

Women in the Old Testament



“They Stood (Daughters of Zelophehad)” Lauren Wright Pittman (graphic image, inspired by Numbers 27:1-11) | A Sanctified Art LLC | sanctifiedart.org
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Linked-In Learning • Fall 2024

Study Guide

NASSAU PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

How to Use this Guide

Everyone, leader and participants, should begin by reading the introduction for its important orientation to the theme for this study.

- * Participants can best prepare for each meeting by reading the assigned text in advance at least once. They can also read the material that will guide the discussion, although this is not necessary to enter into the discussion.
- * If you are unable to attend a small group or the adult education class, you can use this guide each week to prepare to hear the sermon in worship on Sunday or during the week on the Nassau Church website.
- * This guide can also help in your preparation for the adult education presentations.
- * If you didn't sign up for a small group because the times were not convenient, you can gather three or four friends on Zoom to talk about "Women in the Old Testament" using this guide. Or read the text and discuss the questions together as a family or couple.
- * Leaders of small groups can prepare by reading the text in advance as well as looking over the discussion plan to see how it will fit your group and the events of the day. For suggestions and reminders about leading small groups in general and this series in particular, turn to page 19 of this guide.
- * Whether you explore these stories on your own or with others, make notes as you read and ponder the questions. There's space to do this in this study guide.

However and whenever you enter into this study, bring your own questions as you grapple with this material and Christian discipleship today. May your faith increase even as you find a new dimension to your relationship with God and your faith journey.

Carol A. Wehrheim, October 2024

Glossary of Bibles

CEB Common English Bible	NIV New International Version
CEV Contemporary English Version	NRSV New Revised Standard Version
JSB The Jewish Study Bible	NRSVUE New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition
KJVAE King James Version American Edition	RSV Revised Standard Version



Introduction

For several years, in the autumn and the spring, members and friends of Nassau Presbyterian Church have enjoyed the linked-in adult education series. These five-week series have covered topics from the Old Testament and the New Testament. This fall we turn to the Old Testament for a series, “Women of the Old Testament”. Our thanks to the Rev. Dr. Kathie Sakenfeld, whose conversations and whose book *Just Wives? Stories of Power & Survival in the Old Testament & Today*, have been helpful to the presenters and in the preparation of this study guide.

Hearing from others will, we hope, broaden your appreciation along with your knowledge of women in the Old Testament. A queen, mothers of nations, and advocates for themselves and other women are among the women we will meet during these weeks. We will also consider some contemporary women to complete our discussions.

Each week the preacher will preach about the same woman or women, using the appropriate Old Testament text as the sermon text. Members and friends of our faith community will guide us in thinking about the women and why the stories are important to them and might also be important to us. Some of these such as the daughters of Zelophehad may be totally new to you. But the story of Esther is likely to be quite familiar.

To add to your appreciation of these women, you are encouraged to worship each Sunday with others in the Sanctuary or by watching the live-stream service of worship. A second feature to deepen your understanding of the text is to come to the adult education presentation in the Assembly Room on Sunday mornings. If you cannot be present, listen to the recording of each week that will be available by Monday afternoon on the church website. Of course, to maximize your experience with these women and the biblical texts, join a small group to discuss their lives and the Old Testament texts with others. You can sign up at the church during fellowship hour or on the church website. But if none of the times offered fits into your schedule, invite a couple friends to join you over coffee or on Zoom, using this guide as your starting point.

You get the idea; the more you interact with the biblical texts and these amazing woman, the richer and more transformational your experience will be during these weeks of linked-in learning. However you are able to enter into these weeks of worship and learning centered on “Women of the Old Testament,” may they enrich your own understanding of being God’s people.



WEEK ONE

The Competent Wife or Strong Woman

This poem is an acrostic, an a-b-c's of a "good woman"...the poem valorizes daily life and the real economic contributions of women in the ancient world. The ideal woman does good "all the days of her life", putting the focus, as wisdom literature often does, on the lived experiences of normal people. What is of value? Labor, diligence, skill, and provision.

Elaine T. James, *Working Preacher* website, September 20, 2009.

Featuring the Bible Text

Read Proverbs 31:10–31.

Let's start with the heading given to this portion of scripture in contemporary translations: "good wife" (RSV and KJVAE), "capable wife" (NRSV), "competent wife" (CEB), "wife of noble character" (NIV), and "woman of strength" (NRSVUE and JSB). The Hebrew word is the word for both "woman" and "wife." The word describing this wife/woman in verse 10 is translated in a variety of ways: "capable" (NRSV and JSB), "virtuous" (KJVAE), "noble character" (NIV), and "competent" (CEB).

- * Which of these words, or perhaps another word or phrase, do you find the most appropriate to your reading of this text?

Context is always important. First to consider could be the context of the wife/woman described in this passage.

- * What is the setting or life situation for this wife/woman?
- * For whom is this description written?
- * When have you heard this passage read aloud or referred to?

- * Look over the types of activities described. Which of them are in the home? Outside the home?
- * Of these activities, which are usually found in the realm of men?

Looking at the context or placement of the text matters too. Read chapter 1 to gain a sense of the intent of this book and the role of Woman Wisdom.

- * What references in this chapter remind you of Proverbs 31:10–31?
- * In what ways does knowing this about the book of Proverbs offer insight to the description of the wife/woman in chapter 31?

Amy G. Ogden, writing for *Working Preacher* (September 23, 2013), points out what is *not* said in this description:

1. A “woman’s worth is derived from her husband’s...Nor is there any claim that her virtue lives in her submission to her husband and his directions.”

2. There is no reference to pregnancy or childbirth; the only reference to children is in verse 28.

3. No description is given as to her appearance or physical appeal.

- * How do these omissions fit with the ways this passage is often used, i.e. to give wives an example of how they are to conduct themselves?
- * How do these omissions fit with what you know about the culture of the ancient Hebrews?

Featuring “The Competent Wife” or “The Strong Woman” in Contemporary Times

So what do Christians today do with this advice from his mother (the only portion of Proverbs that suggests his mother advises him; but remember it is written from a patriarchal perspective) to King Lemuel? First, we remember that this is not a description of a real woman, but a literary description. However, when you look more carefully at what this wife/woman does, a picture emerges of a strong, powerful, independent woman, who cares for others in her home as well as outside it.

With the popularity of the musical “1776”, we became familiar with the words that Abigail Adams penned to her husband John, who was in Philadelphia as one of the delegates to the First Continental Congress. Abigail was back home tending to the farm and other business matters,

all that went with keeping their lives together while he was away for long stretches of time. But the most quoted part of her letters is probably “Remember the ladies” when she advocates for women as these new laws are written. She wrote: “Do not put unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could.” She sought better protection for the women of her day.

- * Who comes to mind when you think of such a woman?
- * What about it causes you discomfort? For example, the wife/woman described is clearly of the noble class, not emblematic of most women of the time.
- * How might we use this passage today in families? In communities? In our congregation?

Taking this Wife/Woman with You

In each of the stories of “Women in the Old Testament,” we want to consider what we learn from them about being God’s people and, especially for Christians, a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ. Take a moment of reflection to consider these questions:

- * What do you want to take from this passage and our discussion?
- * What would you like to ask the presenter in the adult education class on Sunday?



WEEK TWO

The Daughters of Zelophehad

The special case of Zelophehad, who died leaving daughters but no sons, is foreshadowed in 26:33 in the census record of his clan. The detailed account that follows in chapter 27 and continues in chapter 36 addresses questions surrounding this case and uses it to explore more generally female inheritance of property in Israel, a patriarchal society... In light of ancient Near East practices, it is doubtful that Israelite women were barred from inheriting property.

The Jewish Study Bible, footnote on Numbers 27:1–10, p. 322.

Featuring the Bible Text

Read Numbers 27:1–11; Joshua 17:3–6.

The daughters of who? Would we even know about them if they had brothers or if their father had not died before the Israelites were preparing to enter the Promised Land? Yet here they are, and they are named, not just called “the daughters of Zelophehad” as is the case of so many women in the Bible, Old Testament (see 1 Chronicles 2:34) and New Testaments (see Acts 21:8).

- * Had you ever heard of the daughters of Zelophehad before you picked up this study guide?
- * These daughters—Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah—are named not once, but two more times (Numbers 36:11 and Joshua 17:3), but never in the same order. What do you make of family relationships like this? Is there anything you might surmise about the five women from these slight mentions?

Once again, context is significant. First we might consider the place of women in this patriarchal society. Property was passed from father to son ordinarily, but it was flexible when such flexibility was warranted.

- * How does this information modify your image of the society of the time?

- * What might have encouraged these women to act so boldly?
- * Who are they?

Turn to the illustration on the cover of the study guide. Painted by artist and PCUSA clergy-woman Lauren Wright Pittman, she titled it “They Stood.” In her reflection about this image, she wrote:

I imagine the daughters to fill the entire tent in order to be heard. I imagine Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah took the shape of the tent of meeting, a place where they were met by powerful men, a place of sacrifice and worship—not a place where a woman’s voice was often heard. The text says the women came forward; they stood, they spoke, they questioned, and they even demanded. Any one of those actions alone is difficult for the unseen and unheard. All they wanted was to receive the inheritance of their father and to keep his name from fading. I’m sure the pain of their father’s death was potent, but they needed to be recognized, valued, and seen as human beings in order to survive.

Take a few moments to sit with this work of art. Assign the names to each one, if you like. Notice the colors the artist used, the facial expressions, the clear identity of each woman, how the art work makes you feel.

- * What was your initial reaction to this depiction of the daughters of Zelophehad? Maybe even your reaction when you saw it the first time on the cover of the study guide?
- * Now that we have spent some time talking about the daughters, how does this art look to you?
- * What would you like to know about these women?
- * How might you connect the daughters to the competent wife/strong woman in Proverbs 31?

Featuring the Daughters of Zelophehad in Contemporary Times

Five strong women banded together to get what they needed and desperately wanted in the name of their father. We can point to many strong women in our history and today, perhaps even in our own families. One of the strongest groups of women who had a passion similar to the daughters of Zelophehad were the women of the suffragist movement. These women, from Susan B. Anthony to Ann Paul, stood in places that were the domain of men. They spoke, making solid arguments. They questioned the system and laws that existed. And, yes, they also demanded... the right to vote.

Alice Paul was raised as a Quaker. She took part in the suffragist cause in England where she went to work in a settlement house. Involved in their activities she was arrested three times. Her passion for this cause did not diminish when she returned to the United States. She joined existing groups to seek the vote for women, but felt they were too meek and making little progress. She wanted to use more militant tactics to make people, both men and women, aware of the cause. She was arrested and jailed three times before the Nineteenth Amendment, which granted women the right to vote, was ratified in 1920.

The daughters of Zelophehad would not have succeeded without Moses, who listened to them and sought God's wisdom for guidance. The suffragists were about to lose too. The state of Tennessee was the last state needed to ratify the amendment. The vote was tight and suffragists and anti-suffragists were lobbying hard. The legislators, all men of course, showed their preference by sporting a rose—yellow for suffrage and red for anti-suffrage. One 24-year-old legislator, Harry T. Burn, from a conservative rural area, showed up for the vote with a red rose in his lapel. But in his pocket was a letter from his mother. Despite the red rose, he cast his vote for ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Afterwards, he acknowledged that his mother had written that he should “be a good boy” and vote for ratification. And he did.

- * Who comes to mind when you think about the daughters of Zelophehad or suffragists like Alice Paul?
- * The daughters of Zelophehad and the suffragists were successful in their quest because a man with power supported them. Do you think this is always necessary? Why or why not?
- * How might this story from Numbers be used in families? In communities? In our congregation?

Taking the Daughters of Zelophehad with You

In each of the stories of “Women in the Old Testament,” we want to consider what we learn from them about being God’s people and, especially for Christians, a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ. Take a moment of reflection to consider these questions:

- * What do you want to take from this story of the daughters of Zelophehad and our discussion?
- * What would you like to ask the presenter in the adult education class on Sunday?



WEEK THREE

Naomi and Ruth

There are two options about where the book of Ruth fits in the order of the books of the Bible. The Christian sequence ... reflects ancient Greek and Latin manuscripts. It places the books between Judges and 1 Samuel. This locates the story at the end of Israel's tribal leaders, and looking forward to the time of the kings. The Jewish tradition, going back to ancient Hebrew manuscripts, places Ruth with the five scrolls in the Writings section of the Hebrew Bible. This is because each scroll is read on a particular Jewish holiday. Ruth is read on Shavuot, also called the Festival of Weeks, which occurs at the end of the harvest season. Both the Christian and Jewish ordering provide insight into the meaning of the book of Ruth and demonstrate its ongoing theological significance. They highlight the themes of royal covenant and divine providence that have been important in faith traditions throughout the centuries.

The CEB Study Bible, "Ruth," p. 410.

Featuring the Bible Text

Read Ruth 1-4.

Read aloud Ruth 1:1-2 and 4:16.

The story of Ruth begins with Naomi and her untenable situation in Moab and ends with Naomi, who is given the baby Obed to care for and the neighbors declare that Naomi has a son.

* Why then is the book called Ruth, and not Naomi or at least Naomi and Ruth?

Some of the details in this story are predicated by Jewish law. For example, gleaning after the field has been harvested can be traced to Deuteronomy 24:19-22, and the sale of the field that belongs to Naomi to Leviticus 25:25-28.

* How do these laws move the story along to a positive conclusion, even though God is not part of the action until chapter 4?

Various themes have been identified in the book of Ruth: famine and desperation, barrenness and fertility, emptiness to fullness, death to life, marriage to keep control of the property in the family, as well as loyalty and commitment.

- * Where do you see the theme of emptiness to fullness emerging in the book of Ruth? How is it central to this story?
- * The theme of controlling family property that was central to the story of the daughters of Zelophehad shows up again in the book of Ruth. How are the situations different? What does this tell you about the place of property in the culture?

Ruth is a Moabite, a foreigner. Yet in Ruth 3:11, Ruth is described by the community as “a worthy woman,” using the same Hebrew word as in Proverbs 31:10.

- * How does Ruth, as described in this story, fit the wife/woman in Proverbs 31?
- * What more would you like to know about Ruth or Naomi?

Featuring Naomi and Ruth in Contemporary Times

Several avenues are possible in looking at contemporary woman in relationships that connect with Naomi and Ruth. The one suggested here was chosen because of the difficult situation of migrants (foreigners) in our nation today. Naomi brought a foreign woman, the wife of one of her sons (we’re not sure which one), back to Bethlehem with her. This doesn’t appear to be a major problem, but Ruth is identified as a Moabite frequently in the story, and there was a history of hostility between the two peoples. Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem because a famine had hit Moab and food was reported to be available in Bethlehem. The difficulty of caring for and feeding one’s family drives many people from their home countries to settle where food is available.

Dolores Huerta didn’t leave her home country; she was born in New Mexico. However, as a schoolteacher, she worried about the many farm worker children who came to school hungry. Most of these children were from migrant families. She left teaching to work on changing conditions for these children and their families. In 1962 she and César Chávez began the National Farm Workers Association to seek justice for migrant farm workers, especially in California. Dolores was responsible for the national table grapes boycott in the late 1960s. It resulted in a union contract in 1970. They organized on non-violent principles at the same time that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was doing a similar thing for civil rights in the South.

Continued on page 12

Reflections

Prayers

In an interview with Kelly Corrigan on “Tell Me More” (October 21, 2021), when asked how Dolores thought equity could be achieved today, she answered, “With education and civic engagement.” At 90, Dolores Huerta is still working for justice for all.

- * The times are very different between Naomi and Ruth and Dolores Huerta, of course, but how are their concerns and struggles the same?
- * What other “worthy women” in contemporary times come to mind as you think about Naomi, Ruth, and Dolores?
- * How might this story of Ruth and Naomi be used in families? In communities? In our congregation?

Taking Naomi and Ruth with You

In each of the stories of “Women in the Old Testament,” we want to consider what we learn from them about being God’s people and, especially for Christians, a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ. Take a moment of reflection to consider these questions:

- * What do you want to take from this story of the Naomi and Ruth and our discussion?
- * What would you like to ask the presenter in the adult education class on Sunday?



WEEK FOUR

Sarah and Hagar

Sarah and Hagar are part of the larger story of God's promise to Abraham to provide him with many descendants who will eventually live in a land of their own and become a blessing to others. The Genesis story focuses mainly on the first part of this promise, numerous descendants, but even before the promise is first announced to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3), readers know that his wife Sarah is childless (Genesis 11:30). How then will the promise be fulfilled? The story of Sarah and Hagar answers this question, but the interaction between them raises a host of other issues important for them and for women today.

Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power & Survival in the Old Testament & Today*, p. 7.

Featuring the Bible Text

Read Genesis 16:1–16; 21:1–21.

Before considering the issues that come to light in this story, let's think about each woman. Clearly Sarah has the power, while Hagar is a slave, and a slave from a foreign country as well.

- * What else separates these two women?
- * If you were illustrating this story in a style similar to the art on the cover of this study guide, how would Sarah and Hagar be posed at the beginning of the story (Genesis 16:1–2)? How would you pose them at Genesis 16:4? What pose would you use for Hagar at Genesis 21:19–20?
- * How are Sarah and Hagar alike?
- * In *Whispering the Word*, Jacqueline Lapsley notes that the Sarah and Hagar story is a counter-example to the story of Naomi and Ruth. How do you see this in the two stories?

However, there is something that Hagar experiences in this story that is unique. In both Genesis 16 and 21, God or the angel of God speaks to her directly. The only person God has spoken to up to this point in Genesis is Abraham. Not only that, but in Genesis 21 Hagar names God—El roi (God sees).

- * Why is this information about Hagar notable?
- * Who else does God speak to in the Old Testament?
- * Why do you think God sends Hagar back to Sarah in Genesis 16?
- * What important message does God give Hagar in Genesis 21? Why is it significant?

Barrenness raises its ugly head again, as it does in the lives of several women who inhabit the Old Testament. In a culture where giving birth, especially to sons, is a sign of God's blessing, Sarah must be feeling quite bereft as each year passes and no child.

- * What words would you give to Sarah's sadness?

In her old age, Sarah gives birth to Isaac. But her concern for her son seems always near the surface and on the day of his weaning party, it erupts. Ishmael is now a teenager and Sarah sees him doing what? Some translations (NIV, KJV) say he was "mocking"; others (NRSV, CEV) say "playing" and the NRSV inserts "with her son Isaac" although this is not in any manuscript. The CEB says Ishmael was "laughing," which seems like a strong translation since the Hebrew word there comes from the same root as the name Isaac, which means "he laughs" (CEB. footnote to Genesis 21:9–10, p. 34). Thus, Ishmael and Isaac, sons of Abraham, form another contrasting pair in this story.

- * How do their births pit them against each another?
- * What is the basis for Sarah's concern about Ishmael?
- * The resolution is harsh, but compare the promise God made to Abraham (Genesis 12:2) with the one God made to Hagar (Genesis 21:18). What do the two promises suggest to you about God?
- * How do Sarah and Hagar stack up against the wife/woman in Proverbs 31?

Featuring Sarah and Hagar in Contemporary Times

Enslaved women in this country before the Civil War can tell their own stories of being forced to give birth to children sired by their masters. Their mistresses often treated them harshly as Sarah did Hagar. They were at the mercy of the sexual desires of their masters, who could also sell their children, making them a cash crop. In 1861 Harriet Jacobs, under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, published her story of slavery (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*) in her own words, complete with two statements by white people authenticating her work. From the time she was a young girl, Harriet was harassed by her white owner. She managed to take a lover, the white owner of a neighboring farm, who tried to purchase her, by whom she had two children. Before she was able to escape from the South, she spent seven years in a tiny garret over the porch on her mother's house, where she read and sewed, but was unable to sit up and had hardly enough room to turn over. From there she could hear her children's voices although they didn't know she was there. Finally, the time and circumstances were right for her to escape to New York. The woman she worked for there was able to buy her freedom. Jacobs wrote:

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are as free from the powerful slaveowners as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in *my* condition.

- * Though centuries apart, both Harriet and Hagar, along with their children, are free. How was that freedom similar? Different?
- * What other stories do you know of enslaved people moving through danger to freedom?

Taking Sarah and Hagar with You

In each of the stories of "Women in the Old Testament," we want to consider what we learn from them about being God's people and, especially for Christians, a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ. Take a moment of reflection to consider these questions:

- * What do you want to take from this story of Sarah and Hagar and our discussion?
- * What would you like to ask the presenter in the adult education class on Sunday?



WEEK FIVE

Esther

Esther is best read as a comedy... The story's plot is structured on improbabilities, exaggerations, misunderstandings, and reversals.

The book does have a serious side, and an important function as a Diaspora story... As such it promotes Jewish identity, solidarity within the Jewish community, and a strong connection with the Jewish (biblical) tradition.

The Jewish Study Bible, "Introduction to Esther," pp. 1619–1620.

Featuring the Bible Text

Summarize the book of Esther. It is too long to read aloud in the small group. Perhaps group members can take turns telling the story to its conclusion. It isn't necessary that every action is included.

Esther, the only book of which there was no remnant found among the Dead Sea scrolls, a book where God is not named, where no prayers are prayed, and no worship offered, is still one of the best known books of the Old Testament. This is probably because it is the basis of the celebration of Purim, which is described at the end of Esther (9:20–23).

- * Have you ever participated in the celebration of Purim? What happened?
- * If you haven't participated in Purim, what do you know about it?

Before discussing Esther, consider together the paragraph below and how it could affect your thinking about Esther:

The story of Esther is a tale about the survival of diaspora Jews in the context of the empire of Persia, and one of its narrative functions is to give an etiology of the Jewish festival of Purim. Christian readers in the global North should be vigilant to remember that their social location in the cultural majority gives them more in

common with King Ahasuerus than Esther, a minority orphan who is trafficked into child concubinage. This is a Jewish text first, and a text about cultural survival in diaspora second (Elaine T. James, *Working Preacher*, Esther 7:1–6, 9–10; 9:20–22, September 26, 2021).

- * As you think about this story, when is the written word important?
- * Think about the exaggeration of place, parties, etc. What are some instances of exaggeration or outlandish proportion?
- * How does treating this story as satire or a comedy make it easier to discuss or read?

Read Esther 4:5–17.

- * Esther has hidden her Jewish identity from the king and his court, at Mordecai's insistence. What is he asking of her now?
- * How do you imagine Esther approached this difficult moment?
- * What moments of "improbabilities, exaggerations, misunderstandings, and reversals" do you see in Esther's actions to save her people?

Read Esther 7:1–10.

- * King Ahasuerus has been described as a fool, who gives away his power without a thought. How is that played out here and in the story generally?
- * Both Queen Vashti, by refusing to go to the king, and Queen Esther, by going to him without being invited, defy King Ahasuerus. How are they alike? Different?
- * How does Esther or Vashti match up with the wife/woman in Proverbs 31?
- * What more would you like to know about Esther or Vashti?

Featuring Esther in Contemporary Times

Think about the wives of prominent figures, such as Coretta Scott King, Rosalynn Carter, or Michelle Obama.

- * What difficulties have they faced as they lived in the public eye?
- * What opportunities did that spotlight provide for them?

Eleanor Roosevelt changed the image of the First Lady. Much is known about her and her husband from biographies and television specials. Much could be said about the difficulties of her life and their marriage. While she was First Lady, she wrote many columns for newspapers and magazines, often advocating for groups overlooked by people in power. Symbolic of how the African-American community accepted her and appreciated her was her honorary membership in Alpha Kappa Alpha, a premier Black women's sorority. One event that sealed that admiration was when Marian Anderson, the magnificent singer, was denied holding a performance in Constitution Hall in Washington, DC. The denial was from the Daughters of the American Revolution, owners of the building. When Eleanor heard about this, she resigned from the DAR and arranged to have Marian Anderson sing in front of the Lincoln Monument, to a crowd larger than could have been accommodated in Constitution Hall.

Eleanor's interests and projects covered many arenas and around the world. In 1941 President Truman appointed her as a delegate to the United Nations. She was one of the people responsible for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Later she was appointed again by President Kennedy.

- * Vashti, Esther, and Eleanor were each wives of powerful men. How did each one use her status to improve the status of others?
- * What other women attached to powerful men used their status in this way?
- * How might the story of Esther be used in families? In communities? In our congregation?

Taking Esther with You

In each of the stories of "Women in the Old Testament," we want to consider what we learn from them about being God's people and, especially for Christians, a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ. Take a moment of reflection to consider these questions:

- * What do you want to take from this story of Esther and our discussion?
- * What would you like to ask the presenter in the adult education class on Sunday?



NOTES FOR SMALL GROUPS LEADERS

Leading a small group is not quite the same as leading a Bible study. While the goal of a Bible study or a study of prayer would be to increase biblical knowledge or understanding of prayer, the primary goal for a small group is to deepen relationships among the participants as each one grows in relationship with God and Jesus and as Christ's disciple.

At the first gathering, take time to review the group covenant on the back page of this booklet. It is important that each member of a small group is clear about the guidelines that make for a successful time together. Invite the group to add to the covenant.

A simple process for each week could be:

- * Ask the opening question (see below).
- * Prayer.
- * After the first week, invite comments about the previous sermon or adult education presentation.
- * Read or invite a group member to read the Bible passage , or, for longer passages, follow the suggestion for reviewing the story in the plan.
- * Read and discuss the questions in "Featuring the Bible Text."
- * Read and discuss the questions in "Featuring the (*name of the women*) in Contemporary Times."
- * About ten minutes before the end of the agreed upon time to close, invite the group to meditate on the questions at the end of the plan.
- * Call for prayer requests. Many small groups have found that knowing how they can pray for others between meetings helps to build a stronger community. You can go into a time of prayer before the requests are made.

Opening Questions

To help the participants become better acquainted, and especially if anyone in your group doesn't know the other participants, invite everyone to answer a question at the beginning of each gathering. This time also helps the group make the transition from what has been occupying their minds to the small group discussion space. A choice of questions is below, but feel free to come up with your own.

Week 1

- * What important quality do you look for in a friend?
- * We are a few weeks into autumn. What word or phrase describes this autumn for you?

Week 2

- * What woman or women in your family do you feel especially close to?
- * Mugs and posters carry the message: Well-behaved women rarely make history. Who are some women who have made history? Were they well-behaved according to their peers?

Week 3

- * Have you ever moved to a community that was vastly different from the one you left? How did that feel?
- * Where have you never visited that you would like to visit?

Week 4

- * When making a decision that also affects others, what do you take into consideration?
- * The presidential election was last week. What do you remember about the first time you voted for a president of the United States?

Week 5

- * What female world leader, past or present, do you admire?
- * What women from the Old Testament not in this series would you like to discuss?

Give the group a moment to think about their response. You can model the amount of time for each person by answering the question first. You may need to remind them to keep their answers short; there is much more to discuss. Anyone may choose not to answer.

Closing Prayers

Close the prayer time or your prayer with the suggestion for each week, or create one of your own.

Week 1

- * For women who have tried to be perfect and failed, we ask your love. Amen.

Week 2

- * For women who have stood up for justice, we give thanks. Amen.

Week 3

- * For women who have supported each other through difficult times, we give thanks. Amen.

Week 4

- * For women who have survived the mistreatment of others, we give thanks. Amen.

Week 5

- * For women who have taken a stand for others, we give thanks. Amen.

May leading your small group be a joy and a recognition that where two or three are gathered, Christ is among them, bringing reconciliation and restoration. Thank you.

Group Covenant

- * What happens in the group stays in the group. To build and maintain an atmosphere of trust, confidentiality is essential.
- * Speak and make space for others to speak. Each voice is important. If you are usually quiet, make an effort to offer your thoughts. If you speak out easily, hold back for others to speak or invite someone who hasn't spoken to speak.
- * Stay with the group. Physically, be present at each gathering rather than treat attendance as just another option. Mentally, listen to others and participate.
- * Focus on ideas, not the person. If you disagree, disagree with the idea, but don't belittle the person.
- * Speak from your own awareness. When offering an opinion, claim it as your opinion rather than make generalizations.
- * Everyone in the group is a learner. In a small group, there are no experts. Learning is a lifelong process.