

women of god

introduction

FACILITATOR: *Reona Joly gives us an insight into four female characters in the Bible. These Bible studies are a little different to the norm and often give a different perspective; asking some tricky questions to which there are no simple answers. It's not often that we get the chance to look only at some of the women in the Bible so make the most of the opportunity and you'll find the studies to be very rewarding.*

1: rahab: stepping out in trust

welcome

CELL: What sort of impression do you feel you give to others?

worship

FACILITATOR: *For this next 'four-pack' we are going to complement our theme of four women in the Bible by using our Worship section to look at four songs or prayers in the Bible by women. Today we will start with Miriam and Moses' song in Exodus 15. Use this as a basis for your own worship to God.*

word

FACILITATOR: *As a group, read the following scriptures and then lead this to a time of discussion and answering the questions.*

CELL: Read Joshua 2; 6:16-25.

FACILITATOR: *Rahab, a prostitute, lives in Jericho. Her house is built right into the city wall and, as people come and go, she hears all kinds of stories - news, gossip and information. Her house is a 'passing through' place and she interacts with all sorts of people, cultures, races and religions.*

CELL: Are you interested in meeting and interacting with a wide variety of people or do you move in a narrow circle with those of the same race, same values and same beliefs?

FACILITATOR: *Rahab has heard the stories of what God has done for Israel. When the spies knock on her door and ask for help her choice is so difficult: to help means she must betray her own people.*

Ask the group...Were the spies 'divinely led' to Rahab's door, or was it a coincidence, or expediency?

CELL: Let's discuss it on a more personal level...

-If following God meant for you the betrayal or disowning of your own people would you display Rahab's courage?

-Would you risk your own reputation by befriending those with questionable lifestyles and practices?

-Are there times when, like the spies, we need to ask for help rather than always offering it (remember Jesus first asked the Samaritan women for a drink)?

Rahab used her position, her knowledge, her house and her influence to save the spies— but she lied.

-Are there times when it is permissible to be less than truthful?

FACILITATOR: *In return for her help, she is given a promise that if a red cord is visible on the wall of her house, she and all her family will be spared. The red cord marks out the 'red light' area in major world cities today, but sexuality is not the issue here. Rahab heard the word of God from Israelite spies and her response was "let it be as you say". She is honored for her faith (Heb. 11:31); she and her family are saved; she becomes a vital part of the Israelite nation as well as great, great grandmother to David and an ancestor of Jesus (Matt. 1:5). Our past need never disqualify us from going for God.*

CELL: Without mentioning names, do any of you know anyone with a 'disreputable' past who is now being used by God?

Are there things in our own lives which we feel can hold us back from giving God our all? Are there sins in our past or currently that we feel God can never forgive us for or will never use us the way he might have had we not sinned in such a manner? Remember, forgiveness is guaranteed to the truly repentant (1John1:9) and God desires to use each one of us.

FACILITATOR: *Share as everyone feels able and then take time to pray for one another. This could be a wonderful time of healing and repentance for many students. Encourage everyone to not feel rushed, but to take time before the Lord.*

witness

FACILITATOR: *Are you putting on any event for your friends soon? Discuss, plan and pray together.*

what now?

CELL: Are there any areas that you need to step out in faith or take a stand for Christ? If so, take time this week to talk and pray with your accountability partner or trusted friend. Don't wait! Take action about anything the Holy Spirit is speaking to you.

Memorize 1John 1:9, especially if you have taken time during this cell meeting to pray and repent about past sin.

2: hannah: faithfulness

welcome

CELL: How would your life be different if you knew Jesus was returning at the end of the month?

worship

CELL: Read Deborah's song together in Judges 5.

What strikes you about it? What does it tell you about God?

word

FACILITATOR: *As a group read through the following passages of scripture and discuss as noted. (If you feel the passage is too long, simply summarize portions and pick other portions to read aloud.)*

CELL: Read 1Samuel 1 and 2.

FACILITATOR: *Hannah and her husband, Elkanah, were childless. No doubt they prayed and believed, but when their prayers evoked no response from God, Elkanah did the logical and culturally accepted thing: he took a second wife, Peninnah. It worked! She bore him sons and daughters.*

CELL: How long do we wait for God to answer our prayers before we take matters into our own hands and come up with a human solution?

FACILITATOR: *We read that Elkanah loved Hannah deeply (1:8). Peninnah must have felt used. She was there to produce children that would secure the family line. She fought back with a verbal attack that wounded Hannah (1:6). It was at the annual festival at Shiloh that Hannah broke down. Unable to eat, unable to stop crying, she fled to the place of prayer and poured out her soul to the Lord in soundless praying.*

CELL: Discuss together...

Have you ever found yourself in a position of silent prayer?

How do you think it differs from word-based prayer?

How does God use it?

FACILITATOR: *Eli, in all his years as High Priest, had not witnessed this travail of soul before and concludes that Hannah must be drunk and accuses her.*

Imagine yourself in Hannah's position. What would you do in the face of an accusation like that? Would you be silent, self-defensive, angry, insulted?

Hannah, with courage and respect, speaks the truth and corrects her High Priest. Her response brings a benediction from Eli.

A son, Samuel, is born to Hannah and Elkanah. She decides not to go up to the festival with the baby and Elkanah trusts her judgment: "do what seems best to you" (1:23).

CELL: What does this tell us about God's intention for marriage?

FACILITATOR: *We see here a glimpse of what God intended marriage to be: husband and wife serving and loving God and trusting one another's judgment with a mutual sharing in decision making.*

After weaning (probably aged 3) Hannah honored her vow to God and took Samuel to Shiloh. Instead of weeping with pity and loss she sings a song of worship and praise. Her song (2:1-10) becomes the model for Mary's song in Luke 1:46-55.

It is exciting to think that your life might influence another, maybe generations later. Think about that for a moment and share how it makes you feel. Samuel, unique in Israel's history, combined the offices of priest, prophet and judge. His mother allowed him to grow before the Lord (2:21). In return God gave her five more children – quins perhaps!

CELL: What has struck you most about Hannah? What can you learn about her for your life in college today?

witness

CELL: We have seen how Hannah used silent prayer before God. It is a discipline that many people practice and is a well recognized form of Christian meditation.

Take time as a cell now to bring your friends before God in silent prayer. While it may not be what we are used to, don't be afraid to try new things. Is there anything that God wants to say to you through it?

what now?

CELL: Take time to think of commitments you have made to God or others. Are you being faithful to follow through?

Consider this definition of faithfulness: *"Faithfulness is following through with your commitments even when the sacrifice is greater than what you thought it would be."*

If your faithfulness is lacking in some areas of commitment, purpose to take action this week to correct the situation. Ask God to help you follow through on your commitments.

3: Lydia: hospitality

welcome

FACILITATOR: Ask people what they have been learning from their church over the last week or so.

worship

FACILITATOR: Last week we looked at Hannah and saw how she sang a song of worship and praise when God answered her prayer. Ask the cell members how God answered their prayers recently? Use Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 for your worship this cell.

word

CELL: Read together Acts 16:12-16, 40.

FACILITATOR: A seller of purple dye, she lives as a businesswoman in Philippi but is a native of Thyatira in Asia Minor (Turkey). Knowledge of dye making was probably traditional in Lydia's family. Tradition says that when her husband died she moved to Europe.

Her conversion to Christianity occurred somewhere between 50 and 60 AD. In fact she was the first to be converted in Europe, the first to be baptized and the first to open her house at Philippi (v.40). In Lydia's house was cradled the church of Philippi whose members were later referred to by Paul as his 'joy and crown' (Phil. 4:1).

When Paul and Silas arrived in Philippi they found a group of women who had established a prayer meeting by a river outside the city. The women were open to the message of the risen Lord - Lydia in particular. She was baptized and extended hospitality to them. Lydia was almost surely a highly successful, cultivated, professional woman with prestige and power in the city of Philippi. None of this ceased when she became a devoted disciple of Christ. She used her house - she served him where she was - she lived Christ in Philippi.

Use the following questions to discuss Lydia's life. It may be an idea to have an extra copy of them and divide your cell into two groups (or more) to facilitate easier sharing.

CELL: Questions...

- Do you have a consistent prayer life?
- Is your heart in the condition of being open to God (v.14) where he can reveal his truth to you?
- Are you willing for everything God has given you to be available for his use? What might some of those things be? (For Lydia it was leadership qualities, her home, her standing in the city.)
- Have you moved from a private commitment of faith to a public declaration?
- News of Lydia's baptism would have spread rapidly. Do people in your college know of your faith?

Scripture commands us to "practice hospitality" (Rom. 12:13). If we love God we will joyfully obey his commands.

Characters in the Bible often inspire us in our walk with God. What particularly in Lydia's life inspires you and where would you like to follow her example?

witness

CELL: In the light of Lydia's example, pray for one another, that we might be bold in our public witness. Is there anyone particularly who would like prayer for this?

what now?

CELL: Brainstorm some ways that you can practice hospitality over the coming days and weeks and then put some of those ideas into practice. Make sure to include both Christian and non-Christian friends as you make efforts to be hospitable.

4: phoebe: servanthood

welcome

CELL: What are two things (i.e. qualities) you want your friends to remember about you after college?

worship

FACILITATOR: Read Mary's song (the Magnificat) in Luke 1 and let it form the basis for your worship.

word

CELL: Read Romans 16:1-2 together.

FACILITATOR: In just two verses, Paul outlines the three-fold character of the woman whose name was Phoebe:

1. Sister in Christ
2. Servant of the church
3. Succourer (helper) of many

Cenchrea was the eastern harbor area of Corinth (NB Acts 18:18). In choosing Phoebe to carry his epistle to the Romans, Paul conferred a great honor upon her. She was surely a woman of influence, position and wealth.

CELL: Discuss these 3 areas in more detail.

1. Sister in Christ - Paul has been maligned as having a problem with women. This is a term of affection and speaks of a depth of relationship and respect. Phoebe and Paul were friends. He trusted her - she was his true sister in Christ Jesus.

Consider together your experience of friendship within the Body of Christ.

In smaller groups discuss the following questions; be really honest about your friendships.

Questions...

Do you experience deep, trusting brother/sister relationships?

If the church is essentially men, women and God, do we need to work at deepening our appreciation and respect for one another until we live and work as family?

How can this happen in your situation?

2. A Servant of the Church - The word comes from the Greek, 'diaconos,' from which our word deacon/ess is derived. In the early church much was made of service, little of office, and it was more of an honor to be referred to as a servant than as a deaconess. By the opening phrase of v.1, Paul commends her to the church at Rome and officially endorses her ministry. Phoebe was imitating her master – "I am among you as the one who serves" (Lk. 22:27).

Can that be said of us? Where and how might God be asking us to serve his church?

3. Succourer (helper) of Many - Note the ever-increasing three-fold circle of Phoebe's life:

Ministry to an inner circle

Ministry to believers

Helper of many

In the port city of Corinth, 'the many' had to include derelicts and undesirables, maybe escaped prisoners and drunken sailors. Hence, a polite phrase, but suggesting she reached out to the unprotected and despised. Paul adds: "she helped me also". Paul was no longer young, his eyes troubled him, his travel schedule must have tired him.

Being single provides the opportunity for a breadth of friendship, caring and service as exemplified by Phoebe. Consider again these 3 different areas of ministry together and pray for any challenges that have come out of your look at the example of Phoebe.

witness

FACILITATOR: *Feedback together how things have gone over the last few weeks evangelistically. Is there any good news to share or disappointments?*

Thank God for the good news and pray together for any needs that have arisen.

what now?

CELL: Memorize Matthew 20:26.

Make a list of 3 ways you can serve in each of the following areas:

Your Fusion cell group

Your campus

Your church

(Feel free to add other areas as well!)

For the next 3 weeks, try to implement one idea from one category every week.

further reading

Edith Deen, *All of the Women of the Bible*, Harper and Row, 1995

Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children*, Burns and Oates, 1994.

Miriam Adeney, *A Time for Risking*, Multnomah Press, 1987.

Eugenia Price, *God Speaks to Women Today*, Zondervan, 1964.