden apples in silver settings.”*

**Key Passage:** 1 Samuel 25

### **Introduction:**

Abigail was a wise woman; she was a strong and confident woman. A woman who treated people with respect, even in bad circumstances, a wife whose clear thinking and quick actions saved many lives, a woman who earned a good reputation as a peacemaker. Her story shows us the sanctifying grace of God at work in this woman's life.

The name Abigail means “cause of joy”. Scripture does not say why Abigail, a beautiful and intelligent woman, would marry a surly (rude/bad-tempered) and mean man like Nabal. They had a mismatched marriage, perhaps an arranged marriage in which Abigail had little to say about it. Commentators suggest that this could very well be the case because Nabal was a very wealthy man (1 Samuel 25:2) and most likely, according to the customs of the time, the marriage was arranged by her family. Nonetheless, Abigail dealt with her unhappy marriage by behaving faithfully and respectfully, avoiding confrontation with her husband, and speaking wisely and persuasively.

### **Context:**

At the time of sheep shearing, it was customary for the owner to organize a celebration for his family and servants, so Nabal made preparations for his family and his shearers to celebrate (verse 11). David and his 600 men lived in the hills, hiding from Saul. King Saul feared that David would take away his kingdom, so he tried repeatedly to kill David. While living in the hills, David's men unofficially protected Nabal's shepherds and flocks of sheep from thieves and wild animals. During the shearing celebration, David sent messengers to Nabal to ask for some food for his men for protecting Nabal's flocks and servants, a courtesy that a generous man would have gladly given.

Nabal was very rich. He had a beautiful wife, thousands of sheep and goats, a large piece of property, and many servants. But he was not a happy man. His name means "fool," and that's how Nabal lived his life: foolishly. He had a bad reputation for being mean and a drunk. His servants and his wife, Abigail, knew he was a real scoundrel, he was very difficult to live and work with.

Abigail had to endure a terrible marriage, but she stayed with her husband until he died. Understanding her role to be a supportive wife, she acted in the best interest of her husband and his business, even when she disagreed with him.

Abigail was wise and the servants talked to her when they were afraid to talk to Nabal. This suggests to us that she was patient, merciful and compassionate. The life of a servant was never easy, but it suddenly became disastrous when Nabal insulted David, the future king of Israel. With the lives of Nabal, his family and his servants at stake, Abigail's swift action and respectful words averted tragedy.

David and his band of fugitive men were hiding from King Saul in the hills near Nabal's pastures. David's men guarded Nabal's sheep and shepherds. With little more to do than avoid Saul, David's men protected Nabal's flocks from bandits and wild animals. This was highly appreciated by the shepherds, as they explained to Abigail: *"Yet these men were very good to us. They did not mistreat us, and the whole time we were out in the fields near them nothing was missing. Night and day they were a wall around us the whole time we were herding our sheep near them."* (1 Samuel 25:15-16).

When it was time to shear the sheep, Nabal prepared enough food for the customary celebration. David, knowing the tradition and having cared for Nabal's flocks while they were in the pastures, sent a reasonable request to Nabal: *"Now I hear that it is sheep-shearing time. When your shepherds were with us, we did not mistreat them, and the whole time they were at Carmel nothing of theirs was missing. Ask your own servants and they will tell you. Therefore be favorable toward my men, since we come at a festive time. Please give your servants and your son David whatever you can find for them."* (1 Samuel 25:7-8).

Nabal responded to the request with an insult: *"Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse?"* (verse 10). He accused David of being a runaway slave, someone of no importance, and certainly not a man with whom he would share his food. He probably knew that King Saul was after David and his men. Nabal likely sided with King Saul and that influenced his harsh response to David. David was very angry at Nabal's rudeness. He and his men tied on their swords and set off, intending not to leave any of Nabal's men alive. *"It's been useless—all my watching over this fellow's property in the wilderness so that nothing of his was missing. He has paid me back evil for good"* (verse 21).

One of the servants told Abigail that David's messengers had visited Nabal and Nabal insulted them and David. Abigail quickly prepared an impressive gift of food, loaded it onto donkeys, and headed toward the approaching troops. Seeing David, Abigail *". . . quickly got off her donkey and bowed down before David with her face to the ground."*

(verse 23). In this humble and respectful way, she appealed to David's honor so that he would not allow a villain like Nabal to cause David to take revenge on the whole house. Carefully choosing her words, Abigail presented the generous gift to David's men. She respectfully told David that his reputation as the future ruler of Israel should not be tainted by the shedding of innocent blood in the matter concerning Nabal.

Abigail calmed David's anger down. He thanked her for preventing him from taking revenge on Nabal. David said that Abigail's clear thinking and courage were a blessing to him and to all of Israel: *"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands."* (verses 32-33).

In a surprising turn of events, Nabal died of a heart attack ten days later, and David made Abigail his wife. God rewarded Abigail's kind conduct by freeing her from Nabal and blessing her with a happier future.

Knowing God's word, Abigail made good decisions for her husband, for David, for the servants, and ultimately for herself. She didn't automatically become an enemy of David, even though her husband did. She was a wife who submitted to her husband, but she also recognized when her husband was wrong, and she went to rectify the situation.

#### **Conclusion:**

- Abigail was honorable and wise
- She was married to a foolish man, but she remained sensible.
- She fought for the good of her home, including the most vulnerable.

There are many lessons we can learn from the story of Abigail, Nabal and David. An important lesson has to do with the way Abigail dealt with difficult people and situations. She didn't get angry or lose her temper. She didn't fight with her husband. She tried to make things better. Knowing God's word, Abigail made good choices for her husband, for David, for the servants, and ultimately for herself. God rewarded Abigail for respectfully working with other people. God's sanctifying grace helped this woman to be an agent of change in a difficult situation.

#### **Questions:**

- I. Content:
  1. If you saw David and his men riding to Nabal's place, what would they be wearing (because they are fighting men)?
  2. What celebration was taking place at the home of Nabal?

- II. Understanding:
1. What would have happened to Nabal and his men if Abigail had not acted so quickly and wisely?
  2. How did God's grace work in the lives of David and his men?
- III. Connections:
1. What wife in the Bible do you remember did not wisely advise her husband, there are several?

**Discussions:**

1. Discuss words, actions, and reactions that cause angry. Demonstrate a tone of voice, a facial expression, a body posture that can provoke anger. Demonstrate words and body language that can calm an angry situation. Sometimes the right words and actions will calm down an angry person. However, even when you do your best, you won't always be able to be a peacemaker like Abigail. But if you're careful, you won't make a bad situation worse.
2. Do you think Abigail sent enough food for 600 men? (See 1 Samuel 25:18.) How many men would share each loaf of bread? How would the sheep have been cooked? Why were raisins and figs a good energy food for David's troops? What would you have cooked?
3. Is it important to have a good reputation? Nabal had a bad reputation because he didn't think carefully about what he said and how he treated people. Abigail had a good reputation. She was kind and the type of person everyone wants to be around. How did Abigail show kindness? How did Nabal treat people rudely?

**Activity:** Descriptive Words

Choose two words you would like people to use when describing you and write each one on a card. Then, have the leader mix the cards up and distribute them randomly among your group of women. What do you think about the words on the cards that you received? Think about the words on your cards and ask yourself: "Do my words and actions agree with the words I would like people to use when describing me?"

For example: if you want others to think of you as a peacemaker, ask yourself: "Do my words and actions calm anger and bring peace to tense situations?" If not, consider the changes you need to make so that others will think of you as a peacemaker.

Then pray for God's help as you make these changes.

You can also do the same activity but choose two words that you wouldn't want people to use when describing you. Then follow the same steps as before.

## ON THE PATH OF POSSIBILITIES

**Key Passage:** Numbers 13-14:9

**Introduction:**

Grace has only one path and it's one way - it's the path of possibility. People try to go down the path of possibility and from time to time they end up on the path of impossibility. How long do we stay on the path of impossibility compared to the path of possibility? These questions force us to think about and evaluate our life's journey. Consider what Nelson Mandela said: "It always seems impossible until it's done". We are buying the cheap message of the world that tells us: it's impossible. God will heal so-and-so: it's impossible; I can afford my house: it's impossible; I can rest: it's impossible; I can have peace: it's impossible; my marriage is mended: it's impossible; I will stop sinning: it's impossible. But wait . . . the word impossible isn't really a fact, it's just an idea! Jesus said in Luke 18:27, "*What is impossible with man is possible with God.*" And in Mark 9:23 Jesus said: "*Everything is possible for one who believes.*" Let's look at the story of the 12 spies sent by Moses to spy out the land of Canaan as we delve into this topic: "On the Path of Possibilities".

**Hypothesis:**

**GOD IS GREATER THAN ANY OBSTACLE YOU MAY FACE ALONG THE WAY**

On which path are we going to travel, on the path of impossibilities or on the path of possibilities? What can we learn from this story of the 12 spies?

- I. **Background** - The children of Israel were camped in the wilderness of Paran, not far from the land of Canaan. God told Moses to send a leader from each tribe to explore the land of Canaan. (Numbers 13:2 and Deuteronomy 1:22). Ezekiel 20:6 tells us that God had already made provision for Israel, and it was the most beautiful of all lands. In other words, God already knew that the land was good, but he wanted the Israelites to check it out for themselves. So a leader was chosen from each tribe of Israel, 12 men were going to go check out the land with a very specific mission to verify what the people were like, what the soil was like - fertile or poor, what the cities were like - unwallled or fortified, and how good the fruit that was produced there was? After 40 days, the spies returned and said that Canaan was a wonderful land flowing with milk and honey, but ten of the spies spoke words of rebellion and fear: "*We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are. — The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size.*" (Numbers 13:31-32) They contaminated

the rest of the people by spreading a bad report. But the Bible tells us that Joshua and Caleb had a very different opinion. (Numbers 13:30, 14:6-8). However, the majority prevailed, and Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years while that entire generation died. Paul wrote: *“These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.”* 1 Corinthians 10:11.

**II. Two groups with different attitudes** — I talked about two paths in our lives, and we can see that the spies had two different attitudes. A PATH OF POSSIBILITY AND A PATH OF IMPOSSIBILITY.

- A. Inferiority complex or low self-esteem. Numbers 13:33 tells us that they saw themselves as small, like grasshoppers, insects that would be crushed by big giants. Some Christians are so afraid of failure that they become overly cautious and disinterested. They follow such a cautious life policy that they either hoard their time or are so jealous of their time, talents, and money that, in the long run, they don't serve God. Their motto is: "To avoid failing, don't try!" On the other hand, those who are willing to risk making mistakes are the ones who ultimately accomplish great things for the Lord. Our motto should be: *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”* (Philippians 4:13 NKJV)
- B. Fear. In Numbers 14:9 Joshua indicates that they were afraid. Fear naturally follows doubt and low self-esteem. Fear can paralyze us from doing what we should do. Fear can include . . . the fear of failure, fear of being hurt, fear of the unknown, fear of the new, fear of the different. DO NOT be afraid. Their faith was activated when the word of God was spoken to them. Fear is overcome by listening to God, humanity's problems come when they don't listen to God. Listen oh, Israel. Joshua said, *“If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them”* Numbers 14:8-9. And in 2 Timothy 1:7 we read: *“For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline”*.
- C. A pessimistic or negative spirit. Negativism set in as they tried to assess their future. A Negative spirit is one of the devil's most powerful tools. The devil could not bear the thought of Israel trusting God and moving forward by faith

to receive the land that God had promised. They focused on the pessimism of men rather than on the positives of God's promises. Don't focus on the "but" of human beings, but on God's "in spite of." There were giants, but "in spite of" them, God promised the land to Israel. There were fortified cities, but "in spite of" the walls, the word of God was greater. The towns seemed strong, the people were giants, the people are going to swallow us. But, if you want to stay on the path of possibility, remember that the prophet Jeremiah said, "*But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior.*" (Jeremiah 20:11) ". . . do not be afraid of the people of this land, . . ." (Numbers 14:9) That was a blunt statement. That is the faith they were supposed to have. The God who brought them out from the clutches of the most powerful nation, Egypt, was going to deliver them to a land flowing with milk and honey. Choose to believe.

- D. Emotional manipulation. The 10 spies manipulated the emotions of others by spreading a bad report (gossiping). Numbers 14:1-2 Tell us: "*That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness!"*" This teaches us that when gossip enters, emotions are affected and reason and sound doctrine fly out the window. On the other hand, we see that Joshua and Caleb were tried to bring sanity and balance to the conversation, but the people talked about stoning them (Numbers 14:10). They no longer saw reason. And that's what emotions can do if we let them, they can close people's minds to truth and mercy and lock them in their own opinion. People do not see God's grace and power, but they do see evil and disaster.
- E. Unbelief. The attitude of the 10 spies and the Israelites can be summed up as unbelief. Hebrews 3:17-19 says: "*And with whom was he [God] angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.*" Their lack of faith paralyzed them from going and taking the land that God was giving them. Unbelief paralyzes people. They saw the Red Sea open, and they were the ones who passed through on dry ground. They knew the power of God. Once there was an atheist professor teaching at a university who told his students that he didn't believe in the miracle that the Red Sea divided in two for the people of Israel to pass through because the place where they crossed, during that time in history, was very flat the water was only 6 inches deep. A young man in the class started saying, "Hallelujah!

Thank you, God for that great miracle!” The teacher said, “But what miracle? I just told you that there was almost no water in the Red Sea at that time.” And the young man said, “Thank you, God for drowning Pharaoh's army in just 6 inches of water.” The Israelites, along with the spies, should have trusted Jehovah. In fact, later in the story when the Israelites do go to battle, Numbers 31:49 tells us: “. . . *Your servants have counted the soldiers under our command, and not one is missing*”. We also have God on our side. Romans 8:31 says: “*What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?*” When the Israelites were trapped, God made a way through the sea for them, when they were thirsty God miraculously provided them with water and when they were hungry God opened the heavens and it rained manna, bread from heaven. Unbelief now wanted to rob them of the opportunity to receive all that God had planned for them.

- F. Rebellion. The result? The Israelites followed the path that led them to rebellion. They bought the message the world delivered to them, and they disobeyed God. They grumbled, saying: “*Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?*” (Numbers 14:3-4) They thought it would be better return to the land of their slavery. But the result of their rebellion and grumbling brought severe consequences. In Numbers 14:28-32 God said to Moses and Aaron; “*So tell them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Lord, I will do to you the very thing I heard you say: In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. But as for you, your bodies will fall in this wilderness.’*” So, the Israelites were going to wander for 40 years in the desert, but the 10 spies who spread the bad report were struck down and died of a plague.

III. Now let us contrast the path of the possible with that of the impossible – in other words, the attitude of Joshua and Caleb – confidence in God's grace contrasted with the unbelief of the other ten spies, for whom God's way seemed impossible.

- A. They were brave. Joshua and Caleb wanted to take the land where the giants lived, because it was the land God promised them. They were confident in the power of God that they would succeed because “*the Lord is with us*” Numbers

14:8-9. And when Moses retires, he leaves the leadership of the people to Joshua. The first thing he says to Joshua is *“Be strong and courageous”* (Deuteronomy 31:7) and he repeats this phrase to Joshua again and again. The two spies were brave because God was with them. Today God is calling people to be brave as He travels along the path with them. We need to bravely face the giants (suffering, hardships, or struggles . . .) in our lives. We must stop whining and complaining about the difficulties we have and face them with courage.

- B. Positive and optimistic attitude. We must be willing and capable. Where 2 saw great fruit, 10 saw walls, where 2 saw good land, 10 saw giants.

There was once a farmer who had two mules and he had to plow his land. One mule was called "Willing" and the other "Capable". Well, "Willing" was willing, but she was not capable. On the other hand, "Capable" was capable, but unwilling. Capable thought Willing should have been more capable but she was unable to be. And Willing thought Capable should have been more willing, but she wasn't willing to be. And everything would have been great if only Willing had been more capable and Capable more willing, but neither Willing nor Capable were willing or capable, so as imagined the farmer was left with his land unplowed.

- C. Influencers of good. I have a friend that always says, "I have faith, but...?" Joshua and Caleb were a good influence, and their influence continues to this day. We need people who are governed by ambition, money, or emotion. We need people who depend on God and His word. People that have faith without a "but".
- D. Faith. Joshua and Caleb's greatest quality was their faith (Numbers 13:30 and 14:7-8). They were loyal to God because of what he had done in the past and they believed that God was going to do what he promised in the present and in the future. Their faithfulness and obedience were rewarded: *“Because they have not followed me wholeheartedly, not one of those who were twenty years old or more when they came up out of Egypt will see the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—not one except Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua son of Nun, for they followed the Lord wholeheartedly.”* Numbers 32:11-12. We too need to believe God's Word. Psalm 19:7-11 says that in keeping God's law, decrees, commands, statutes, precepts, there is great reward.

We need a firm faith in the Lord. God calls us to a focus on His word, God calls us to see His power and not our own resources. God calls us to join the chorus of believers and not the doubters. God calls us to trust his processes. **God calls us to let him be the one to explore the earth for you.** God calls us to listen to his voice and close our ears to the message that the world offers. God calls us to remember all that He has done for us.

**IV. Let's Look at Jesus in This Story And In Our Story** – The passage we've read also sheds light on Jesus and the gospel. The Israelites had received good news, that God would be with them and take them to the promised land that they may “enter his rest”. (This is also referred to by the author of Hebrews.) But because of their unbelief they didn't get to enter. Hebrews says that this offer from God is active. Hebrews 4:9 says: *“There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God;”*. This “rest” is no longer on a physical earth, but this seemingly impossible rest is possible in Christ Jesus. **He recognized the land first and defeated the real enemy.** He, by his obedience, defeated sin by dying on the cross. He conquered the giant of death through his own death and resurrection. He has already entered the promised land and Hebrews 10:12 says that he is seated at the right hand of God. His work is complete so that in our lives what seemed impossible is now possible. Now we need to have the faith that the Israelites did not have. Both Psalms 95:7-8 and Hebrews 4:7 offer us the same warning: *“If you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”*

**Conclusion: On which path are you?**

How often do we say: Yes God, but . . . I need to learn more from the Bible first; “Yes God, but . . . I don't know how people are going to treat me; Yes God, but . . . I don't have strength; Yes God, but . . . you don't know how things are at home; Yes God, but . . . it was one thing in the Bible and it's another in our reality; Yes God, but . . . you don't know what the people around me are like; etc.

Keep the faith. God is powerful enough to intervene in any situation, powerful enough to save you, to save your children, to heal you, to heal your family, to heal your finances, to heal the church, to save neighbors and friends and even enemies. God can. For God everything is possible. Jesus has done everything necessary for salvation and redemption. By his grace. We don't have the solution to everything. Let's not be like Israel who didn't trust God to take them safely into the promised land. As long as we follow the path of his grace, he'll walk with us. I ask God that we'll see Christ as the mighty giant who defeats all the strongholds that threaten our lives. Not only so that we have the forgiveness of sins, but so that we'll be forever united in harmony with him. Is there anything in your life that

overwhelms and paralyzes you? Something that looks huge in front of you? What challenge are you facing, are you traveling the path of possibilities, with Jesus?

**Hypothesis:**

**GOD IS GREATER THAN ANY OBSTACLE YOU FACE ALONG THE WAY**

Don't let anything stop you or rob you of the beauty that God has for you. No giant can steal from you what has been promised to you.

*“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:37-39*

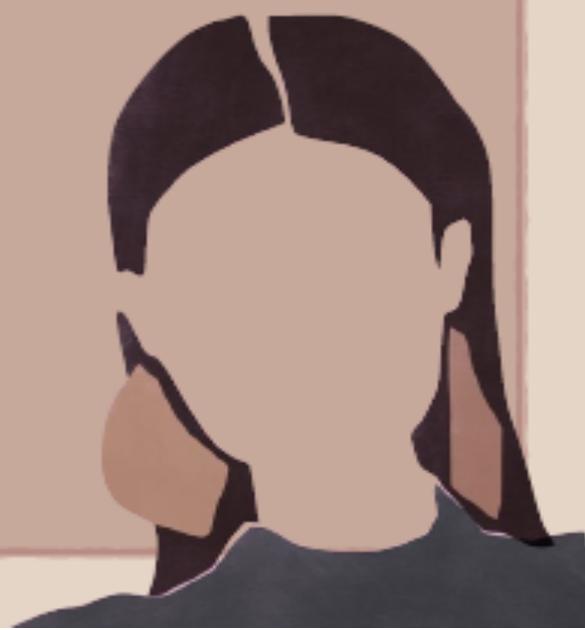
# Annex

The following is artwork for you to use in  
your Women's Ministry program

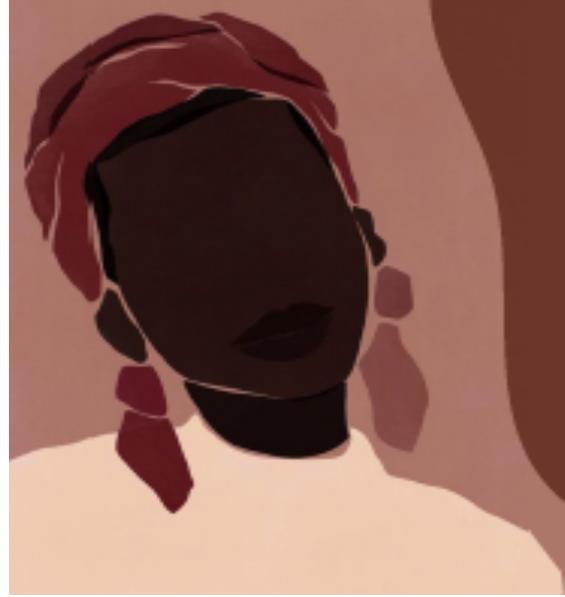


# INTRODUCCIÓN

# PROPOSICIÓN



# CONCLUSIÓN



# PALABRA CLAVE

