

ELIZABETH

MARY, MOTHER OF JESUS

MARY MAGDALENE

MARTHA
AND MARY

WOMAN WITH THE FLOW
OF BLOOD

THE BENT-OVER WOMAN

THE FORGIVEN WOMAN

THE CANAANITE WOMAN

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

PRISCILLA, LYDIA, PHOEBE,
AND DORCAS

WOMEN OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament is about Jesus. His character shows very clearly in relation to the people around him. When dealing with hypocrites, he was strong. When dealing with children, he was tender and loving.

Following are portraits of the women with whom Jesus related during his earthly ministry, as well as women in the early church who worshiped the ascended Jesus. These women showed great faith and human faults; they were forgiven women, friends and disciples, and leaders in the church. Their short stories give us examples for our own relationships with the risen Lord.

ELIZABETH

BIBLICAL REFERENCES	Luke 1
LOCATION AND DATES	Jerusalem, around 7-4 BC
KEY EVENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childless wife of Zechariah, a priest in the temple in Jerusalem • Received a message from God saying she would have a son • Mother of John the Baptist, the prophet or "forerunner" of Jesus • Relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus

KEY STORY

The Gospel of Luke begins not with the story of Jesus' birth but with an unusual couple: Zechariah, a priest in the temple in Jerusalem, and his wife Elizabeth. Their story starts like the story of Abraham and Sarah. The first parallel Luke notes is a painful reality: Elizabeth, like Sarah, was barren and elderly. God uses the lives of these women to show that he is the God of life and miracles.

After a 400-year silence from God since the closing of the Old Testament, an angel from God surprised Zechariah during his service in the temple. The angel promised a child to the old couple. Like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah found it difficult to believe the words of the angel. Even though Zechariah was a priest in the temple, he could not believe that God was again speaking to his people. But his unbelief does not stop God: Elizabeth became pregnant.

In Elizabeth's view, God restored her and gave her a new beginning. However, God's plans go beyond her; he was about to restore humanity through the birth of Jesus Christ. Just as God changed Elizabeth's sadness into joy, God was about to produce an unexpected reversal for humanity. Elizabeth's son, John, who became John the Baptist, prepared the way for such a change.

Elizabeth not only experienced God's special favor, she was also the first person in the gospel of Luke about whom we read that she "was filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:41). She and the baby in her womb were the first ones to recognize Jesus, still in Mary's womb, as the promised Messiah.

INSIGHTS FROM HER STORY

- ✎ God demonstrates that there is nothing impossible for him.
- ✎ He transforms childlessness into fertility; he brings life where there is none.
- ✎ He shows that he is faithful to his promises. As he had promised to the Patriarchs and through the prophets, God now begins the process of restoring his people, and the whole world.
- ✎ Elizabeth and her unborn baby's recognition that Mary's baby was the Messiah was possible by the presence of the Spirit in them.

MARY, MOTHER OF JESUS

BIBLICAL REFERENCES	Luke 1
LOCATION AND DATES	Nazareth, around 7-4 BC
KEY EVENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A young, virgin woman, engaged to Joseph • God chose her to be Jesus' mother • Called "blessed among women" • Submitted to God's will and sang a beautiful prayer • Became another of Jesus' disciples

KEY STORY Mary was a very common, simple, young woman who would have passed unnoticed at any other moment. Scripture's focus is not about who she was, since the Scriptures say little about her; it is about what happened to her and her response to such an amazing event. The Bible simply says she is forever "blessed among women."

In a dark time when God's silence felt unending, his people had been under the oppression of the powerful Roman Empire, and the people's faith was in great need of renewal, a light shone in the least expected place: the village of a young couple-to-be, Joseph and Mary. The New Testament pays very little attention to this couple. They were engaged to be married (Matthew 1:18), they were from the little northern town of Nazareth, probably from a poor family, since they offered the sacrifice of the poor—two doves and two pigeons—rather than the required lamb (Leviticus 12:8). The Gospel of Luke's focus is Mary. The angel Gabriel descended to give Mary some extraordinary news: the Savior was coming, and Mary was to be his mother.

This unexpected news gives us a chance to read about Mary's extraordinary character. At this time in Israel's history, the people had little faith that God was involved with them. There had been no prophets in Israel for 400 years. Compare the priest Zechariah's reaction to the hopeful attitude in Mary's response: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38). Mary was willing and quick to submit to God. Her response was written in Luke 1:46-55.

Although the Bible mentions Mary on two other occasions, during the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12) and requesting time to talk to Jesus (Luke 8:19-21), the Scriptures do not report that she had a prominent part in Jesus' earthly ministry. Perhaps this is because the Gospels are about Jesus' ministry. Acts 1:14 is the last appearance of Mary in the Bible. She is shown with the other disciples. Mary, Jesus' mother, was above all else a follower of Jesus.

INSIGHTS FROM HER STORY

- ✦ Mary's humble acceptance of God's will is an example for God's people.
- ✦ The presence of the Holy Spirit allowed Mary to recognize that God was about to do something marvelous.
- ✦ Her humility is also shown after Jesus' death in her willingness to wait alongside the disciples as just one of them (Acts 1:14), not demanding special treatment.

MARTHA AND MARY

BIBLICAL REFERENCES	Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-3, 17-45
LOCATION AND DATES	Bethany, AD 26-30
KEY EVENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sisters of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from death • Close friends of Jesus • Mary sat at Jesus' feet; Martha actively served and was hospitable • Martha echoed Peter's confession: "I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (John 11:27) • Mary washed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume

KEY STORY When thinking about Jesus' earthly ministry, it is easy to forget that he too was human, with human needs. He walked far on hot days, was thirsty, and became tired. In such moments, friendship and loving companionship must have been precious to him. Besides his quiet moments of prayer and intimacy with his Father, Jesus also found friendship in people like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

The Gospels tell of several interactions between Jesus and at least one of these women. The first shows Jesus visiting at their home. Mary sat at his feet listening to the Master talk. The expression used to describe her actions is unusual when one of the parties is a woman. Tradition forbade rabbis to instruct women. While Mary sat listening to his teachings, Martha was busy being hospitable to Jesus. In frustration at Mary's lack of help, Martha asked Jesus to intervene. Jesus' gentle response shot to the heart of the matter: Only one thing was truly necessary, and Mary had made a good choice.

The Gospel of John describes two emotional interactions between Jesus and these two women. In one, Jesus came to Bethany, the village where Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived, after having learned that Lazarus was sick. Once again Martha was on the go, running to meet Jesus before he came into town. Her confession is both powerful and beautiful. After Jesus identified himself as the resurrection and the life, Martha confessed: "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (John 11:27).

Later on, as Jesus continued with his ministry, he returned to Bethany and visited his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Once again, Martha was serving dinner and attending the guests. Mary took perfume and cleaned Jesus' feet with it. That action was often associated with burials. Her act of love and gratitude becomes an announcement of Jesus' death.



INSIGHTS FROM HER STORY

✿ Martha and Mary are examples of two important characteristics in the Christian life: Willingness to serve and hunger for God's instructions. The choice is, then, not between being like Mary or like Martha, for both are required: "Love the Lord with all your heart...and your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31) However, loving God is a necessary first.

✿ In addition to being disciples, the sisters were also Jesus' friends. Yet, they fully recognize who Jesus is: Martha's confession and Mary's foot washing show their deep love and commitment to Christ.

DEFINITION OF GNOSTICISM

The word Gnosticism comes from a Greek word, *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge." Gnosticism brings together ideas from many sources. There are many types of Gnosticism; however, they all seem to agree that everything physical is evil, so they use some secret knowledge to escape this evil reality.

The idea that Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus was popularized by some books, such as Jose Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. But the Gnostic writings do not really say that. They suggest that Jesus loved Mary more than any other disciple. These Christian Gnostic writings were rejected early on by early Christian leaders, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Eusebius, and many others.

EXAMPLES OF "CHRISTIAN" GNOSTIC WRITINGS

- ✿ Gospel of Thomas
- ✿ Gospel of Judas
- ✿ Gospel of Philip
- ✿ Gospel of Mary
- ✿ Infancy Gospel of Thomas
- ✿ Gospel of Truth

MARY MAGDALENE

BIBLICAL REFERENCES	Luke 8:1-3; Mark 15:40-47; John 19:25; 20:1-18
LOCATION AND DATES	Galilee, AD 26-30
KEY EVENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belonged to the larger group of Jesus' disciples • Healed of possession by seven demons • Present at the time of Jesus' death • First to talk to the Lord after the resurrection • First disciple commissioned to tell about Jesus' resurrection

KEY STORY

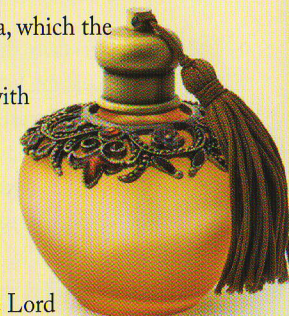
Who is the real Mary Magdalene?

- She appears to be connected to a wealthy northern city, Magdala, which the Roman armies destroyed.
- Traditionally, Mary Magdalene has been mistakenly associated with the sinful woman in Luke 7:37-39. However, careful study of the text does not support this connection.
- Luke 8 introduces her as woman who had been cured of evil spirits.

Mary was a follower of Jesus, one of the larger group of disciples who traveled with him. She was one of the many women who supported the Lord in his travels and sufferings. In fact, the four gospels show her present at the time of the death of Jesus. She was also among the women who went to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus for burial, and she was the first person to speak to the resurrected Jesus.

It is a special experience; one unparalleled by that of any other disciple: she was the first disciple commissioned to tell the amazing good news of the risen Jesus. Some have suggested that Gnostic writings claimed that Jesus was married to Mary. There is no evidence of such a thing, and the Scripture makes it clear that, although Jesus did have a close relationship with Mary, it was one of Teacher (Rabbi) and disciple.

However, Jesus' relationship with Mary was unusual for that culture. Rabbis did not disciple women. Women were not permitted to study the Law, and associating with women was potentially a cause for impurity. But even more shockingly, relating to a woman who had been possessed by impure spirits was an unthinkable action by a man of God.



INSIGHTS FROM HER STORY

- ✿ Mary Magdalene exemplifies a person who left everything to follow Jesus. She became a friend, travel companion, supporter, and disciple of Jesus.
- ✿ When all the disciples abandoned Jesus during his crucifixion, Mary Magdalene stayed there, alongside the other women.

FOUR WOMEN OF THE EARLY CHURCH

PRISCILLA

Acts 18 tells that Priscilla and Aquila, a Jewish couple living in Rome, had become Christians. After the Emperor Claudius expelled all Christians from Rome, Aquila and Priscilla ended up in the port city of Corinth, where they became acquainted with the Apostle Paul, who was also in the profession of tent-making. Paul lived with them during his stay in Corinth. Both Priscilla and Aquila came with Paul to Ephesus.

As Paul continued in his traveling, Aquila and Priscilla stayed back in Ephesus to work with the church there. Although the exact nature of their work there is not clear, they were active leaders of the church. Acts recounts a special story about a young and fervent Jew from Alexandria, Apollos, who became a point of contention for the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 3. While in Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila took on the task to instruct him in “the way of God more adequately” (Acts 18:26).

LYDIA

Lydia bears the honor of being the first recorded European convert to Christianity. Her place of origin was an important commercial city in what is now Turkey. She was a dealer of purple fabrics, which were used for expensive robes. After God’s miraculous intervention (“the Lord opened her heart...”), Lydia’s home became the central base for Paul’s work in Philippi.



DORCAS

Dorcas, also known as Tabitha (Acts 9:32-43), was a Christian in the church near Joppa, an important ancient seaport. Dorcas was much loved because of her generous and compassionate heart. She became sick and died. However, urged by the church in Joppa, the Apostle Peter came by and raised Dorcas from the dead. Dorcas’ life is a beautiful illustration of God’s love and power in favor of those who love him (Romans 8:28).

PHOEBE

Phoebe is mentioned only once in the New Testament. At the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul introduces Phoebe (apparently a gentile name) who was a *diakonos* of the church (that is, a deaconess). It is the same term that Paul applies to himself (1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 6:4) and Timothy. She may be the one bringing Paul’s letter to the church in Rome. Paul’s introduction makes it clear that Phoebe was a respected, committed member of the church, who had provided valuable help to the Apostle Paul.



ANONYMOUS

	THE WOMAN WITH A FLOW OF BLOOD
BIBLICAL REFERENCES	Mark 5:21-34 (Matthew 9:18-22; Luke 8:40-48)
LOCATION AND DATES	West of Galilee Lake, AD 26-30
KEY EVENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suffered from a disease for twelve years • Was considered “impure,” unfit for participation in religious rituals • Lost everything trying to find a cure • Was healed by touching Jesus’ garment

KEY STORY

While Jesus was in Galilee, a synagogue ruler named Jairus met him with an urgent request to come and heal his daughter. Jesus agreed to come to Jairus’ house. At this point, there is a curious interruption—an anonymous woman who had suffered a disease for twelve years breaks into the narrative. This sick woman was banned from any ritual activity, from any contact with others who did not wish to be unclean. Not only was this woman a religious and social outcast, she was also a poor woman who lost everything trying to find a cure. But she had heard of this Jesus who performed miracles. In a desperate act of courage, under the anonymity of a crowd, she touched the garments of this miracle healer, hoping that act would be enough to receive the healing she deeply hoped for. And she was right. A mere touch brought that healing.

However, in her moment of greatest happiness, Jesus sensed what happened and asked who touched him. Rather than trying to run away, the woman came forward with the truth. Instead of the anger and punishment she expected, she met Jesus’ gentleness and grace: “Daughter,” he said. For a person shunned from society, such a tender address must have come as a cup of sweet, refreshing water. This miracle worker addressed her as a human being, as a person with dignity and worth. Jesus was revealing himself as so much more than a miracle worker—he is the very Lord of Creation, the Great Healer, and the Savior of humanity.

INSIGHTS FROM HER STORY

Like this woman, we can find healing if we dare to touch Jesus and allow him to touch us. Just as Jesus restored her health, dignity, and the possibility of a future, Jesus offers to us the same wholeness.



	THE BENT-OVER WOMAN
BIBLICAL REFERENCES	Luke 13:10-17
LOCATION AND DATES	Galilee, AD 26-30
KEY EVENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bent over by a spirit for eighteen years • Went to synagogue the same day Jesus was teaching • Jesus called her forward to heal her • Jesus restored her physically and socially: she was a daughter of Abraham

KEY STORY

The Bible states that this woman was not suffering from the bending of age. It was a bending produced unnaturally. A spirit had afflicted her for eighteen years. Her condition was probably understood as a result of spiritual impurity, perhaps from a hidden and hideous sin. So her very presence in the synagogue may have taken courage.

As Jesus taught in the synagogue, he noticed the woman and called her forward. He healed her. Healing someone on the day of rest was against tradition. The reaction from the leader of the synagogue was criticism: If you can be healed on the other six days, why choose the holy day?

Jesus turned this awkward moment into a moment for teaching about God’s grace and mercy. Jesus healed her and more: He also restored her sense of being, her value and rightful place among God’s people. Traditionally, Israelite men were identified as “sons of Abraham.” Jesus went beyond this tradition and applied the title to the woman, calling her “a daughter of Abraham.” This woman, now whole, becomes an illustration of what is to come for those who enter the Sabbath of the Lord (Hebrews 4). We are all bent over by the weight of our burdens and our desires, but Jesus makes us whole; he leads us into a true Sabbath rest.



INSIGHTS FROM HER STORY

This story illustrates what Jesus said in words before: The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). Jesus’ care for this woman surpassed the traditions concerning the Holy Day. Indeed, although the day continued to be holy, God’s work of restoration, bringing God’s people to the true Sabbath (rest, wholeness), was Jesus’ ministry. Just as he fully restored her health, he also restored her rightful place among God’s people as a daughter of Abraham, a daughter of the promise!

WOMEN TOUCHED BY JESUS

THE FORGIVEN WOMAN	
BIBLICAL REFERENCES	John 8:2-11
LOCATION AND DATES	Jerusalem, AD 26-30
KEY EVENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accused of adultery • Brought before Jesus • Received Jesus' forgiveness and invitation to a changed life

KEY STORY

Jesus was teaching at the temple courts. Some religious leaders barged in, making a great commotion, bringing a frightened woman along. From the perspective of the religious leaders, the moment was a perfect opportunity for trapping Jesus. The trap was clever: if he agreed with them, he would break Roman law; if he disagreed with them, he would break Jewish law. Whether justice would be served with the woman or not is not what mattered; catching Jesus was the goal.

The woman was accused of adultery. It was a most dangerous charge with a deadly consequence. We do not know if the charge was truthful nor why the other party in the crime was absent. The Law required both the man and the woman to stand trial and punishment (Leviticus 20:10). We already know what Jesus thought about the Law: "Has Moses not given you the law?" (John 7:19); the answer is: obey it! He did not repeat the reminder, nor engage them in a legal debate. He simply responded: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone."

Jesus skillfully turned the dilemma around: if they did not throw stones, they showed that they were inadequate to judge the woman. If they did throw the stone, they would be pretending to be without sin and not in need of the Law. Everyone went away.

The woman could have fled: her life was saved. Yet she remained standing. What could she have expected from this man writing on the ground? He engaged her in conversation, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," were the only words she said. Jesus replied: "Then neither do I condemn you." Judgment belongs to Jesus (John 5:22).

INSIGHTS FROM HER STORY

✎ The woman gets a glimpse of Jesus' grace and mercy. The Law required that the woman to be put to death. We do not know if she was really guilty or not. Jesus' gentleness shows that there is no sin he could not forgive. Forgiveness allows new possibilities, the opportunity of a second chance. In Jesus, everyone can get a second (and a third and fourth) chance for a future and a new life.

THE CANAANITE WOMAN	
BIBLICAL REFERENCES	Matthew 15:21-28 (Mark 7:24-30)
LOCATION AND DATES	Region of Tyre and Sidon, AD 26-30
KEY EVENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistently cried out for Jesus' help • Her daughter suffered from demon-possession • Courageously engaged Jesus in a conversation • Jesus rewarded her faith by healing her daughter

KEY STORY

Matthew 10 tells how Jesus commissioned and sent his apostles to preach the coming of the kingdom of heaven. He instructed them: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel" (10:5-6). Later on, after attending the crowds, Jesus and his disciples retreated far to the north for some peace and quiet. There they found a woman disturbing the peace with her cries for help in healing her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus' unresponsiveness was unusual. The apostles desired to rid themselves of the screaming woman and appealed to Jesus to send her away. Jesus repeated what he already told them, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

However, it was not the disciples who responded but the woman herself, begging Jesus to help. And still Jesus' answer to her petition is puzzling: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." At this point the woman has been ignored, looked upon as a nuisance, and clearly rejected. However, although she could have walked away dejected or angry, she instead demonstrated great courage and wit, offering a response to Jesus: "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." According to Mark, "because of her answer" Jesus granted her petition. Matthew's account builds on Mark's by understanding her ingenuity and wit as expressions of a great faith, which Jesus commended and rewarded: "Then Jesus answered, 'Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.' And her daughter was healed from that very hour" (Matthew 15:28).

INSIGHTS FROM HER STORY

✎ The faith and perseverance of this woman is a reminder that the good news of Jesus is for every person, everywhere. Her faith also contrasts with the lack of faith of the Jewish leaders. Sometimes Jesus found more faith outside of the people of God.





THE SAMARITANS

- The Samaritans were a group of Israelites in the northern region, between Galilee and Judea, West of the Jordan River.
- Although not Jewish, they were the result of the intermarriage between Israelites and Assyrian deportees from other places.
- Although they observed the Law of Moses, they did not consider some of the other Old Testament books as authoritative.
- Their profound hatred of the Jews is first recorded in Nehemiah 4.
- The level of hostility between both groups was extremely high.

THE CANAANITES

This story in Matthew is the only place in the New Testament that uses the name Canaanites. Who were the Canaanites?

- The inhabitants of Canaan, the land that God promised to Abraham (Genesis 15:15).
- A name used to describe sea merchants (Isaiah 23:8; Zechariah 14:21; Ezekiel 16:29).
- Later it became closely associated with the Phoenicians, people who lived by the Mediterranean Sea and were well known for being sea merchants.
- Matthew uses the name Canaanite as a way to make it very clear to the reader that the woman was not a Jew.



THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

BIBLICAL REFERENCES	John 4:1-42
LOCATION AND DATES	Samaria, AD 26-30
KEY EVENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She came out to draw water from Jacob's well • Jesus revealed to the woman that he is the promised Messiah • Went back to town to tell of her discovery • People believed in her testimony and came to Jesus

KEY STORY We read that Jesus "had to go through Samaria" (John 4:4). The necessity was not geographical, since most Jews would have crossed the Jordan River. This meeting was, in fact, a divine appointment: Jesus went out of his way to go through Samaria for this conversation.

Jesus sat by a well during the heat of the day. Some people have thought that because the woman came out to draw water at noon she must be hiding from the other women. It is just as probable that the woman had run out of water while cooking and had a pressing need for water.

The woman was surprised when Jesus talked to her, requesting some water. The surprise arises from a double awareness: she was a Samaritan and a woman. Jesus was breaking two old traditions at once: teachers of the law did not talk to women in public, and practicing Jews did not relate to Samaritans, since both activities could cause impurity. Yet, the woman proved to be quite daring in questioning Jesus and in her openness for conversation.

It is easy to assume that the woman *divorced* five husbands, but this is not likely, as the culture allowed only men to file for divorce. It is possible that: 1) each husband died, or 2) she was caught in the Old Testament marriage laws that pass a widow from brother to brother, or 3) possibly that some husbands divorced her and some died. In any case, it is likely that this woman was deeply hurt. Her desire for this conversation and her thirst for something more demonstrate her need for Jesus. The fact that Jesus pointed out her affair with a man who was not her husband showed the woman that Jesus was more than just a teacher: he was a prophet. Yet, he is much more than that. The following dialogue makes this even clearer: Jesus revealed to her that he is the Messiah, the Savior of the world (John 4:42).

The Samaritan woman went to bear witness of the Messiah to the people in her town. Remarkably, the people believed her and came to Jesus. Despite the disciples' bewilderment, Jesus accepted the invitation of the people and stayed two more days with them.