

# LITTLE WOMEN



*Lessons to learn from lesser  
known women of the Bible...*

*with Pastor David Legge*

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# Little Women - Chapter 1

## "Rahab"

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**N**ow I have a number of readings for you this evening, and I want you to turn with me to all of them. First of all we're turning to the book of Joshua, the book of Joshua chapter 2 - and the first two readings are the ones I want you to mark particularly, but it wouldn't do any harm to mark them all because we'll be referring to them as we go through in our first study: 'Little Women', lessons from lesser known women of the Bible.

Joshua chapter 2 verse 1: *"And Joshua the son of Nun sent out of Shittim two men to spy secretly, saying, Go view the land, even Jericho. And they went, and came into an harlot's house, named Rahab, and lodged there. And it was told the king of Jericho, saying, Behold, there came men in hither to night of the children of Israel to search out the country. And the king of Jericho sent unto Rahab, saying, Bring forth the men that are come to thee, which are entered into thine house: for they be come to search out all the country. And the woman took the two men, and hid them, and said thus, There came men unto me, but I wist not whence they were: And it came to pass about the time of shutting of the gate, when it was dark, that the men went out: whither the men went I know not: pursue after them quickly; for ye shall overtake them. But she had brought them up to the roof of the house, and hid them with the stalks of flax, which she had laid in order upon the roof. And the men pursued after them the way to Jordan unto the fords: and as soon as they which pursued after them were gone out, they shut the gate. And before they were laid down, she came up unto them upon the roof; And she said unto the men, I know that the LORD hath given you the land, and that your terror is fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red sea for you, when ye came out of Egypt; and what ye did unto the two kings of the Amorites, that were on the other side Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom ye utterly destroyed. And as soon as we had heard these things, our hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more courage in any man, because of you: for the LORD your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath. Now therefore, I pray you, swear unto me by the LORD, since I have showed you kindness, that ye will also show kindness unto my father's house, and give me a true token: And that ye will save alive my father, and my mother, and my brethren, and my sisters, and all that they have, and deliver our lives from death. And the men answered her, Our life for yours, if ye utter not this our business. And it shall be, when the LORD hath given us the land, that we will deal kindly and truly with thee. Then she let them down by a cord through the window: for her house was upon the town wall, and she dwelt upon the wall. And she said unto them, Get you to the mountain, lest the pursuers meet you; and hide yourselves there three days, until the pursuers be returned: and afterward may ye go your way. And the men said unto her, We will be blameless of this thine oath which thou hast made us swear. Behold, when we come into the land, thou shalt bind this line of scarlet thread in the window which thou didst let us down by: and thou shalt bring thy father, and thy mother, and thy brethren, and all thy father's household, home unto thee. And it shall be, that whosoever shall go out of the doors of thy house into the street, his blood shall be upon his head, and we will be guiltless: and whosoever shall be with thee in the house, his blood shall be on our head, if any hand be upon him. And if thou utter this our business, then we will be quit of thine oath which thou hast made us to swear. And she said, According unto your words, so be it. And she sent them away, and they departed: and she bound the scarlet line in the window".*

Then turning a couple of chapters to chapter 6, please, and verse 17: *"And the city shall be accursed, even it, and all that are therein, to the LORD: only Rahab the harlot shall live, she and all that are with her in the house, because she hid the messengers that we sent. And ye, in any wise keep yourselves from the accursed thing, lest ye make yourselves accursed, when ye take of the accursed thing, and make the camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it. But all the silver, and gold, and vessels of brass and iron, are consecrated unto the LORD: they shall come into the treasury of the LORD. So the people shouted when the priests blew with the trumpets: and it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city. And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword. But Joshua had said unto the two men that had spied out the country, Go into the harlot's house, and bring out thence the woman, and all that she hath, as ye swear unto her. And the young men that were spies went in, and brought out Rahab, and her father, and her mother, and her brethren, and all that she had; and they brought out all her kindred, and left them without the camp of Israel. And they burnt the city with fire, and all that was therein: only the silver, and the gold, and the vessels of brass and of iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD. And Joshua saved Rahab the harlot alive, and her father's household, and all that she had; and she dwelleth in Israel even unto this day; because she hid the messengers, which Joshua sent to spy out Jericho".*

Now put a marker please in those two portions, and then come with me to Matthew's gospel chapter 1, and we are given the genealogy of the Lord Jesus Christ as Matthew presents it. In verse 1 it begins: *"The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren; And Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar; and Phares begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram; And Aram begat Aminadab; and Aminadab begat Naasson; and Naasson begat Salmon; And Salmon begat Booz of Rachab" - which is 'Rahab', the Authorised Version puts a 'c' in there to help us translate, but really it is 'Rahab', which is the same person - "and Booz begat Obed of Ruth; and Obed begat Jesse; And Jesse begat David the king; and David the king begat Solomon of her that had been the wife of Urias".*

Then turn with me to Hebrews chapter 11 please, that great 'Hall of Faith', Hebrews chapter 11 verse 31 - I should hear more pages going over than that! Hebrews 11:31, just one verse: *"By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace".* Then one final verse, James, just after Hebrews, chapter 2 and verse 25, James chapter 2 and verse 25: *"Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?"*.

One of the best sellers in fiction literature must surely be espionage, spy thrillers. Now I know confession is good for the soul, but you don't have to tell us whether it's your favourite or not tonight - but many people enjoy a good spy thriller, and the 'James Bond' phenomenon is proof in point of that fact. People love them, simply because there is often an exciting cocktail of danger, intrigue, mystery, even romance. I suppose there is a desire in all of us for that type of escapism, and maybe we even imagine ourselves in the mix of such an adventure. Well, if you love a thriller with intrigue, danger, mystery and romance, look no further: there is one here in this great story of Rahab - but the only difference is, it's not fiction, it's true.

Now if this were a movie, I imagine that the opening caption would tell us the location of our story: Jericho, Canaan. Perhaps the opening scene, probably, would take the form of a

camera shoot scanning across Jericho to show us what it's like: a well-watered oasis, a beautiful cultured city that is surrounded by desert and rocky ravines. You would probably notice that there is a dark shadow that is cast on its inhabitants, because towering around the city of Jericho are her massive walls, promising security, protection, defence from invaders to its people. Archaeologists have done a great deal of research at Jericho, and they tell us that the city covered about 8 acres, it had inner and outer walls. The inner wall was 12 feet thick, the outer wall was 6 feet thick, and both walls stood approximately 30 feet high. The ramparts on the walls were as broad as a street, so broad that you could build houses on them, and there were such houses built on it.

Now if this were a film, I imagine that the director at this moment, after showing us where the setting is, would very slowly begin to focus in on one lone figure of a woman standing on these great walls outside one of these elevated houses. She, of course, is the central character in this saga: Rahab the harlot. Now running parallel to this great personal story of Rahab is the story of General Joshua and the Israelites. So for a moment our attention is now taken away from that scene in Jericho to another place called Acacia Grove, which is east side of Jordan, just a little bit north of the Dead Sea. There the Israelite army is camped with their General, and they are planning to invade this great city of Jericho, because Jericho is the gateway to the land of Canaan, which was the land that God had promised the Israelites. So Joshua, according to that plan and the promise of God, sends two spies out to scout out for intelligence before they go in for the assault.

Now here is the point at which our three main characters, the two spies and Rahab the harlot, encounter one another. Verse 1, the spies found shelter in the house of a harlot, Rahab. Now we, in our Christian age, with our teachings on holiness - which, sadly, are lacking in these particular days, yet we still believe Christians should be holy people - we can't understand why these two spies would have went to a harlot's house. Some have even insinuated that they were up to no good when they were doing it, even Bible scholars. Now, the Hebrew far from indicates that, and indeed the whole point of the story is that this was the ideal place for two foreign spies to hide. Harlots often were innkeepers, but apart from that fact - and I don't believe that this was an inn, but her own house - two foreign strangers away from home, entering a brothel, would not have raised any suspicion whatsoever. It was quite normal, and indeed it was probably one of the best places for these two men to hide inconspicuously.

Now of the many, many people that lived in this ancient city of Jericho, we know only the name of one: Rahab the harlot. The reason is, as this great story transpires, Rahab comes to believe in the God of the Israelites. Then, subsequently, she shelters these spies, and by doing so she commits high treason against her own nation. Then she lies about the whereabouts of those spies who she is hiding up on the roof, and then she goes up to them and she does a deal with them to save herself and her family. It's such an adventure, it's a roller coaster ride that ends with Rahab being accepted by Israel, almost as an honorary Israelite! She marries a man called Salmon, who may well have been one of these spies that stayed in her home. She gives birth to a baby boy who becomes King David the Great's great-grandfather, and if that's not enough - wonder of wonders - this harlot Rahab is recorded in the family tree of Jesus Christ in Matthew chapter 1 verse 5, and in the hall of faith in Hebrews chapter 11. What a woman! What a story! But you see, it's more than a story of just Rahab, General Joshua and the Israelites, this is the story of every soul that is saved by grace through faith, because this is the story of salvation. Hopefully, by the end of this evening, you'll be rejoicing in it once more if you're a Christian, and if you're not: please God, that you may experience this wonderful salvation yourself, just as Rahab did.

Now first of all what I want us to look at is: who was Rahab? What was she? Now the name 'Rahab' means 'storm', or it could mean 'insolence', 'fierceness', 'arrogance', it can also mean 'broad' or 'spacious'. Now I'm not going to go into too much detail of what those things might mean, but I think they're self-explanatory, and without interpreting too much into a name, they certainly speak well of one who is a harlot. Now I want us to think of what she was and who she was under three headings. First of all there is her nationality, then there is her religion, and then there is her occupation.

Let's look first of all at her nationality: she was a Canaanite, and resided in the city of Jericho. Now the Canaanite was of a race that was inherently wicked, and is condemned right throughout Scripture as immoral and idolatrous. Jericho was a Canaanite city, and because of that it was a condemned city - judgement was coming to the city. If you were an inhabitant of Jericho, whether you felt judgement was coming to your town or not, it didn't matter, because it was definitely coming! Let me show you why we know this, if you turn with me to Genesis chapter 15, beginning to read at verse 13. You remember that God promised Abraham this land of Canaan as his own, and promised him an inheritance of a great seed - verse 13 of Genesis 15: 'And God said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs', that is the land of Egypt, 'and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full'. God was waiting until the iniquity of the Amorites, or I could put in there 'Canaanites', was to such an extent that He judged them, put them out of the land, and gave Israel that land.

Let me just say as an aside, many of the enemies of the word of God and the Gospel today accuse God of cruelty when He purged the Canaanites out of the land to give the Israelites the land of Canaan as His promise to them. Now let me say that that is absolutely fallacious, and these people are ignorant, and do not believe them because they do not know the Scriptures! The verses you have just read from Genesis 15 show that God waited 400 years before He judged the land of Canaan. He gave these people 400 years to turn from their idolatry, and believe in Jehovah, the God of Israel. After those 400 years, when the Israelites were delivered out of Egypt, they walked through the desert 40 years. So God gave them an extra 40 years to change their ways and believe in God after the exodus. Now in the additional days of waiting, while Israel camped around Jericho, where we are now, we see from chapter 4 and chapter 5 that these were extra days that were given so that Jericho could look out their windows and see the Israelites encamped, realise that they were coming to sack the city - they could have repented! They could have believed! But they didn't! If that were not enough, then there came the week when Israel marched around the city, chapter 6 and verse 14 - and then they had again, as Canaanites, an opportunity to flee from the wrath to come, but they didn't! I'm left thinking: what a patient, long-suffering God we have! Don't you swallow this fly that 'God is a cruel, vicious God, who killed all these men women and children and put them out of the land'. These were wicked people who hardened their heart against God and, after many many opportunities of long-suffering mercy and grace, shunned God's invitation.

But it was during this period of grace that Rahab was saved. I don't want to go into too much detail just now, but there may be someone, or some folk in this meeting, and you're just like these Canaanites. Many folk say: 'How could a God of love send people to hell?', when that same God of love sent His Son to the cross, and for the last 2000 years has presented a Gospel of grace and love and mercy to people, if they would only believe in Him. Maybe you're

one of these people, 2000 years later, who is still refusing His offer of mercy - well, you need to know that judgement is coming, and the day of grace, God's offer, is coming shortly to a close! May you take His offer now. But what I do want you to see tonight is: in her nationality she was condemned, in the city she lived she was condemned.

Then look with me at her religion, because the Canaanites were infamous idolaters. Their chief gods were many, some of them were 'El', 'Baal', 'Dagon', 'Ashteroth', and these gods and goddesses were gods and goddesses of sex and of war - very similar to the things that people worship today: sexual immorality and violence. This is what was worshipped! The religious practices of these forms of worship involved ritual prostitution, and even sacrificing their own children to the fire, to their false gods.

So this woman, Rahab, was condemned because of her nationality - Canaanite - she was condemned because of her religion, she was an idolater. Then thirdly I want you to see her occupation: she was a prostitute. Now a prostitute, I don't need to define that for you I'm sure, but maybe I do need to say that a prostitute in this day and age that we are speaking of could engage in sexual relationships outside marriage as a profession either for mercenary gain for herself, or out of religious devotion. There were ritualistic prostitutes in the Baal and Astheroth worship of the Canaanites, just as there are in some religions even today across our world. But the word 'harlot' here in relation to Rahab seems to indicate only that she was a mercenary prostitute, she was in it for the money. We imagine that she had a good vantage point for her trade, because this house of hers was on the top of the wall, and she was able to see when the strangers were coming in who would be obvious candidates for her services. So she was condemned because of her Canaanite nationality, she was condemned because of her religious idolatry, and she was condemned because of her occupation of harlotry.

Let me just remind you what the Bible says about the profession of a prostitute. The law says that a priest's daughter who was a prostitute was to be burned, Leviticus 21. An ordinary woman, if she was found to be a prostitute, Deuteronomy 22 says, was to be stoned to death. The Levite's were forbidden to marry a prostitute, Leviticus 21, and money earned from prostitution was forbidden to be offered in the temple as a payment for a vow, Deuteronomy 23. Right throughout Scripture prostitutes are seen as adventuresses who lead men to ruin, Proverbs 23, Revelation 17. They are seen as those who frequent public places in order to seduce others, often wearing seductive dress, 1 Kings 22, Proverbs 7, Isaiah 3. They are seen as those who are loud and have an unrestrained manner, Proverbs 7, Isaiah 3, Jeremiah 2. They are seen to be those who have beguiling tongues, Proverbs 6 and 24. Do you see the picture of what this woman was? In her nationality, in her religion, in her occupation, she was a sinner in every possible understanding of the word.

But hold your horses! Please do not make the mistake of looking down your nose at her! Because we, as people of the New Testament, should know all too well, as Romans 3:23 tells us, that whether we are religious or irreligious, moral or immoral, clean or dirty in that sense, there is no difference: for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Please, if you have this distinction in your mind that you are somehow better than she is, you have missed the whole point of what it is when the Bible teaches that we are all sinners by nature - however that sin comes out.

Now that we have looked at who she is and what she is, let's look at what happened to her. There are four things that I want to share with you tonight that happened to her that are so instructive, and I trust will be to your eternal benefit. First of all we see that she heard about God. She heard about God! As well as entertaining the locals of Jericho, Rahab, because of

where she was situated on the wall, would have often welcomed guests from various caravans who, along their route, crisscrossed with the city of Jericho. So all sorts of men were coming through her premises, men from all over the East, and as they swarmed the gates of Jericho they would be telling about the folk who were camped outside the city. They would be telling stories of years gone by, of how the Israelites were so strong and God defeated their enemies, how they crossed the Red Sea and so on and so forth. Indeed, from archaeological finds from pottery, we find some pieces that were imported at this time that history was written on, and they were sent all over the particular empire of the day. There are other international diplomatic letters that have been found, so there was a lot of communication going on, and it is feasible to imagine that Israel's exodus, the great conquests, could have been widely reported throughout the then contemporary world. They didn't have Internet, they didn't have TV and radio, but the word got around as it gets around today.

So Rahab was party to many of these marvellous stories about the exploits of the Israelites and their God. She testifies, look at verse 10, 'For we have heard how the LORD', this is chapter 2 of Joshua, verse 10, 'dried up the water of the Red sea for you, when ye came out of Egypt; and what ye did unto the two kings of the Amorites, that were on the other side Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom ye utterly destroyed'. So she had heard about this, how the Lord cleared the Red Sea and delivered the Israelites from Egypt across into the wilderness. Then we read further that she understood the mighty power that God had over nature, over the Egyptians, even over their judgement and very death. She understood the ownership of the Israelites by Jehovah, she understood that the Israelites knew what it was for Jehovah to intervene for them and deliver them from their enemies. She also says that she heard about how God destroyed Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites - if you want to read about that, it's found in Numbers 21. All of these events that she quotes here happened over the space of about 40 years ago, and she still remembers them, they are still talked about! She heard about God: 'I have heard', 'We have heard'.

What does Romans 10 verse 17 say? 'Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God'. Do you think I'm pushing the application a little? Well, come with me: not only did she hear about God, she believed on Him. Look at verse 9: 'I know that the LORD hath given you the land, and that your terror is fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you'. 'I know' - what did she know? First of all, God had given Canaan to the Israelites. Secondly, in verse 9 we see that she knew that a great fear of the Israelites had fallen on her land. Thirdly, from verse 9, she knew that her own inhabitants were fainting with fear of the Israelites. If you look at verse 11: 'As soon as we had heard these things, our hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more courage in any man, because of you: for the LORD your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath'. She knew that the people of Jericho's heart melted, they lost courage. Verse 11 tells us, fifthly, that she knew that Jehovah - it's translated there 'the LORD', which is the name 'Jehovah', which really is not a true translation because the name is four letters 'YHWH', with no vowels, you can't pronounce it - but that is the proper name of God! 'I AM', and Rahab knew that name! She knew that this One was the God of heaven and the God of the earth. Could I put it in New Testament language for you? She knew whom she had believed! Isn't that what Paul said in 2 Timothy 1:12: 'I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day'.

Sixthly, in verse 13, she knew something else: that she and her family would perish, unless they found refuge in God. She had heard a message of who the real living God was in all of His holiness, wrath against sin - in other words, she had heard a message of judgement, and that led her to faith in Jehovah God. We need to remember this evening, lest we forget that it

is faith that saves, Romans chapter 4 and verse 5: 'But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his', or her, 'faith is counted for righteousness'. She believed: she heard, and she knew, and she was saved! She was able to say: 'I know', and that is the assurance of her salvation that was also brought by her faith in this great God - 'I know'! The writer to the Hebrews, as we read, speaks of Rahab's great faith. Hebrews 11:31: 'By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace'.

Now I know she lied, and I'm not going to go into a whole discussion about whether it was right or wrong for her to lie in such a circumstance, but the fact of the matter is: the Bible nowhere commends her lying, but it does commend her faith. She was a prostitute who, I'm sure, had been used to lying a lot about the whereabouts of men, but what God commends to us tonight is not the etiquette of her profession, but the confession of her faith in God. She heard about God, she believed in God, and then we find that she showed her faith in God to others.

Of course, the story goes that the rumours spread that the two spies were in her home, and a summary of it is there for us in chapter 2 verse 2. The King of Jericho sent some messengers, and said: 'We've heard that you're holding these two boys in your brothel. We want you to bring them forth'. The woman quickly took the two men and put them on the roof, and hid them beneath some flax, and she came and said to these messengers: 'Well, they have gone, and I don't know where they've gone to, but you better go out and catch them now. You might be able to get them if you go quickly'. As soon as they left the city walls, they shut the gate behind them, and then she ran up to these two spies and made the deal with them: 'If you save me and you save my family, I'll keep you safe, but when you come don't destroy us for my lovingkindness towards you'. That's what the word is 'hessed', 'I want to enter into a covenant with you, that you will agree with me, when you come to take the city, that you will not wipe us out, that we will be saved'.

The story goes that she kept these men safe, and then she let them go, and told them to stay around the outskirts of the city for three days, and then escape and bring their message of intelligence back to the Israelite army and General Joshua. Now we read this evening James 2 and verse 25, let me remind you about what it says: 'Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?'. Now that phrase 'justified by works' grates on us, simply because - as we have just read - we are so used with Romans and Galatians and other portions of the New Testament telling us that it is not by him that works, but him that believes that the ungodly are justified. What we need to understand is the intention of the writer of Romans and the writer of James. The writer of Romans is wanting to show us that salvation is by faith apart from the law, by faith alone in Christ alone; but the writer of James in his epistle is wanting to teach us how we are justified not before God, but before men, how we can show our faith to others so that they might believe also.

Now this is important: the Bible teaches clearly that we are justified before God by faith alone; yet James teaches that we are justified before men by works - faith without works is dead. We are better to show people our faith by our works - chapter 2 of James, if you want to read that, verses 17 and 18. Then James gives us an illustration of this by the character Rahab, telling us that she was justified before men and women - the Israelites, that is, who eventually she went and lived among - because she kept these two spies and she let them go, proving her faith. Now please notice the difference of emphasis: Hebrews 11 and verse 31 that we read says, 'By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when

she had received the spies with peace' - it links her faith to the receiving of the spies - but James talks about how she received the spies, and then let them go out another way. The emphasis there is that she was justified before the Israelites by letting them go. Let me reinforce this, what I'm talking about here is the fact of the matter that, right up to the moment she let them go, she could have betrayed them. She could have killed them, she could have blown the whistle on them, and we read from the passage in Joshua 2:20 that these two spies had lingering doubts about Rahab. Verse 20 of chapter 2: 'If thou utter this our business, then we will be quit of thine oath which thou hast made us to swear'. So in order to justify herself before the rest of Israel and these two spies, she not only had to receive them, but let them go another way - and by doing so, she proved that she was a friend of God, and proved that she was a friend of theirs.

Is that not true of us? We hear about God, and we put faith in God, but we have a duty to show that faith to others, show that our faith is alive and not dead. Side with God's people, and God's ways, and God's word; rather than with this world. She heard, she believed, she showed her faith to others, and fourthly: she was saved. We have heard in recent days how salvation is not just a once in a moment experience: we have been saved, that's our justification; we are being saved, that's our sanctification; and one day we will be saved in our glorification and the consummation of all things. So, though she was justified by her faith, what she heard about God, that day of deliverance had still to come. We read of it in chapter 6 and verse 25: 'And Joshua saved Rahab the harlot alive, and her father's household, and all that she had; and she dwelleth in Israel even unto this day; because she hid the messengers, which Joshua sent to spy out Jericho'.

Before the spies came she believed. What does John 1 verses 11 and 12 tell us? 'He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the children of God, even to them that believe on his name' - and she believed in that same God, and she was justified by faith because she had received the message. Then, when the judgement came, that great salvation deliverance was fully realised. Friends this evening, what a great type, what a lovely, wonderful picture of our salvation we have. If you look at chapter 2 and verses 18 and 19: 'Behold', here were their instructions to her after they had made this covenant, 'when we come into the land, thou shalt bind this line of scarlet thread in the window which thou didst let us down by: and thou shalt bring thy father, and thy mother, and thy brethren, and all thy father's household, home unto thee. And it shall be, that whosoever shall go out of the doors of thy house into the street, his blood shall be upon his head, and we will be guiltless: and whosoever shall be with thee in the house, his blood shall be on our head, if any hand be upon him'.

So the spies promised Rahab and her family: 'If you hang the scarlet cord in the window of your home, and if everyone remains indoors during the attack of judgement, you will be saved'. Now you can't tell me that this harlot who had been hearing all the stories about exodus and conquest, didn't know about the Passover, and didn't know about the children of Israel in Egypt taking the hyssop and putting the blood from the basin on the lintel and the door posts, sheltering beneath the shed blood of the lamb while the Angel of Death went through in judgement - she knew all about it! She had heard about their deliverance, and do you not think that she realised that this speaks of the same salvation by grace, through faith that the Israelites have known? Picture the scene: there it is, hanging from the concrete windowsill of Rahab's house, a scarlet cord, as scarlet as her deep-dyed sins, and it dangles down the outer wall of Jericho, scraping against it with every wisp of wind. To and fro it goes, marking the days until the judgement comes. Watch, as Rahab daily comes to that window, and peers across the wilderness from her wall vantage point, saying: 'Perhaps today, Lord,

perhaps today'. Then, one day, she sees in the distance a sea of men like a darkening storm. Perhaps she asks in her mind: 'Here are the Israelites coming! Will these fierce soldiers remember the word of the two spies? Will this powerful God honour the promise that they gave me? When they said', in verse 14, 'Our life for yours', will they honour their word?'

Maybe she runs into the house again, and she reminds her mother and her father, and her sisters and her brothers, and maybe some children in the family to stay inside the house, to not even go one step outside the door lest they perish. That first day Rahab watches, and seven priests carry an ark, the Ark of the Covenant, led by thousands of men around the city. She braces herself, she thinks it's coming now, but nothing happens. The next day comes, and the next day, and five more days this continues - and then, on the sunrise on the seventh day, the men of Israel march again. They encircle Jericho seven times, and suddenly there is the blowing of a rams horn, and the thunderous cry of the people, and the city walls are shattered! The Israelites rush in and sack the city, and when the smoke of the battle of Jericho settles, miraculously one house is still left standing - Rahab's.

We believe, by inference, that that was the only section of the wall that did not fall - of course, it was burned when they burned the city down, the two spies had to go and get them and bring the family out - but the promise was that their house would be saved, and they in it. I couldn't help thinking, and I'm sure some of you are already doing it now, of the words of our Lord Jesus when He said: 'Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock'. The Lord there in the Sermon on the Mount was talking about judgement, that the only way to be safe from judgement is to have your life built on the word of Christ:

'On Christ the solid rock I stand,  
All other ground is sinking sand'.

As the Israelites' salvation had been secured by the scarlet strip of blood on the door posts and lintel in Egypt, Rahab's salvation had been secured by that scarlet strip of cord. All that scarlet typology was pointing towards the shedding of the scarlet blood of Christ in which we put our faith - for, as Paul says, our Passover, Christ, has been sacrificed. Sure, it's the red thread right throughout this whole book, for blood circulates on every page from cover to cover, for without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin. Whether you take it from Abel's slain lamb at the gate of Eden, right to the Lamb sitting on the throne in the book of Revelation in the Heavenly City, and the redeemed throng singing praise unto the Lamb that was slain and has loosed us from His sins in His own blood. I ask you tonight: are you trusting in the heavenly Joshua? 'Joshua' means 'Jesus', 'Jehovah', 'the Saviour' - you could read chapter 6 and verse 25 and substitute the word 'Joshua' for 'Jesus': 'And Jesus saved Rahab the harlot'. It was Joshua then, but it was faith in Jehovah Saviour that saved her.

Most likely people walked by her window, and hadn't a clue what this red thread was, just like people mock and scorn Christianity, and laugh at it - they don't understand it today. The cross is foolishness to them, but it is the only way to be saved. No one was laughing at Rahab when hers was the only family that survived! Is your family trusting in the heavenly Joshua? Are you seeking to save your family with this Gospel? You know, this story tells us that this salvation is good enough for a whole household, just like the Philippian jailer who experienced an earthquake in his situation, and he thought it was the end of all for him, and he was going to kill himself. He said to Paul and Silas: 'What must I do to be saved?', they said, 'Believe on

the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house' - and they believed as well and were baptised.

Oh, there are many things that we can learn from this lesser known little woman, Rahab. We can learn, one, the importance of women in redemptive history. Do you know that along with Sarah, Abraham's wife, Rahab is the only one that is recorded in the hall of faith in Hebrews chapter 11? A harlot who wasn't even an Israelite! It can tell us secondly that the grace of God knows no bounds - hallelujah! Thirdly, it tells us that salvation is through faith alone in Christ alone. Fourthly, that salvation, by faith alone in Christ alone, brings you into the family of God and His Son. Matthew 1 verse 5 tells us that this harlot, Rahab, went to live in Israel, and married an Israelite, Salmon, and was the mother of Boaz - the mother-in-law of Ruth, the great-great-grandmother of David, and eventually came in the line of the sinless Saviour whose blood was shed for us all! What a story! Is it yours? Did you hear me? Is it your story?

'There is a story sweet to hear,  
I love to tell it too,  
It fills my heart with hope and cheer,  
'Tis old, yet ever new.

It tells me God the Son came down  
From His bright throne to die,  
That I might wear a starry crown  
And dwell with Him on high.

They say He bore the cross for me  
And suffered in my place,  
That I might always happy be,  
And ransomed by His grace.

Oh wondrous love, so great, so vast,  
So boundless and so free!  
Lo, at Thy feet my all I cast,  
And covet only Thee'.

May it be your story by faith tonight. Do come back next week, and we'll be looking at the little woman 'Abigail' from the scriptures.

Father, we pray that every heart here tonight will be fully trusting in the Lord Jesus alone, and have the assurance of that faith - that He has said: 'Him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out'. Lord, we thank You for a wonderful salvation, that all manner of sin and blasphemy is forgiven of men, for the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth from all sin. Thank You, Lord, thrill us again tonight with the wonder of it all. Amen.

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Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - May 2007  
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## Little Women - Chapter 2

# "Abigail"

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**T**urn with me to 1 Samuel 25 please. Our character tonight, as I have said, is 'Abigail' - and we have rather a long reading this evening. Do make yourself comfortable, it's been warm these last couple of days within the building, and we don't want you to lose concentration because of that, so do make yourself as comfortable as is possible.

First Samuel 25, beginning to read at verse 2 - and I'm warning you that we're reading down to verse 44, so be prepared for that, to the end of the chapter: *"And there was a man in Maon, whose possessions were in Carmel; and the man was very great, and he had three thousand sheep, and a thousand goats: and he was shearing his sheep in Carmel. Now the name of the man was Nabal; and the name of his wife Abigail: and she was a woman of good understanding, and of a beautiful countenance: but the man was churlish and evil in his doings; and he was of the house of Caleb. And David heard in the wilderness that Nabal did shear his sheep. And David sent out ten young men, and David said unto the young men, Get you up to Carmel, and go to Nabal, and greet him in my name: And thus shall ye say to him that liveth in prosperity, Peace be both to thee, and peace be to thine house, and peace be unto all that thou hast. And now I have heard that thou hast shearers: now thy shepherds which were with us, we hurt them not, neither was there ought missing unto them, all the while they were in Carmel. Ask thy young men, and they will show thee. Wherefore let the young men find favor in thine eyes: for we come in a good day: give, I pray thee, whatsoever cometh to thine hand unto thy servants, and to thy son David. And when David's young men came, they spake to Nabal according to all those words in the name of David, and ceased. And Nabal answered David's servants, and said, Who is David? and who is the son of Jesse? there be many servants now a days that break away every man from his master. Shall I then take my bread, and my water, and my flesh that I have killed for my shearers, and give it unto men, whom I know not whence they be? So David's young men turned their way, and went again, and came and told him all those sayings. And David said unto his men, Gird ye on every man his sword. And they girded on every man his sword; and David also girded on his sword: and there went up after David about four hundred men; and two hundred abode by the stuff".*

*"But one of the young men told Abigail, Nabal's wife, saying, Behold, David sent messengers out of the wilderness to salute our master; and he railed on them. But the men were very good unto us, and we were not hurt, neither missed we any thing, as long as we were conversant with them, when we were in the fields: They were a wall unto us both by night and day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep. Now therefore know and consider what thou wilt do; for evil is determined against our master, and against all his household: for he is such a son of Belial, that a man cannot speak to him. Then Abigail made haste, and took two hundred loaves, and two bottles of wine, and five sheep ready dressed, and five measures of parched corn, and an hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs, and laid them on asses. And she said unto her servants, Go on before me; behold, I come after you. But she told not her husband Nabal. And it was so, as she rode on the ass, that she came down by the covert on the hill, and, behold, David and his men came down against her; and she met them. Now David had said, Surely in vain have I kept all that this fellow hath in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that pertained unto him: and*

*he hath requited me evil for good. So and more also do God unto the enemies of David, if I leave of all that pertain to him by the morning light any that pisseth against the wall". Let me just say of that phrase, which can be quite startling to people today when they realise how it is used in our contemporary sense in the genre of bad language, that this is an idiom in the Hebrew. Whilst it is a bit crudely translated in the Authorised Version, it is very literally translated - that is, in fact, what the Hebrew says, and it is an idiom that speaks of males, men. What David is saying is that 'I'm not going to leave one of Nabal's men alive today', and maybe the mood that he was in accounts for the language that he uses!*

*Verse 23: "And when Abigail saw David, she hasted, and lighted off the ass, and fell before David on her face, and bowed herself to the ground, And fell at his feet, and said, Upon me, my lord, upon me let this iniquity be: and let thine handmaid, I pray thee, speak in thine audience, and hear the words of thine handmaid. Let not my lord, I pray thee, regard this man of Belial, even Nabal: for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him: but I thine handmaid saw not the young men of my lord, whom thou didst send. Now therefore, my lord, as the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, seeing the LORD hath withholden thee from coming to shed blood, and from avenging thyself with thine own hand, now let thine enemies, and they that seek evil to my lord, be as Nabal. And now this blessing which thine handmaid hath brought unto my lord, let it even be given unto the young men that follow my lord. I pray thee, forgive the trespass of thine handmaid: for the LORD will certainly make my lord a sure house; because my lord fighteth the battles of the LORD, and evil hath not been found in thee all thy days. Yet a man is risen to pursue thee, and to seek thy soul: but the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of life with the LORD thy God; and the souls of thine enemies, them shall he sling out, as out of the middle of a sling. And it shall come to pass, when the LORD shall have done to my lord according to all the good that he hath spoken concerning thee, and shall have appointed thee ruler over Israel; That this shall be no grief unto thee, nor offense of heart unto my lord, either that thou hast shed blood causeless, or that my lord hath avenged himself: but when the LORD shall have dealt well with my lord, then remember thine handmaid".*

*"And David said to Abigail, Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, which sent thee this day to meet me: And blessed be thy advice, and blessed be thou, which hast kept me this day from coming to shed blood, and from avenging myself with mine own hand. For in very deed, as the LORD God of Israel liveth, which hath kept me back from hurting thee, except thou hadst hasted and come to meet me, surely there had not been left unto Nabal by the morning light any that pisseth against the wall. So David received of her hand that which she had brought him, and said unto her, Go up in peace to thine house; see, I have hearkened to thy voice, and have accepted thy person. And Abigail came to Nabal; and, behold, he held a feast in his house, like the feast of a king; and Nabal's heart was merry within him, for he was very drunken: wherefore she told him nothing, less or more, until the morning light. But it came to pass in the morning, when the wine was gone out of Nabal, and his wife had told him these things, that his heart died within him, and he became as a stone. And it came to pass about ten days after, that the LORD smote Nabal, that he died".*

*"And when David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, Blessed be the LORD, that hath pleaded the cause of my reproach from the hand of Nabal, and hath kept his servant from evil: for the LORD hath returned the wickedness of Nabal upon his own head. And David sent and communed with Abigail, to take her to him to wife. And when the servants of David were come to Abigail to Carmel, they spake unto her, saying, David sent us unto thee, to take thee to him to wife. And she arose, and bowed herself on her face to the earth, and said, Behold, let thine handmaid be a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord. And Abigail*

*hasted, and arose and rode upon an ass, with five damsels of hers that went after her; and she went after the messengers of David, and became his wife. David also took Ahinoam of Jezreel; and they were also both of them his wives. But Saul had given Michal his daughter, David's wife, to Phalti the son of Laish, which was of Gallim". Amen.*

Now if espionage is one of the most popular types of fiction, as we saw last week, surely the most popular is romance. No? I imagine that is the case, and this account that we have in the Old Testament is primarily there not for your romantic instincts, but to tell us historically how David came to marry this woman Abigail. Whilst that is the case, that's why it's here, there also is within this account all the ingredients of a great love story with, of course, a happy ending. It's better than fiction, because - why? - it's true! It's God's word, it's a real story. Here we have in Abigail a highly intelligent, stunningly beautiful young woman - but, she is married to an arrogant, selfish drunk whose name, 'Nabal', personifies his character - for 'Nabal' in Hebrew literally means 'fool'.

Now, do note, before we go on any further, that we this evening will be extolling the wise virtues of this wonderful woman, Abigail, and we read of them in verse 3 where she is described by the narrator as 'a woman of good understanding, and of a beautiful countenance'. You might retort: 'Well, she couldn't be that wise if she took this fool to be her husband!'. The fact of the matter is, we can't blame Abigail for that. More than likely her parents matched her up with Nabal in the arranged marriages of the East as they were. The likelihood was that Abigail was eligible to marry Nabal because she was so beautiful, and Nabal was seen to be an eligible husband to Abigail because he was a wealthy man, and the two were brought together. But let me say that although what we have here is most likely an arranged marriage between these two, there is still a great warning to all of us - and especially young people - that though we will see tonight how God can and does often overcome in a bad marriage, it is far better not to get into a bad marriage. It is better to use the entire God-given sense that we have in order to make an intelligible choice of a marriage partner. As the saying goes: 'To be forewarned is to be forearmed', and as the marriage institution says, 'Therefore it ought not to be entered upon lightly or unadvisedly, but thoughtfully and reverently'.

Abigail didn't have that privilege most likely. You do. But the sad fact is that even those who do do this, and enter the institution not lightly and not unadvisedly, but thoughtfully and reverently, and even carefully seeking God's guidance and believing that they have it, often discover after they are in it, with horror, that the person they married has changed beyond all recognition from the person they first came to love. Now if you find yourself in those circumstances, can I say to you that Abigail is your perfect role model. If this is your circumstance, you need to study Abigail tonight, and derive great instruction and encouragement from her.

Now, yes, this story has a happy ending - but like most love stories and happy endings, there is a lot of heartache, heartbreak, and pain along the way. I'm sure that some of you can identify with that tonight. Someone yesterday confessed to me that they knew nothing about Abigail. I heard also that there is a little group of women who have taken to studying the Bible lately, and they couldn't even find where Abigail was in the Bible! Proverbs 31 and verse 10 tells us: 'Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies' - and in Abigail we find such a woman. So let's learn the lessons from this lesser-known woman of the Bible, tonight, that is Abigail.

First of all what I want to do is show you the scene that is set. Here in verse 2 we find that

David is at a low point, one of the lowest points, I believe, of his life. In verse 1 of 1 Samuel 25 we find that Samuel has died. You remember that God promised to take the kingdom from Saul, and to give the kingdom to another, and it was the prophet Samuel who had anointed David as the next king over Israel. Saul, fuelled by jealousy, set out to kill his successor, David. Now Samuel, David's adviser and confidant has now died, and David along with the nation is plunged into deep grief. This is a very dark period in David's experience. To escape the wrath of Saul David flees and wanders the country with about 600 loyal soldiers. Now during his travels in the wilderness David stayed for a time near Carmel - verse 2 speaks of that - now that is not Mount Carmel, but it is a town near Maon named 'Carmel', where he defended the shepherds and sheep of Nabal against enemies and animals.

Now whilst David was there he began to run out of provisions. He sent ten of his men to go and ask Nabal for provisions because they were protecting his sheep, his livelihood, his business. This was customary, it was the accepted thing that if someone was being your bodyguard for your business, you had a duty to pay them by these provisions. Now think of this: Nabal was the man who was benefiting from David, Nabal had grown richer by the day because of David, and Nabal had the audacity, the arrogance and insolence to scorn these messengers of David and give them nothing. We see this in verses 10 and 11: 'Nabal answered David's servants, and said, Who is David? and who is the son of Jesse?'. He insults him and his father! 'There be many servants now a days that break away every man from his master'. The fool insulted David, though he was starving and though he was poor, though he was an outcast, he was still the most powerful man in the region at that time.

Now, how did David react? Well, instead of overcoming evil with good, David was vehemently angry. We see here that David, in verse 13, readied 400 soldiers for battle. They got on their horses, got their swords ready for the kill. If you look at verse 13, 'David said unto his men, Gird ye on every man his sword. And they girded on every man his sword; and David also girded on his sword: and there went up after David about four hundred men; and two hundred abode by the stuff'. He marched forward towards Nabal's home. We saw from verses 21 and 22 that David was intent on slaughter of all the males in Nabal's house, young and old alike.

Then the story turns, for in verses 14 to 17 Abigail hears through one of her servants of the rude and inhospitable actions of her husband as he insulted David's servants. This wise woman Abigail decides to take the situation in hand, because she realised the danger she and her whole household were in, and so she set about to appease David. In verse 18 we read: 'Then Abigail made haste, and took two hundred loaves, and two bottles of wine, and five sheep ready dressed, and five measures of parched corn, and an hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs, and laid them on asses'. She prepared a supply of provisions over and above anything that David would have been expecting or had requested, and she took it and went out to meet them.

Once she met David on the road, Abigail immediately began her appeal. From verse 24 to 32 we read of it, we'll look at it a little bit later in detail, but in the end the result was that Abigail's words and actions turned and averted the wrath of David - verses 32 to 35. Abigail, in the end, was rewarded in her lifetime for her wisdom, and her good character, and her godly ingenuity. About ten days after David's aborted attack, God avenged David, and verse 38 tells us He smote Nabal. And when David heard of the death, he sent his servants to Abigail, and asked Abigail to be his wife - verse 42 tells us she accepted. What a story! What an ending! What a woman Abigail was!

But before we look at this heroine, let's look at some of the other primary characters in the story. So we move from the scene that is set, to the characters that are presented, and the first one we face is Nabal, Abigail's husband. Nabal, whose name means 'Fool'. The first term that springs to mind when I think of Nabal is 'incompatibility'. We hear an awful lot about that word these days when it comes to separations and divorce, but if ever there was a mismatch, there was one in this pair: Abigail and Nabal. He was a fool, he was a difficult man, but I believe that this name tells us more than that. In Psalm 14 and verse 1 we read these words: 'The', in Hebrew, 'Nabal has said in his heart, There is no God'. That's how it reads, 'The fool has said in his heart, There is no God' - and the word 'Nabal', this man's name, is used there, and I believe that this is indicating that as a son of Belial, she says and her servants say, this man was an unbeliever.

In verse 2 we read that he was rich. He had 3000 sheep, 1000 goats - and Abigail, I suspect, would agree with the Beatles that 'Money can't buy me love', and it certainly didn't for her! In verse 3, the second half of it, we find that Nabal was harsh and evil, that's what that means, 'He was churlish and evil'. In his dealings with other people he was an arrogant, insolent individual - no regard for anyone but himself. In verse 11 we see this in the fact that he is so selfish, and - I think I'm right - I counted seven times where Nabal refers to himself: 'Shall I then take my bread, and my water, and my flesh that I have killed for my shearers, and give it unto men, whom I know not whence they be?'. Intoxicated with himself!

Then we see in verse 17, in the second half of the verse, that he was a wickedly stubborn man, for Abigail's servant says: 'For he is such a son of Belial, that a man cannot speak to him'. He was unteachable, unadvisable! Then verse 36, near the end of account, we find that he also had another problem: he was a drunk. Incompatible, would you agree? It appears that though they were incompatible, Abigail, to her eternal credit, tried to make the most of what was a terrible situation for her. It was an unequal yoke that we read of in the New Testament, 2 Corinthians 6:14. Now don't underestimate when I say she tried to make the most of it: it was very hard for her, perhaps nigh on impossible. He was a fool, she was wise. He was an unbeliever, she, from the evidence we have here, was a believer. He was ugly in his nature, she was beautiful internally before God. He was brash, she was gracious. He was hostile and violent, she was a peacemaker and loving. He was carnal, she was spiritual. Now know some of you are thinking: 'You need to go further, he was a man and she was a woman - is that not the idea?' - no, not quite! They're not all the same!

But Abigail must have felt suffocated in such a marriage, having been paired with a husband - now I am sure that her father thought this was some match. Wealthy Nabal was a real catch! Little realising that the man's life and his attitude might one day endanger his daughter's very life. Can I just say a word to parents here? I have a lot to learn in the days that lie ahead of me, but we need to be careful of the relationships that we encourage in our children. I know we don't have much say in it, but perish the thought that we should ever encourage our children to seek a life partner because they are rich, because they're intelligent, because they're successful - because all those things mean nothing, as we see in Nabal. We must encourage them to seek first the kingdom of God, and all these other things may be added unto them.

Nabal was a fool, and she was lumbered with him. Then look at Abigail. Abigail means, perhaps ironically, 'My father is the source of my joy' - that's what it means, and I just wonder did the father think he was going to be the source of her joy in pairing her off with Nabal? That didn't work out, for sure! The Bible doesn't say that Abigail was young, though it's more than likely she was because David, we believe, by this stage in his life was still under

30 years of age - and we can't imagine him being attracted to anyone too much older than him. We see very clearly first of all about Abigail: she was an attractive young woman. Verse 3 says she was of a beautiful countenance, but as we read on we see that her beauty was not only skin deep. I believe Pastor Mitchell preached on this many years ago under the title 'More Than a Pretty Face', and she was certainly that. She was beautiful and intelligent. Verse 3 says 'Of a good understanding', and we see from this particular account that she was very wise and quickwitted in how she dealt with this potentially disastrous situation.

In verses 14 to 17 we see that after her servant came to her and appraised her of the situation, she heard how David's men were coming, and David's men had only done good to the shepherds of Nabal - but David's men were angry. Though they had been a wall of protection to Nabal and his shepherds, verse 16, now he had insulted them, now they were coming to slay them and the whole household - and what did Abigail do? Post-haste she devised a strategy to avert disaster, verse 18: 'Then Abigail made haste', and we have read it before, she took these provisions as a gift. She and her servants took them on a donkey, went to intercept David on his way - and what was David doing? He was breathing murderings and threatenings, like Saul of Tarsus. Look at the import and weight of verses 21 and 22: he was going to kill all around him! He had been angered!

So not only was Abigail attractive and intelligent, but we see that she was also a mediator, or a conciliator - we would say 'a peacemaker'. Now see how she does this, for it is masterful. In verse 23, if you look at it: 'When Abigail saw David, she hastened, and lighted off the ass, and fell before David on her face, and bowed herself to the ground'. She prostrated and bowed on her face before David as an act of homage, she respected him and she showed him. In verse 24: 'She fell at his feet, and said, Upon me, my lord, upon me let this iniquity be'. She took the guilt of her husband's iniquity upon herself. Now if that shows anything, it shows great humility, because Abigail had suffered years of living with this insolent fool - and yet it had not made her bitter. She had resisted the temptation of saying: 'Give him what he deserves, David'. Neither did she play the blame game that's so easy to play when we're in bad relationships, but she actually asks that the guilt of this offence of her husband should be laid upon her! Then she does ask for pardon, because she herself did not know of David's request through his servants - we see that at the end of verse 25. In verse 25, at the beginning, she says: 'Let not my lord, I pray thee, regard this man of Belial, even Nabal: for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him'. She excused Nabal's behaviour on the grounds that he was an unbelieving fool whom God would judge, and foolishness would always be with him because of the way he lived his life.

A mediator, a conciliator, a peacemaker - then we see fourthly, not only was she attractive, intelligent, peacemaking, but she was a wise counsellor. I think it's interesting that in Samuel's absence, after his decease, she was fit to give advice to David - just the advice that he needed at that moment. So she appeals to David not to commit this butchery. Look at verse 26: 'Now therefore, my lord, as the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, seeing the LORD hath withholden thee from coming to shed blood, and from avenging thyself with thine own hand, now let thine enemies, and they that seek evil to my lord, be as Nabal'. She pointed out that God had caused them to meet, that God had brought Abigail across David's path - why? In order to prevent him committing murder and becoming blood-guilty. That's reassuring, isn't it? I don't know whether David's reaction of great anger and murderous spirit was a result of his deep grief for the death of Samuel, and also an expression of his hurt being out in the mountains, away from Jerusalem because he was running from Saul, not recognized as King. And now this sheep farmer felt he could be insolent enough to curse his name! Yet the steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord. Just in the right time, before

David committed this great sin, God brought Abigail along his path.

What I want you to see is that Abigail points this out to David: 'God has brought me to you'. Then, at the beginning of verse 26, we see as well at the end, she points out that God is the only rightful avenger - that is the inference. 'God has prevented you avenging yourself, but He is the only one', that's the point she's making, 'who can avenge'. Then in verses 27 and 28: 'Now this blessing which thine handmaid hath brought unto my lord, let it even be given unto the young men that follow my lord'. She points out these gifts that she has brought, and she reminds David that there was a day coming when he would receive far greater gifts, he would receive a dynasty as the King of Israel if he honoured God. Then verse 29: 'Yet a man is risen to pursue thee, and to seek thy soul' - she reminds David that God would protect him from Saul, he had no need to be afraid. Then we see in the second half of verse 29: 'My lord shall be bound in the bundle of life with the LORD thy God; and the souls of thine enemies, them shall he sling out, as out of the middle of a sling'. Abigail reminds David that God would deal with Saul, God would deal with all David's enemies, he didn't need to take the matter into his own hands! She uses this metaphor of them being slung out of a sling. She knew about David and Goliath, and she was reminding him about all the odds being against him as a young boy, and yet God came to his rescue - and He would do it still.

Then verses 30 and 31, she reminded David that God would keep His promise to him to become King. The weight of the argument here is found in verse 31, she makes the point that if he had shed blood causelessly and avenged himself, the Lord would not deal well with him. I'm reminded of that proverb, Proverbs 15 verse 1: 'A soft answer turneth away wrath'. Here you have these two testosterone-fuelled males: Nabal the arrogant fool, David the powerful outcast warrior - and there is more heat than light, until this attractive, intelligent, peacemaking, wise woman comes with a soft answer. Now I know a lot of men, myself excluded, who never take a woman's advice - never, ever, because they're only women! This is very common even in a church context. Can I tell you: if you're like that, do you know what you are? You're a fool! You're a fool!

Nabal was a fool, he didn't listen; but David listened. David didn't say: 'Listen, you mind your own business love, this is men's business - man-to-man - away you back to the kitchen sink and the nappies. It's not for you!'. Now I know that men are to be the head of the home, and I know that men are to lead a church - but sometimes, men, it would help if we listened to the women, because sometimes, sometimes, they have something to say. Look at David's reaction to see how he took this advice. He was, I believe, bowled over. In verse 32 he praised God: 'David said to Abigail, Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, which sent thee this day to meet me'. Then he blessed her for her wise intervention that prevented him sinning in verse 33: 'Blessed be thy advice, and blessed be thou, which hast kept me this day from shedding blood, and avenging myself with my own hand'. Then in verse 35 he sends her away: 'Go up in peace to thine house' - pardoned! Disaster and bloodshed averted!

Then the story takes another turn. She arrives home to tell Nabal what she has done, the threat that is averted - and do you think Nabal was worried? Look at verse 36: 'Abigail came to Nabal; and, behold, he held a feast in his house, like the feast of a king', and his heart was merry within him, and he was drunk! This fool is feasting like a king, when he was a no good fool who had insulted the true anointed king of God - and he was drunk. He would have been a lot of use if David and his men had come, wouldn't he? But what a wise woman - what did she do? Did she grab the frying pan, and take it to him? She waited till the morning, verse 37 says, waited until he was sober, and when he wakened she told him of the disaster that was impending because of his foolish arrogance, that he would have been dead, and his men

would have been dead - and she would have been dead, perhaps. Verse 37 says his heart died within him, now that's not literally speaking, it means it became as a stone - and it may well be that he took a stroke. It says that ten days later, verse 38, the Lord struck him, the Lord took his life.

It reminds you of that story Jesus told about the rich farmer building his barns, and God said: 'Thou fool'. When David heard the news he blessed God for avenging him, and verse 39 shows us he sent to make Abigail his bride. What a story! What a woman! But we need to ask tonight: what lessons can we learn from this lesser-known woman of the Bible, this beautiful, intelligent mediator, conciliator, peacemaker, wise counsellor. So I want to leave you tonight in our closing moments with the timeless truths that are acted out in this great biblical romance. There are so many that I wouldn't have time to exhaust them this evening, but let's deal with a few. The first, I believe - and there are five truths involved in this, and they are all related to the issue of marriage. Now if you're not married, forgive me for dealing with this for a moment - there might come a day when you will be! - nevertheless, listen, because this has great application to many here this evening.

Here's the first truth that we find in this story: it is that an unequal yoke can cause untold pain and anguish. Now Abigail didn't make the choice of an unequal yoke, and maybe you're here tonight and you have not made the choice either. You were saved after you were married, or you came back to the Lord after your relationship. But the point I'm making here tonight is: don't you make that mistake. It's one thing having it imposed on you by circumstance, it's another thing making the choice. She didn't have a choice, you do.

The second timeless truth here, and this is profound, and I want you to listen very carefully to this: bad marriages happen, even when we seem to make right choices, even when we feel that we are being guided by God, even some of the most godliest of individuals have found themselves in bad marriages. Mismatches are common! Now let me say, to qualify that remark, some of those marriages improve - praise God for that. There is nothing too hard for the Lord, and God's grace is great. Often a partner gets saved, or there is a spiritual transformation in the life of a spouse, or they just grow into spiritual maturity and are easier to live with. But some bad marriages don't get better, some bad marriages don't have happy endings - we need to live in the real world here. Whilst this is a wonderful romance with a happy ending, there needs to be a public health warning on this: your happy ending may not happen this side of heaven.

In verse 39 it says that Nabal was judged, and many people launch in there and say: 'Well, there you go! God bailed Abigail out of this awful situation'. But note what verse 39 says: Nabal was not judged for Abigail's sake, but for David's sake because he was the anointed king. Justice may not be meted out for you, dear one, in this life because of a bad marriage or a bad situation; but be assured of this: God will iron out all the creases of injustice in your life some day. It might be in time, it might be later on in eternity, but here's the point: so many of us are tempted to take these matters into our own hands. What Abigail teaches us is that she believed, and she exhorted to David, that revenge is God's business. He will avenge! He will distribute justice from His courts!

But there is tremendous encouragement for those who may find themselves in a bad marriage from Abigail, and it's this: you don't have to despair, you can glorify God in such a marriage - please God, it gets better; please God, God transforms it supernaturally and wondrously - but if you find yourself in such a circumstance, all hope is not lost. Even if that marriage seems to end, and you've done all in your power to prevent it, you can still glorify God! Indeed, some

of the greatest saints had the most unhappy experience in their relationships. I don't know whether you've ever read a biography of John Wesley, but John Wesley had awful unfortunate experiences related to romance. Grace Murray was a young, attractive, well educated, married woman who was converted through John Wesley's preaching on one occasion. She was married, she was the wife of a Scottish Master Mariner who was from no mean family. When he returned from sea, after her conversion, he was absolutely appalled and furious because she had become a Christian and a Methodist - I don't know which was worse for him! He threatened to put her out, put her in an asylum. It seems, as the story goes, that her meek and winsome spirit delayed the execution of his threats against her. Having gone back to sea, another tragedy struck, the husband was drowned.

So she was a widow, she left London, went back to her home in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and there she employed her life in working for the Lord. Often, when John Wesley visited to preach, she was one of the class leaders for the women's groups. Later, when John Wesley opened an orphanage, he employed her as the housekeeper. During her 9 or 10 years employed there he would often stay. Grace Murray's labours as a class leader for women were so successful that she came to lead all the classes in the whole of the North of England, and became an itinerant, a bit like John, on horseback - moving around preaching God's word to other women. Now, would you be surprised that such a woman found affection in John Wesley's heart? The two of them agreed to be married, but there was a problem. A young man called Charles disapproved - Charles Wesley, yes, the hymn writer, John's brother. He disapproved even more so when he was misinformed that Grace Murray was engaged to be married to one of Wesley's other preachers, John Bennett. So Charles took it upon himself to tell Grace that though John loved her, he would have to give her up for the sake of the work of the Gospel, and could not marry her. Then Charles went and persuaded John Bennett that he should marry Grace Murray a few days before John's marriage to her!

John's heart was broken, and his state was revealed in an unpublished letter, let me quote it to you where he says: 'The sons of Seraiah were too strong for me, the whole world fought against me, but above all my own familiar friend, Charles Wesley. Then was the word fulfilled, 'Son of man, behold I take from thee the desire of thine eyes at a stroke. Yet shalt thou not lament, neither shall thy tears run down''. That wasn't the end of his romantic tragedies, for at age 48 he married a wealthy widow, Molly Vazeille. J. C. Ryle, in his biographical chapter, writes this - listen carefully: 'The union was a most unhappy one. Whatever good qualities Mrs Wesley may have had, they were buried and swallowed up in the fiercest and most absurd passion of jealousy. One of his biographers remarks: 'Had he searched the whole kingdom he could hardly have found a woman more unsuitable to him in all important respects'. After making her husband as uncomfortable as possible for 20 years by opening his letters, putting his papers into the hands of his enemies in the vain hope of blasting his character, and even sometimes laying violent hands on him' - I indeed read one account where it said she used to swing him around the room by his hair! - 'Mrs Wesley at length left her home, leaving word that she never intended to return. Wesley simply states the fact in his journal saying that he knew not the cause, and briefly adding' - and I love this - 'I did not forsake her, I did not dismiss her, and I will not recall her'. This was the man that shook at least two continents for Jesus Christ, and he was in a bad marriage.

So the third thing is: your spouse is no excuse for your lack of spiritual growth. Abigail testifies that, Wesley testifies that. Bad marriages can happen - now don't be using reverse reasoning with me tonight, and say: 'Well, then it doesn't matter who you marry, because God will make it alright in the end'. No, if you want to help matters, marry the right person! But if you find yourself in such circumstances, though it might be hard, and even very hard,

don't believe the lie of the devil - because God's Word tonight testifies: it is not impossible.

The fourth lesson: God will bring other encouraging believers along the way, just like he did for Abigail and David. When they come, seek their fellowship, take their counsel and advice. Fifthly, even good marriages have their problems. Yes, that's right! Maybe you're one of these special couples - I hear people talking like this - 'We never argue, we never fight, 40 years and we've never said a bad word to one another'. I'll not call you what I think you are, but the fact of the matter is: Abigail had to go into exile with David. She wasn't marrying a rich man, she was marrying a rejected King, he was fleeing from Saul. She had to join him in the wilderness, verse 42. She lived with him, we read later on, in Gath of the Philistines, in Ziklag of the Philistines - and from there, in Ziklag, she was captured by the Amalekites until David led a rescue. This was a different situation, she didn't have her own donkeys like she did in Nabal's marriage. What was the difference? Here was the difference: both of them loved God, and they loved one another, and that got them through! It wasn't easy, but because she suffered with him she ended up reigning with him in Jerusalem as King, and bore his son Chileab, or 'Daniel', to him.

Now finally let me give you some timeless truths that are acted out in this story that apply specifically to the women. First, if you are married, women, be godly examples to your husbands. If you're not married, be godly examples to other men - that is possible, because if they are unsaved, that might save them. In 1 Corinthians 7:16 that's what Paul says: 'For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?'. First Peter 3:1: 'Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives'. I'll tell you something: no one ever got nagged into heaven. If the man or the woman is saved, it will not save them but it might sanctify them - there's a lot of husbands and wives need to be sanctified! Some people feel that Abigail was rebellious here, that's what some commentators say, that she was going behind her husband's back, and because she didn't tell him her plans she was usurping the headship of the home. Women, how would you like to be married to some of those teachers? The fact of the matter is, the Bible says this in Ephesians 5, men are to love their wives as Christ loved the Church, wives are to obey their husbands and submit to them - is that it? 'In the Lord'.

When a husband fails to do the godly thing, do you know what the wives should be doing? They should be encouraging him to be the head, and do the right thing. Even when he doesn't do the right thing, do you know what I'm going to say tonight? You do it! If he fails, and you can't even encourage him to do it, you do it! It will have an important effect on your children and your family, that's for sure. Then secondly, women, pray for your husband and your family. Pray for his health, his work, his relationship with the children, his service for the Lord. If you need to, confess to God bitterness that is in your heart, ask God to shape your marriage for His purposes. Thirdly, women, be peacemakers in your family, in the church too!

We can live on several levels, that's what this story tells us, surely if it tells us nothing else. We can return evil for good like Nabal, or like David we can return evil for evil, or like Abigail we can return good for evil. Jesus said: 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they are the children of God'. What a story! What a woman! What an example! Now it's over to you.

Our Father, we thank You for Abigail's example and the lessons we can learn from her. We thank You for her beauty that was internal, for her intelligence that was wisdom from God, for peacemaking that came from Your Spirit. Lord, we pray that we will be able to follow her counsel as David did. Help those that are struggling in their situation, but let none believe the

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lie of the devil that they are no use to God, but show them tonight what You can do with one who feels a failure, by Your grace, and by Your mercy in the strength of the Lord. Hear our prayer, we pray, Amen.

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## Little Women - Chapter 3

# "The Woman Of Abel"

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**N**ow we're turning in our Bibles to 2 Samuel chapter 20, and I trust that some of you have found - between last week and this week - where the woman of Abel is. There was some great discussion going on, whether it was Eve, Abel's mother, or whoever it was. Of course, she's found in 2 Samuel chapter 20, and we'll read a good bit of the chapter tonight from verse 1, so that we can really know the context in which we find this lady.

Second Samuel chapter 20, verse 1: *"There happened to be there a man of Belial, whose name was Sheba, the son of Bichri, a Benjamite: and he blew a trumpet, and said, We have no part in David, neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse: every man to his tents, O Israel. So every man of Israel went up from after David, and followed Sheba the son of Bichri: but the men of Judah clave unto their king, from Jordan even to Jerusalem. And David came to his house at Jerusalem; and the king took the ten women his concubines, whom he had left to keep the house, and put them in ward, and fed them, but went not in unto them. So they were shut up unto the day of their death, living in widowhood. Then said the king to Amasa, Assemble me the men of Judah within three days, and be thou here present. So Amasa went to assemble the men of Judah: but he tarried longer than the set time which he had appointed him. And David said to Abishai, Now shall Sheba the son of Bichri do us more harm than did Absalom: take thou thy lord's servants, and pursue after him, lest he get him fenced cities, and escape us. And there went out after him Joab's men, and the Cherethites, and the Pelethites, and all the mighty men: and they went out of Jerusalem, to pursue after Sheba the son of Bichri. When they were at the great stone which is in Gibeon, Amasa went before them. And Joab's garment that he had put on was girded unto him, and upon it a girdle with a sword fastened upon his loins in the sheath thereof; and as he went forth it fell out. And Joab said to Amasa, Art thou in health, my brother? And Joab took Amasa by the beard with the right hand to kiss him. But Amasa took no heed to the sword that was in Joab's hand: so he smote him therewith in the fifth rib, and shed out his bowels to the ground, and struck him not again; and he died. So Joab and Abishai his brother pursued after Sheba the son of Bichri. And one of Joab's men stood by him, and said, He that favoereth Joab, and he that is for David, let him go after Joab. And Amasa wallowed in blood in the midst of the highway. And when the man saw that all the people stood still, he removed Amasa out of the highway into the field, and cast a cloth upon him, when he saw that every one that came by him stood still. When he was removed out of the highway, all the people went on after Joab, to pursue after Sheba the son of Bichri.*

*"And he went through all the tribes of Israel unto Abel, and to Bethmaachah, and all the Berites: and they were gathered together, and went also after him. And they came and besieged him in Abel of Bethmaachah, and they cast up a bank against the city, and it stood in the trench: and all the people that were with Joab battered the wall, to throw it down. Then cried a wise woman out of the city, Hear, hear; say, I pray you, unto Joab, Come near hither, that I may speak with thee. And when he was come near unto her, the woman said, Art thou Joab? And he answered, I am he. Then she said unto him, Hear the words of thine handmaid. And he answered, I do hear. Then she spake, saying, They were wont to speak in old time, saying, They shall surely ask counsel at Abel: and so they ended the matter. I am one of them that are peaceable and faithful in Israel: thou seekest to destroy a city and a mother in*

*Israel: why wilt thou swallow up the inheritance of the LORD? And Joab answered and said, Far be it, far be it from me, that I should swallow up or destroy. The matter is not so: but a man of mount Ephraim, Sheba the son of Bichri by name, hath lifted up his hand against the king, even against David: deliver him only, and I will depart from the city. And the woman said unto Joab, Behold, his head shall be thrown to thee over the wall. Then the woman went unto all the people in her wisdom. And they cut off the head of Sheba the son of Bichri, and cast it out to Joab. And he blew a trumpet, and they retired from the city, every man to his tent. And Joab returned to Jerusalem unto the king". Amen.*

Tonight we look at 'The Woman Of Abel'. Now if, in our first study, week one, as we looked at Rahab, there was a hint of espionage; and then last week, when we looked at Abigail, it seemed to be a tale of romance; well, surely tonight's story is something more like a spaghetti western! The blood and guts being the predominant feature!

Now before looking at our lesser-known lady, we need to meet some of the other characters, and of course understand the broader story in which the woman of Abel comes to play such a pivotal part. Let me give you a bit of the background to chapter 20 of 2 Samuel. Of course, this occurs after the rebellion of Absalom, David's son, and that rebellion was successfully thwarted. Now David has begun to re-establish his reign from his throne in Jerusalem, but all is not yet well. In these last verses of chapter 19, we see that relations were tense between Judah and the northern tribes of Israel. It seems that the northern tribes of Israel were half-hearted about their allegiance to David. If you look at verse 20, you see there that all the people of Judah, in the second half of the verse, conducted, or the word is 'escorted', the king, and also half the people of Israel. Only half of them, literally they were half-hearted. Even though in verse 43 of chapter 19 they claimed to have a greater share in the king - they say, 'We have ten parts in the king, and we have also more right in David than ye', that is speaking of Judah - because there were ten tribes of them, they felt, 'Well, we have more claim over David'. Yet those were empty words, because their heart was not completely with him.

So it's in the midst of this political instability that we enter chapter 20, and we meet a rabble-rouser by the name of Sheba. He is designated as a Benjamite, and you will remember that the tribe of Benjamin was Saul's tribe - David's predecessor - and Sheba attempts a revolt against King David. In verse 1 we see that it seems he takes the words of Judah that they spoke in verse 42, 'Because the king is near of kin to us' - he was of the tribe of Judah - and he turns on the king on the basis of that statement, and rebels. He defiantly announces that the ten tribes have no part in David, the middle of verse 1: 'We have no part in David, neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse: every man to his tents, O Israel'. Now that statement 'Every man to his tents', simply means 'Let's go home, and from our homes we will resist the king'.

Then in verse 2 of chapter 20 we see that only Judah was left to David: 'So every man of Israel went up from after David, and followed Sheba the son of Bichri: but the men of Judah clave unto their king, from Jordan even to Jerusalem'. Now although it does say 'every man of Israel' did not follow after David, that has to be understood in a restricted sense. We know from reading later on in this book that it was probably a dissident group of these ten tribes, not every single man of them, but a representation that followed this rebel Sheba.

I don't know how many of you can remember the premiership of Harold MacMillan between 1957 and 1963 when he was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, but when he was asked what represented the greatest challenge for a statesman, he answered: 'Events, my dear boy,

events'. Events create opportunities, and people use events, particularly in the political realm, as opportunities either negatively or positively. Here we see that Sheba saw this tribal conflict between the ten tribes of the North and Judah at the South as an opportunity to promote himself. Because he was a Benjamite he probably hoped to get some of the support from Saul's friends who, of course, were David's enemies. Now in verses 4-7 we find that by now Joab, who you will be familiar with if you know the story of David's life, he has now been demoted and a man called Amasa has been put in his place. Amasa was Absalom's rebel commander, who is now in charge of David's army. David orders Amasa, because of the rebellion of Sheba, to assemble the soldiers of Judah within three days and pursue and capture this rebel, Sheba. Now, of course, we read that Amasa did not complete his job within that time, for whatever reason, so David orders Abishai to take command of Amasa, and to prevent Sheba from getting established in the fortified cities of the nation.

Then, as we look at verses 8 through to 10, Amasa's slowness to carry out the orders could have resulted in greater disaster. David actually says that the rebellion could have become one greater even than Absalom's. Now this relinquishing of authority by Amasa provided Joab with an opportunity. Joab saw this as a chance to kill Amasa, and to regain his lost position as chief in the army. So the account says that as they reached a large stone marker in Gibeon, Amasa came to greet Joab and Abishai. With a great show of friendliness Joab grabs Amasa's beard - as was the custom then to give him a kiss in greeting - however, if you look at verse 8, it seems to indicate that Joab apparently contrived to let his sword fall out of its sheath, so that as he picked it up he was able to stab the unsuspecting Amasa - who, incidentally, was his cousin.

Now, after Amasa's death, command transferred again to Joab. If you know anything about the biographical details of King David, one thing you will know is that Joab - though he was fiercely loyal to David - he was a ruthless and brutal character. We don't have time to look into his life story, but we know of course that he murdered Abner, against David orders he murdered Absalom, David's son - and now we find him murdering Amasa, and apparently throughout his whole life David did nothing to discipline him. The question must be asked: perhaps was that because Joab knew a bit too much about David? I remind you of 2 Samuel 11 verse 6, where David gave the orders for Uriah to be put at the forefront of the battle in order to die, so he could steal his wife Bathsheba - and who was the army captain that he ordered to do that task? It was Joab. Joab knew about his murder, Joab knew about his adultery, Joab knew about how he had indulged his son Absalom. Perhaps Joab just knew a little bit too much.

Well, as I've said, events create opportunities. Amasa was chosen to lead David's army to victory, but what did he do? He delayed and he lost his opportunity for greatness. However, Joab sees this weakness in Amasa, and ruthlessly seizes his opportunity and removes him and get his old job back. Then, as we look at verse 10, the second half, through to verse 13 - when Joab and Abishai begin to pursue Sheba, we see that their followers froze at the gruesome sight of Amasa wallowing in his own blood on the highway. It's not until the body is removed that Joab's men follow him to pursue Sheba. Then in verses 14-22, at last - you'll be glad to know - from all this bloodshed we meet our heroine, the wise woman of Abel. This hunt for Sheba, the rebel, led them to the far north to a city the Bible calls Abel-Bethmaachah. It was about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee in the Hula Valley, and it was, it seems, a city very famous for the wisdom of its people.

If you look at verse 15 we read: 'They came and besieged him in Abel of Bethmaachah, and they cast up a bank against the city, and it stood in the trench: and all the people that were

with Joab battered the wall, to throw it down'. Joab and his men begin to siege the city. They put these ramparts around the walls in order to climb them and eventually batter them down to gain access to the city, and eventually capture this rebel, Sheba. Here enters the wise woman of Abel, verse 16: 'Then', as they were battering down the walls, 'a wise woman cries out of the city, Hear, hear; say, I pray you, unto Joab, Come near hither, that I may speak with thee'. So this wise woman calls to Joab and asked him why he was going to destroy what he calls, if you look at it, 'the mother city in Israel', a mother in Israel. That is simply a metaphor for a very important city in the nation, it may even have been a capital city, regionally speaking, in that area.

She describes in verses 18 to 19 how this city was famous, in a proverbial sense, for its wisdom and the wise people in her, verse 18: 'Then she spake, saying, They were wont to speak in old time, saying, They shall surely ask counsel at Abel: and so they ended the matter. I am one of them that are peaceable and faithful in Israel: thou seekest to destroy a city and a mother in Israel: why wilt thou swallow up the inheritance of the LORD?'. If you had a question, if you had a query, if you had a problem or a puzzle, the place to go was the city of Abel. Now sometimes I think I see humour where there is no humour, and I have to beware of a wicked sense of humour! But nevertheless I can't help but see a little bit of humour in this account, because up until this point - around verse 16 - we've got all this macho action, bloodshed, positioning for political and military power. Then all of a sudden we see this trained assassin scaling the wall of this city, and all of a sudden this woman is shouting down at him - I don't know whether she was shouting down or not, but she certainly was shouting in his direction - and I can only imagine her saying: 'Hey! What do you think you're doing?'

It wasn't just a foolhardy objection on the part of an ignorant bystander. In all likelihood, this woman of Abel knew exactly who Joab was. In verse 17, in fact, she asks him: 'Are you Joab?' - the inference was that she knew exactly who this ruthless character may be. If she knew who he was, she therefore most likely knew his reputation as a very ruthless, bloodthirsty warrior. What I want you to note this evening is that she had something greater in her heart than a fear of Joab. This little woman had a fear of God. Now you might say: 'Well, how do you know that? I mean the text, does it indicate that?'. Well, it does, I feel, because she was making an appeal to Joab that was based on the law of God. Now you have to dig a little deeper for this, and we find it in Deuteronomy chapter 20 and verse 10, I will read it to you if you don't look at it - it says this: 'When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it'.

You see, in the law of God there were also laws of warfare. When you came to siege a city, before sieging it you had to offer peace, you had to deal with the inhabitants of the city - and if you did make an agreement with them, you were to abide by that agreement. In other words, you were to seek peace before war. So this law in Deuteronomy 20:10 required an assaulting army to offer peace before making war. Now we don't know this woman's name, let alone her occupation - it may well be that she was a judge in the city of Abel - but whatever her occupation, the woman questioned Joab's failure to submit to the citizens' terms of peace in accordance to Deuteronomy 20 and verse 10. In other words, if we can put it in our vernacular: she threw the book at him! What a woman! She feared God more than Joab, she feared God's law more than the warrior of the King.

Now Joab explained to her that he was simply after the rebel leader Sheba, hiding inside. Now incidentally, I don't ever remember Joab having to explain anything to anybody! But he's having to explain something to this woman, if you look at verse 20, he says: 'Far be it, far be

it from me, that I should swallow up or destroy'. Now you can be sure of one thing: if Joab had a grievance against the people of Abel, and if it was in his political expediency and interest, he would have slaughtered every single one of them and razed the city to the ground. Yet, before the wisdom of this woman he is somewhat silenced. What I want you to note is that because of her wisdom she effectively takes ownership of this traumatic tinderbox of a situation. She agrees - the ball is now in her court, she's in the driving seat - she agrees to have Sheba killed, and his head to be thrown over the wall as proof that he was dead. Within a matter of minutes that was done, the man was searched out of the city, wherever he was hiding, his head was cut off - decapitated - cast over the wall. Joab blows the trumpet, his army retreats, returns to Jerusalem. His mission is accomplished, the city is saved, and a potentially disastrous situation has been defused.

Joab saw his opportunity to advance himself. Amasa missed his opportunity of greatness. This woman of Abel found an opportunity to end a war and prevent many innocent deaths. Now there are many lessons that we can learn from the woman of Abel tonight, and hopefully we'll get a good lot of them looked at this evening, but I want you to note that as we look at each of them - particularly the first three - they are all leading to a predominant trait in this woman's life, and that's what I want us to be left with tonight to consider.

First of all, as we learn lessons from this little-known lady of the Bible, the first thing we need to see which is quite obvious is her wisdom. I've spoken a great deal already about opportunities, and how these characters in this story used their opportunities whether for good or for evil. One thing is for sure: as Christians, even in this dispensation, if we are wanting to use our opportunities well for the Lord Jesus and for God's glory, one thing we will need is wisdom how to use our opportunities!

Now if you want to learn about wisdom, there is no greater book to turn to than the book of Proverbs. Turn with me to it for a moment - and Proverbs, of course, details the invaluable, priceless nature of wisdom. Proverbs 3 and verse 13, we read: 'Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. Length of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her'.

Proverbs shows us right throughout its chapters that wisdom is not to be equated with intellect or education, it's got nothing to do with those things. Whilst you might be educated and intellectual and be wise, they are not the same commodity, because wisdom is something that is given by God, it is His gift. We see within this book alone that it is the humble, not those who are puffed up in their own understanding and wisdom, who receive this wisdom from God. Look at chapter 1 and verse 7, we find this foundational verse of the book of Proverbs, it's repeated again another two times throughout the book: 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge', or wisdom, 'but fools despise wisdom and instruction'. So it is those who fear the Lord that acquire this gift of God's wisdom. Now it follows through, doesn't it, logically and biblically, that if you fear the Lord you will fear His word. If you fear the Lord, you will fear the law of the Lord just like this woman did - Deuteronomy 20 verse 10 that she quoted, effectively anyway, to Joab.

This is right throughout the whole of the scriptures, and of course we know it too well when we come into the Acts of the Apostles and we see there that the disciples of the Lord Jesus

were commanded not to be preaching and teaching in the name of the Lord Jesus. What does it say in Acts 5:29? 'Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men'. They feared God, and that was the beginning of their wisdom. They feared God's word and the Gospel that they had been trusted with, more than the authorities of their day.

I wonder do you want wisdom? Would you like to have the wisdom of Solomon? Would you like to have the wisdom of the woman of Abel? It's very simple: if you want such priceless wisdom, you need to acquaint yourself with the word of God. You can't bypass this book, and you need to meditate in it day and night. You need to memorise it, you need to assimilate it and digest it into your very being. You need to surround yourself with those who love the law of the Lord, and those who are wise in it. Now that means going to a place where the word of God is faithfully preached and taught, but it means having friends around you and confidants and counsellors who know God's wisdom from this book. It also means that you need to ask God for it. James, of course, says: 'You have not because you ask not', and in Proverbs 2 we see there what is tantamount to an instruction to ask God for this wisdom. While reading the word of God, and meditating on it, and listening to it, and experiencing it in your own life and the lives of others, you need to humbly come and implore God to give it to you. Verse 3 of chapter 2: 'Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding'.

So, by implication, I think this lady had to be very acquainted with God's word. She had to have meditated in it day and night - how many of you could have quoted Deuteronomy 20 verse 10? Or any of Deuteronomy for that matter! It's interesting, she quotes it, and the Lord quotes it three times in His temptation facing the devil - it's a wonderful book. She was surrounded, I'm sure, by people who loved the law of God, and she prayed - maybe in a position of leadership in the land - for that knowledge, that she would dispense according to God's will the authority and the responsibilities that He had given to her.

Her wisdom is staggering - but do you know something? We see from her example that it is not enough to possess wisdom. What do I mean? Well, in this woman of Abel we see that her wisdom was active. She had wisdom, but her wisdom was active. In other words, she put her wisdom to good use. God had called her to act in this moment of time, and she did, and God was with her in the midst of it. She was called to do something, she did what she needed to do, God blessed it, God honoured it. Through this woman God saved innocent inhabitants of the city of Abel.

Now I don't know whether you'll agree with me or not, but I reckon that one of the sins of evangelical, Bible believing Christians today that must rank as at least one of the highest is that of having knowledge without action, that of knowing something and not using that knowledge, of knowing even what to do and how to do it, when to do it, but not doing it. Today, I think more than any generation in the history of Christendom, and arguably in the history of any of God's people, whether we talk of the church or the nation of Israel, we know more about the Bible, know more about spirituality, there are more resources than there have ever been - yet we know more and we do less! It's an indictment to us all. Her wisdom was more than wisdom alone, her wisdom was active. She was not a hearer or a learner of the Word alone, she was a doer of the same.

Then thirdly, as we move gradually toward what I think is her greatest trait, we see that not

only had she wisdom and her wisdom was active, but her active wisdom was spontaneous. Teddy Roosevelt, the once President of the United States, once said: 'Nine-tenths of wisdom consists in being wise in time' - did you hear that? Nine-tenths of wisdom consists in being wise in time, using your wisdom at the right time in time. Now so many of us are wise after the event, aren't we? We have that great gift of hindsight, and perhaps others are very able to advise you on how you should have behaved, or how you shall behave even though they don't stand in your shoes or sit in your hot seat - they're not in your situation - but it's different when you're there. The big question that we should ask ourselves, as we look at the example of this woman in an awful predicament, is: how would you have fared in such a crisis? What would you have done? What would you have said? Maybe the more general question needs to be asked of us tonight: what do we do when we enter the crises of life? How do we respond? How do we react?

Now here's a great lesson, and if you can grab hold of this I believe it will be a great help to you in the everyday bread and butter issues of your life, and it's simply this: ultimately how we behave in a crisis or a dilemma is determined by what we do the rest of our time. Have you got that? When the heat is on and we find our backs to the wall, how we react will be determined according to what we do all the other moments in our lives. I think I've used the illustration before, it can be used of sports competitors - rugby, football, whatever team sport you care to speak of. The players' spontaneous reactions on the field are determined, if they are a professional sports person, according to what they were trained to do in practice. So in the heat of the moment they will behave as they have been programmed to behave in such a situation. Now if they go into the match cold without any training, or missing the nights with the boys in the cold and in the ice when there's no glory, when there is no praise, no cups, no matches to win, their own reactions will come out according to their emotional reflexes. The same with a soldier, they are trained in the heat of the battle to behave in a certain way, and that comes out - why? - because it has been put in at great pains with high discipline.

So what determines how you spontaneously react in a crisis is what you do every other day of your life. When you're faced with a dilemma and you don't know what decision to make, and the decision you have to make has to be made quickly - just like this woman - it's too late trying to prepare for the crisis when you find yourself in the middle of it! You mightn't have time to fall on your knees and pray. You mightn't have time to get your concordance and see what God's Word has to say in such a circumstance. But if you are channelling the word and wisdom of God into your heart day and night, moment by moment, month by month, year by year, the Holy Spirit brings it out when you need it - in a split second, in that moment! Her active wisdom was spontaneous. I love this, because so many of us are so willing to pass the buck - 'Oh, I couldn't make that decision on my own, I would have to consult somebody else over that' - or passively, we're willing to wait for someone else maybe to come along and save the city. Did she do that? No! She knew if she didn't act the city would be sacked, her children would be killed, so she acted quickly and decisively.

How we see her active wisdom in its spontaneity. But this is what I've been leading up to this evening, fourthly I want you to see not only her wisdom, and the fact that her wisdom was active, and her active wisdom was spontaneous, but her spontaneously active wisdom was motivated by courage. Now many call her 'the wise woman of Abel', and I think that's right, we have seen her great wisdom - but I think if you home in only on her wisdom, in a sense you miss the point somewhat of her greatest characteristic. What I mean is simply that if she had spontaneously active wisdom, and then in the heat of the moment she was paralysed by fear and trepidation - that would have been no use to anybody! That's why I like the title 'the able woman of Abel', because not only did she have this spontaneously active wisdom, but

she was able to execute it, use it in the midst of this terrible situation. She had wisdom, but the significance of this event, I believe, is the fact that she had courage to use it!

During his years as Premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev denounced many policies and atrocities of Joseph Stalin. On one occasion he was censuring Stalin in a public meeting, and he was interrupted by a shout from a heckler, and he cried: 'Well, you were one of Stalin's colleagues, why didn't you stop him if he was wrong?'. Khrushchev loudly said: 'Who said that?'. There was an agonising silence, and no one followed to reply, no one even dared to move a muscle - and then Khrushchev replied very quietly: 'Now you know why'. Fear! We dare not underestimate what fear can do to us. We could have all the wisdom in the world, it could be active wisdom at certain times in our lives, it can even be spontaneous and come to us in a moment of need, but at the end of the day we can be paralysed by fear from doing the right thing at the right time! You see, there are only two responses that we can have essentially in the midst of a crisis: one is fear, and the other is courage. As Proverbs 29:25 says: 'It is the fear of man that brings a snare', it entraps us, ensnares us from acting as we should and applying the wisdom that we may have.

I want you to see two things about her courage tonight, for this is the paramount characteristic I believe that we find in the woman of Abel. I want us to learn first of all that her courage put the men to shame. One writer puts it like this: 'The men in the story appear to behave only in the conventional terms: mobilise the army, build a siege ramp, violently smash the city walls, squelch the rebellion - but the woman looked for another solution, one that would keep the peace and spare lives on both sides. Because she acted wisely and well, interceding on behalf of her people, innocent lives on both sides of the city walls were spared'. Now I want you to note a couple of things about how she put the men to shame in this situation. I believe you'll find them clearly in the text, the first is this: this woman, by the writer I believe, is shown to be more able than any other of the people in the city of her town to face Joab. The application is that she was more able, probably, than the rest of the elders and the judges of the city at that time. She was the one who took the issue in hand, she was the one who had the ingenuity and the wisdom and applied it with her courage - she and only she!

Secondly, she is not only shown to be more able than her other elders, she is shown to be equal to Joab. Now this isn't irrelevant stocking filler for the story here, this is God's Holy Spirit that is inspiring these lines so that we might learn. She is the one who essentially uses a theological and doctrinal argument to show to Joab that what he is doing, according to the law of God, is wrong and he shouldn't be doing it! She was equal for him. Then the third thing that shows her putting the men to shame is that she was more powerful than Sheba. She was the one who got his head chopped off and thrown over the wall. In the greater picture, she was the one who thwarted the division of the Israelite kingdom, she was the one who stopped this schism and rebellion taking fruition. She puts these men to shame.

Now you might be asking: 'Well, why does she have such prominence? Why does the writer give it to her?'. Well, I think one reason may well be in order to humiliate the male dominated society in which she lived. We've got precedent for this in Deborah in the Judges: Barak needed her, he wasn't willing to go on his own. Then in Isaiah 3 and verse 12, the prophet says: 'As for my people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them'. So there was a sense in which God could have used this to show the pitiful state of the male leadership at the time in the nation. He has to use a woman to deliver them because the men are so powerless. We see this in Abigail, we looked at her last week, but we didn't note that we see her as vastly superior to the men in the story. We dare not miss this: Abigail is seen as super-

above her husband, Nabal the fool, but Abigail is also shown to be ethically and spiritually superior in the moment to the King, David, who was going to slaughter Nabal and all the house.

Now I don't need to tell you folk here tonight that male leadership is at a low ebb in society in general, but especially in the church of Jesus Christ. Feminism in society at large, and evangelical so-called feminism in the church, political correctness has effectively emasculated men from the leadership role. Men feel disenfranchised in the home and in the church, and I have to say that some women would put men to shame as far as their spirituality goes and their spiritual wisdom. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 16:13 says: 'Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong'. In other words, act like men! Some men act like women, and women act like men! Women, I know this is your night and your series so I'm not going to steal it on you, but women, one thing you can do is encourage men to be men. You don't have to be married to do that.

There was a party on board a cruise ship in full swing, and speeches had been made by the captain, the crew and some of the guests. They were enjoying a week-long voyage, and sitting at the head of the top table with the captain was a 70-year-old man. He looked quite embarrassed, he was doing his best to accept the praise that was being poured on him because earlier that morning a young woman had apparently fallen overboard, and within a few seconds this elderly gentleman was in the cold, dark waters at her side. The woman was rescued, and the elderly man became an instant hero. The time finally came for the brave passenger to speak, and the whole stateroom fell into a hush as he rose from his chair. He went to the microphone, and in what was probably the shortest hero's speech ever offered he spoke these stirring words, he said: 'I just want to know one thing: who pushed me?'

Friends, our men need a push to be men, and to be leaders. Now I'm not saying that women, you're to be pushy, but if there's anybody to give them a push, it's the women. Not push them out of the road and take their place, no, no, no - encourage them to be men, to fill their role and their position. For in this instance, and in many instances in Scripture, we see that the women put the men to shame. It's not to take anything away from these women, no, no, far from it. They stand alone in integrity before God, and according to the witness of the revelation of the Bible - but it's at the detriment to the men of their time.

Then secondly we see in her courage that it demonstrates the honourable place women have in the Bible. Apart from the fact that she put men to shame, she stands in her own right as a woman of wisdom, a woman of action, a woman of courage and integrity. Now let me say before anyone misunderstands what I'm saying, or misrepresents it: we always must keep within the biblical boundaries concerning male and female roles in the church of Jesus Christ, and this passage has no relevance to church order in the New Testament. Yet that being said - the Bible does not teach, of course, women elders, women leaders - but that being said, I can't help thinking that the Bible gives more honourable place to women than some in the church do!

Now this might be uncomfortable for some of you, but the facts are here, even in the New Testament: God used women. They weren't in positions of leadership, they weren't in positions of government in the New Testament assembly, that's always male, but they were prominent. Even in the New Testament we read of women disciples, we read of women helpers we read of those who were in the Gospel with the apostles, we read of women prophetesses. But there are even special distinctions given to women in the New Testament, and we miss them at our peril: the last to be at the cross were the two Marys; the first at the

tomb was Mary Magdalene; the first to proclaim the resurrection were the two Marys; the first to speak to the Jews was Anna the prophetess; the first to attend a prayer meeting, the first ever church prayer meeting, was not only the men but the women in the upper room; the first to greet the first missionaries in Europe was a group of women by a river who were praying; and the first convert in Europe was Lydia, whose heart the Lord opened in Acts chapter 16 - a woman.

There is an honourable place that women have in the Bible that should be reflected in the church of Jesus Christ today, without muddying the waters or feeling intimidated regarding the rules and leadership in the church. I feel that the opposite is the case. It would have been sufficient, would it not, for the record to be - if the narrator had wanted it to be - simply: 'The city of Abel handed over Sheba to Joab, and he was dead, and that was the end of the whole situation'. But the author doesn't do that, the author of 1 and 2 Samuel highlights her, as he does highlight other women. Abigail was in 1 Samuel, you remember; and we find several women who he cites, women of nobility, wisdom, godliness and courage - why does he do it? Because in his day he wanted us to know first of all that women are important to God, he wants us to see secondly that women have been used in very important ways in redemption history. Thirdly, and this is the most frightening for some of you men, at times in biblical history women were the only ones God could turn to. Do you not like that? It's too bad, for that's what's there! That's what we find in Deborah.

Now, you women ought to be feeling good: God wants you, as women, to do something for Him. Do it biblically, do it according to the Scriptures, but courage is not a manly thing: courage is a godly thing, it is a holy thing! Now whilst none of us might be scaling a wall, or fighting off brutal enemies in an army, our households, our families, our nation, our church is under siege of various kinds. Homes are being broken and captivated by all sorts of evil. Churches are being bombarded by wholesale wickedness, an onslaught from every side. I want to tell you this evening: women, you have a special role to play in that battle, and you have something to do that men can't do.

This story tonight is a gruesome, disturbing story, but the facts of life for many people today are equally as harrowing. The only answer is godly wisdom, active wisdom, spontaneous wisdom, courageous wisdom - that wisdom is needed in both men and women. May God give you that wisdom tonight, may you seek it with all your heart and get it, may God use you, may God bless you - and in blessing you, bless others.

Our Father, we thank You that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, there is no bond or free, there is no male or female, and by grace we are all equal. Yet we acknowledge that in the New Testament Church there are roles for redeemed men that are not given to women, and yet we see that there are ministries that women can fill that men cannot. Lord, help us not to despise each other and our gifts, help us to operate biblically but also compassionately and, in the right sense, charismatically according to the gifts of the Spirit that You have gifted us with. Lord, help us to operate as a body, and Lord we pray that all of us, whether male or female, may have God-given wisdom from Your word that might be active in our lives, spontaneous in our crises and dilemmas, and courageous when it is so necessary - that Christ may have all the glory as men see our good works, and glorify our Father who is in heaven. Part us now with Your blessing, we pray, till we meet again. Amen.

## Little Women - Chapter 4

# "Rizpah"

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**W**ell, we're turning in our Bibles this evening to 2 Samuel chapter 21, and we are beginning to read at verse 1 through to verse 14. Of course, our character study tonight is 'Rizpah'.

Verse 1 of 2 Samuel 21 then: *"Then there was a famine in the days of David three years, year after year; and David inquired of the LORD. And the LORD answered, It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites. And the king called the Gibeonites, and said unto them; (now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; and the children of Israel had sworn unto them: and Saul sought to slay them in his zeal to the children of Israel and Judah.) Wherefore David said unto the Gibeonites, What shall I do for you? and wherewith shall I make the atonement, that ye may bless the inheritance of the LORD? And the Gibeonites said unto him, We will have no silver nor gold of Saul, nor of his house; neither for us shalt thou kill any man in Israel. And he said, What ye shall say, that will I do for you. And they answered the king, The man that consumed us, and that devised against us that we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the coasts of Israel, Let seven men of his sons be delivered unto us, and we will hang them up unto the LORD in Gibeah of Saul, whom the LORD did choose. And the king said, I will give them. But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan the son of Saul, because of the LORD's oath that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul. But the king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bare unto Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Michal the daughter of Saul, whom she brought up for Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite: And he delivered them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them in the hill before the LORD: and they fell all seven together, and were put to death in the days of harvest, in the first days, in the beginning of barley harvest. And Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it for her upon the rock, from the beginning of harvest until water dropped upon them out of heaven, and suffered neither the birds of the air to rest on them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night. And it was told David what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done. And David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son from the men of Jabeshgilead, which had stolen them from the street of Bethshan, where the Philistines had hanged them, when the Philistines had slain Saul in Gilboa: And he brought up from thence the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son; and they gathered the bones of them that were hanged. And the bones of Saul and Jonathan his son buried they in the country of Benjamin in Zelah, in the sepulchre of Kish his father: and they performed all that the king commanded. And after that God was intreated for the land".*

Now if you've been with us in this series looking at 'Little Women', learning lessons from lesser known women of the Bible, you will remember that we began in our first week with the character of Rahab. We felt, at least I did anyway, that there was a hint of espionage in that particular story. The following week we looked at Abigail, and of course all you ladies enjoyed the romance that was in that tale. Then the next study was the woman of Abel, and that was more like a horror story with all the blood and guts involved. If we were to classify tonight's story in some kind of literary genre, we would probably come to the conclusion that the story of Rizpah is a tragedy if ever there was one.

Now I have found in my research, looking at this character, that a lot of poetry has been written about this dear lady. Alfred Tennyson, Lord Alfred Tennyson, wrote a poem called 'Rizpah', and it wasn't specifically about this character, but many feel that behind the scenes of his thoughts he was thinking of this biblical lady. One of the lines in his poem goes like this: 'But the night has crept into my heart and began to darken my eyes'. That was Rizpah's experience, and tonight we're going to look deep into the dark, damp eyes of this mother as she keeps a vigil at Gibeah's hill where her son's corpses have been left to rot. Despite a law that said that their burial should take place before sunset, there they are, there she is.

I want you this evening to see her convulsing in anguish, perhaps pounding her chest having watched her two sons die in a gruesome manner, and now suffering the ignominy of the shameful exposure of their bodies to the merciless elements. There she is on her sackcloth rug, her skin is brown and seared from the exceeding heat, her once jet black hair is shot with grey and matted by nights of wind and rain one after another. All day and all night, for five solid months the Bible says, from barley harvest - that's about late April time - to the early rains in the month of October, she sits like a sentinel on watch, lest a claw or a paw be laid upon the faces of her sons who once nestled to her breast. Can you see her as she flaps and squeals, driving away vultures and ravens? At night she is haunted in the dark by the glowing eyes of savage beasts, perhaps in desperation she has to reach for a flaming brand in the campfire to scare them away. At night, I wonder, was she afraid to close her eyes lest in sleep the scavengers that were circling overhead dive for their prey? Tennyson imagines her saying to any enquirers concerning her condition, these words:

'Ah - you, that have lived so soft, what should you know of the night,  
The blast and the burning shame and the bitter frost and the fright?  
I have done it', she says, 'while you were asleep - you were only made for the day.  
I have gathered my baby together - and now you may go your way'.

It's a heartbreaking scene. As one writer has said: 'Rizpah would not bury her grief as long as the bodies of her sons remained unburied'. There we see her, a tragic figure. Who of us can understand, enter into what it must have been for her? Who can take in the depth of the pain of a grieving mother like this? Though I ask the question, I have to answer: the fact of the matter is, many understand. Many, in a relative sense, know what Rizpah went through, because there are those who have suffered the loss of a child - and if they have never suffered the loss of a child, they have experienced one tragedy or another in their lifetime, and if you're not one of those people the day will surely come when you will experience something that could be classified as a tragedy. Henry Kendall wrote another poem on Rizpah, and he put it like this, broadening this theme he says:

'We have our Rizpahs in these modern days  
Who've lost their households through no sin of theirs,  
On bloody fields and in the pits of war;  
And though their dead were sheltered in the sod  
By friendly hands, these have not suffered less  
Than she of Judah did, nor is their love  
Surpassed by hers'.

She was a woman of tragedy, perhaps you are too. Maybe you are of the male gender, and you know what tragedy is also - well, there's a lot we can learn from this little woman of seeming insignificance in biblical writ, this woman of tragedy. I want to give you the lesson

tonight under four headings which are questions. The first is: how had things come to this? The second: how did she get through this? The third: could any good come out of this? The fourth: what can we learn from all this?

The first: how had things come to this? Now before looking at the matter in hand in 2 Samuel 21, it's important that you realise that this incident that we are concentrating on specifically was not the first time Rizpah had become an innocent victim in a bigger battle that was out of her hands. I wonder do you ever feel like that? Something is going on in your life, and you've no control over it, and as far as you're concerned it's not your fault, and you class yourself a victim. Well Rizpah was in 2 Samuel 21, but if you turn with me now to 2 Samuel chapter 3, you will see the first time - as far as we have it recorded - that Rizpah suffered victimisation from the selfish hands of others. Second Samuel 3 verse 7, we'll just read that verse: 'And Saul had a concubine, whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah: and Ishbosheth said to Abner, Wherefore hast thou gone in unto my father's concubine?'

I've got to say something to you so that you understand what this verse means: if anyone was to have sexual relations with one of the king's women, whether it was the king's wife or the king's harem, that was understood in the custom of the days that we're speaking of as an attempt to take the throne. So by taking his bride or by taking one of his concubines, you were saying that you were in authority and you wanted, or were taking the kingdom. Now what's going on here in 2 Samuel 3 is that Saul has died, and Ishbosheth Saul's son has now accused Abner, Saul's General of the army, of relations with Rizpah. He suspects that Abner is losing in loyalty toward the house of Saul. Now, Abner denies vigorously that he laid a hand on Rizpah, and it's actually this incident that causes Abner to transfer his allegiance to David and bring the eleven tribes over with him. Now we don't know from the Bible whether Abner was guilty of sleeping with Rizpah - but either way, it doesn't really matter whether he did or whether he didn't, I ask you a question tonight: who is the victim in this whole scenario? Rizpah. Whether she was raped is immaterial in a sense to the fact that she was slandered, any reputation she may have had in the court was now in tatters, and all at the expense of someone else's squabble.

Right away, before we even enter 2 Samuel 21, the biblical author paints a portrait for us of Rizpah as one who was used and abused by others, trodden upon as others climbed their status ladder! Many feel like that in life and, I have to say, particularly women. Now Rizpah suffers a second cruelty, for her two sons to King Saul are now hanging on a tree - Armoni is the name of one, and Mephibosheth the name of the other, and that is not Mephibosheth that was Jonathan's son - and they are both dead. To add insult to injury, the fact of the gruesome death is not enough, they are not granted a proper burial - there they are left to hang in the open air, exposed to the elements. I ask you the question on Rizpah's behalf: did she deserve this? Had she done anything to warrant such treatment? Life's like that - I'm not saying there aren't things that happen to us we do deserve, and we ask for when we precipitate with our behaviour and choices and decisions - but this could not be classed as one in this woman's life. Again, she is suffering for the selfish sins of another. We see what those sins are, turn back with me to 2 Samuel 21 and verse 2 and we see that the cause of this bloodshed is because of the bloodthirsty house of Saul.

Now let's tie all the loose ends together so that we understand the context of this character Rizpah. In verse 1 we read that there was a famine in the land. Now Deuteronomy 28 tells us that famine in Israel was often for divine chastisement. God was making the heaven brass and the ground fruitless to bring His people away from sin to repentance and faith in Himself. So David and his kingdom are experiencing a famine, and so he goes to God and enquires

what the reason is, and God tells him that Saul broke the covenant with the Gibeonites, that's why you're experiencing a famine. In verse 2 the author outlines that for us, and he summarises effectively what we read in Joshua 9 verses 3 to 27, and that is that about 400 years earlier than this moment the Gibeonites, who were Canaanites in the land before the Israelites inhabited it, they tricked Joshua into a treaty and a covenant to guarantee their protection and security in the promised land. If you read the story, they made out that they were foreigners coming to serve the Living God, when really they were their very close neighbours who God had told them to cleanse from the land. They duped Joshua, and he gave his word, and it was before God, and Joshua and the Israelites had to honour it - but now King Saul comes along, 400 years after this event, and he breaks the treaty and he tries to exterminate the Gibeonites from Israel. Verse 2 says that his motivation was zeal for the children of Israel.

Now, here are several lessons from the behaviour of Saul before we even look at the character of Rizpah. A first elementary lesson is that we need to note that Saul did this act through zeal. Now righteous zeal in the word of God is often the motivation for heroic faith, but we need to note tonight that misdirected zeal can have serious and long, far reaching consequences. Now I just suspect that perhaps Saul was trying to make up for the fact that he spared the king of the Amalekites, and he spared some of their livestock when God told him to exterminate them all. Maybe he thought: 'Well, when I'm dealing with these Gibeonites, I'll not make that mistake again!' - and he wiped them all out, or most of them anyway! His zeal may have expressed a sincere desire to do something he felt was right, but he did something that was wrong. So that means that you cannot always trust your zeal. Didn't Paul say that in Romans 10 when he was crying to God, as it were, for those who were his kinsmen according to the flesh in Israel, that they would be saved. In verse 2 of that same chapter he says: 'For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge'. You couldn't get anyone more zealous for God than a Jew, particularly the Jew of Jews, the Pharisee. Paul says that of his own self in his biographical text in Philippians 3:6, he says: 'Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless'. Yet he was wrong, he was an enemy of God.

You can't trust your zeal all the time, but a second lesson is that the time that transpired from these events did not nullify the covenant with the Gibeonites that Joshua had made, nor did it erase Saul's sin against them. So what I'm saying is that 400 years had passed since Joshua made the covenant with the Gibeonites, several years have now passed since Saul had sinned against them, now David is suffering because of Saul's slaughter - but time didn't change anything. Here's a lesson for you tonight, and it's one that many of us learn with hardship: time and truth run together. Time and truth run together! What do I mean? Numbers 32:23, you can be absolutely sure that your sin will find you out, it will catch up on you, the truth will arrest you one day. In Galatians 6 verse 7 we have the law of sowing and reaping, Paul says there: 'God is not mocked: whatever a man sows he reaps'. In this particular instance it was a matter of the word that was given by Joshua as a man of God to the Gibeonites, and God takes our word seriously - more serious than we do! God remembers what we say, and keeping our word is no small matter to God - to such an extent that 400 years later, plus more, He is visiting the sins of transgressing agreements on the ancestors of Joshua and Saul.

So, because of this, in verse 3 David approaches the Gibeonites and he asks them what they would accept as an atonement, a satisfactory sacrifice for Saul's offence. In verse 4 you will see that there was no amount of silver or gold, no financial compensation that would satisfy these people. They also said: 'Nor shall you kill any man in Israel for us' - now that could be translated as them really saying, 'It's not for us to put a man to death in Israel'. In other

words, they're expressing the fact that they have no rights in Israel, they have no authority for taking blood vengeance against the guilty man, they're really saying: 'David, if something is going to be done, you're going to have to give us the jurisdiction to do it. It's going to have to be done in your name!'

What the Gibeonites wanted was life for life, and so they requested seven offspring, males, seven sons of Saul to die. Two of those sons were Armoni and Mephibosheth, Rizpah's sons, the other five were Saul's grandsons. David gave permission for them to be hanged after being executed, and there they hanged for the sins of the father - exposed, impaled to a pole in Gibeah. Incidentally, Gibeah in 1 Samuel 10:26 is designated as the capital city for Saul's reign. If you like, this is the epitome of the fact that Saul's sin was revisiting his house. As God said to Cain, 'Sin lieth at the door', and literally Saul's sin was coming to his own back door again.

Oh, I say to you from the Scriptures, as I say to myself: beware, personal sins can be revisited upon us, and indeed revisited upon our families - because often our sins have consequences. No man is an island, no man sins unto himself, but sins affect others. Now you might say: 'Well, it's not really fair, is it, that these two sons of Saul and five grandsons should suffer for their father and grandfather's sins?'. Well, it's not really fair that you should suffer for somebody else's selfish sins, or Rizpah should suffer for other men's sins, but she did - that's a fact of life, it is part of the fall, we suffer because of what others do. But maybe your next question is, and it certainly should be: 'But if this was wrong, why did David go along with it? You wouldn't think he would allow something that was unjust'. Well you're probably right, indeed Deuteronomy 24 verse 16 prohibits punishment of a son for his father's sins. In this instance we never find David reprimanded by God for taking this action, and it may well be that David was just, and the Gibeonites were just - and when it says that this was a judgement for Saul's bloodthirsty house, it may be that Saul was not the only one involved with this, but perhaps these two sons of Rizpah and five grandsons of Saul were also party to this murder and extermination of the Gibeonites.

Indeed, you will note that Rizpah makes no attempt to cut down these bodies. Perhaps she shows her submission to the righteous judgement of God. But even if that be the case, the fact of the matter is: she is still there, she is still mourning, she is still loving, she's still praying, she's still interceding, she's still mediating. What a lesson there is for us all, especially those who are parents. Like Rizpah's children, your children will surely do wrong - and though you should never condone any wrong that they do, never ever ever cut them off from your love. Sometimes I hear very harsh Christians saying: 'If he goes that far, or does that thing, that's it, I don't want to see him or her again' - that's a tragedy. However these two sons died, they were still her sons. When you walk down the street and see a man lying in the gutter, or drive through the centre of town late at night and see the working girls, we of all people as Christians ought to remember that that is some mother's son, some mother's daughter - a human being that used to be in the cradle that sin has destroyed. Whatever they had done, verse 10 tells us Rizpah remained near the bodies, protecting them from scavengers from the barley harvest in late April until the early rains in October.

That's how things had come to this, but how did she get through this? Well, if I was to answer that I probably could do it in just one word, she got through it all by love. You see, love covers a multitude of sins. But if I was to be more specific, she got through this ordeal through a love that was expressed in devotion. Now please do not think that Rizpah was a wee woman, weepy-eyed and weak-kneed. This was a woman whose devotion manifested itself in a steely eyed determination. She is one of the most persevering, persistent characters

in the whole of the word of God. Now here is a New Testament lesson for us, for we read in Romans chapter 5 verses 3-4 these words: 'And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope'. Remember that: here's a woman who had no rights, it would seem, she had little power in the court in the land, she had now been stripped of any family or social dignity she may have had - yet she made a resolution to sit there for five months until her sons were buried.

How did she get through it? Sheer love that was birthed in a devotion that was characterised by a determination that was second to none. She wasn't deterred by her hunger, by exhaustion, by the stench of the decomposing bodies, by her own grief, by hopelessness of her situation, by the reactions of others who passed by - but her tribulation worked patience, and her patience experience, and her experience hope. She never gave up! She loved, and because she loved she was devoted, and because she was devoted she persevered, and because she persevered it gave birth to hope in her heart. How do you get through? How do I get through? Hope. You see when you lose hope, you lose everything.

Could any good come out of this? We have seen how things came to this, how she got through this, it's very hard to see a light at the end of the tunnel of such an experience. One author has said: 'By refusing to hide her grief, by living it out in public, Rizpah gave meaning to her son's deaths, making the entire nation face the evil of what had happened'. That's exactly right: could any good come out of this? Verse 11, look at it: 'And it was told David what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done'. David heard of her devotion, of her love, of her sacrifice, and it touched his heart. We read that he took steps to give a decent burial to these two men and the other five.

But in verse 12 we read something very interesting, for 'David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son from the men of Jabeshgilead, which had stolen them from the street of Bethshan, where the Philistines had hanged them, when the Philistines had slain Saul in Gilboa', and we read that he buried them, verse 14, in the land that belonged to the Benjamites. Did any good come out of this awful situation? Yes. Not only did this wee woman, because of her hope, get her two sons buried, but she pricked the conscience of a King who remembered a similar situation where Saul and his son Jonathan, who David loved better than the love of women, were slain and hung, impaled to the wall of the city of Bethshan - and how the brave men of Jabeshgilead went, against all odds, and retrieved their dismembered bodies and buried them there. David realised that they had not been given a proper burial the way they should have been, and his conscience was moved to do it - why? Because of this little woman! David's action is directly related to the determinate devotion of an insignificant concubine called Rizpah. Surely now this used and abused victim had come into her own?

It shows you, doesn't it, the power of one? Can I say to you ladies tonight: the power of one woman, one tragic woman and yet one highly compassionate, deeply loving, devoted woman who persevered, never lost hope, who turned the heart of a King - what a woman! Now, we fourthly need to ask: what can we learn from all this? We've seen how things had come to this, how she got through this, and the good that could come out of this - but what can we learn in our day and age, going through the struggles and tribulations that we face, from this situation? There are four things that I want to share with you this evening, lessons we can learn from Rizpah.

The first is a lesson on loss, a lesson on bereavement and sorrow. Now I've read a number of commentators who comment on Rizpah - and there are very few, I have to add - but they

would accuse Rizpah of inordinate grief. To put it in our words, she was going a bit over the top. I don't know what you think of that, and I have to say that there is a danger that we can absorb ourselves in a hopeless grief over a long period of time, but those who accuse Rizpah of this, I feel personally, are trying to extract her out of the context in which she is experiencing this grief. You don't know, no commentator or Bible teacher knows, what she was going through. Incidentally, none of you know what anyone else is going through when they are grieving. That's why you should be slow to judge others concerning how they grieve, because many people, if not everyone, grieve differently. Don't be like some people who think that after a few weeks you should be just getting over it, and getting on with your life.

I love Matthew Henry, but I have to disagree with him on this point. This is what he says: 'Rizpah indulged her grief, as mourners are apt to do, to no good purpose. When sorrow, in such cases, is in danger of excess, we should rather study how to divert and pacify it, rather than humour and gratify it. Why should we thus harden ourselves in sorrow?'. Now that is a danger, he's right - but where he is wrong is that it was not to no good purpose! Had Rizpah not kept this vigil of sorrow and grief, David would not have acted as he did, ultimately peace would not have been brought to his kingdom, and famine would not have departed from the land. Let's always remember that genuine grief, long-term grief, is not inordinate. Our Lord Jesus wept.

From Rizpah we get a lesson on loss, the obvious lesson we get is on love. First of all, love to others. I'm sure most of you know Shakespeare's 116th sonnet:

'Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds...  
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken...  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom'.

You'd think he was writing about Rizpah! Five months! Paul echoes Rizpah's sentiment and passion in 1 Corinthians 13, does he not? 'Love suffers long. Love is kind. Love endures all things. Love never fails'. What about Solomon? 'Love is as strong as death'. What a lesson in love Rizpah gives us, and we all ought to thank God for a mother's love if we knew it. Parents here tonight, you ought to love your children fiercely, just as Rizpah did even in death. There are some children in our world and in this district even who have never experienced the protecting love of a mother, or a father for that matter - let us, as the children of God who should show love more than anybody, manifest it to them for Jesus' sake. Let us all, as believers, obey the Lord Jesus who said: 'A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another'.

Not only does Rizpah give us a lesson in love to others, but she gives us a lesson in love to the Lord. It is evident that her love was manifest in devotion, and love to the Lord Jesus should be the same. We ought to be completely and utterly devoted and surrendered to Him: persevering, persisting, determined - and the most obvious place that that determination should be manifested surely is in prayer. So we get a lesson from Rizpah in loss, a lesson in love to others and to the Lord, and a lesson in prayer. Do you see her, spreading her sackcloth prayer mat, if you like, on the rock of Gibeah: resolute to stay there for as long as it takes! Like old twisted Jacob, she is not letting go until she gets a blessing.

Now, if an earthly king like David could yield to Rizpah's demands, how much more do you

think our heavenly Father will hear us, will hear a mother's prayer and a father's prayer, and a child's prayer? I just wonder had the Lord Jesus this story in mind when He told the story in - if you turn with me to it - Luke 18. Think of Rizpah as we read these verses together, Luke 18 verse 1: 'The Lord Jesus spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint; Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man: And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily'.

Our Heavenly Father is not an unjust judge. Though David had a heart after God, he had an impure heart, an ill-motivated heart at times, but our Heavenly Father has a heart toward us. He knows our need before we ask it, and when we ask, He says: 'Ask and it's given, seek and you'll find, knock and the door will be opened'. But that statement that Jesus spoke - 'Ask, seek, knock' - is in this sense: 'Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking'. One of the common ingredients with all prayer warriors in the Bible and Christian history is this persistent determination that we see personified in Rizpah.

George Muller, a great man of faith and prayer - and we're used to hearing about all the answers to prayer that God gave in an instant to George Muller, but perhaps not so familiar with a statement like this that he made on one occasion: 'The great point', of prayer that is, 'is never to give up until the answer comes. I have been praying 63 years and 8 months for one man's conversion'. The story continues, Muller said, 'He is not saved yet, but he will be. How can it be otherwise? I am praying!'. That might be too simplistic for some of you, but the day came when Muller's friend did receive Christ - but Muller never saw it, because it was on the day Muller's coffin was being lowered into the grave at the funeral service. Round that open grave, which seemed to be a gaping hole, a void of defeat in Muller's life where that prayer was never answered, that hole was a willingness, an openness on the part of God, a door that was left ajar for a prayer that was persevering enough not to quit right to the end, and that man was saved at his funeral!

I love the writings of E.M. Bounds, I'm forever recommending them to you, on prayer. I may have told you before that he had two sons, one was a believer the other wasn't. Bounds died at the age of 90, and his unconverted son was not saved. He lived until he was 90, and was converted at 90 - but he was converted! Someone has said, in relation to Rizpah: 'We should determine to cover those in sin and those in need with our prayer, so that Satan can't devour them, be it day time or night time'. If Rizpah says anything to us, surely the lesson of prayer is: don't give up! When you're tempted to let it go, remember Rizpah.

She gives us a lesson in loss, a lesson in love for others and for the Lord, a lesson in prayer - and finally: a lesson on sin. 'What's that lesson?', you say. Sin must be paid for. Time didn't atone for her. Four hundred years passes, the years between this event, Saul slaying the Gibeonites and David being cursed for it in his kingdom. Silver and gold could not atone for it as far as the Gibeonites were concerned. There had to be justice, and that justice demanded blood. Galatians chapter 3 and verse 13 tells us that 'Cursed is everyone that hangs upon a tree', quoting the law in Deuteronomy - but in the context that Paul speaks those words, he says: 'Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree'. Yes, sin must be paid for, but - hallelujah! - sin has been paid for! We are 'not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and

gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot'. We sing it:

'Nothing can for sin atone,  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus'.

The only thing that could satisfy the just demands of the holy God of heaven was the shedding of the precious blood of Christ as a righteous, just victim - the just dying for the unjust, the righteous for the unrighteous - that He might bring us to God. Christ being made a curse, that we might be delivered from the curse! It's a lesson on sin. How many men hung on the tree? Seven. You know, don't you, that seven is the number of perfection or completeness in the word of God. What did our Lord Jesus Christ cry from that accursed tree? 'It is finished!', complete satisfaction, He has put away sin before God so that men might believe and be saved. Jesus hanging naked on a tree - why? Because sin lies at your door, because it lies at the door of my heart.

I'll never forget visiting St Giles Cathedral, I think it was in Glasgow - I get mixed up whether it was Glasgow or Edinburgh. There's a wonderful stained glass window in the church, and it portrays a picture of the crucifixion. There at Calvary's Mount are these three crosses, and the Lord at the centre, two thieves either side. But the artist portrays a great throng around the foot of the cross, and that whole crowd is turned facing the spectacle, probably shouting abuse. The guide that was taking us round the church asked could we see anything unusual in the crowd. Of course we couldn't, until he pointed out that right at the bottom right-hand corner there was a face that was not looking toward the cross, but was looking toward us. Of course, these artists have reasons for doing these things as you may know, and the reason for that one face facing out, he said, was to draw us into the crowd - to realise that we had a part, our sin laid on Him. Do you know that? Your sin, your present sin He bore.

Armoni and Mephibosheth died for the sins of their father, but there was another Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, and because of an oath and a covenant between Jonathan and David before God, Mephibosheth was saved. We can be saved also if we take God at His word and trust in the new covenant: Christ shed His blood for our sins, His body was broken for our sins. If that is our experience, we can say like Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, 'Mine by covenant, mine forever; mine by oath, and mine by blood'. What a lesson we have from Rizpah. In spite of these circumstances, she got through with determinate devotion and love that birthed hope in her heart. Good came out of this situation, and how much we can learn from it in loss, in love, in prayer and even in our sin. May God bless His word to all our hearts tonight.

Father, we thank You tonight that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, nothing in this life or even in death. Lord, give us a sense of that everlasting, eternal, never dying love in our hearts now, all of us. Help us to show this strong love, divine agape love to others. Part us now with Your blessing, we pray, and whatever Rizpah-situation we find ourselves in, Lord, let us not lose hope. For Christ's sake, Amen.

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Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - May 2007  
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## Little Women - Chapter 5

# "Huldah The Prophetess"

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**W**ell, we're turning in our Bibles to 2 Kings chapter 22, this is our fifth study - and of course all of the recordings are available on CD and audio cassette of all the meetings, and you can order those tonight if you wish. We're looking this evening at Huldah, and this is where we find her, and also in 2 Chronicles 34 but we're not going to look at that portion tonight, we're just going to look at 2 Kings 22 and beginning to read at verse 1 through to verse 20:

*"Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty and one years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Jedidah, the daughter of Adaiah of Boscath. And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left. And it came to pass in the eighteenth year of king Josiah, that the king sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, the son of Meshullam, the scribe, to the house of the LORD, saying, Go up to Hilkiyah the high priest, that he may sum the silver which is brought into the house of the LORD, which the keepers of the door have gathered of the people: And let them deliver it into the hand of the doers of the work, that have the oversight of the house of the LORD: and let them give it to the doers of the work which is in the house of the LORD, to repair the breaches of the house, Unto carpenters, and builders, and masons, and to buy timber and hewn stone to repair the house. Howbeit there was no reckoning made with them of the money that was delivered into their hand, because they dealt faithfully. And Hilkiyah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD. And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. And Shaphan the scribe came to the king, and brought the king word again, and said, Thy servants have gathered the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of them that do the work, that have the oversight of the house of the LORD. And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiyah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king.*

*"And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes. And the king commanded Hilkiyah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king's, saying, Go ye, inquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.*

*"So Hilkiyah the priest, and Ahikam, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Asahiah, went unto Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; (now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the college;) and they communed with her. And she said unto them, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Tell the man that sent you to me, Thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the king of Judah hath read: Because they have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore my wrath shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched. But to the king of Judah which sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall ye*

*say to him, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, As touching the words which thou hast heard; Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the LORD, when thou heardest what I spake against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and hast rent thy clothes, and wept before me; I also have heard thee, saith the LORD. Behold therefore, I will gather thee unto thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered into thy grave in peace; and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place. And they brought the king word again".*

We began our lessons from these lesser women of the Bible several weeks ago, looking at the character of Rahab. I hope you agree with me that that was a kind of espionage story, spies, intrigue, danger. Then the following week we looked at Abigail, and of course that was a tale of romance. Then we looked at the woman of Abel, which was a bit more like, as we said, a spaghetti western, a horror story of blood and guts. Then we came last week to what could only be classified as a tragedy, the story of Rizpah.

Well, how do we classify tonight's tale? 'Huldah The Prophetess' - well, I have put it into the category of a tale of the unexpected, the reason being that we are used to God speaking through prophets, not prophetesses. Perhaps, if you're honest, you would be more comfortable with a prophet speaking God's word than a prophetess - it fits more into our convenient and, I would have to say, sometimes contrived categorisation of male and female roles. But we are faced with a problem when our clear-cut distinctions of what men should do and women should not do appears not to square with what the Bible teaches.

We have to be honest, Huldah the prophetess - as all prophetesses - initially seems to cause us a bit of problem. So I want us to study her character under three headings. The first is: what does the ministry of a prophetess mean? Secondly: how does Huldah come onto the scene? And thirdly: why is Huldah sought out by the king?

Let's deal with the first: what does the ministry of a prophetess mean? We're really looking at this essential problem: how do we understand the role of a prophetess? Now, of course, if you're familiar with your Bible, you will know that Huldah is only one of several women who were designated prophetesses in the Bible. Of course, if we begin with the Old Testament, we find that way back as far as Exodus chapter 15 and verse 20 Miriam is classified as a prophetess. Exodus 15:20 reads like this: 'And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances'. Then when we come to the book of Judges, in Judges chapter 4 and verse 4 we find that Deborah is also designated a prophetess: ' And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time'.

Many of you may not know that Isaiah's wife was a prophetess, Isaiah 8 and verse 3 we read, and Isaiah says: 'And I went unto the prophetess; and she conceived, and bare a son'. When we come to Nehemiah's book and chapter 6 and verse 14, we read of another prophetess by the name of Noadiah, and Nehemiah prays unto God against Noadiah and Tobiah and Sanballat, his enemies, and he says: 'My God, think thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works, and on the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets, that would have put me in fear'. Now she was prophesying wrong prophecies, but the problem that Nehemiah had with her was not that she was a woman prophesying, that she was a prophetess, but rather that her prophecies were against him. So we are faced with this Old Testament phenomenon of women as prophetesses, authoritatively, agents transmitting the word of God.

Now prophetesses, believe it or not, appear to be even more common when we enter the New Testament. Right away in the Gospels we encounter Anna, a prophetess who thanked God when the Lord Jesus was brought into the temple as a baby and she recognized that He was the Messiah in Luke chapter 2 verses 36-38. Then of course Peter, on the day of Pentecost, cites Joel's prophecy that when the Holy Spirit would be poured out, we read in Acts 2 that he says: 'Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; and on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy'. Now, Acts 21 and verse 9 seems to be a fulfilment of that quoted prophecy of Joel in Peter's Pentecost sermon, for we read there that Philip had four daughters and they were all prophetesses. We don't know much more about them, but they are designated clearly as having prophetic ministry.

Then when we come into the Epistles - we're not going to delve into these passages in too much depth tonight, I'm just citing them as examples - the apostle Paul also encourages women to prophesy with proper adornment, that recognizes headship. We read of that in 1 Corinthians 11 and verse 5, where Paul says: 'But every woman that prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven'. So Paul indicates that prophecy was common in the New Testament church, even among women. So right away we have to lay down a foundation, and it is that we cannot deny - whether we like it or not - we cannot deny that women in the Old Testament and in the New Testament prophesied.

Now so-called 'evangelical feminism' - and you may not have heard that phrase before, but there are those within the church who assert that women should have all the leadership roles and rights of men, i.e. they should be pastors, teachers, elders, and so on and so forth. Evangelical feminism has used examples such as Miriam, Deborah, Anna, Philip's four daughters, and even Huldah that we're looking at this evening, to prove - they think - that there should be no role distinctions in the church between male and female. We've got to face this, and try and biblically answer. Perhaps you're starting to wonder, having heard about all the prophetesses in Old and New Testament: 'Do they have a point?'. Do we have an answer from the word of God that can counteract such accusations? Now let me recommend a book to you - you will not, I'm sure, agree with everything in it, we don't agree with many things in all the books we read, but it's very helpful regarding a response to evangelical feminism - it's called 'Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood', and it's edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem. Some of the details that I'm going to impart to you are deciphered from that volume.

How do we answer? Is there no difference? If women prophesy and were prophetesses, where does that leave headship and the role of men in leadership? Well, here's three things initially that I want you to consider as we ask the question: what does the ministry of a prophetess mean? Here's the first thing: Huldah did not publicly proclaim the word of God. Huldah did not publicly proclaim God's word, rather the text shows that she explained it privately when Josiah sent messengers to her. So she exercised her legitimate prophetic ministry in a way that did not obstruct male leadership. Incidentally, Jeremiah and Zephaniah were exercising their public prophetic ministry at the same time as Huldah the prophetess. So there were two very eligible prophets who could have prophesied for her, but they didn't. Yet she didn't go out of her way to usurp their public ministry, but she prophesied in private. Now for some reason Josiah the King did not send his officials to either Jeremiah or Zephaniah, he sent them to Huldah - and we can suppose why that may be. Yet we must mark the fact that she did not usurp or replace the public ministry of Jeremiah and Zephaniah.

Now, you say: 'That may be the case for Huldah, but what about the other prophetesses?'. What about Miriam? Well, the ministry of Miriam follows a similar headship principle in that she ministered only to women. Exodus 15:20 that we read, or I quoted to you, let me read it again, says: 'And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances'. She led the women, her ministry was to them.

What about Deborah? She was a Judge, wasn't she? Well, she is not an exception to this rule, because she prophesied in private rather than in public. Turn with me to Judges 4, so that I can show you this from the text, Judges 4 verse 5 says: 'And Deborah dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment'. They came to her, she dwelt in a private place, she did not go out with a public itinerant prophetic ministry. Even when she speaks to Barak, we see from verse 6 that she calls him and speaks to him individually: 'And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedeshnaphtali, and said unto him, Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor'. Though she gives Barak a command, and that is self evident if you look down at verse 14, there is implied within her ministry, and indeed her instructions to Barak, a rebuke of Barak because he was not willing - not man enough - to go into the battle without the help of Deborah. If you look at verse 8 of chapter 4: 'Barak said unto her, If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go'. Because of Barak's reluctance, God's word says that the glory that day, as the Israelites won the battle, would go to a woman and not to Barak - verse 9: 'And she said, I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honor; for the LORD shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman. And Deborah arose, and went with Barak to Kedesh'. And incidentally, the honour that was given to a woman here was not given to Deborah - if you look down at verse 17 and the following verses, you see that Jael was the one, the woman who was given the glory, because she...well, you know the story, it's more blood and guts! She put an end to the whole problem!

The point I'm making is: Huldah, as with all the other prophetesses, it seems, in the Old Testament thus far in our study that we have looked at, operated a private ministry, not a public one of proclamation. Then secondly I want you to consider something else that helps us to understand what the ministry of a prophetess means, and that is simply that prophecy differs from teaching. Prophecy differs from teaching. Prophecy is a thing of spontaneous revelation. We know that from 1 Corinthians 14, yet teaching is an exposition of an already given and received revelation - i.e. an exposition of the Scriptures. Now, if we take the Old Testament first of all, even in the Old Testament it was the priests who gave instruction regarding what was Biblical, what was lawful. All of the priests had to be male, for they were in that teaching role. The point I want to make is that prophecy, therefore, is a different gift to teaching in the Old and indeed in the New Testament.

Though prophetesses in the Old Testament are self-evident, they only rarely spoke for God to the nation, but whenever they did we have already seen that they conducted their ministry in a way that supported male leadership, they never usurped it. Now when we come into the New Testament it appears that prophecy is not the same as teaching again, but prophecy takes on in the New Testament a different connotation to Old Testament prophecy. Let me illustrate this for you. When the prophet Jeremiah, or Zephaniah, or indeed Huldah, came and spoke the word of God it was to be unquestionably received as God's word. You weren't allowed to dissect it or to test it or prove it, you just submitted to it. Yet when we come to the New Testament, when prophecy is spoken of there it is to be tested, and the apostles encourage us to test and prove New Testament prophecies. So there's a difference right away.

Let me show you this, if you turn with me to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verse 20, we read that the apostle says: 'Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good'. Do not despise prophesying, prove all things that are prophesied is the implication. So this is different than Old Testament prophecy, Old Testament prophecy was not to be tested, it was to be accepted and submitted to - but here we see Paul telling them to test what people said were prophecies. Now when we turn to 1 Corinthians, if you would, and verse 29 of chapter 14, we see this principle emphasised again that New Testament prophecy is to be weighed in the balance: 'Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge'. So there is an element of judgement and criticism that comes into an assessment of New Testament prophecy. So we are seeing that it appears at least that New Testament prophecy is not as authoritative as Old Testament prophecy, and indeed New Testament teaching. So have you got it? There's a difference between Old Testament prophesying that we see in Huldah, in Jeremiah, in Isaiah and all the other major and minor prophets, and what prophecies took place in the New Testament - but we go a step further to say that teaching in the New Testament is more authoritative than New Testament prophecy. Now even if you don't accept that, the fact of the matter is that 1 Corinthians 11 that we've already quoted from, the whole passage makes clear that New Testament women who prophesy were to do it in such a way that recognized male headship in the church. That is clear.

So we've established, as we look at what the ministry of a prophetess means, that Huldah did not publicly proclaim God's word. Secondly, prophecy differs from teaching in the Old Testament, but especially in the New Testament. Thirdly, women are equal to men in Christ under grace. Galatians tells us that, there is no more any bond or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female. In grace we are all equal as sinners saved by grace. We are all given the same spiritual gifts in Christ, given by the Holy Spirit - but that does not mean that male and female are to exercise those gifts in the same role or in the same manner. Now I've come to be able to read you over the years, and I know that some of you have a problem with what I've just said, but if you turn with me to Titus chapter 2 you will see that women are clearly given a measure of a teaching gift. Now, that seems to contradict, does it, with what I've just said? Well, it doesn't, as I'll make clear as I go on. Titus chapter 2 and verses 3 and 4 says that: 'The older women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things' - teachers of good things - 'That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children'.

So these older women are to teach, it implies that there is a gift to teach, but they are to teach the younger women. Lest these roles should be obscured, Paul tells us in 1 Timothy chapter 2, if you would turn to it, verses 11 and 12 - that though women may have a gift, and exercise that gift to teach, teaching younger women, they are not allowed to teach men - 1 Timothy chapter 2:11: 'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor', and this is the classic statement that defines this teaching, 'nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence'. The point is that they are not to teach in the assembly, in a mixed gathering, because it usurps the teaching leadership place of the male.

Paul did speak of women in his epistles as 'fellow workers', and we ought not to dilute that, they worked with him in the gospel. He also called some of them 'fellow labourers', and if you want a list of several women who come under that category, read Romans chapter 16. But any of these designations, whether they are 'prophetesses', whether they are 'workers' or 'fellow labourers', does not mean that any of these females usurped the principle of male headship that is found both in the Old and New Testament Scriptures. Now here's an

interpretive principle for you which is fundamental to how we understand the word of God: the clear passages of the Bible must interpret the unclear passages. There are some obscure passages of Scripture, even in the New Testament, but we know clearly from 1 Corinthians 11, 1 Corinthians 14, 1 Timothy 2, that leadership in the church - that is pastors, teachers, elders - is not a position that is open to women, even women who have gifts of teaching and gifts of leadership. Those passages are clear on headship and leadership in the local assembly.

Though there are women prophets, they cannot claim that there are no distinctions in the role and use of New Testament gifts. Add to that fact that it's interesting that there is no book named after a prophetess in the Bible, though there are many books named after prophets. There is no record of an ongoing prophetic ministry of a woman in the Bible, though there are of several male prophets. There were no women heads of the twelve tribes of Israel, there were no women apostles, there were no women inspired to write the 66 books in the Bible. So, yes, there is a ministry of a prophetess, but we must understand it in the context of biblical headship. However Old Testament, or for that matter New Testament, prophetesses operated their ministry, it never usurped the position of male headship in the assembly.

Now, that being clear, let me also say that some men have gone further than Scripture and have suppressed the valuable ministry contributions that women can give. We see that clearly from the example of these Scriptures. We see how wrong men are on that very count when we observe the significant part that Huldah and other prophetesses had in the story of the Bible.

So now that we have established what the ministry of a prophetess means and doesn't mean, let's look at: how does Huldah come onto the scene? We're going back again to 2 Kings 22, look at verses 1 and 2. The scene begins as the assassination of Amon brought Josiah to the throne of Israel at eight years of age, and the Bible says that he remained there for 31 years. But we find out that at the age of 16 he began to seek the Lord, that was his conversion experience if you like. No doubt Hilkiah, the high priest, taught this lad the word of God. It's also interesting to note the name of his mother in this passage, Jedidah, which was also the pet name that God gave to Solomon the King, and this pet name means 'Beloved of the Lord' - that could imply that his mother was a godly woman, and had a godly influence in his life. So though his father was a very ungodly man, he had the influence of the high priest, Hilkiah, and his godly mother, Jedidah.

There's a lesson there right away for us all. We should never underrate the influence of a godly mother. Sad to say, these days this is a ministry of women that is sadly underrated and felt, on the part of many women, to be very underwhelming. I can appreciate why, and yet you've got to realise that this is a ministry that God has given, and it's a very precious one. It can have very long, far reaching effects as we will see from this story. Never underestimate the power of a godly influence on children, whether it is a father, a mother, a grandmother, a grandfather. You only need to look at Susanna Wesley, how she poured her life and her prayers into all those many children, and look what John and Charles did in our own nation for God, across the world indeed.

Now when we come to verse 3 we see that Manasseh rebuilt everything that his father, Hezekiah, tore down; but at 20 years of age Josiah tore down what Manasseh, his grandfather, had built up. So young Josiah started purifying the city of Jerusalem and the land of Judah from idolatry, the idolatry of Manasseh his grandfather, and Amon his father. Young King Josiah's ultimate goal was to restore the Temple, to bring the nation back to worship of

the true and living God. After purging all the idols out of the land, in his eighteenth year of reign when he was 26, Josiah instituted a program to rebuild the Temple of God. Verse 8 tells us that while the repairs were going on, Hilkiah the high priest found a copy of the book of the law. We don't know how much was in it, whether it was the whole Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible - the likelihood is that it was probably the book of Deuteronomy, with many of the curses that were given at the covenant in it. It had long since been discarded by the idolatrous people of God.

Now imagine this for a moment: imagine losing the word of God in the house of God. That's what happened! It teaches us that you can lose the word of God in the church, you can lose the word of God in a denomination, you can lose the word of God in a religious place, living a religious life, doing very religious things! That's what happened to Judah, it can happen to us! In verse 10 the book was taken to King Josiah and read before him, and verse 11 tells us that when King Josiah heard the word of God, he realised how far the nation had wandered, and he tore his clothes in repentance and remorse. Verses 12 and 13 tell us that, realising that the nation must be under the condemnation of these covenant curses, he sent five of his officials to enquire of the Lord. Would these things come to pass? Would the people be judged for their idolatry and unfaithfulness?

In verse 14 we read that the officials went to Huldah the prophetess, who dwelt in Jerusalem - some versions say 'in the second quarter', which was a district or a suburb of the city, the Authorised Version says correctly 'a college'. The Hebrew word for 'college' is 'mishnah', and it simply means 'a place of repetition' - and education in those days was done by repetition, repeating things over and over again like you learnt your tables. It may well have been that Huldah ministered in that college, it may also be that Huldah was the aunt of Jeremiah, but it's interesting that King Josiah didn't send these men, Hilkiah and his officials, to Jeremiah or to Zephaniah. Now I can't give you a reason for that, but he didn't. I came across, in my studies, a poem by a Jewish poet by the name of Mrs R Hyneman, she captures the unexpected nature of this tale of the unexpected when she wrote these words in one verse:

"Go ask', he said' - that is, King Josiah - "of the good and the wise,  
 If this doom may pass away;  
 If lowly prayer and sacrifice  
 Of our penitent hearts may yet arise  
 To avert the evil day'

And whom shall they seek in that trying hour  
 What bearded sage or deep-learned seer,  
 Whose prophetic words have a magical power  
 To point the right path when dark tempests lower,  
 And the strong man shrinks with fear?

Oh, how can a woman's soft voice foretell  
 The heavy doom they dread to know?  
 Or how can she pierce through the mystic veil  
 Of the shadowy future, and breathe a spell  
 Like that which her lips breathe now?'

'What bearded sage', she said, 'or deep-learned seer' would these officials go to? Not one with a beard, but a prophetess. I'm sure that Huldah, when she received these men into her home, must have taken the scroll, the leather-covered scroll of the law from their hands like a

mother pressing a long lost child to her bosom, like the woman in Luke 15 that Jesus told of who lost that one silver coin. The law of God that was lost from the nation had now been found! She could say, like the Psalmist in Psalm 119:72, 'The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of coins of gold and silver'. The high priest, Hilkiah, and several of these other men stood before her. King Josiah wanted to know: would the words of the book of the Law come to pass? If you look down at verses 16 to 18, she confirmed Josiah's fears that God was going to punish Judah soon, but she also added that it would not happen during Josiah's lifetime or reign because he had humbled himself before the Lord, and his heart was tender. Look at verse 19 - can I ask you this evening: is your heart tender before the word of the Living God?

Now look with me at the result of Huldah the prophetess's faithfulness: immediately Josiah shared the word of the Lord from Huldah with the elders of the land, and he began again to lead the way in a great service of dedication, reaffirming the covenant of God on behalf of the people. He continued these purges of the state, he went down to the Valley of Hinnon which had been defiled with idolatry - there the people of Judah had offered up her children to fires in sacrifice, atonements to placate the god Molech. Josiah went down and defiled that sacred place of idolatry, he made it a rubbish dump it became known as the Gehennon Valley, and in the New Testament of course was known as 'Gehenna'. The Lord Jesus used it as a vivid illustration of hell, the place where the worm dies not and the fire is not quenched! Why? Because it was a rubbish dump, and the fire was continually raging. Josiah did it, he defiled the idolatrous holy places.

Not only did he do that, but he uncovered the altar of the wicked King Jeroboam. He also uncovered the tomb of the young prophet who warned Jeroboam that the prophets of Baal would be sacrificed on the altar, and that is exactly what King Josiah did - fulfilling 1 Kings 13. He not only restored the Temple, he not only found the law of God from the Temple, but we know that he restored the celebration of the feast of the Passover that had been long neglected by the nation. Now many have called this 'Josiah's revival', but we know with hindsight that it was a surface thing, and the people of Judah remained idolaters in their heart. Yet this was a great Reformation, and any reform that took place was effected directly by the prophet, the prophetess Huldah.

Do you see the significance of her faithfulness? We have answered: what does the ministry of a prophetess mean? How does Huldah come on the scene? Thirdly: why is Huldah sought out by the King? Now, I freely admit we don't know all there is to know about Huldah, but one thing we do know is that Josiah chose to send his officials to her, and God chose to use her to speak this word of prophecy to the king and bring a great Reformation in Judah. She was mightily used of God. Now that implies a number of things: she was obviously highly respected, well-known, for the King to send his officials to her. She had to be wise, for we cannot conceive of the King sending his officials to one who was foolish. She must have been holy to have been a vessel used for the Master's use. She must have, therefore, also been spiritual and prayerful. She was filled with the word of God, not just because she knew that these curses of the covenant in the law of God must come to pass, but she experientially - and, we might say, charismatically - experienced the prophetic ministry of the word of God through her in her own use. She was a courageous woman - but what I do want you to see this evening is ultimately that, though she was respected, wise, holy, spiritual, prayerful, filled with the word of God and courageous, she was available - available to be used by God.

Now, Huldah does many things, but certainly she being dead still challenges the perception of men and women in the church regarding the role of men and women in ministry. Now we

have established, and we are on safe ground tonight, that though women are certainly not permitted to do some things that are offices and operations only for men, there is a lot more that women can do that women are not doing in this New Testament church. I believe churches have a responsibility to recognize this, and indeed to help women use their gifts biblically. I think at times often we extol the virtues of dynamic women on the mission field, but we stifle their gifts in the church. That ought not to be so.

I'm asking you women here this evening: are you respected? Are you holy? Are you wise? Spiritual? Prayerful? Are you courageous? Filled with the word of God? But perhaps most importantly: are you available for the Lord to use how He sees fit? Are you willing, that's what I'm asking, willing to do what God would have you do in the bounds that He has set in the New Testament Church? Are you spiritually qualified to do it? If not, why not? Because the Bible teaches us, Old Testament and New Testament and church history, that great things have been done by holy, courageous, Spirit-filled, word-filled, wise, respected women for God - great things have been accomplished because they made themselves available! Mothers like Susanna Wesley; hymn writers like Fanny Crosby, Francis Ridley Havergal, Mrs Alexander of Londonderry; authors like Elisabeth Elliott, Helen Roseveare; evangelists like Miriam Booth of the Salvation Army; missionaries like Gladys Aylward, Amy Carmichael; even the fervent prayers of two bed-ridden old women could be instrumental in bringing Duncan Campbell to the Isle of Lewis in 1949, which ultimately brought revival, an influx of thousands of souls into the kingdom of God.

These women knew what they could not do, but they knew what they could do. No woman should say: 'There's nothing for me to do' - nor, for that matter, no man should say that. What I'm exhorting you to do in the light of Huldah the prophet, the tale of the unexpected, is to make your life a tale of the unexpected for God. May God bless His word to our hearts.

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Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - May 2007  
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