



Free to Rise

WOMEN IN THE STORY OF GOD

tearfund

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IN OUR WORLD, WOMEN FACE INEQUALITY AND INJUSTICE EVERY DAY.

But in God's Kingdom, and throughout his story, women are central to his redemption and reconciliation of our world.

Persistent women are rising up and transforming their own lives and their communities. **When women have the freedom to rise, they bring their entire communities up with them.** Like the persistent widow from Luke 18, women around the world are crying out "grant me justice" and "will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones?". Persistent women can transform our world.

In the Bible, we have countless examples of persistent women whom God chose to lead: Women like Deborah, Esther, and

Martha. As they stepped into their callings, they rose above the limits their societies placed on them. These women - advocates, protesters, servants, and fighters - transformed their communities and the course of history. They are our spiritual mothers. We carry their legacy as we live out our faith today.

This collaborative devotional was written by women across the globe. They bring with them different backgrounds and experiences, informing their reflections on these eight women of the Bible.

The same God who empowered them is empowering you today.



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THE UNNAMED SERVING GIRL OF NAAMAN'S WIFE

2 KINGS 5:1-10

1 Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.

2 Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. 3 She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

4 Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. 5 "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing.

6 The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With

this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

7 As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!"

8 When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel."

9 So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. 10 Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."

The Heroine

This is one of my favorite stories in the Bible. On the surface it reads quite prosaically: a young serving girl sees that her mistress' husband is suffering from a serious skin disease. The girl is from Israel, so she knows about Elisha and how God can heal through him. If Naaman could just meet Elisha, she thinks, he could be healed. And of course, that is what happens, despite Naaman's arrogant attitude towards the Jordan river!

But let's think more about some of the dynamics going on here.

The Israelite servant girl has been kidnapped by a band of raiders from Aram. In today's language, she has been trafficked, sold into slavery and bought by Naaman for his

wife. The text tells us nothing but it doesn't take much to imagine what treatment she may have received at the hands of the band of raiders, or even at the hands of Naaman. This isn't a girl who has applied for a housekeeping job in someone's house. This is a girl who has most likely suffered severe violence and is living in domestic slavery in a stranger's house, a long way from home.

And yet she is able to reach out beyond herself to think about Naaman and the suffering he is going through.

I wonder how I would do in her situation? Not quite so well I suspect. I think I would curl up into a ball of bitterness and revenge.

Her story challenges and motivates me to think outside of myself and my own situations to be mindful of others. You may not be in a situation that you would have chosen to be in, but are there people God has placed in your life that you may need to reach out to with compassion and love?

Through the servant girl's openness, God is able to work a wonderful miracle. This leads Naaman to acknowledge that the God of Israel is the only God of the world. Despite the awfulness of her situation, God is able to use her powerfully. And yet, is it too obvious to state that we cannot even give today's devotional a proper name? We do not know the name of the serving girl. We do not even know the name of her mistress! All we know is the man's name: Naaman.

There is a lot wrong in this situation, of course. It reflects the patriarchy of the time that records the man's name, but not that of the women, and that allowed domestic slavery to go unchallenged. At the same time, though, I am humbled and chastised by this anonymity. I'm reminded that whatever work God does through us - however small or big - what matters is that His name is the one that is known.

Let's take some time to reflect on this story. What life situation are you in? Is it one of your own choosing or not? What would God like to say to you through this slave girl, and what would you like to say to God?



By Ruth Valerio, *Director of Global Advocacy and Influencing at Tearfund UK*



RAHAB

JOSHUA 2:8-21

8 Before Joshua's spies lay down for the night, Rahab went up on the roof 9 and said to them, "I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. 10 We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea[a] for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. 11 When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

12 "Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign 13 that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them—and that you will save us from death."

14 "Our lives for your lives!" the men assured her. "If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the Lord gives us the land."

15 So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. 16 She said to them, "Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way."

17 Now the men had said to her, "This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us 18 unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house. 19 If any of them go outside your house into the street, their blood will be on their own heads; we will not be responsible. As for those who are in the house with you, their blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on them. 20 But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear."

21 "Agreed," she replied. "Let it be as you say." So she sent them away, and they departed. And she tied the scarlet cord in the window.

The Influencer

Meet Rahab. Prostitute. Mother of Boaz. But there was more to who she was than these identities.

Over the last decade, social media has become the glue that holds global conversations together. Within that world, a new royalty is rising up – the social media influencers. Influencers are the kings and queens of the advertising world and of activism. As children, our parents often admonished us to steer clear of the influence of friends who had the potential to

lead us astray. When we think about influence as adults, terms such as "undue influence" or "under the influence" come to mind.

While influence can be seen as something that moves you off the path of destiny, it can also be used for good. The concept of influence or being an influencer has changed over time. Social media has created a meteoric rise in both the popularity and use of the term "influencer" but also in how positively

influence can be used. Rahab's actions in the Book of Joshua would have likely helped her achieve that coveted official "blue check" status.

RAHAB'S SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILE MAY HAVE READ:

- Saved spies in Jericho
- Ancestor of Jesus
- Servant of the Sovereign God

Many influencers choose to represent causes they believe in. Rahab did not come from a people group who believed in the God of Israel. But her ability to be an influencer came from her trust in a foreign God and her bravery in the face of danger. She had seen God save a whole nation (Joshua 2:10-11) and trusted that he would be able to save her family. This level of trust in the unknown is akin to the spiritual discipline of faith in God in our Christian walk.

Rahab put everything on the line to protect the two spies that Joshua sent to spy out the land. She acted on the evidence of the greatness of God – it wasn't the God she knew but the God she saw do miracles for the Children of Israel. Her combination of influence and trust gave her a place in the annals of history and even the genealogy of Jesus.

Rahab also demonstrated bravery by entering into a space where women who were like her had the potential to be judged. Her purpose trumped pride.

Rahab's reputation meant that others saw her as someone with negative influence, not someone to be remembered in history as an ancestor of Jesus. But she put her life on the line, she was unwavering in her trust of God, and she applied wisdom when dealing with the king. Rahab's actions are inspiring because she overcame how people saw her, focused only on serving God, and became a history maker.



By Liz Muir, Organization Development Manager (Diversity and Inclusion) at Tearfund UK



DEBORAH

JUDGES 4:1-16

1 Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, now that Ehud was dead. 2 So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Sisera, the commander of his army, was based in Harosheth Haggoyim. 3 Because he had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help.

4 Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. 5 She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. 6 She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. 7 I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'"

8 Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."

9 "Certainly I will go with you," said Deborah. "But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands

of a woman." So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. 10 There Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand men went up under his command. Deborah also went up with him.

11 Now Heber the Kenite had left the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law, and pitched his tent by the great tree in Zaananim near Kedesh.

12 When they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, 13 Sisera summoned from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River all his men and his nine hundred chariots fitted with iron.

14 Then Deborah said to Barak, "Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" So Barak went down Mount Tabor, with ten thousand men following him. 15 At Barak's advance, the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot.

16 Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim, and all Sisera's troops fell by the sword; not a man was left.

The Leader

Deborah was an incredible ruler-judge and prophet, filled with faith and God's power (Judges 4-5). The time of the judges was a violent, destructive and faithless period for Israel where "everyone did what was right in their own eyes". As one of the

most influential women in the Old Testament, Deborah proved her grit. She heard from God and acted on it in remarkably courageous ways.

THE HONOR MAY NOT BE YOURS

Deborah's story features an ensemble of three characters: Deborah, Barak, and Jael. Deborah went off to battle with Barak, and, as foretold in her prophecy, the enemy fell at the hands of a woman – but not Deborah. The honor does not go to Deborah, Barak the military commander, or Jael the female assassin. The honor goes to God.

Deborah's story is a powerful reminder that leadership is not limited to a glorified upfront personality. I first came to understand this in my early twenties as board president of a youth-run development organization, where my influence was behind the scenes clearing obstacles and creating an enabling culture for the team to shine. The limelight was not on me, but rightly on the mission of poverty eradication, and working together for impact. In my role leading advocacy for Tearfund in Australia, I help Christians speak up to politicians on behalf of people in poverty. My leadership is like the conductor of an orchestra, where the right messenger is chosen for the right political moment or all the contributing voices are tuned together for maximum effect. We raise a powerful voice together.

Tearfund supports women in development to work together like an ensemble. Self-Help Groups transform the reality for women in poverty through economic empowerment and collective action. I love meeting women in India or Nepal who have together saved, lent to each other, funded education or started small businesses. I have caught onto the joy of possibility as I have been taken into mud huts to see a pedal sewing machine powering a tailoring business or patted goats proudly presented as evidence of a growing farm. No single individual gets the glory, but every member lifts up the other.

TRAILBLAZING

Deborah was the only female judge in the Bible, and one of five female Old Testament prophets. Deborah was renowned for her wisdom and character and people came to her to settle all sorts of disputes, as she sat under her tree.

I am keenly aware of being outnumbered as a woman around decision making tables or speaking platforms, including in Christian forums. I've mellowed somewhat from the feisty

young woman who could only see gender injustice to now using my power to seek space for other women, indigenous peoples, or affected community members. Deborah, in God's strength, exercised wise leadership against the grain of her times, and we too can emulate her example.

IN TUNE WITH GOD

The book of Judges depicts violent and disturbing times, which are just as confronting today. Deborah's leadership and faith brought the Israelites back to God. Judges and prophets prayed and meditated before ruling or speaking a word from God. We too need to call out for wisdom and understanding, seeking it like hidden treasure (Proverbs 2:3-5). Deborah was in tune with God and that's what we want for ourselves and our leaders.

GOD USES ALL OF YOU

Deborah was an impressive mix of judge, prophet, poet, singer and songwriter. We see Judges 4 account for the history of Deborah's leadership and the military battle, and chapter 5 brings Deborah's poetic reflections. I love that Deborah has a creative, distinctive voice. Artists can cut through and spark our imagination powerfully. This has certainly been true of Tearfund's artist ambassadors who bring poetry, music, installations and animation to speak deeply to our values and spark responses towards justice. Thank God for biblical heroes like Deborah who was a poet and creative as well as a courageous military leader. God too calls you. All of you.



By Jo Knight, *Advocacy Director at Tearfund Australia*

ABIGAIL

1 SAMUEL 25: 4-5, 10-13, 18-24, 27, 32-35

4 While David was in the wilderness, he heard that Nabal was shearing sheep. 5 So he sent ten young men and said to them, "Go up to Nabal at Carmel and greet him in my name.

10 Nabal answered David's servants, "Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. 11 Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?"

12 David's men turned around and went back. When they arrived, they reported every word. 13 David said to his men, "Each of you strap on your sword!" So they did, and David strapped his on as well. About four hundred men went up with David, while two hundred stayed with the supplies.

18 Abigail acted quickly. She took two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five dressed sheep, five seahs of roasted grain, a hundred cakes of raisins and two hundred cakes of pressed figs, and loaded them on donkeys. 19 Then she told her servants, "Go on ahead; I'll follow you." But she did not tell her husband Nabal.

20 As she came riding her donkey into a mountain ravine, there were David and his men descending toward her, and she met them. 21 David had just said, "It's been useless—all my watching over this fellow's property in the wilderness so that nothing of his was missing. He has paid me back evil for good. 22 May God

deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him!"

23 When Abigail saw David, she quickly got off her donkey and bowed down before David with her face to the ground. 24 She fell at his feet and said: "Pardon your servant, my lord, and let me speak to you; hear what your servant has to say.... 27 And let this gift, which your servant has brought to my lord, be given to the men who follow you.

32 David said to Abigail, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. 33 May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands. 34 Otherwise, as surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, who has kept me from harming you, if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by daybreak." 35 Then David accepted from her hand what she had brought him and said, "Go home in peace. I have heard your words and granted your request."



The Intercessor

This reflection contains mentions of violence against women.

THE WORLD IS FULL OF ABIGAILS, IF YOU CARE TO LOOK.

You cared so much and your people knew that.

You were a safe space so they came to you in times of crisis.

You were so full of faith and courage so you rode through the desert on a donkey, laden with food, to meet your husband's enemy.

You were so close to God that fear was not your portion.

You spoke with humility and confidence showing the depths of your wisdom.

You acted in the moment knowing what was in the future.

You used your gifts with love, wisely, and for the sake of your people and your household. That kind of love is God's love.

Even as I write these words about Abigail, wife of Nabal and David, my mind is flooding with images of many faces, women like Abigail, from across the many nations I have traversed over the years. In the midst of war and chaos, division and despair, these women – these Abigails – have done what they knew was best for their families and their people, almost always at a painful cost.

A gorgeous Abigail in war torn Burundi went out to find food so that her husband and children could eat that day. That night, she was beaten. Another night, she was thrown out of her home by her drunken husband, her Nabal. She slept in the bush and woke up early to do whatever she could to get food for herself. At least her children already had their food as did her husband who lay in a drunken stupor. In the heat of the midday sun she went out again, trying again to pick some firewood to sell, giving some to the woman next to her as well.

Another young, beautiful Abigail in South Africa went back to college to complete her education. The rape of her body, mind, and spirit in the corridors of her college stalled her for a while, but she came back determined for the sake of her two sons. She looked at her rapist in the eye and told herself that he had no power over her. She launched a movement of survivors of rape and together they began to speak justice and power at home, places of worship, and seats of power. For the sake of other girls, Abigail spoke up. She knew her God was with her.

A petite, gentle Abigail grew up in the dangerous forests of Myanmar, where groups have fought each other and the government for years. She did not know much about the world beyond her village. She knew God and that He was with her. She knew that the children in her village needed her and the other mothers to look after them. She knew that the women who were from the side of the enemy also cared about the things that she did. So she reached out, sharing food and laughter in the other women's homes so that they could live in peace even as their men fought.

The Church leaders saw and gave her room within their worship walls so that this quiet leader could lead them and their people in ways of courage, love and generosity, breaking away from the fear of oppression of armed groups.

I am compelled! How could I not be?

I wonder if Abigail felt any anger, even for a second? I will never know. But what I do know, what I am drawn to seeing in Abigail in the Bible – and the many Abigails across the world – is that I have the power, ability and gifting to intercede and become a safe space, so that my people can count on me to act with love, wisdom, and generosity even in the face of adversity. As a woman, as a child of God, and as one who has much but also sees and feels much, I am drawn to intercede for others. God is mighty and willing to do far more than I can imagine.

So I stand up again.



By Veena O'Sullivan, Head of Sexual Violence & Peace Building at Tearfund UK

MARTHA

LUKE 10:38-42

38 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

41 "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

JOHN 11:1-6, 17-27

11 Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

4 When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, 7 and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19 and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

21 "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

24 Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26 and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

27 "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."



The Fighter

Martha of Bethany is most commonly known as being the “busy” sister, but if you look closely at her stories in the Gospels, you’ll find there was a lot more to her than an affinity for doing.

Yes, she was the one in the kitchen, preparing food for her guests, seeing to everyone’s needs -- a job she took very seriously, so much so that she complained to Jesus about her sister’s lack of help. But he responded by essentially saying, “It’s okay to relax, you know?”

But Martha was more to Jesus than someone who merely received his critique. In John 11, we learn that Jesus loved her.

What did he love about her? Perhaps it was that she spoke with unedited honesty. Or the raw openness she maintained when approaching her frustrations and hurts. When something seemed unfair, she didn’t hide her objections. If something seemed wrong, she fought for what was right. There was no deceit or backbiting. Perhaps he loved her servant-heart -- or her tasty cooking! All we know for certain is that Jesus loved Martha.

Maybe that’s why she felt comfortable coming to him with her concerns. Feeling overstretched and alone while taking care of everyone else, she petitioned Jesus. What does this say about Martha?

She trusted that he would listen and take her seriously, that he wouldn’t talk down to her, or make her feel ashamed for being outspoken. Martha had the right perspective in how she viewed Jesus. And because of this, she had the confidence to stand up for herself without fear of being rejected.

She seems like the kind of woman who, when something is unfair, won’t hesitate to say so. If something upsets her, she’s forthright about it. If someone slights her, instead of holding onto resentment, she speaks openly about it.

Sometimes I wonder if we focus on the wrong point of Martha’s and Mary’s story. So often the overarching message is: we should be like Mary, not like Martha. Yet perhaps the focus was never meant to be on Martha’s busyness, but rather how Jesus knows that sometimes we just need to sit at his feet. And that when we reach such a place in our lives, he would rather we rest there, for however long we might need to. And I like to think, in that moment, Martha understood this. It’s why the

story ends there, why she didn’t continue to argue or petition. Like all women with some fight in them, this wasn’t the only time we hear of Martha speaking for herself.

When her brother Lazarus died, and Jesus showed up late to the funeral, Martha went out to meet him while Mary stayed at home with those who mourned. In the midst of her suffering, she wanted to be near Jesus.

Coming to him, she explained that if he’d only been there, everything would’ve turned out alright. I can imagine their conversation. Martha, tears steadily flowing down her cheeks, airing her disappointment to Jesus. And him responding with tender comfort.

Her brother had been laid to rest in the tomb for four days at this point, yet she hadn’t given up hope. After voicing her hurts, Martha reminded Jesus that God would do whatever he asked. And scripture tells us that he did indeed raise Lazarus from the dead.

How jubilant Martha must’ve felt. The miracle Jesus performed that day was nothing short of astounding, but Martha’s fervent trust in Jesus was impressive, too. So great was her faith that she proclaimed Jesus as Lord before witnessing him raise her brother from death.

She had the right perspective of Jesus. Martha recognized Jesus’ divinity -- and she never doubted his compassion or love for her. I pray we all could be a little bit more like Martha.



By Amanda Miah, Strategic Initiatives Manager at Tearfund USA

ESTHER

ESTHER 2:15-17, 3:13, 4:13-16

15 When the turn came for Esther (the young woman Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. 16 She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

17 Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

13 Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

13 Mordecai sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 14 For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

15 Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: 16 "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

The Advocate

Esther was an orphan, a minority, a woman who came from humble beginnings. But she was much more than those labels. She became an advocate for her people and helped save an entire generation.

She would have never thought or dreamed of entering the palace of Shushan for it was completely out of reach for a Jew like her. And yet, God placed her there.

After Persian King Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, disposed Queen Vashti for not obeying his commands, he told his servants to search far and wide for the most beautiful women in the land. This is how Esther was chosen. In the book of

Esther, it says "she had a lovely figure and was beautiful." She was pretty on the outside, but what made her the most beautiful was her character and her deep love for God.

Imagine being taken to a foreign place and not being able to expose your identity, scared what would happen if they found out who you truly were. Not only that, but imagine competing against hundreds of other ladies for the attention of the king. What inspires me about this is that Esther was put in a very odd situation but continually trusted God with the process. She was also extremely humble. She could have had anything she wanted to make herself more beautiful for the king, but she didn't.

Esther eventually won his favor through her humble spirit as God shined through her.

Once she was chosen to be Queen, I think she would have realized the authority God placed on her life, but she might not have realized God would use her to save her people. Throughout her time in the palace her cousin Mordecai, who raised her, advised her of many situations, but when he had discovered Haman's plot to kill all of the Jews it was a game-changer.

Imagine someone high up, with power in government threatening to kill off your whole family. This is exactly what she was going through.

But what inspires me about her is that she doesn't panic. She doesn't rush and go and tell the king immediately. She doesn't rely on her own strength but she completely relies on God. She knows she has a huge responsibility to advocate and stand up for her people.

She dealt with this situation in such an inspiring way that we can all learn from. She was so passionate about standing up for her people that she would die for them. Not only is that a sign of great courage and bravery, but also great leadership.

God used Esther, an ordinary woman, blessed with beauty, to do an extraordinary thing. That is exactly what God can do for us. It doesn't matter what we have been blessed with, whether that is good looks or a great job. Whoever you are, wherever you live, whether you are the lowest in society or the wealthiest - God can use you.

So, stand up for what you believe in, fight for what is right and give yourself 100% to God. We just have to be willing to draw from God's strength -- just like Esther did.



By Grace Stanton, *Communications Specialist at Tearfund New Zealand*



SHIPRAH & PUAH

EXODUS 1:8-22

8 Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. 9 "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become far too numerous for us.

10 Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country."

11 So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites 13 and worked them ruthlessly. 14 They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.

15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, 16 "When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the

delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." 17 The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. 18 Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?"

19 The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive."

20 So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous.

21 And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

22 Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

The Protesters

In the first chapter of Exodus, we are introduced to a pair of midwives named Shiprah and Puah. Although scholars aren't totally sure whether these women were Egyptian or Hebrew, we do know that these midwives had a lot of work to do!

At the start of their story, the Israelites were living under Egyptian captivity, and they were having a lot of babies. As the Pharaoh exploited their labor and denied their God-given

dignity, the Israelites were well on their way to outnumbering their enslavers.

But Pharaoh knew he could not let this happen. Determined to keep a grip on his power and wealth, he devised an evil plan. He believed that by getting rid of all newborn boys, he could keep the captive Israelites from rising up against him, and he believed that Shiprah and Puah would help him.

BUT THIS PLAN FAILED ON TWO ACCOUNTS:

1. The women he tasked to carry out his evil bidding, Shiprah and Puah, weren't ultimately accountable to the laws of earthly kings - but to the laws of God.
2. He sorely underestimated the power and influence Shiprah and Puah had, especially within their sphere of influence among other midwives.

Some scholars believe that Shiprah and Puah were actually the head midwives among all the others in the land. If this was the case, Pharaoh would have expected them to share the orders he gave to all of the midwives beneath them. In other words, Shiprah and Puah may have held a position of power and influence. Depending on how they responded to the Pharaoh's commands, they had a lot to gain or lose: If they obeyed, they may have been rewarded and honored. If they disobeyed, they risked their position, privilege, and even their lives.

It's important to recognize that Shiprah's and Puah's ultimate decision to disobey Pharaoh wasn't just because they didn't like his plans or his politics. They resisted out of respect toward God and his laws. This was probably an attitude that had been cultivated over time. Each day, as they supported laboring mothers, encouraging them to keep going and bringing them through the danger of childbirth, they had been practicing for the moment they would be called before Pharaoh: Would they turn their back on their people when things got tough? Or would they continue to protect the Israelites in their most vulnerable moments?

In the end, their civil disobedience led to the protection of God's people, and eventually, their deliverance into the promised land.

Centuries later and thousands of miles away, a woman named Rosa Parks also refused to follow the law of the empire. She entered into a lineage of powerful women who've pledged their highest allegiance to the God of Justice.

On a December night in 1955, Parks boarded a city bus in Birmingham, Alabama. She was riding home from another shift at work, but this trip would change the country forever. Fortified by righteous conviction, Parks, a black woman, refused to yield her seat on the bus to a white rider. At the time, the law required black passengers to give up the front seats to white passengers and move to the back.

"From my upbringing and the Bible, I learned people should stand up for rights just as the children of Israel stood up to the Pharaoh," Parks wrote later in her autobiography.

As she remained in her place, she had broken the law of the city, but upheld the law of the Kingdom of God. Despite the risks to her life and safety, Parks remained rooted in what she knew to be true: every person is created by God with equal dignity and worth. She was arrested that night and faced threats for years afterward, but she never wavered.

Long before she became famous for the bus incident, Parks had been an activist for civil rights. Like the Hebrew midwives, Parks was well-practiced in obedience to God and prepared to protect her people.

When the time came and the pressure was on, these women knew without a doubt that their loyalty lay with the King of Heaven, not their earthly emperors. Despite the risks, their minds were fixed on God's justice.

"I have learned over the years that when one's mind is made up, this diminishes fear; knowing what must be done does away with fear," Rosa Parks said.

Thankfully, we don't have to summon this courage on our own. God promises us his Spirit to strengthen and encourage us to do what must be done for the sake of his Kingdom.



By Corie Colliton, *Digital Communications Manager at Tearfund USA*

MARY

LUKE 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called[a] the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail."

38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

The Nonconformist

I can only imagine what it was like to be in Mary's shoes when Angel Gabriel told her that she would have a child - and that He would be the Savior of our world. As I imagine what it was like for Mary to endure confusion, fear, and shock, I admire her response to God's call on her life, "I am the Lord's servant." I aspire to respond similarly to God, knowing that God's Spirit and power rest on me, too (Luke 1:26-38).

Like Mary, many women in today's society are expected to respond to our passions and purposes through a worldly lens, but God calls us to respond to such delicate assignments with obedience to His voice and His way. He created us with such passions and desires for His Kingdom purposes. Responding to God's voice may take us through uncharted paths, but as there was a fourth person seen in the fiery furnace along with

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3:16-18), so will He be with us.

Often fear tries to creep in as a subtle yet overpowering voice, as I am sure fear tried to do with Mary. But we, as God's chosen daughters, have a choice -- just as Mary did -- to continuously choose to hear, trust and obey our Father's voice. Although we may not have the entire plan mapped out, or feel that we are qualified, we can rely on God's word that He is with us (Joshua 1:9 and Matthew 4:4).

We should not focus on ourselves, or operate in self-reliance, aiming to master challenges with our finite minds. Instead we should allow God's Spirit to embody, encourage, and empower us truly.

We are to be encouraged by the beautiful witness of Mary's story as a daughter, wife, mother, and mighty nonconformist. Mary's choice to trust our Father with her story and life's course led to you and me having eternal life. When we ponder Mary's story of surrender, our spirit should be quickened to identify and respond (whatever response looks like for this season) to God's strategic plan - not only for our life but ultimately for the Kingdom. Mary's obedience changed her family, her community, eventually her nation, and now the entire globe.



By Sadara Shine, Program Information Officer at Tearfund USA

So, dear sisters, set the tone for powerful breakthroughs with your willingness to go against the grain of culture -- with God always before you!

A Prayer for Women

GOD,

As your daughters, you've adopted us and brought us into a beautiful heritage. You've surrounded us with a great cloud of witnesses that includes faith-filled women. You've designed us to be mirrors of your persistence, vulnerability, might, and mercy.

JESUS,

As your sisters, you have seen us, healed us, held us, and commissioned us. As your followers, you challenge us to be more than "good Christian girls", but holy troublemakers working to build your kingdom of love and justice.

HOLY SPIRIT,

As you empowered Esther, Deborah, Shiprah, and Mary, you are strengthening us to carry on their legacy as advocates, leaders, protesters, and revolutionaries. Give us the courage to uniquely express these callings in our lives, in our spheres of influence.

Amen.



It's up to all of us - both men and women - to make sure every woman has the freedom to rise to her full potential.

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