

# On the Woman Bleeding for 12 Years

By Jessi Rennekamp

**I**t's been dark for hours, but I haven't slept. Tossing and turning on my blankets that are ragged from frequent washing. Despite pouring my emotions into vigorous scrubbing almost daily, the blankets have brown stains everywhere, the remains of the blood I can never get fully clean.

***Blood. It has defined so much of my life for a dozen years.***

I was 14 when I started to bleed. Other girls in my village had begun their cycles; I knew because they couldn't go to synagogue during the time of their bleeding and for 7 days afterward. I missed them.

I remember seeing my friend Lea outside the marketplace after she'd been absent from synagogue for several days. I raced over to her and threw my arms around her in a hug before she knew what I was doing. "No!" she said, pushing me away reflexively. "You're unclean now," she whispered, not looking me in the eye.

After touching my friend when she was unclean, I too had to stay away from synagogue for 7 days and follow the purification rituals before I could return. When my own bleeding started a few months later, it never stopped. ***I haven't set foot inside synagogue for 12 years. No one in my community has hugged me for 12 years.***

I'm now well past the age when women typically marry. My parents gave me my dowry anyway – a parting gift when they sent me out of our home.

And tonight I lie awake, plagued by anxious thoughts, because I have spent every penny of that dowry on trying to stop the flow of blood from my body. I'd tried everything; I wouldn't give up looking for any possible option, no matter how tenuous the hope that it may work. What use was saving that dowry money for food if I couldn't truly live? But neither the most well-respected doctors with the latest medicine nor the midwives with their mysterious salves and ancient wisdom could do anything.

Now all hope is gone.

I have nothing left. No family. No money. No food.

No God?

All my life I'd had faith in Yahweh, the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel. But after 12 years unable to enter his house or participate in his people's community, sometimes I wondered if he'd forgotten me.

"El Roi," I pray quietly in the dark, uttering the name that Hagar had given to God when she had nothing left, when she was dying in the desert, unloved, mistreated, with no water or family or hope. ***"You are the God who sees me."***

At last, I fall into a deep sleep. I dream of the Temple – not the synagogue in my village or even the Temple in Jerusalem. It is far grander than that. Could this be Solomon’s Temple? Somehow I know that even Solomon, in all of his splendor, couldn’t be the maker of this beautiful building.

Before the Temple stands a man in a radiant white robe, with kind, deep brown eyes. “Come,” he says in a voice as strong as rushing waters and as warm as sunlight. He stretches out his hand to me and I recoil automatically.

“Unclean,” I say.

But he doesn’t take his hand back. He continues to hold it outstretched, an invitation. Overcome by this gesture of kindness and by his shining glory, I fall to my knees with my face to the ground. I peek up from the dirt at his sandaled feet and, hesitatingly, reach toward him. ***At the tiniest touch of the pure white fabric of the bottom of his robe, I feel a burning sensation flow through my entire body, like a hot coal.*** The feeling is intense, but not painful; it is Love in its purest form, burning away everything that made me broken and unclean and alone, healing me at the deepest part of my soul.

I look up from his robe to peer into his kind eyes once more, but all I see is my own room. The sky that had been midnight black is now painted with streaks of pastel pink and orange. Soon my bed will be bathed in light.

Later that day, ***the one they call Jesus of Nazareth*** is teaching in our village, surrounded by a crowd of people. Ordinarily I’d have stayed away, not wanting to risk touching anyone and making them unclean. Not wanting to see them all turn away and maintain a safe distance from me. But they say he is a healer. Although none of the other “healers” have been able to help me, I have nothing left but to try once more.

When I get to the edge of the crowd, I catch a glimpse of his face. Even from that distance, I recognize the kind, deep brown eyes – ***the eyes from my dream.*** My heart leaps.

Using the crowd’s fear of touching me, I walk recklessly forward, and the crowd parts for me like the Red Sea. ***“If I can just touch his robe,” I say urgently to those around me, “I will be healed.”*** I know it. This man can do what no one else could do for me – offer me a way back to God’s house, God’s family, God’s abundant life.

As I get closer to Jesus, the crowd is packed in more tightly and no longer moves aside for me. “Unclean,” I say desperately, and a few people startle out of my way. But others have their eyes focused on Jesus so intently that they don’t hear me or don’t care. I take a deep breath and put my hand on the shoulder of the man in front of me, pushing him until I can get past him. I squeeze between two more people, getting one step closer to Jesus. His back is to me, as he turns in a semi-circle to address those on the other side of the gathered crowd. I strain toward him.

***I’m almost there.***