

An Introduction to “Five Lives — women who encountered God”

Everyone enjoys stories. The stories of people’s lives are among my favourite kinds of books. The Bible is God’s story. It tells of his magnificent purpose for the humans he created and how he worked throughout history to bring about his plan for our salvation so that we may have eternal life in his Son.

In this series we’ll see how God touched the lives of five particular women in the Bible: Hagar, a slave woman in Abraham’s family; Miriam, the older sister of Moses and Aaron; Mary, the mother of Jesus; and two very different sisters – Martha and Mary – who were loved friends of Jesus.

What did these women with such diverse backgrounds and life stories have in common? Each encountered God’s love and experienced his faithfulness in their individual circumstances. In their problems, each came to understand him in a deeper way. God kept his promises to them and he will keep his promises to us too. The challenge for us is to trust him, no matter what life brings; to seek his will for our lives, take him at his word and live in the light of his love.

Hagar

The time span of this series stretches across about two thousand years. We begin with Hagar, an Egyptian woman who served in the household of Abram (whom God later named Abraham). Around 2100BC, Abram was called by God to leave his country, (now modern day Iraq), his relatives and his father’s house and go to a land God would show him. God promised to make Abram the father of a great nation (Genesis 12:1–2). So Abram set out, taking his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all their servants and livestock.

At Shechem, in the centre of the land of Canaan, God gave Abram an amazing promise: ‘I am going to give this land to your descendants’ (Genesis 12:7). But Abram had no children. He was already 75 and Sarai was 66. Humanly speaking, offspring seemed unlikely. But Abram believed God and built an altar in honour of God’s promise. Ten years passed by. At age 76 Sarai felt certain there was no hope that she would bear Abram a child. But she believed God’s promise, so she came up with a way to help it come true. ‘Go and sleep with my servant,’ she told her husband. ‘Perhaps I can have children through her.’ (Gen 16:2)

By custom, this was acceptable practice for infertile couples. Ancient documents found in the region where Abram grew up, show that it was even covered by law. One law stated ‘If a man marries and his wife gives him her servant to bear children, and then the servant starts acting like she is equal to the wife because of this, the wife is not allowed to sell her. But she can put a slave mark on her and treat her as a slave.’ (*Law 146 of Hammurabi, sixth king of the First Babylonian Dynasty, reigning from 1792 BC to 1750 BC*)

By this time Abram was 85, but he conceived a child with Hagar. However, the pregnancy brought trouble rather than joy. Sarai blamed Abram because Hagar now despised her, but Abram just handballed the problem back to his wife. ‘Do with her whatever you think best,’ he said. Sarai mistreated Hagar so badly that she ran away into the desert.

There the ‘angel of the LORD’ came to comfort her. Their conversation is recorded in Genesis 16:8–12. Hagar was given the promise that she would give birth to a son, Ishmael, which means ‘God hears’, “for the Lord has heard of your misery” (v 16). Hagar was told to return to her mistress and submit to her. And the LORD promised to increase Ishmael’s descendants and make them too numerous to count (v 10).

God knew all about this young woman — where she was, her name, social status, her emotional state and physical condition. Hagar called him ‘the God who sees me’. And she said, ‘I have now seen the One who sees me.’ As she returned to a life she had little control over, this encounter must have reassured Hagar of God’s care and good purpose for her.

Thirteen years later, God confirmed his covenant with Abram and changed his name to Abraham. God also said that within the year a son would be born to Sarah and Abraham. They laughed, but Isaac was born when Sarah was 90 and Abraham was 100 years old. Through this miracle son, God would make a people — a nation — for himself. And through that people, God’s promised redeemer would come.

But, for Hagar, more pain was ahead. Normally the eldest son would receive a double portion of his father’s inheritance. However, Sarah was determined that the slave woman’s son would have no share at all. So, when the teenager mocked and tormented the toddler at his weaning party, Sarah used it as an excuse to demand that Abraham get rid of Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham was distressed, but God confirmed to him that he should do as Sarah wished. It was through Isaac, not Ishmael, that God’s promises would be fulfilled. But God would make Ishmael into a nation also, and he is generally considered to be the father of the Arabs.

And so Abraham gave Hagar and Ishmael food and water and sent them from his camp. When the provisions were gone, their situation became desperate. But again God heard their cries and came to them in their distress. God is faithful to his promises and he had a plan for their lives. He wouldn’t let them perish in the desert. We read the lovely words: ‘God was with the boy as he grew up’. This is the same God who hears our cries in times of trouble and comes alongside us with compassion and consolation.

Miriam.

In Exodus 15, several hundred years later in history, we get our first impression of Miriam. She is the unnamed older sister watching over her baby brother hidden in a basket among the bulrushes beside the river Nile. At this time the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and his son Jacob, had been living in Egypt for about 350 years. God had used Abraham’s great grandson Joseph to establish the family there during a severe drought. At that time they numbered about 70 people. But by about 1500 BC, they had become so numerous that the pharaoh at that time viewed them as a threat to national security. So he forced them into hard labour and oppressed them, even to ordering that the Hebrew midwives kill at birth all male babies.

Most of us know the story of how Miriam’s baby brother Moses was discovered by an Egyptian princess. The quick-thinking sister offered to find a wet-nurse for the child. And so it was that Moses was nurtured by his own mother under the protection of royalty. What courage, initiative and faith Miriam showed as a young girl in a dangerous situation.

Moses was prepared for leadership as he spent his youth in Pharaoh's court. But, at 40, he fled to the desert after killing an Egyptian foreman for beating a Hebrew slave. There he married and lived quietly as a shepherd. But when Moses was 80, God called him to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt and back to Canaan, the land he had promised to give Abraham's descendants.

On that journey of forty years, known as the exodus, we see Moses' brother, Aaron, and sister, Miriam, also in leadership roles. Miriam was Israel's first female prophet. It seems she was a strong leader and an example to other women. But she became envious of Moses and stirred up Aaron to join her in complaining against him. God quickly confronted these two with their rebellious attitude towards his appointed leader and mediator. Public consequences followed. Yet, even in disciplining Miriam, God showed great mercy by limiting the period of her expulsion and disgrace.

Like our own life stories, Miriam's is a mixture of success and failure. Like her, we have the choice to repent or to remain in our sin. God's heart is to forgive and restore us if we humbly admit our wrong attitudes and failures, and turn back to him.

Mary the mother of Jesus

From the Old Testament we move forward fourteen centuries in time to the birth of Jesus, the promised rescuer — the Messiah through whom God would accomplish salvation for all people.

Mary, the young woman chosen by God to mother his Son, lived in Nazareth in northern Israel. Then it was not much of a place, a small village built on the ridge of a hill. Now it's the largest Arab city in Israel, with 75,000 residents. A Catholic church stands over the place that tradition says was Mary's home, where the angel Gabriel appeared to her and announced that she would give birth to a son, conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Mary was probably a teenager, the customary age for girls to marry in the ancient Middle East. For one so young, Mary's acceptance of God's message is remarkable. Apart from Jesus himself, what greater assignment has any human received? But Mary is an example of humility, trust and obedience to God's will for her. Her song of praise (Luke 1) echoes Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2, so it is clear that Mary had been taught the Scriptures and knew them well.

Mary was engaged to Joseph, a carpenter and man of integrity. How did he feel when he learned of Mary's pregnancy? If he felt humiliated, rather than humiliate Mary in return, he decided to break the relationship privately. This was no small thing, because in those times betrothal was as binding as marriage. Mary might have faced life as a single mother had not God assured Joseph in a dream that she had not been unfaithful; this was a supernatural, divine conception. Joseph should still take Mary into his home as his wife. And so God provided a supportive husband for Mary and the security of a home and father for her child.

During Mary's pregnancy, the Roman emperor called a census and the couple had to travel to enrol in Joseph's home town, Bethlehem. Hundreds of years before, the prophet Micah had

named Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah. From Nazareth it was at least a four day journey on foot of around 110km (70–80 miles).

Did Mary wonder at the humble setting for the birth of God’s Son? What went through her mind when shepherds came in from the fields at night to see the baby that angels had told them about — ‘the saviour, Christ the Lord’ (Luke 2:11) The Bible says that Mary treasured these things and pondered them in her heart.

What kind of mother was Mary? Brief scenes in the gospel records show that she had the same human responses and motherly concerns for her child as any other woman.

She and Joseph presented their eight-day-old son at the temple in Jerusalem to fulfil the requirements of the Law to consecrate their firstborn son to God. There, a godly old man named Simeon praised God for the revelation that this child was the Messiah. Simeon blessed the parents, speaking words of prophecy regarding the babe, and warning Mary of the heartache to come in her role as his mother.

Luke’s gospel next shows Mary twelve years later, a worried mother searching for her missing son after the annual Passover festival in Jerusalem. After three days she and Joseph were astonished to find him safe and unconcerned, listening to the teachers in the temple courts. “Son, why have you treated us like this?” Mary asked. “Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.” They were simply mystified by Jesus’ answer: “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”

At twelve years of age, it seems Jesus was already aware of his unique relationship to God, but he was obedient to his earthly parents and returned with them to Nazareth. Again, Mary treasured all of these things in her heart. Perhaps in her old age she shared them with Dr. Luke as he carefully researched the facts for his gospel.

In time, the disciple John wrote about a wedding in Cana at which Jesus and the disciples were guests. Mary was there, perhaps assisting in the background, because she knew before the host that the wine was all gone. She also knew that her son could help. By a miracle, Jesus did indeed rescue the host from social embarrassment, but his mother needed to understand that God, not she, directed his ministry. Like everyone else, Mary didn’t really understand what kind of Messiah Jesus would be, or the personal cost to her of his priorities.

Like parents everywhere, Mary worried about Jesus’ physical and emotional well-being. When his public ministry became so busy that he had no time to eat, she and Jesus’ brothers came to take him home, believing that his mental health was also in doubt. It must have been difficult for Mary when Jesus didn’t respond as expected. Jesus’ priorities extended far beyond his own family. Yet his commitment to God’s will did not diminish his love for them.

Even as Jesus hung dying on the cross, he had compassion for his mother in her grief, and gave her into John’s care. What anguish Mary must have felt, not understanding that her son’s terrible suffering was for the sin of the world. Not until later did Jesus’ followers grasp the significance of what he had done for mankind. But think of the wonder and joy Mary must have felt when Jesus rose from death and appeared to his disciples.

Mary described herself as ‘God’s servant’. His call on her life required deep faith and long-term obedience, even in circumstances she must have found incomprehensible. We, too, are privileged to serve God with our lives in the opportunities given to us. Like Mary, we may not always understand why some things happen, but we need the same willingness to persist in faith and obedience until God’s purposes for us are complete.

Martha and Mary of Bethany

In the last two units of this series the spotlight falls on two well-known sisters, Martha and Mary and their interactions with their close friend, Jesus. The Bible tells us that Jesus loved the sisters and their brother Lazarus. They lived in the village of Bethany, about 3 km (2 miles) from Jerusalem, not too far to walk into the city for the day. Martha opened her home to Jesus and he probably made this his base whenever he came to Jerusalem.

Martha had a gift for serving and was the kind of woman who got things done. But she was put out when her sister left her to it, which seems a natural enough reaction. One day she was so stressed she appealed to Jesus to make Mary help her. No doubt Martha expected Jesus’ support and she must have been taken aback by his response. Gently he rebuked her. He would not be manipulated or take sides. And he wouldn’t stop Mary from sitting at his feet to hear the truths of the kingdom of God. Food for the spirit is as necessary as food for the body, and Mary hungered for the spiritual nourishment in “every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

In Matthew 6, we read that Jesus told his followers not to worry about what to eat, drink or wear, because our heavenly Father knows that we need these things. “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (v 33). Mary got her priorities right and we need to as well, so we can then serve him and others with love.

The stories of both of these women will challenge us in different ways. Both were women of strong faith and character, devoted to Jesus. They grieved at the death of their brother and both expressed a belief that he would not have died if Jesus had been there. Did they feel let down when the Lord delayed coming to them? In times of crisis or tragedy are we tempted to doubt God’s care for us? Are we able to trust him through those difficult circumstances? From the stories of these women we can be encouraged to look to Jesus, our friend and comforter, and pray that he will use our situation for his purposes and for the glory of his name.

In the middle of her grief, Martha expressed her faith in Jesus and received his assurance that her brother would rise again. His words to Martha hold a stupendous truth: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.” Are we among those who believe?

When Jesus ordered the removal of the stone that lay across the entrance to the tomb, it was the ever-practical Martha who was mindful there would be a bad smell. But Jesus knew that the miracle to come far surpassed any concern of that nature. What marvels of God might we miss out on by allowing perceived problems to get in the way?

We can only imagine the impact on Mary and Martha as Lazarus emerged from the tomb. But we can see the sisters' love and gratitude expressed at a dinner given in Jesus' honour at Bethany six days before Passover. Lazarus was reclining at the table, and Martha was serving. Then Mary brought a pint of expensive perfume and, in a beautiful act of devotion, she poured it on Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair. When some of those present, in particular Judas, objected to the apparent waste, Jesus took an entirely different view. He said that Mary had prepared his body for burial, and that her loving act would be retold in memory of her, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world.

Even today, Jesus' words are fulfilled as we remember Mary among these women of faith who encountered God. As you enjoy the stories and consider what can be learned from them, be encouraged by the examples of these women's lives. God worked in and through them in different ways to bring about his purposes. By grace he has chosen each of us, too, for a unique part in his ongoing plan of redemption for the world. We are his people, called to walk with him by faith, in the same trust and obedience as those from ages past. May our faith in the God they encountered grow stronger, and our knowledge of the Saviour's love increase as his story continues to be told through the pages of *our* lives.