



UNLIKELY SERVANTS

Five-Minute Devotions Based on Women of the Bible

These thematic studies were written to encourage women to dedicate their lives and work to the Lord, in spite of their own shortcomings. These Biblical women chosen all have “chinks in their armor”...all have been handicapped by something in their lives which might seem to make them unworthy to serve a holy God. However, these women, loved and forgiven, were chosen by the Lord to fulfill a specific purpose for Him.

THE BIBLICAL WOMEN

1. Ruth..... handicapped by her background
2. The Samaritan Woman..... handicapped by her lifestyle
3. Hannahhandicapped by poor personal relationships
4. Eve handicapped by doubt and pride
5. Sarahhandicapped by anger and impatience
6. Rebekah.....handicapped by showing favoritism within the family
7. Estherhandicapped by age/ethnic background
8. Miriam.....handicapped by jealousy
9. Marthahandicapped by worry

RUTH

Genesis 19:30-38; Deuteronomy 23:3-6; Ruth 1-4

“You have chosen me? Have you any idea of my family history?”

When one thinks of the story of Ruth, words such as commitment, love and devotion quickly come to mind. Some find her words as recorded in the King James version of the Bible especially touching. They read, *And Ruth said, “Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God”* (Ruth 1:16). These words imprint a picture of purest devotion.

When these words were spoken, Ruth was still a relatively young woman, a widow, probably in her thirties. The Bible tells us that Naomi, along with her husband and two sons, moved from Bethlehem in Judea to Moab to escape a terrible drought and the famine that followed. It was here that Ruth met and married her husband, Mahlon, Naomi’s son. As time went by, all three of the men in Naomi’s family died. After a time, the famine ended and she decided to move back to Bethlehem to be among relatives. Both daughters-in-law accompanied Naomi as she left Moab on her return to Bethlehem. Naomi, however, told her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab with their families. Orpah agreed to her request, but Ruth responded with the beautiful words recorded in the Book of Ruth.

The story then continued with Ruth’s encounter with Boaz in which marriage was proposed and consummated. Ruth became an important figure in the ancestry of King David and eventually the earthly life of her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

But when looking at Ruth’s family history, it seems strange that God would choose one who has a family history which is suspect in many ways. One could easily think that her history would be an impediment to God calling her to service in His kingdom. Ruth’s people, the Moabites, were direct descendants of Lot...not Lot and his wife, but Lot and his daughter. The Moabites’ history has its beginnings with a shameful, incestuous relationship, considered by God to be an abomination. (Genesis 19:30-38)

The Moabites were long-time enemies of the Israelites, God’s chosen people, following their encounter on the way to the Promised Land under the direction of Moses. It was during this time that the Moabites called on Balaam, a heathen prophet, to curse the Israelites. The Moabite king feared that the huge number of people traveling through his country would pose a terrible danger to his land. The king thought that if Balaam would curse this great people of God, he would be safe. God, of course, did not let that happen, and Balaam’s curse was turned into a blessing for the Israelites (Deuteronomy 23:3-6).

As a result of this encounter with God's people, no Moabite was allowed to enter into the assembly of the Lord. They were permanently banned from worship and were hated by the Jews.

Yet God chose Ruth, this remarkable Moabite woman, to be part of the earthly history of Jesus. Many people might use their backgrounds or their family history as excuses not to serve the Lord or become involved in the work of the church. God doesn't look at it that way. If He would, would He have chosen a woman who came from a shameful nation to be part of the ancestry of His beloved Son? Would He have chosen a woman whose people were permanently banned from the house of God to be part of the genealogy of Jesus?

The story of Ruth, a woman God chose to be part of the family history of His Son, would lead us to believe that God would want all, even those who have had a troubled past, to serve Him. Often their experiences enable them to communicate God's grace and forgiveness more clearly than others, who would be unable to empathize with those having similar life experiences.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank You that You use all of us to be in Your service. You look at the heart of Your people and call them to serve You. Do not let our past sins or things over which we have no control hinder us in serving You. Forgive us all our sins for the sake of and in the Name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

----- THE SAMARITAN WOMAN -----

John 4:4-42; Acts 8:1

“If you really knew what I have done, you wouldn’t want me in your group!”

If there ever was a woman who would see herself as unfit to work for a holy and just God, it would be the Samaritan woman, the woman Jesus met at the well. There was no question that her lifestyle was sinful and contrary to the way that God would want her to live. Just by virtue of her being Samaritan, she was considered contemptible and reproachful to the Jews. Yet, Jesus brings life to this woman, and she, in turn, brings her countrymen to Jesus.

This account begins with Jesus traveling through Samaria on his way to Galilee. Jesus is tired and sits by the well while His disciples are going to the village to buy food. The Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw water, and Jesus asks her for a drink. This is surprising to her, and she asks Jesus why He is asking her, since she is a Samaritan woman and He is a Jew. Jesus continues to talk to her and tells her that He would give her living water. This is of great interest to her, since Jesus tells her that whoever drinks of this water will never be thirsty again. She thinks having this kind of water would be wonderful, perhaps thinking of all the times she had to go to the well in the heat of the day. Then Jesus tells her to go and call her husband, to which she responds, “I have no husband.” Jesus tells her that what she says is true, continues to tell her that the man she is living with is not her husband, and then says that she has had five husbands. She correctly perceives Him to be a prophet, and Jesus then tells her that He is the Promised Messiah, the One who is the Living Water.

At this point, she returns to the village and tells the people there, *“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ”* (John 4:29 NIV)? The villagers came with her to see Jesus. They then listened to Jesus’ words of life. They invited Jesus to stay longer, and He stayed with them two more days. The Bible continues, *And because of His words many more became believers.* (John 4:41 NIV). The villagers said to the woman, *“We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world”* (John 4:42 NIV).

Why God used this sinful woman to bring an entire village to Him is not clear. God works in mysterious ways, using people that He chooses to accomplish great things for Him. What is clear is that this woman did not let anything stand in her way of bringing people to Jesus. Her enthusiasm in proclaiming Him to her people was remarkable. The Holy Spirit did the rest.

Several years ago, the buzz word among congregations who sought growth was “networking.” The idea was to have people reach out within their circles of friendship and bring the unchurched people they associated with to church. It was very hard for those who only knew church people to become good networkers. If, however, you associated with

people who had no church connection, it was easier. The Samaritan woman was the perfect networker. She had a circle of acquaintances who did not know the Lord, and she simply witnessed to the Lord's presence among them.

One must wonder whether the men of the village, knowing her reputation, went to see Jesus with great feelings of cynicism and doubt. But they were moved to just "come and see," and God made something great happen. It is interesting to note here that the Word of God continued to spread to Samaria following the stoning of Stephen and the persecution of the early Christian Church. Acts 8:1 Isn't it an awesome thought that these displaced believers may have been welcomed by the very families that came to Christ through this woman?

There are many people in the world today who have left behind lifestyles of which they are ashamed. Things of the past, once confessed to our Savior, are forgiven and must be left behind. While God has the marvelous power to forgive and then forget, we sinners with our human frailties often fail in that area. Forgiving outwardly, but not forgetting, is a great impediment to those seeking to do God's work. We must constantly strive to reach out and bring in those who feel that they are "not good enough" to do God's work. Our own goodness has no place in serving God—only His goodness, power and strength do that.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, You came to save sinners. You saved each one of us. Help us to reach out to those who may feel unworthy to serve You. Give us the power to proclaim Your love and forgiveness to them so that they may serve You with great joy! Amen.

----- HANNAH -----

1 Samuel 1:1-28

“I have so many problems with my family. I find it hard to serve the Lord!”

When most of us think of Hannah, we think of her tearful, heart-wrenching prayer asking God to give her a son. In Biblical times, begin barren was considered a curse. Much shame was endured by the woman who was unable to bear children. The Old Testament believers were aware of God’s charge to Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply” and being blessed with a family was considered God’s choicest blessing.

Hannah’s story was much like that of many Old Testament wives. Often a man had more than one wife and there was rivalry between the women. This was the case with Hannah. Her husband, Elkanah, was a devoted man—both to God and his family. It was his custom to go to Shiloh every year to offer sacrifices to God. This was a big family affair! His other wife, Peninnah, would go along with her children. This was very sad for Hannah because this was the time she most longed for a child of her own with whom to share the joy of the celebration. To make matters worse, Peninnah would tease Hannah, who was already sensitive of her barrenness. This caused great family friction during what was supposed to be a happy family celebration. Elkanah was aware of Hannah’s feelings and tried to comfort her by bringing her a greater portion of the sacrificed offering. The Bible tells us that he gave Peninnah and each of her children a portion of the meat, but he would give Hannah a double portion. She would still not eat, so Elkanah would ask her, *“Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don’t you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons”* (1 Samuel 1:8)? It was his way of telling her how much he loved her, and how helpless he felt in bringing about her dearest desire...that of a child.

The Bible tells us that following one of these feasts Hannah went into the Lord’s temple in “bitterness of soul” (1 Samuel 1:10). It was one of those times when she agonized over her infertility. She decided to pour out her soul to the Lord. She was so intent on her request to God that Eli, the priest, thought that she was incoherent and perhaps drunk. But Hannah told Eli that her prayer was out of great anguish and grief. God granted Hannah her request and she became the mother of Samuel, a boy she promised to give back to God. She kept her promise and at a very early age, Samuel was brought back to serve the Lord, first with Eli and then later as God’s special prophet.

Although they are probably different in nature, there are many family problems that keep people at arm’s length from the Lord today. First and foremost, there is the problem of finding or devoting the time necessary to make God part of their lives. Often a household has both parents working which certainly makes time a premium commodity. They must find time on weekends and during evening hours to do all the things necessary to maintain a home. When children are involved, time becomes even more precious. The nurture and care for a family requires additional hours of tutoring, disciplining and car-pooling, besides extra

laundry, food and clothing needs. When these things need to be done, something must be sacrificed. Often it is the church and the spiritual needs of the family.

Other problems confronting families today are divorce and family separation. Although divorce has become more commonplace and many families struggle through it, it causes great pain for all those involved. It often leads to depression for the adults and bitterness and cynicism for the children. Family quarrels and custody battles often put the children in the middle, like pawns in a battle. When families are broken up, often their spiritual wholeness suffers as well. Some drop out altogether; others find it hard to take part in any activity which has ties to their former status.

How should we as Christians deal with problems revolving around the family? How do we involve those people who are overwhelmed with painful family problems and never-ending time pressures? Taking a look at Hannah, whose family problems were anguishing for her, we see her becoming depressed and crying. The Bible does not tell us how often she took her problems to the Lord in sincere prayer. But it does tell us that at one particular time she besieged God with prayer, and He responded by giving her her heart's desire. It would seem that more of us need to remember our families of today in regular prayer. We need to love them, encourage them, mentor and nurture them so as their families get older they, too, can take on a younger generation and teach them by what they say and do.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we ask for Your special blessing on all our families. Help them to set their priorities so that they put You above all else. Give them the power to be faithful to You and each other. Make their homes a place where Your love and grace is evident and help them to be forgiving to each other. This we ask in Jesus' Name. Amen.

----- EVE -----

Genesis 2:4; 3:7

“Did God really say?”

We have heard people say that when they get to heaven the first thing they will do is ask Eve what kind of fruit was so enticing that it would get all of us in trouble for the rest of our lives! When thinking about Eve and the perfect sinless condition she and Adam were in prior to their fall, it's hard to imagine that anything could come in the way of remaining in perfect harmony with God. Even in Eden, however, the temptation to sin, and especially thinking we can be God or like him, was present.

It's amazing how smart and cunning Satan is. Many might think that he comes in a red suit with a long tail, has blazing eyes, is visible for miles, and his ways are immediately recognizable as being satanic. Not so! The account of Adam and Eve, as well as many others throughout the Bible, bear that out. Eve, whom God created holy and sinless, perfect in every way, would verify that. It was she who was tricked into sinning and bringing Adam into the same condition.

All of us know the story of God's creation—how He carefully and with great wisdom created the earth and everything in it. We know that God is a God of order, and that He went about His plan methodically, in a way that prepared the earth and the seas before He made the animals, fish and birds. But when he was finished, the earth and its inhabitants still seemed incomplete to Him. The Bible says, *Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground”* (Genesis 1:26 NIV). And so God made Adam in His image, holy and sinless and giving him the breath of life. Adam was the crown of God's creation, the one God intended to rule over the rest of His wonderful works.

God gave Adam work to do. He was to name the animals and birds and care for the garden. He was to spend his time wisely. But Adam was alone. The Bible tells us, *But for Adam no suitable helper was found* (Genesis 2:20b NIV). Among all of the things that God had created, there was no one who could be a companion for the crown of God's creation. And so God created Eve, also in His image—sinless and in perfect harmony with God. Together, Adam and Eve had a marvelous relationship with their Creator in a beautiful garden. So what went wrong?

Satan had a way of bringing both doubt and pride into Eve's thinking. His words, “Did God really say...” brought things into her mind that she never thought before. She had never doubted that God loved them and would care for them. She knew Him as her caring and

concerned Creator. She had every reason to think that the forbidden fruit would lead them to misery and death, just as God had clearly told them. However, Satan followed his initial question with something that appealed to her pride. He told Eve that eating the fruit would make her wise and like God. The Bible says, *When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it* (Genesis 3:6 NIV).

Satan has a way of luring even the staunchest Christian to doubt. How many times and for how long has he used the so-called learned scientists to renounce God's creation as a fairy tale? How often have geneticists and anthropologists insisted that we evolved from a single cell even though there are countless "missing links"? How many of our children have had to deal with anti-God theories proclaimed by those agents of Satan who once said that God was dead? Satan uses people whom we love and trust to proclaim his propaganda. And he does it well, he does it convincingly, and he does it relentlessly.

Pride often leads people away from God, too. Many people think that if they cannot understand something, they can't believe it. Understanding God and His love for mankind in sending a Savior is beyond human comprehension and only possible through the eyes of faith, as well as understanding the justice of God, and that, too, is only possible through the work of the Holy Spirit. Pride has no place in the faith life of any Christian—only the grace and mercy of God does.

It shouldn't be hard for any of us to realize that doubt and pride could well be a hindrance to our faith life. If Eve, God's perfect creation, was tempted by these two tricks of Satan, we surely will also know his attacks.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we are so weak in so many ways. We ask You to keep us free from the power of Satan, who uses every possible means to tempt us to fall away from You. Keep us strong in the Word and the Sacraments, so that we can remain faithful. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

SARAH

Genesis 16:1-16; 18:1-15; 21:1-15

“I’ve waited long enough. It’s time to take matters into my own hands!”

Sarah, the wife of Abraham, had a problem with which many of us are familiar. The prayer, “Lord, give me patience and give it to me right now!” fits her very well. Patience, a philosopher told us, is a virtue. The Bible, in St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians, calls it a fruit of the spirit. (Galatians 5:22). Yet for Sarah, the woman God chose to be the mother of the Jewish nation, it was very difficult.

At the age of 76, Sarah had given up on building a family by bearing her own children. While this was a painful acknowledgment of her own physical inadequacy, she thought that perhaps she could use another method of building a family. Having children of her own was a woman’s deepest desire, and a childless woman thought of herself as being unfulfilled, perhaps even cursed. Sarah thought that she could use her Egyptian maid, Hagar, as a surrogate mother.

It was Sarah’s idea to build her family this way. The Bible tells us that she initiated this plan when she said to Abraham, “*The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her*” (Genesis 16:2 NIV). Abraham agreed to this plan and Hagar became pregnant. During her pregnancy, Hagar became arrogant and began to despise Sarah. Sarah’s impatience now bore fruit that she found very hard to live with. Not only was she childless and past the normal childbearing years, but her maidservant deliberately belittled and despised her. In her distress, Sarah confronted Abraham, blaming him for her misery. She told him, “*You are responsible for the wrong I’m suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me*” (Genesis 16:5 NIV). Abraham then told Sarah, “*Do with her whatever you think best*” (Genesis 16:6b NIV). What followed was that Sarah began to mistreat Hagar, who then fled. The Lord intervened by saving Hagar from death in the desert and told her to return to Sarah and be submissive to her. Hagar did what the angel had told her to do, and then bore Abraham a son, who was named Ishmael.

Thirteen years later, God’s promise to Abraham that he would have a child by Sarah came true. In a miraculous way, Sarah, who was now near 90 and certainly past the normal childbearing years, was told that by this time the following year she would have a son. Both Abraham and Sarah, who were both aware of God’s promise of a son, must often have thought that God was ever so slow in keeping His Word!

But Sarah became the mother of Isaac as God promised. What a happy event this was! The Bible tells us that Sarah said, *“God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.”* And she added, *“Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age”* (Genesis 21:6-7 NIV). One might think that their problems were over. Not so! Ishmael was by now a teenager and Sarah saw him mocking Isaac. This angered her, and she then demanded that Abraham exile his son, Ishamel, and Ishmael’s mother, Hagar. With a heavy heart, Abraham agreed to send them away.

What pain and anxiety Sarah’s impatience and anger caused her! And how often does it cause us grief! So many of us, like Sarah, feel the need for control...making sure everything is in a certain order. Sometimes God’s timetable, the amount of time that He takes to respond to our call, is so frustrating! We make our plans, we save our money, we’re ready to go—and then something happens! Our plans have to be changed or perhaps even canceled. Charges of unfairness are leveled at God. We need someone to blame...and God is right there, so we blame Him.

Isn’t it good that we have a patient God, a God who listens to us, loves us, and then always forgives us when we come to Him? As we look around our world today, it seems that our nation is much like the nation of Israel was prior to its exile. How many times does the Bible tell us that the nation of Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord! God surely knows that He is way down on the list of priorities in the majority of our American homes today, and yet He patiently waits for our return. He may even permit trials and hardship to come as a reminder that we need Him, but He waits patiently and lovingly.

Prayer: Dear Lord, when impatience and anger trouble us, we ask for Your forgiveness. Be with us as we struggle with our daily schedules. When we find it hard to wait for an answer from You, draw us to Your Word. Make your promises clear to us, knowing that You love us with an everlasting love. In Jesus’ Name we pray. Amen.

REBEKAH

Genesis 25:21-34; 27:1-47; 28:10-17

“I love you most, want you to have the best and am willing to bear the consequences.”

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Smothers Brothers were great hits on television. One of the lines that Tommy Smothers used with great regularity in talking with his brother was, “Mom always loved you more than me.” While it was used in a humorous way and often brought laughs, favoritism within the family is not funny at all. It causes great pain and division. It can lead to violence and family separation.

Rebekah, the wife of Isaac and mother of Jacob and Esau, was guilty of family favoritism as was her husband. The Bible tells us, *Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob* (Genesis 25:28 NIV). How these parents, loved and chosen by God to be part of His beloved Son’s earthly family line, came to pick favorites is unknown. We do know, however, that Esau became a skilled hunter, a man of the open country. Perhaps he came home and told Isaac stories of great adventure—things which appealed to the “macho” image of his father. Perhaps Isaac thought of Esau as a “man’s man.” Jacob, on the other hand, was a stay-at-home person. The Bible says, *Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents* (Genesis 25:27b NIV). It may have been that by being around his mother more, Jacob and Rebekah developed a close, loving relationship which may have been envied by Esau. Regardless of how the favoritism developed within the family, its consequences were very sad.

In Biblical times, the blessing of the birthright (that given to the oldest son) was of great importance. The oldest son in the family was especially valued and at his father’s death was given two-thirds of the family estate. It carried with it a special privilege and honor. In Esau’s and Jacob’s case, even though they were twins, Esau, by virtue of being delivered first, became the older son. The birthright was to be his. An incident which occurred in their young adult life caused Esau to despise and give up his birthright to Jacob, an action of great consequence, but perhaps unknown to the parents.

When the time of Isaac’s death drew near and he was about to give Esau the blessing of the first-born, Rebekah overheard the conversation. Not wanting Esau to have that blessing, she quickly schemed to have Jacob receive it instead. She was fully aware that once a blessing was given it could not be withdrawn or given to someone else. She called Jacob and made all of the necessary preparations for the meal which was part of the ceremony. She planned the deceitful process so that her favorite son would receive the blessing which rightfully belonged to his older brother. Jacob went along with her scheming, lied to his father and received the blessing. When Esau returned to receive his blessing, he found out that his father had been tricked into giving it to Jacob. Esau became so angry that Jacob was forced

to leave his home and mother in order to save his life. A family separation of more than 20 years followed and there was much bitterness and sadness as a result.

Rebekah paid a big price for choosing to play favorites. Not only was her family separated, but she may never have seen Jacob again. There was strife and hatred, distrust and scheming. Jacob, who was forced to flee home in order to avoid the wrath of his brother, went to live with his uncle, Rebekah's brother, Laban.

How often we get ourselves into critical situations which involve our families. And God bails us out each time...just as he did with Jacob, who was forced to leave his home and all he knew and loved. His mother, who schemed to give him the very best because she loved him more, had to be left behind. The comfort of a home and friends now became things of the past. He was lonely, but not alone. As Jacob fled and laid his weary and troubled head down for the night, God came to him in a special dream in which Jacob realized that God would never leave him or forsake him.

And Rebekah? How much family strife might have been averted had Rebekah permitted God to put His plan into action! In spite of her scheming and deceit, she was used by God to be part of the early history of her Lord and Savior. God uses sinners like Rebekah and you and me to further His kingdom. None of us, by ourselves, would be fit to serve the Lord. But through our baptism, God calls us. Through the Word and Sacrament, He equips us for service to Him.

Prayer: Father in heaven, in Your wisdom, You ordained marriage and the family. Help us, as we live together, to do it in peace and harmony. Help us not to show favoritism. You value each one of us more than we can imagine. Help us to value each other. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

ESTHER

Esther 1-2:10; 3:1-4:17;8

“I am too young and, besides that, who would listen to someone from a minority?”

One of the most fascinating stories in the entire Bible is the story of Esther, the young Jewish girl caught up in a squabble between a powerful king and his queen. The story of Queen Esther shows how God places people into history and then uses them to fulfill His purposes.

The story of Esther has its beginnings at the time of Xerxes, a powerful Persian king whose rule followed that of Darius, the Persian king identified with the prophet, Daniel. It was customary for kings in those days to hold banquets which lasted many days. Prior to holding a particular banquet, the Bible tells us, this king invited all the important leaders of his country to his palace in Susa and displayed his wealth and power. The banquet that followed lasted for seven days—and there was no shortage of food and drink. The servants were instructed that each guest should have what he wanted, how much he wanted, and that it was to be served the way he wanted. At the end of seven days, the king and his guests were in high spirits.

While this was going on, the queen, Vashti by name, held her own banquet for the women. When Xerxes demanded she appear before his group in her royal attire, she refused. This angered and embarrassed the king and he sought advice from his cabinet on how to handle the matter. At their suggestions, the queen was deposed and permanently banned from the palace.

Later, however, Xerxes regretted his hasty action. Those who attended the king noticed his regret and proposed that the entire kingdom be searched for the most beautiful women, one of whom was to become the new queen. The king endorsed this plan. This is where Esther came into the picture. She was a beautiful, young orphan brought up by her uncle, Mordecai, who had forbidden her to reveal her Jewish ancestry. After she completed her preliminary requirements, she was brought to the king. The Bible tells us, *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* (Esther 2:17 NIV).

Among the leaders in the king’s court was a proud man named Haman. He was enraged by Mordecai’s refusal to bow down and pay him homage. Haman was so angered by this action that he sought to kill not only Mordecai, but all the Jews throughout the kingdom. This action distressed Mordecai so much that he sought the help of his niece, Queen Esther. He asked her to intervene. Esther was fully aware that seeking an unasked audience with the king could cost her her life. She told her uncle just that.

In Mordecai's mind, however, the problem was so serious that he asked Esther to put aside all her personal concerns and put the welfare of her Jewish people ahead of any danger that might befall her. He reminded her of the dire consequences, the annihilation of an entire race, if she refused to take action. And then he followed with the words, *"And who know but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this"* (Esther 4:14b NIV)?

With the help of prayer and fasting not only by herself and her court, but the entire Jewish community of Susa, Esther gathered the courage to seek an audience with the king. In dramatic fashion, Haman's plot was revealed and the Jewish community was saved from sure and complete destruction...this through the efforts of a young queen, a member of a minority group within the country where she was living.

Mordecai's words to Esther, *"And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this,"* have implications for us today. No longer is America a church society. Church people are now in the minority! Polls within our country suggest that Americans are religious, many believe in a supreme being, but at the same time, many refuse to become members of the church. We Christians have a royal position—a position given us by a good and gracious God who loves us with an everlasting love. We know that God wants us to live in a way that would draw others to Him. And we know that He has placed us where we are. So, what are we to do—those of us in the minority who seek the Word of God within the four walls of our churches? Are we to leave His love within those four walls? God would want each of us to use all that He has given us to proclaim His love to those around us that do not know Him. After all, He said to His disciples and us, *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations..."* and then followed that with His wonderful promise, *"...and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age"* (Matthew 28:19-20 NIV).

Prayer: Lord Jesus, sometimes speaking your word of grace is so difficult. Many would not listen and others laugh at us when we do. Give us the power to be bold in our proclamation of You. We ask that by the Holy Spirit's power, You would enable us to be faithful Christians, living the kind of life that would draw others to You. In Your Name we pray. Amen.

MIRIAM

Exodus 1:22-2:10; 15:19-21; Numbers 12:1-15

“Who does he think he is, this little brother of mine!”

Psychologists tell us that birth order within the family has a great effect on each child. Firstborn children, they say, are often achievers. They tend to talk and walk earlier and have a larger vocabulary at an earlier age. Firstborns have a tendency to act cautiously, hoping thereby to avoid making mistakes. They tend to be perfectionists. Miriam, who was the oldest daughter of devout Levite parents, was the sister of Aaron and Moses, the youngest of their three children.

Girls of Old Testament times were taught the responsibility of running a household at a very early age. Miriam undoubtedly learned how to prepare food, bring in water, and take a major role in the care of her younger brothers, all under the watchful eye of her mother.

It was during this time that the Israelites had become a large nation of people in Egypt and, in the eyes of the king, a real threat to the security of the nation. They had lived in Egypt for almost 400 years, having begun their pilgrimage there while Joseph was the ruler. Jacob's family of 70 had grown to well over a million. They were a powerful workforce in the expanding Egyptian economy, especially after they were forced into slavery. Their numbers continued to grow, so Pharaoh issued an order that all male children born to Hebrew parents be thrown into the Nile River...certain death for each little boy.

Moses' parents, along with countless others, were horrified at this directive from the Pharaoh. They were about to have a child, and when the baby turned out to be a boy, they were called on to use their imagination and ingenuity to keep him alive. They hid their tiny baby for three months, always fearful that their secret might be given away and their child brutally taken from them and drowned. When Moses was three months old and hiding him was no longer possible, Moses' mother decided on a course of action to protect their son. She fashioned a papyrus basket and coated it with tar and pitch to make sure it was seaworthy. Then she laid her infant son in it and placed it among the reeds, so common in Egyptian waters. It was at this point that Miriam, the older sibling, was called on to do her part. She was to be the sentry and to report back on what happened to Moses once he was in his little boat.

All of us are familiar with the ending of the story...how the Egyptian princess found the baby in the basket, had compassion on him and rescued him from certain death. Watching from a distance, Miriam then asked the princess if she wanted a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby,

and she went and got her mother, who then received her son back. Moses stayed with his parents until he was old enough to be taken to the palace where he was given the finest education and the best of everything.

Little is heard of Miriam until God called Moses to be the leader of Israel who would lead his people back to the promised land. The Bible calls her a prophetess who took a tambourine in her hand and sang and danced once the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea in safety and the Egyptian army had perished in their attempt to force the Israelites back to Egypt. She held a position of honor under Moses' leadership. It may have been that he felt gratitude to her for her role in saving his life. Perhaps he had given her a position of honor because of family loyalty. Later in the journey, however, both Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses "because of his Cushite wife." While using Moses' wife as an excuse to speak against him, their real reason was jealousy. They asked, *"Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Hasn't he also spoken through us"* (Numbers 12:1 NIV)? They were jealous of God's close relationship to their younger brother. They felt slighted to think that the youngest of them would be accorded such a great honor while they were given less. The Lord heard their words and called all three into His presence. Coming in a pillar of cloud, He asked Miriam and Aaron why they were not afraid to speak against Moses, with whom He (God) himself spoke face to face. The Bible says that the anger of the Lord burned against them, and when the cloud lifted, there stood Miriam, leprous. Aaron pleaded with Moses to intercede for Miriam, which he did. God, however, punished her with seven days of leprosy, after which she returned, cleansed. (Numbers 12:5-15).

Jealousy is described by St. Paul as one of the acts of the sinful nature. It brings about discord in the home as well as in the church. Jealousy has no place in either. Who would question God when He chooses to bestow His blessing in unequal measures? No one should. There is a lesson in the example of Miriam, who chose to question God's motives in His dealings with the members of her family, and yet God forgave His servant in her weakness and continued to use her in His service.

Prayer: Lord, it's so easy to look around the world and feel that we have been short- changed. Do not let jealousy get in the way of our family and church relationships. Help us to be thankful for all the blessings of body and soul You give us so freely each and every day. In Your Name we pray. Amen.

MARTHA

Luke 10:38-44; John 11:1-44

“I want everything to be perfect, so I worry about getting it all done!”

An upstate New York couple handled worry in an ingenious way. The husband was the worrier, so he and his wife decided that she should do all the worrying. “The only problem,” he said, “was that then it never got done.” If only resolving worry problems were that easy! Being a worrier and letting worry control your life is difficult for all involved. What’s more, it is a sin against the first commandment where Martin Luther, in his explanation, says that we should fear, love and trust in God above all things. Trust does not allow for worry.

Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus, and friend of Jesus, was a worrier. She wanted things to be “just right,” especially when Jesus was their guest. Jesus’ closeness to the family is apparent when the Bible tells us that when Lazarus died, Jesus wept. We picture the three of them often welcoming Jesus into their home where they became close friends—almost family.

It was early on in His ministry that Jesus came to the home of Mary and Martha. We know that Martha was very concerned about the preparations that had to be made for having Jesus as their guest. We can picture her hurrying and scurrying about, cleaning every nook and cranny and making sure that the best possible food was prepared. We can also imagine Mary, who seemed to be far more sedate, dilly-dallying around, perhaps daydreaming, moving slowly doing her jobs, and perhaps even sitting down in between. For someone who is fast-paced, which worriers often are, this is frustrating. When Jesus arrived and the preparations were still not complete, Mary’s sitting down and listening to Jesus was the last straw! It was here that Martha then complained to Jesus and where He reminded her to put first things first. He never told her that the preparations were wrong, but that she simply had her priorities mixed up.

Martha, a woman and close friend of Jesus, had a worry problem. Jesus gently reminded her that the worries and cares of the world must never be in the way of putting God first. Being a listener and disciple like Mary was the better choice. We are to be good managers and stewards of the things that God has given us. We must use our time wisely to manage God’s gifts—to keep up our homes, feed and care for our children, or be faithful employees. All these things are important in the life of a Christian...but God must come first. The worries and cares of the world must never draw us away from God.

In the explanation of the first commandment, Martin Luther says that we should fear, love and trust in God above all things. Worriers find that very hard. They tend to trust in their own abilities, and when things go wrong, find it hard to cope. Putting trust in the Lord, turning the worries and cares over to Him is a much more desirable choice!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, You take such good care of us. So often we choose to go our own way. We ask You to give us a bold faith that would trust You in all circumstances. Do not let the worries and cares of the world get in the way of coming to You. Keep us faithful in worship and prayer. This we ask in Jesus' Name. Amen.

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