

## A Guide to Session Three: The Book of Faith, Women and Justice

**Set-up:** Arrange the seating either around a large table or in a circle so all participants can see each other. Consider setting up a small altar in a central location in the room. Simply drape a cloth on a table. Display an open Bible and a candle. Light the candle when you begin your conversation as a reminder that Christ is the Word Incarnate and that the Holy Spirit is in your midst as you converse. Consider adding a clear bowl filled with water as a reminder of our unity in baptism.



It would be helpful to have copies of the Book of Faith bookmark and the Reading Scripture with Five Lutheran Lenses bookmark on hand for newcomers or those who may have forgotten theirs from the last session. Check the resource section of the “Leader’s Preparation Guide” for links to download the bookmarks.

Additional copies of “Some Helpful Ways to Read the Bible” by Diane Jacobson and “Women and Justice: Issues in Biblical Interpretation” by Erik Heen may also be helpful should newcomers want copies for deeper study and reflection.

Check the resources and references section in the “Leader’s Preparation Guide” for additional books that might be helpful as you delve deeper into the use of Scripture in the discussion of women and justice.

### Session objectives:

- To look at areas in which engaging Scripture can inform the study of women and justice
- To review stories and texts used to support women and justice

### A summary of past sessions

If the study has been done as two or more separate sessions, give the group a summary of the material you’ve covered thus far. This will be a reminder for those who have previously attended and a quick catch-up for those who have not.

Session one gave an introduction to the Book of Faith Initiative approaches to studying Scripture: devotional, historical, literary and Lutheran theological reading. The bookmarks that were shared give a summary of the methods. The group also had an opportunity to engage in and compare the methods in the study of Mark 5:24-35 (the bleeding woman).

Session two looked more in-depth at the Book of Faith approaches and which were most helpful in studying issues related to women and justice. Material from Erik Heen's document, "Women and Justice: Issues in Biblical Interpretation," was also added to the conversation. Under his discussion of the devotional approach, Heen added two ways in which the Bible has historically been used to place women in a "client" status: thematic study (looking for biblical passages to seek information on a specific topic such as divorce, homosexuality, or women and justice) and proof-texting (using specific Bible passages to prove a doctrinal point).

In this last session the importance of the literary approach in the interpretation of Scripture regarding women and justice issues was introduced and participants had an initial opportunity to explore it. This session will give the group a deeper dive into the literary approach to see how women are portrayed in the ministry of Jesus. It will also look at how Jesus redefines power in Matthew 22:35-40, and look at Galatians 3:27-28, which is identified as a key text related to women and justice.

## Opening

**Scripture reading:** Luke 1:46-55 (NRSV)

<sup>46</sup>And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,

<sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup>for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

<sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

<sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

<sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

<sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

<sup>55</sup>according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

**Prayer:** O God, the Bible is the greatest story of your love for us, a love that is embodied by your Son, Jesus Christ, whom you sent to live and minister among us. The power of this love is ultimately demonstrated by Jesus' death and resurrection. As we study this greatest story, open our hearts and minds to see the way your Spirit empowers *all* of your people to participate in the story, both past and present. Amen.

Point out or read to the group the communications guidelines presented in the "Leader's Preparation Guide." Ask the participants if there are any other guidelines they would like to include. Here is the place to provide a bridge into this week's session by sharing a review of what the previous two sessions have covered. (See above.)

## God's story

Return to Mary's song in the opening devotion, but this time from the perspective of a literary approach to Scripture in which God is the primary actor. As the central actor, God has a way of turning things upside down. In her song, Mary recognizes that she is but a lowly servant, yet God has seen fit to glorify her by setting her apart to carry God's Son, a savior. She is both surprised and honored that God has placed her in this position.

When you look at the entirety of the narrative about Jesus, just when it appears that his opponents have won by crucifying him, the story takes an unexpected turn. Jesus conquers death and appears to his disciples. God doesn't follow the typical expectations or rules of society or its leaders.

Since you have been discussing the topic of how women are treated in the Bible, it is worth pointing out that Mary's song contains 11 pronouns referring to God as male. While the majority of references in the Bible refer to God as male, it is worth doing an internet search on "female images of God in the Bible" to locate passages where God is portrayed as a woman, e.g. Isaiah 66:13 where God is described as a comforting mother. While this is a much more in-depth conversation it is worth mentioning here.

It is also worth noting that Genesis 1:27 says God created both male and female in his image. What might this mean for conversations surrounding the image of God?

Use the Book of Faith bookmark questions to look at Luke 1:46-55 together or break into smaller groups. What does the group notice using the literary approach?

## Bible study in small groups

Break the group into smaller groups to have them look at some additional texts that mention women. Use the literary approach. The following are two suggested texts, but at the end of the lesson there are also additional texts listed for further study and contemplation. Give each group 10-15 minutes to discuss their text. Then come back for a large-group conversation.

1. John 4 (The Samaritan woman)
2. Mark 16:1-15 (The resurrection)

Use the Book of Faith book mark as a starting point.

1. Be attentive to what aspects of the story seem predictable. What aspects of the story seem unpredictable?
2. How does this story contribute to the overall narrative of Jesus?
3. What does a literary interpretation reveal about the role of women in Jesus' ministry?  
(See the following additional Gospel texts mentioning women if the group or particular

individuals want to delve more deeply into other passages where women are central characters.)

Some additional Gospel texts mentioning women:

- Matthew 15:21-28 (Canaanite woman)
- Mark 5:24-34 (Bleeding woman)
- Mark 12:41-44 (Widow's offering)
- Luke 1:39-45 (Mary visits Elizabeth)
- Luke 7:36-50 (Woman bathes Jesus' feet)
- Luke 8:1-3 (Women accompany Jesus)
- Luke 13: 10-17 (Jesus heals the crippled woman)
- Luke 15:8-10 (Woman and the lost coin)
- Luke 18:1-8 (Woman and the unjust judge)
- Luke 21:1-4 (Woman's offering)
- Luke 24:1-11 (Resurrection)
- John 11 (Mary, Martha and Lazarus)
- John 12:1-8 (Mary anoints Jesus)
- John 20:1-18 (Resurrection)

### **Discussion topic: Jesus redefines power**

In the Gospel of Matthew when the Pharisees ask Jesus which is the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:35-40) his response is all encompassing. Read this text out loud for the group. Ask one or more of the following questions:

1. What are the greatest commandments that Jesus lists?
2. How might these commandments affect the way that women, or any group previously discriminated against, are treated?
3. How might congregations or church bodies embody these commandments in the world today?
4. How can we individually embody these commandments in the world today?
5. What are the implications of these commandments for issues of women and justice?

### **Wrapping up: One in Christ as breakthrough**

If participants have been involved in this entire three-part study, they have likely come to the conclusion that there is no clear view on what the Bible says specifically about the role of women in church and society. As indicated in session two, thematic and proof-text use of Scripture has typically sought to subjugate women. Yet, Jesus in stating the two greatest commandments shows that there are over-riding themes within the Bible that take priority in how we relate to one another.

In his case study based on the debate over the ordination of women in Sweden in the 1950s (see resource list), Krister Stendahl, then the dean of Harvard Divinity School, identifies one text that he believes is a theological breakthrough text addressing how Christ redefines unity. This text is Galatians 3:27-28, the text which sets the path for the work of the Women and Justice Task Force.

Break the group into four and assign each one a different Book of Faith approach to reading the Bible. Once again have them start with the Book of Faith bookmark to review what Galatians 3:27-28 says from each perspective. Give approximately 10- 15 minutes for conversation. Come back into the larger group and share insights. Consider collecting the insights on chart paper for visual review.

As the group winds down its study and conversation, ask what insights they would like to share with the Women and Justice Task Force. Remind them they are free to share their own personal insights, but if there is consensus consider, sending a group email.

Ask the group for any parting thoughts. If they are interested in continuing a discussion on the topic of women and justice, there are other study materials available at [www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice](http://www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice).

**Closing prayer:** O God, it is our tendency as human beings to define people into hierarchies of value and power that are used for harm and injustice. Open our hearts and minds to see that through Jesus Christ you have redefined the entirety of our lives both on earth and eternally. Empower us to understand how your desire for us is lived out in the details of our daily living. Embolden us to truly live as one in Christ. Amen.