

Exploring Scripture: Women & Eldership - Session 2

Intro

This week we are going to look at several examples throughout Scripture when God called and equipped women, by his Spirit, for what we, as modern readers, might consider to be spiritual leadership.

Since the Bible contains a significant amount of narrative and the whole of Scripture itself tells a bigger story, we should consider deeply how these examples within the narrative contribute to the whole story. We saw in Session 1 that God originally created the man and woman for partnership. While the Fall introduced all sorts of barriers, God has consistently worked to restore this partnership.

We can easily slip into the habit of reading the Bible only as a textbook or rulebook, but in reality it is much more varied than that. This session will help us understand how to notice and interpret patterns across Scripture which reveal God's will and God's wisdom for his people. As we explore these stories, we'll look for:

- How God calls women beyond the expectations and limitations of their culture
- What these calling patterns reveal about God's character
- How these examples connect to the broader story of restoration

This narrative approach helps us see not just what God commanded, but how God actually worked throughout history.

An exciting part of these groups is we get to read the Bible more together and learn more as followers of Jesus as a result. [Check out this document for some good tips on reading the Bible.](#)

Session 2: Women Breaking the Mold - Called by God Throughout Scripture

Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4
Creation, Fall, Restoration and God's Design for the Church	Women Breaking the Mold - Called by God Throughout Scripture	Paul's Letters - Understanding Women's Roles in the Early Church	Elders in the Early Church & Discernment

Prayer

Dear God, we praise you for your wisdom and how you share it with those who ask for it. Please open our eyes in our Scripture reading this week to see what you want us to see. As we consider cultural contexts that are different from our own, please give us insight into the role of culture in the Bible and in our own lives and communities. Show us how it impacts our understanding and influences the way we seek to be your faithful people. Thank you that you entered into this world to redeem it. Help us see the ways you have done that and are continuing to do that through people across the world today. Amen

Key Readings

- OT: Judges 4:1-14; 5:1 (Deborah), Exodus 15:20-21 (Miriam), 2 Kings 22:11-20 (Huldah)
- Gospels: Luke 10:38-42 (Mary and Martha), John 4:4-30, 39-42 (Woman at the well), Luke 8:1-3 (Women who followed and supported Jesus), Matthew 28:1-10 (Women witnessing the Resurrection)
- NT: Acts 18:24-26 (Priscilla), Acts 16:11-15, 40 (Lydia), Romans 16:7 (Junia), Romans 16:1-2 (Phoebe)

Reflect

Can you think of a time when faithfulness to God meant stepping outside of cultural expectations?

Reflecting on your upbringing and faith background, what were the spoken or unspoken assumptions about men's and women's roles? How have those shaped your understanding of God's calling?

Think about men and women from the Bible who “broke the mold” or did not fit cultural expectations. What might God be encouraging us to learn through these people?

Part 1: Women Called in the Old Testament

Read Judges 4:1-14; 5:1 (Deborah)

The time of the Judges spanned from the death of Joshua to the rise of the monarchy. Judges were tribal leaders who delivered God's people from their enemies, settled disputes, and, though at times questionable characters themselves, directed the community back to God.

What do you observe Deborah doing in this passage? How do you imagine her leadership fit or did not fit with cultural norms of her time?

Some scholars note that God raising up Deborah as judge during a time of spiritual decline (Judges 2:19) might demonstrate either God's willingness to work outside normal patterns or His consistent pattern of using unexpected vessels. How do you reflect on this?

Read Exodus 15:20-21 (Miriam)

From his earliest days, Moses' sister Miriam is at his side, first helping to secure his deliverance from Pharaoh's order to kill all Hebrew boys and later celebrating her entire people's deliverance from living as Pharaoh's slaves. Here she leads the people in a short but important song making sense of their deliverance through the sea.

Imagine yourself as a Hebrew slave who walked out of Egypt and through the sea. What do you see and hear Miriam doing? What's her significance as a "prophetess" for you and your community?

Micah 6:4 says, "I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam." How does God's explicit inclusion of Miriam alongside her brothers inform our understanding of shared leadership?

Read 2 Kings 22:11-20 (Huldah)

Why might the king's officials have consulted Huldah rather than other prophets like Jeremiah or Zephaniah? What does this suggest about her authority?

Huldah's authority to authenticate Scripture (2 Kings 22:14-20) raises important questions about the prophetic authority women had alongside men. What theological significance lies in God choosing a woman to confirm the authenticity of His Word?

Reflect further

How do these examples expand our understanding of God's calling beyond cultural expectations? What patterns emerge in how God used these women?

Part 2: Jesus and Women in Ministry

Read Luke 10:38-42 (Mary and Martha)

In Jewish culture, sitting at someone's feet was the posture of a disciple learning from a rabbi. By choosing this position Mary takes the place of a learner and follower, a role traditionally reserved for men. This dynamic may lie behind Martha's request to Jesus.

What does Martha want Jesus to do? How does Jesus' defense of Mary challenge cultural expectations? What does this teach us about women as disciples?

Read John 4:4-30, 39-42 (Woman at the Well)

In John 3 Jesus has a conversation in the middle of the night with a high status religious and cultural insider, Nicodemus. In contrast in John 4 Jesus has a conversation in the middle of the day with a low status religious and cultural outsider, the Samaritan woman at the well. John's placing of these stories side by side does a good job of encouraging us to think about insider-outsider dynamics.

What barriers does Jesus break in this encounter?

How does Jesus elevate this woman from outcast to evangelist? Imagine yourself as one of this woman's neighbors, when she runs back to town proclaiming the good news, how would you respond? What barriers is she breaking by becoming his witness? How does his choice of her shape the good news about him?

If Jesus entrusted deep spiritual truth to someone as unlikely—by cultural and religious standards—as the Samaritan woman, how might that shape the way we think about who is qualified to speak, teach, or testify in the church today?

Read Luke 8:1-3 (Women who followed and supported Jesus)

What do you notice about the women traveling with Jesus? What is significant about women traveling with Jesus and the disciples? What does their financial support demonstrate?

Read Matthew 28:1-10 (Women witnessing the resurrection)

Who are the women at the tomb? When have we met them before and what do we know of their stories?

What task do the angels give to these women? What is significant about this task?

The Jewish first century historian Josephus wrote, "But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex." (*Antiquities of the Jews* 4.8.15)

Giving this assignment to these women does not make sense culturally, if the goal is to create an air-tight case for the resurrection, what does the revealing of the resurrection first to these women show us about God's priorities?

Reflect further

Jesus' relationships with women must be understood against the backdrop of first-century Judaism, where women were generally excluded from formal religious education. What theological implications arise from Jesus deliberately including women in His teaching ministry?

In what ways did Jesus redefine women's roles in the kingdom of God? How might this inform our understanding of church life and ministry today?

Part 3: Women in the Early Church

Read Acts 18:24-26 (Priscilla)

Who is Apollos? What does he need? What is notable about Priscilla's role in teaching Apollos?

In Acts 18:26, both Priscilla and Aquila teach Apollos, but in several places, Priscilla's name appears first—unusual in a culture where men were typically listed first. Paul also mentions her as a 'co-worker' in Christ (Romans 16:3). What do you think this ordering and designation reveal about her role in teaching and ministry? How does this example inform our understanding of teaching authority in the church?

Read Romans 16:7 (Junia)

What does it mean that Junia is "outstanding among the apostles"?

The designation 'apostle' carries different meanings in the New Testament. It literally means one who is sent out. Sometimes it refers particularly to the twelve, other times it refers wider to others in the early church (e.g. Barnabus and Paul). How might we understand Junia's apostleship in light of the various uses of this term?

Read Romans 16:1-2 (Phoebe)

What does Phoebe do in the church? What does "benefactor" suggest about her influence?

The term 'deacon' (diakonos) is the same term used for male and female deacons. What does this suggest about early church structure?

The majority of Bible scholars agree that Phoebe was likely the one who carried Paul's letter to the Romans. This is based on the formal commendation at the start of Romans 16 and Paul's request that the Roman church receive and assist her. In the ancient world, such commendations typically introduced the letter bearer, who was also expected to represent the sender, read the letter and explain the message, and answer questions about the content of the letter. Phoebe is the only person in Romans given this kind of introduction, and her trusted role suggests she was not only a leader in her own church but also played a key part in delivering and interpreting one of Paul's most important letters.

Read Acts 16:11-15, 40 (Lydia)

Not every character in the book of Acts gets mentioned by name. Why do you think Lydia is?

What aspects of Lydia's identity and actions might be interpreted as leadership? Is there a difference between leadership and spiritual leadership? If so, what might it be and where would Lydia's role be understood?

How would you describe the calling and equipping that God has given Lydia to serve this new church in Philippi?

Reflect further

In session one, we read Joel 2 and noticed how Peter used that passage to describe what he was seeing unfold in the early church. How do these examples reflect the outpouring of the Spirit promised in Joel 2? What continuity do you see between the ways men and women ministered together then and the way men and women are collaborating in our church now?

Application Questions

1. What surprised you most about the biblical examples of women in leadership? How do these stories challenge or affirm your understanding of how God calls people to ministry?
2. What kinds of leadership roles do you see described in Scripture? How are women giving witness to God's character and advancing God's story? What differences, if any, exist between the authority of prophets, apostles, and other kinds of leaders? What similarities do you see between these functions and the work of our modern church leaders (e.g., pastors, staff, preachers, worship leaders, lay leaders, elders, deacons)?
3. What implications might these examples have for our church's current discussion about women serving as elders?
4. What role does cultural context play in understanding both these narratives and our application of them today?