

Through Christ: Abundant Life for Women

By Marlys Taege Moberg

Open with Prayer: Lord, we thank You for loving us enough to send Your only Son as our Savior. Give us wisdom and understanding now as we study Your Word to see how Jesus encouraged and interacted with women. Help us discern Your will for us today. In Christ's Name, we pray. Amen.

Introduction: Cultural attitudes that devalue women existed during the times of the Old Testament and the New Testament — and still exist today. Women were often (and in many cases still are) denied an education.¹ They were considered the property first of their fathers and then their husbands.² Men sometimes had multiple wives (Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines), but women were expected to be virgins when they married (**Deuteronomy 22:14b-15, 20-21**).

With increasing forcefulness and clarity, the Holy Spirit has spoken against cultural attitudes that devalue women, beginning with the prophets in the Old Testament, continuing with Jesus in the New Testament, and continuing now with the proclamation of both the Old and the New Testament in His church today.

Through the prophets, the Lord spoke highly of women's contributions to society (Proverbs 31). Our heavenly Father held up women who had served Him as heroes of the faith (e.g. Huldah, Deborah, Miriam, and Esther). The Spirit also elevated women by writing laws that contradicted the cultural norms of the day. For example, not until the Lord approved the request of the daughters of Zelophehad (**Numbers 27:1-11**) were women permitted to inherit land.

It is true that some ceremonial and purity laws in the Old Testament were arguably biased against women. But these laws often offered women some protection where none previously existed, and in at least some cases, reflected the hardness of the hearts of the people to receive God's Word (see **Mark 10:1-12**).

The coming of Christ, with his abolishment of the ceremonial and purity laws and his sometimes counter-cultural interactions with women, brought a world of new opportunities for all people — especially for women! Let's explore how Jesus offered encouragement, freedom, and hope to women in Scripture and to women today.

(If your time is limited, divide into small groups and have each one take one or two of the following sections. Then report the findings to the entire group.)

Christ Removed the Purity Law Stigma of Female Uncleaness.

Read **Mark 5:25-34**. How does this woman demonstrate her courage? Her faith?

Read **Leviticus 15:25-30**. According to v. 27, what was the effect of her touch? Instead of acknowledging that effect, what does Jesus do?

How does Jesus also assure us of freedom from the purity laws? (See **Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 2:14**.)

Christ Included Women in His Traveling Team.

In Jewish culture, a woman's domain was the home — not the outside world. Yet Christ allowed women to join the men who followed Him from place to place. Who were they and what did they do for Him? (See **Matthew 27:55-56, Mark 15:40-41, Luke 8:1-3, 23:49,55; 24:9-10**.)

Christ Taught Women and Encouraged Them to Learn.

Read **Luke 10:38-42**. Normally both Mary and Martha would have been working in the kitchen. Only men sat at the feet of rabbis (teachers) to learn.³ What is the impact of v. 42? What does this suggest for us today?

Read **John 11:17-28**. How does Martha demonstrate that she also must have spent time learning from Jesus? The important words of v. 25 — which we so often quote today — appear only here in the Gospels, in Christ's conversation with Martha.

Read **Luke 11:27-28**. In an age when bearing children was a woman's primary duty, ⁴ where does Jesus place the greatest importance?

Christ Prevented Abuse of Women.

Read **John 8:1-12**. Why do you suppose the teachers and Pharisees brought only the woman to Christ?

What did the ceremonial law require in cases of adultery? See **Leviticus 20:10**.

What might Jesus have written in the dust (v. 6)?

Some scholars suggest what Jesus wrote may have been the Ten Commandments or a list of sins that the men had committed. ⁵ Regardless of what He wrote, what was the effect for the woman?

Christ Defended Women

On two occasions, women were criticized by observers for anointing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume.

Read **Luke 7:36-50**. Who was the woman and why did the Pharisees criticize her action? How does Jesus turn the conversation to explain her loving deed and force the accusers to think about their personal failings? What final reassurance does He give her?

Read **John 12:1-8**. What is the occasion here? Who complained and why? How does Jesus view Mary's action?

In each case, Christ encouraged the women with His strong defense. How do we show our appreciation for what Christ has done for us?

Christ Prepared/Sent Women to Tell the Good News.

Read **John 4:1-26** and **39-42**. Identify two reasons why the Samaritan woman was surprised when Jesus spoke to her. What did He teach her? What was the result? (See v. 39)

(Note: Jews avoided Samaria because of religious differences and the Samaritans' intermarriage with non-Jews. Jewish rabbis believed that greeting or talking with a woman in public would bring evil upon them. ⁶)

Read **John 20:1-18**. Who were the first to go to the tomb? According to **Mark 16:1-7**, who were the first to be told to "go and tell"? After the women came and left, Peter and John arrived with the returning Mary Magdalene. Although men were there, whom did Jesus choose for his first post-resurrection appearance? In response to His "Go and tell" directive, what did Mary do? (**John 20:18**)

How can women nowadays effectively share the Good News?

Conclusion: Historians tell us that because of the opportunities and freedoms that Christ offered to women, many of them soon became followers of the Triune God, and they held to that faith staunchly and courageously, even when the result was martyrdom. ⁷

What blessings and opportunities does Christ offer you today? Note especially:

John 10:10b

Revelation 2:10

Galatians 5:1

Ephesians 2:10

Share others that are especially meaningful for you.

In gratitude for all that Christ has done for us, let's follow the advice of **Ephesians 5:16** (TEV): "Make good use of every opportunity you get."

Close with a prayer. Ask the Lord to work through you to do His will and fulfill the purpose for which He placed you on earth.

If a hymn is desired, consider "Thee/You Will I Love, My Strength, My Tower" (*TLH* 399; *LW* 375), or "For All the Faithful Women" (*Hymnal Supplement* 98, especially stanzas 10, 11 and 12), or "By All Your Saints Still Striving" (*LSB* 552, stanza 14).

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¹ Henri Daniel-Rops, *Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1962), 114-115; Walter A. Elwell, editor, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1984), 1177, 1182; Alvin J. Schmidt, *Veiled and Silenced, How Culture Shaped Sexist Theology* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1989) 167.

² Exodus 20:17 and 21:7; Daniel-Rops, op. cit., 129; Schmidt, op. cit., 125-128; the custom of the father "giving away" his daughter in today's weddings is an outgrowth of this.

³ Deuteronomy 11:19; Schmidt, op.cit., 147, 169

⁴ Ibid, 168.

⁵ *The IVP Background Commentary, New Testament*, (InterVarsity Press, Downer's Grove, IL, 1993) 284-285

⁶ Schmidt, op. cit., 166, in which he quotes *Aboth* 1:5 and *Berakhoth* 43b of the Jewish *Mishna*.

⁷ Schmidt, op.cit., 218; Acts 5:14; Numerous women were among the early martyrs, including Agnes, Blandina, Perpetua and Felicity. Most are now Catholic saints and are found in Catholic books of martyrs, as well as Edith Deen's *Great Women of the Christian Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).