

# Woman and God's Plan

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, this is not going to be a presentation which emphasizes a strongly feminist point of view. I hope that won't disappoint you. Nor does it decry the lack of attention that the distaffed side gets in the Bible. That being said, we all know that a great deal more ink has been devoted to the men in the Bible and their activities than to the women.

And I don't pretend that today is going to rectify that balance. But I will, however, draw your attention to some very interesting women in the Bible and ask you to consider what they have contributed to our understanding of God and the special ways in which he has chosen to use his handmaidens. My overall theme is one of nurture and protection.

Women are known to be nurturers. We have a reputation for it, you know, even when we neglect our children don't take very good care of our husbands. Caring and nurturing has kind of become embedded in our societal and religious life to the extent that women have bought into this, you know.

We expect to be given the nurturing things to do. We as a sex are very vulnerable to these assumptions because most of us actually enjoy doing this. Don't tell.

And so I need your reaction, you know, to volunteer, to make the coffee, to work in the nursery, to clean up after communion, to host the connections to nurse. You know, the list goes on. We just, we don't stop to ask will somebody else do this, we put our hand up.

[ 1 : 3 4 ] That said, I believe that one of the very positive benefits of the women's movement has been to free up men to participate in the nurturing process. Nowadays, nurturing is considered to be much more of a function of circumstance or situation than a characteristic of one particular sex.

The admin tell us, hey, come a long way, baby. But you know what? The guys have come a long way, too. There is, however, one aspect of nurturing that a man cannot fulfill, and that is nurturing a child before birth.

Women are built with a special little nurturing place where a baby can be cared for until independent life can be sustained. Her ability to be an incubator, that's really what we are, you know, part of what we are, very often determined her worth.

Or, in some cases, her lack of worth in tribal communities, and you know, believe it or not, even today, even today in cultures that are heading toward a high degree of sophistication, China being an example.

You get down to a one-child family, and if you have not produced that one child, you are going to hear about it from the neighbors, who will say nasty things to you like, a dog can bark, even if he can't reproduce, and a cat can, I forget what the cat can, the saying has a cat in it, but you know, a woman who can't have children is pretty worthless.

[ 3 : 0 7 ] You can't do the other things. The reproductive value of women had familial, tribal, political, social, and economic impact and consequences that went far beyond nurturing sometimes.

And this is the context in which we first meet the women in the Bible. Both Sarah and Rebecca were vilified by other women when they seemed not to be able to conceive, no matter how much time they spent with their husbands.

Both of them got tired of waiting for God. In Sarah's case, God had promised her a child, and she thought, yeah, women, you know. And in Rebecca's case, in response to her earnest prayers, both encouraged the clergy as a concubine as a surrogate.

And this was a practice, not just for Hebrews, but in the surrounding cultures as well. As long as the man acknowledged the child, it was as if he was born to the wife.

The record shows a difference here, I think. Sarah seems not to have developed a relationship with Ishmael, but Rebecca clearly wanted not just to produce a male heir, but to be a mother, to have that relationship.

[ 4 : 16 ] And she enjoyed the children that were born to her surrogate, and maintained a relationship with them even after she had children of her own. A word about the status of women in tribal times.

You will remember that Abraham left an important and sophisticated city to follow the God who called him to a different life. I have always suspected that God did this because there were too many temptations in polytheistic ur, and things that would have made it hard for that very close relationship to develop, with all these distractions that maybe going out and looking after sheep would be answered.

So his job was collecting and caring for a flock of sheep, living around in search of grazing land, settling in places only so long as he could make a living this way. And we know that he became a wealthy man, and the head of an extended family that sometimes moved with him.

In his travels, he did not adopt an urban life ever again, except for a brief sojourn in Egypt. He came in contact with more than one kingdom, lived among and did business with them, and adopted some of their ways.

That would have been especially true in doing business. He would have been to follow whatever the business practice was in the area where he was living. He knew life among the Chaldeans, Hittites, and Egyptians, and would probably have been bound by or influenced by their laws while with them.

[ 5 : 44 ] Before the Hebrews had God's law, the patriarchs would have been familiar with aspects of the laws of those kingdoms that I have mentioned. Some of these were very light Mosaic law, some of them almost identical, in terms of contracts, property ownership, inheritance, and the treatment of women.

Both rural and urban dwellers regarded women only as part of family groups.

Women belonged first to a father, then to a husband, and perhaps then to some other male relative. They were expected to share a husband with other wives and concubines sometimes.

Not quite sure how that works. To contribute to the economy of the tribe by making bread and beer, spinning and weaving wool, and preparing it for sale, and assisting others in childbirth, and later on in childcare.

These people did not live in an overpopulated world. So having babies was a good thing to do, and filling up the family genealogy was great.

[ 6 : 54 ] This is why the security of the tribe or family group in terms of safety and economic prosperity depended on a supply of children, preferably but not exclusively male.

Think of it as a cheap labor force. And every woman knew it was her job to conceive and nurture children. When this did not happen quickly or easily, women, not men, were assumed to be infertile.

No recorded instance of a low sperm count in either the Old or New Testament. There was hardly a worse fate for a woman than to be childless.

You know the agony that some of these barren quote unquote women went through in trying to find their place in the world when they were not a mother.

The tribal extended family came to an end when the brothers of Joseph moved to Egypt with their households. There, although the evidence suggested that Hebrews retained their ethnic and religious identity, they would have been bound by Egyptian laws, which occasionally meant the hymns of the Pharaoh.

[ 8 : 01 ] The biblical record moves us from the death of Jacob to the birth of Moses fairly swiftly without a lot of data about how the Hebrew community grew. What we know from the text is that they grew in sufficient numbers to make Pharaoh nervous.

There are some historians who have suggested that this may have been because they were Semitic people. That is not a racial designation. That is a linguistic designation. And the enemies of Egypt were also Semitic on their eastern border.

That is where most of their fighting took place. And the Egyptians were not. The indirect references in Exodus tell us that they continued to worship the God of Abraham, even though they were surrounded by polytheists, and that they continued the ceremony of Abrahamic covenant through circumcision.

And without their own places of worship, and without a whole lot in terms of a priestly class, they did that for 400 years. And you know why? Because George Edutton told us last week.

It is because of memory and remembrance. Right. Now we turn to a closer examination of the Great Nile Conspiracy.

[ 9 : 14 ] There are five women in on this conspiracy. They are Pula, Shifra, Yaqabed, Miriam, and an unnamed royal lady. The first two were midwives who looked after Hebrew and Egyptian women alike.

They actually might have been Egyptian. They've got Egyptian names. They who had been summoned into Pharaoh's presence and instructed to kill Hebrew baby boys did not kill the baby Moses, and thought of excuses to tell Pharaoh.

The third was his mother, Yaqabed, who devised a plan for his care that involved primitive boat-building skills and finding a babysitter. The fourth was that sitter, Miriam, the older sister, who not only watched over her brother, but also offered to find a suitable wet nurse for Moses.

Just as a sidebar here, people for hundreds of years, and the La Leche people even today, nurse their babies until they are three, four, and five years of age.

So this is why it was a good idea to choose his mother, not just because she had the right kind of milk, but she would have a prolonged contact with him in early childhood.

[ 10 : 24 ] And finally, there was the royal lady who was probably the only person who could have ensured his safety on an ongoing basis and provided him with education and training that would make him a good leader when God called him to that role.

It is a wonderful plot in which each of these women offered something special to ensure the survival of this special baby. This is not, I think you will agree, an accidental rescue.

All of these women risked their own safety to ensure his. All of them contributed something unique to his care and protection. So here we have five women who all broke the law and conspired to keep this particular baby alive.

If you are following this on your sheet, we are going to move on to the next two women on our list now. And they had very different opportunities to nurture and protect God's people.

The first of these is Rahab the harlot. Now that's not a winning title for people in our society. We've even changed the name to sex trade workers, I think we call them nowadays.

[ 11 : 36 ] And no modern translation the Bible has yet put that into. Because Rahab... Dr. Tiger is looking at me, I won't pursue that.

But you know, it's a dreadful name to go through life with. And yet this woman's deeds actually have given some honor to that title.

Because we never say Rahab. There are some other Rahabs in the Bible. But when we mean her, we always say Rahab the harlot. And it's become a badge of honor in a sense. She lived in Jericho and though not part of the Israelite group, clearly knew about and respected their God.

We are told how. But the advancing successful army of Joshua and the Israelites was hardly invisible. Rahab may not have understood why the God of Israel was stronger than her God.

But she believed in his power and she wanted his favor. You know, it isn't just that she looked after spies, which we'll get to in a minute. But there would have been spies from Jericho going out to look at this army too.

[ 12 : 41 ] And what did they see? What did they see? 10,000 men marching along the side of the river, led by the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant. Not once, but several times. Now, can you imagine them going back and reporting?

I don't know what kind of magic they've got in that box, but something terrible is going to happen once. You know? I mean, it's a really good military ploy, actually. Terrify your enemy first and then it will be easier to overcome them.

At any rate, when Joshua's spies were captured, or discovered, sorry, she risked her own safety to hide and protect them. And also to assist them by sheltering them while the search for them was on.

We know that this would seem to be very important for the success of Joshua's mission, because she is referred to later in the Bible. She does not disappear from history when the walls come from them down.

So we move on now to a lady who could not have been farther from Rahab on a social scale. The story of Esra takes place in the royal city of Susa.

[ 13 : 46 ] Susa is about 240 miles south slightly east of Baghdad. So, you know, take a boat up to the end of the Persian Gulf and keep going.

Susa was the envy of all the kings who ever ruled in this area, and most of them used it as a capital or maybe as a winter palace. Spending the winter on the Persian Gulf for me? Oh, right, you know.

It was actually a city from 4000 BC to 650 AD. How many other cities can you name that were important for that length of time?

It is the only place that Alexander the Great ever considered settling in, and we all know that he spent most of his adult life on a horse with a sword in his hand. So the fact that he hung about Susa long enough to marry a Persian wife is probably a record.

But he did more than that. He loved the kind of luxury that he found there. And although he had a very nice wife, Roxanne, I guess he thought it was a good idea to have another wife.

[ 14 : 57 ] Multiple wives were not common in the Greece that he came from. But he did marry a royal Persian lady, and he gave many of his captains land that was nearby, and he allowed 10,000 of his soldiers to marry Persian wives in a mass ceremony.

Now this is the stuff of epic movies. And Esther's story is too. We don't very often get around to her in our home study groups, do we? But maybe this will make you reconsider that.

The court where she lived as the wife of Ahasuerus was an oriental court on a grand scale. It was opulent, it was ostentatious. If you want to read about how temples and palaces are built, read Solomon.

Read about Solomon. If you want to know how they were used, read about Esther. She did not start life as a member of a nobility, nor could she have expected that she would ever wear a crown.

She lost her parents when she was young and went to Susa to be raised by her uncle Mordecai as part of a Jewish family. She was reputed to be a great beauty, and one who eventually came to the attention of a king.

[16:07] His first queen had displeased him by refusing to come when summoned to his court. That was a no-no. You get told to come and you stay home, bad news.

If you come when you're not called, worse news. Well, his court officials convinced him that this was a very bad example for the women of the country. They saw that their wives would not be paying much attention to what they said after that.

And we all know that this would create domestic havoc, don't we ladies? So the king banished Vashti, the other queen, from court forever and set about to find another wife. Now in the Bible this reads very much like a beauty contest.

Everything except the sash and the whatever. But Esther made the short list of twelve, and then out of all the women in the land, the king chose her.

Although there was a substantial Jewish population in Persia, it did not occur to him that his new wife might be a Hebrew. And Esther did not tell him. Now the plot thickens.

[17:11] Mordecai, sitting at the gate one day overhears a plot devised by Haman, a powerful official, to eliminate the Jewish population from the Persian Empire. He writes a decree to this effect, sure that he can convince Ahasuerus to sign it into law.

Mordecai visits Esther, I'm sure, in a state of panic, and begs her to use her influence with the king to save her people. Go and see him. Talk to him about this. Well, she would have been risking her life to do that.

As I said, it was worse to come when not called than it was to stay in the palace when called. Now this royal court was a typical oriental court where women lived in separate buildings.

She may have had one of her own, being the queen, but they would have had a harem building. They were all cared for by eunuchs. No threats of the king there. And saw the king only when summoned.

To intrude upon his life without an invitation was punishable by death. Now this is really hard for us to understand because we've had centuries of rulers that were not quite like this.

[18:11] But if you've ever seen *The King and I*, which doesn't come on a timeline anywhere near Ahasuerus, you know, it's 19th century stuff. Very much like that. Very much like that.

Esther decided to take the risk and sent word to invite the king to dinner at her house. That was clever. Not going to him, but asking him to come to her.

The king agreed, partly out of curiosity because the invitation had included Haman. While she made preparation, Haman was building a gallows outside his house in order to make a public exhibition of the death he planned for Mordecai.

When the day came for the dinner, Esther pulled out all the stops. Lots of courses. Probably entertainment, decorations, it would go on all night. And she so impressed the king that he offered her to name anything she wanted up to half his kingdom.

Now half a kingdom that stretched from India to Ethiopia was a fair chunk of real estate. But she didn't say, yes, I'll have it.

[ 19 : 18 ] She just said, the dinner isn't over. It's going on tomorrow night as well. So again, Ahasuerus came, ate, offered Esther anything she wanted up to half his kingdom. And this time, she revealed Haman's plot and also revealed her Jewish background and asked him to save her people.

You know, it is entirely possible that she might have died if this decree had gone through being Jewish. There would have been people who would have told the king that, likely. At this point, the king exercised his royal rage and hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai.

And the planned elimination of the Jewish population was aborted. Now, is this not a plot of every proportion? I mean, straight out of Arabian Nights, it was actually not a Arabian Nights.

Sorry, it's up to the Bible. Whoops. Where was Steven Spielberg when we needed him? Right.

Now, it is little wonder that the Jews have made this a cause for ongoing celebration and remembrance. Here we go with George's word again.

[ 20 : 28 ] In the yearly festival of Purim, I used to have students that brought me cookies called hamantashen when I was teaching at Eric Hamber a lot of years ago. And these were prune cookies filled with prune and sort of, they had four corners on them.

And they were supposed to have been shaped like the hat that Haman wore. In pleading his case to Esther, Mordecai had suggested that she was born for such a time as this.

It could be said of each of these women that I have mentioned so far, that they were born for such a time, to be part of a historic moment. Think about this when God calls you.

The nurturing, protecting women I have mentioned so far all knowingly risked their lives in responding to the challenge of saving people for whom God made special plans. The next women on the list made a very different contribution in that they nurtured and protected the law.

Our first example is Tamar. Tamar was in part also a victim of the law. She was the daughter-in-law of Judah, one of Jacob's sons. As such, she was married to his oldest son who died before they had any children.

[ 21 : 48 ] I surely remember that it was her job to raise up children to her husband's name. Then, legally, she should have been given in marriage to the next son. And she was.

But he too died without heirs. It was his own fault. He didn't want to have babies with Tamar. Judah then promised that she would have his third son as husband when the boy got old enough.

But he didn't implement that promise. Now, I mentioned earlier that a woman had no life, status or protection outside of a family. You only have to look at the agony of Hagar who has been expelled from the tribe of Abraham.

To know that she is not going to survive. You know, any passing traitor can make her a slave. She was a slave already. But he can take possession of her in any way that he likes.

There was no protection. And there wasn't for Tamar either. Her legal status was determined by the relationship to men. But, you know, the law also limited man's control over her.

[ 22 : 55 ] So, Judah was not free to ignore his obligation to her. That was also spelled out in the law. So, he did have an obligation to Tamar, who by this time must have been feeling much like a parcel that could be handed around in the family.

But was yet without a husband or children. So, she did a very daring thing. She veiled her face and went to a place where one would normally expect to find a prostitute.

Her first customer was Judah, her father-in-law. What can I say? Old Testament man. And he didn't see past her disguise. He contracted with her for a casual sexual encounter.

And she would not agree to this until he gave her some personal tokens. Things that were identified with him. That brief liaison resulted in a long-for pregnancy. And in time, Tamar became the mother of twins, twin boys.

At first, Judah would not accept that the children were his. And made moods to make Tamar pay with her life for her indiscretion. Her indiscretion. Whereupon she sent him the tokens that he had given her when bargaining for sex.

[ 24 : 08 ] And he realized his mistake and acknowledged his sons. Now, this seems in a way a rather tawdry story to be included in any discussion of God's handmaidens.

But the story of Tamar tells us how important family was to God. Until the Hebrew people were established with an identity in their own homeland, a strong sense of family, of genealogy, of knowing who you were, was what held them together as a people.

Until Tamar was given her legal rights within the family, she had no status or protection. She had, in fact, been sent home to her father's house. That was a huge disgrace. An insult.

She needed the protection of the law and was right to insist upon its importance. But perhaps she did more than that and her daring move to go out on the street. I think she draws our attention to the need for a humane interpretation of law and events.

Not just a just one. And we encounter that all the time in the New Testament with Jesus, who looked at the law, the letter of the law, and decides to follow the spirit of the law.

[ 25 : 19 ] And Judah had broken the spirit of the law in his lack of integrity and his lack of sympathy for Tamar's plight. You will have recognized that the law referred to with Judah and Tamar was not the Mosaic law.

This predates Mosaic law. However, it was almost identical to the Mosaic law, which was protected by, and also protected, our next handmaiden, Naomi. In the book of Ruth, we are told this beautiful love story about Ruth and Boaz.

But the real heroine of this plot is Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law. Naomi, you will remember, had left her own people to marry outside of her community, went to the land of Moab. Had two sons who legally would have been required to care for her when she was widowed.

However, both of her sons died without heirs. So suddenly, hers became a household of three widows. Now, if you think about what Sharia law is like in the instances we nowadays hear about, with regard to women who are not allowed to work outside the home, and that sort of thing, it would be like that.

A household of three women, unprotected, and without a way of staying alive, really. We already know about the plight of women who were not attached to the household of a man.

[ 26 : 40 ] And now there were three women in that predicament. One of the daughters-in-law went back to her own people. And that would have been alright. Her father could then arrange another marriage for her because her husband had died. Naomi planned to return to her homeland to search for the nearest male relation.

And Ruth decided to accompany her. And you know the story about gleaners and how Boaz owned the land that they were gleaning on. And Ruth caught the eye of Boaz, who clearly was interested in her.

He already had his own household. But as his interest in Ruth seems clear, Naomi, who has kept the Mosaic law in her heart through all those years in the land of Moab, realizes that this law can be invoked to protect both of them.

It is Naomi's son who has died and would have inherited land. And if Ruth, his widow, can raise up a child to his name, there will be an inheritance. And this can also be used as a bargaining point if it comes down to it with Boaz.

She instructs Ruth in what to do about a ceremony that will let him know what she really wants from Boaz. And the two of them do have a child.

[ 27 : 53 ] In addition, Naomi has protected Ruth, herself, and the future of the child. It is interesting to note that both Tamar and Ruth are mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus.

One of those little twins I mentioned with Tamar was his ancestor. As we move toward New Testament times, we find that women's position and treatment has changed over the centuries.

Some of these changes are related to the different social and legal traditions of conquering empires. And as you know, empires move back and forth across Palestine all the time. In New Testament times, people were governed by Roman law.

But in Palestine, the Romans had allowed a puppet king, Herod, to have limited control. And as you know, the Romans had allowed the monotheistic Jews to continue their worship undisturbed.

And the law was part of Jewish worship. So I think the closest equivalent we would have to this nowadays is Quebec in Canada.

[ 29 : 02 ] Where, like, Roman law covered the whole of the empire. But in this little part of the Roman Empire, a local government was allowed to deal with certain things. In Canada, it's the difference between civil law and federal law.

But the Jews had a fair amount of control over things that did not involve the empire in a way that the empire would determine. Roman women had many privileges that Jewish women did not.

They could own property. They could inherit property. They could use it for bargaining in marriage. They were allowed to reject a husband that may have been chosen by their father, but only if they had a good reason.

They could own and operate a business. And they could work outside the home, if they worked, because of course slaves were the major labor force. If they had money, they could be educated. None of those things was available to Jewish women that were subservient to the law at that time.

And I'm not suggesting that all of them would have been subservient to the law. There would have been people that might have fudged a bit on that, even in Palestine.

[ 30 : 15 ] Clearly, women had more freedom. Their roles in society and in the early church were less prescribed. I'll let Gordon say about that in a minute. And their nurturing opportunities increased. And so this is a context in which we meet the women who protected and nurtured God's promise.

The promise, as articulated by the prophet Isaiah, my favorite prophet, was, Unto you a child is born, unto you a son is given. One of the ways in which he expresses God's promise.

As we begin the Advent season, I think it's fitting that we turn our attention to three women associated in quite different ways with the fulfillment of God's promise that a son would be sent to be a rescuer of his people.

The first of these is Elizabeth, wife of Zechariah the priest, cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the mother of John the Baptist. We know little about her except that she and her husband seem to have had a good relationship.



And they are described as being righteous and blameless in keeping God's commandments. And they have given up hope of ever having a child. When the angel Gabriel was sent to tell Zechariah that he would become a father, Zechariah didn't believe him and was struck down in consequence of this.

[ 31 : 31 ] We have no indication of Elizabeth's reaction to this announcement. But confirmation would have come soon enough from changes within her body. The future mission of this expected son was outlined by the angel in that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb, and would make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

So Elizabeth was to nurture the Lord's messenger. And he was distinguished by having his diet outlined by an angel who also gave him a name that was not a family name, John.

Elizabeth was six months pregnant when she received a visit from her cousin Mary, also pregnant. Mary had also received a visit from Gabriel, this angel, right? Who announced that she would have a child.

The angel also gave this child a name, Jesus, and outlined his mission. To reign over the house of Jacob and assume the throne of David. Unlike Zechariah, Mary believed the angel without question.

She immediately understood the implications of the Old Testament references, and echoed these prophecies in her own praise of the Lord. When Mary told Elizabeth about the angel's visit and the fact that she would nurture a special baby, Elizabeth's baby, leapt in her womb, we are told.

[ 32 : 51 ] The Bible does not interpret this motion for us. Did unborn John recognize as yet unborn Jesus? Maybe he did. Or was this a further confirmation of God's activity for Elizabeth?

If Mary needed any confirmation, the dramatic events which followed Jesus' birth would have been more than sufficient, I think. A word about Mary. I worked in a Catholic hospital for 20 years.

I know you've heard me say this before. And I learned a little about the special devotion that the nuns and others had for Mary. That is what they called it, a special devotion. Our former Pope also attended.

It was very difficult for me as a Protestant to distinguish some of these devotional activities from worship, although they flatly denied that they were worshipping Mary.

But I'm not entirely sure how one would know that. They had been raised to regard her as the Queen of Heaven and as co-redemptorists with Christ. That is just plain faulty teaching.

[ 34 : 01 ] That part of it seems to have received much less attention since Vatican II. And I don't know whether, um, where was Christine? Ah!

Right. Did that change in Vatican II? We don't hear much about Mary being a co-redemptorist anymore. Well, it's like Mary and the Rosary and all the devotion.

It can only take you to Jesus. That's what it is. Oh, thank you for explaining that. And does it always do that? Yes. It should, and it must. But in popularity, how people sort of take it on, the folk conversion could be different.

But basically, you always go back to Jesus. Well, I hope it gets everybody there. That's great. Um, many...

Mary has always been popular with Catholic Christians in particular. And sometimes this devotion has got quite out of hand, as it did in the Middle Ages, when there were actual cults for whom the adoration of Mary outweighed devotion to God.

[ 35 : 08 ] We call it Mary Olive Tree when that happens. Anthropology and sometimes religious studies, and maybe even women's studies, produce writings to suggest that Christianity needed a woman to represent the softer side of God, who is too often seen as God of judgment and not a God of love.

Others have suggested that she became the goddess figure in our faith. Fleshing out our understanding of the nature of God, these ideas are not supported in any way by Scripture, and are only part of man's musings and possibly a private search for another figure.

I have to say, though, that it has huge proportions in some places. And if you can stand the personal narrative at this point, when I was briefly studying Spanish in Cuernavaca, the only non-Catholic church I could find was Jehovah's Witnesses.

And I didn't go to that. I went to the Cathedral instead, which instead was the first Christian church built in North America, seven years after the Conqueror came, Quarteiz.

And I was practicing my Spanish, which is what went on. And we had a professor at the college that would not speak English to us, signs on the lawn, Por favor, no hablar en inglés.

[ 36 : 42 ] And so everybody spoke in Spanish in an effort to make us do that too. And so if he got to something that was too difficult to explain, or he could see mystified faces staring at him, he would pantomime it out.

And so when he got to a part of Mexican history that dealt with the Virgin of Guadalupe, he is pantomimeing little Juan Diego growing up and having this vision of the Virgin Mary. And nobody believed him, especially not the bishop, so she came a second time, still nobody believed him.

The third time she filled up his cape with roses that would not possibly have been able to bloom in Mexico at that time of the year. So he takes the roses back to the bishop and finally he is believed.

She is now the patron saint of Mexico. But the important, the very important thing about his vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe, is that she was a brown lady. She was Indian.

He too was Indian. He recognized that right away. And, you know, historians will tell you, I can't resist keeping, you know, I can't keep history out of some of this. Historians will tell you that this was the endorsement that was needed for Mexicans to accept the conqueror's god.

[ 37 : 57 ] And it worked because she is their patron saint and they love her and they will crawl on their knees to get to the cathedral and honor her name. But when he got through all of this pantomime, and this professor of mine, I raised my hand and said in English, because I wasn't quite sure, you know, I didn't have enough Spanish words, I don't know Spanish words, has Guadalupe replaced Jesus in the Christian religion here?

And he, who was a lapsed Catholic, looked at me and answered in English, Mexicans only know two things about Jesus. He is the baby and the child in the arms of the Virgin Mary and he is the man on the cross.

And they don't know anything else about him. No one else can even have connected the dots. Now when I came out of church the following Sunday, I noticed tables and chairs being set up, umbrellas.

I thought, oh, congregational picnic, maybe. But no, when I asked K-Pasa, they told me that they were setting up studying tables because they were going to learn the Word of God.

And I thought, yes, now you will connect the dots. And I'm sure that there are lots of Mexicans for whom his words about knowing nothing else about Jesus would be an exaggeration.

[ 39 : 16 ] But it was also a lesson that sometimes things have been used in a way that took the spotlight off the place where it was intended to shine.

That being said, I think the Protestants have managed to wipe Mary out of their thinking apart from the Christmas celebrations, when we remember and honored the fact that she was God's incubator and brought Jesus into the world.

Was this, and I believe this could be at least partly true, was this a Reformation reaction to the excess of attention that Mary had received and the distortion of her role in the Christian saga?

Make no mistake about it, Mary was a very special lady to have been chosen by God to bring his Son into the world. Now, Irena gave us a word for this from the icons that she presented to us.

I hope I've got it right, Irena. Where's Irena? Seokotos? Have I got that right? God-bearer? That is probably not literally true. She bore the Son of God. She did not bear God the Son.

[ 40 : 27 ] But it's a nice distinction. Yeah. How old would Mary be when she was? She would have been allowed to marry when she was 13 years and one day old. But we don't actually know how old she was when she was betrothed to Joseph.

But that was the legal age for a woman to marry, 13 years plus one day. So she was quite learned in the Old Testament to sing. Well, she would have had most of it second hand, you know, because she didn't get instructed in the synagogue like the little boys did.

No, I think, you know, this was important for fathers and for husbands to pass on that learning. Always, and this may go back to tribal days, I don't know, always a Jewish father can be the priest in the home.

All of those ceremonies that they do can be carried on without a temple. And that has been an important part of preserving memory in this religion as well.

We know that Mary was with him at several pivotal times in his life. And she was with him at the end of his earthly life, watching him die, slowly and painfully. Can there be a worse experience that her mother could have?

[ 41 : 38 ] And she was with him. In the penultimate moment of his life, Jesus arranged for her care, not with a member of the family, as might be expected, but in the care of his best friend, John.

Another woman at the foot of the cross was Mary Magdalene, who had been a steady companion of Jesus and his disciples after he cured her of a demon. Mary is an example of a more modern first century lady.

She had independent means. There is nothing in the scripture to suggest that there was a man in the head of our household. So she was probably living alone or with servants.

And she was free to become one of his followers and spend time learning from him because of this. She was able to survive without the household of a man. That by itself would tell you that the years had brought remarkable changes to women's opportunity to serve God in different ways.

Mary's close relationship with our Lord, coupled with this apparent lack of family and her independence, has been tantalizing to some modern writers who could not resist the temptation to pair them and construct stories about Jesus' family.

[ 42 : 56 ] The Da Vinci Code is the most recent, but a similar, a very, very similar plot, was also produced in the 1990s. I think it was called Precious Blood, but I'm not entirely sure.

I can remember my Catholic colleagues being very upset about it. Both had Jesus marrying Mary Magdalene and settling in one case in Spain and the other book in France. Both are nonsense in terms of scriptural truth.

A good tale, nonetheless, you know, but don't believe what's there. Just regard it like you would Robert Ludlum. Biblical truth, however, tells us something far more important about the value of Mary Magdalene.

Not only was she part of Jesus' life and death, but she was the first to see him after he rose from the tomb, and he sent her with a message for the disciples. There isn't, I think, another event in the Bible in which a woman was allowed to bring tidings as significant as these.

Despite what I have said about the freeing up of women during the first century, Jewish law, as interpreted by rabbis, had not kept pace with these changes. They still believed and taught that man was God's primary creation, and women were secondaries.

[ 44 : 22 ] The writings of some of the rabbis were in direct contrast to the opportunities that Roman law afforded women. Here are some examples. Quote, It was taught, do not speak excessively with a woman, lest this ultimately lead you to adultery.

Quote, a man should not speak to a woman in the market, even if she is his wife, much less another woman, because the public may misinterpret it. Quote, We have found that the Almighty spoke, We have not found that the Almighty spoke to a woman, except Sarah.

Now there speaks somebody that does not know about the Holy Spirit. In view of the attitude displayed here, and reflected in many rulings governing lives and relationships of first century Jews, the Gospels are truly remarkable documents.

When Jesus interacted with women, he often directly violated rules laid down, and scrupulously kept by the Pharisees, who were the strongest proponents of rabbinic Judaism.

Now we are given many examples in the Bible when they argued with him right on the spot. But they were not around, or did not argue with him about these things. It is not an overstatement to affirm that the Gospels portrayed Jesus as liberating women in some ways, lifting them up to an equality with men unknown in first century Palestine.

[ 45 : 48 ] This transformational process is carried on in the early church. Here are a few instances when Jesus acted in ways that would have been unusual. The woman who was troubled with an ongoing hemorrhage, she would have been regarded as ritually unclean, and prohibited from social and religious contacts as a result of that malady.

But Jesus was untroubled by her touch, and cleansed her by his power. Mary and Martha were friends of Jesus, who were unmarried and living in their brother's house. It was disgraceful that both of these women were single, in a society which expected universal marriage.

Unless you had taken a vow to serve the Lord. And this is probably how John the Baptist would have been regarded. Because he also didn't marry.

And I don't know of a novel that is trying to pair him up with somebody. Mary rejects the nurturing role of food preparation in the kitchen, in favor of pursuing an opportunity to learn from Jesus.

Jewish women did not have the chances to learn that men did. But Jesus took pains to affirm her right to be there, learning with the others. Jesus initiated conversation with a strange woman at a well in Samaria.

[ 47 : 05 ] She was shocked. Forget the Pharisees. She was shocked. Because she knew what the law was. He had talked to her. He had initiated the conversation. There was nobody else present. Second no-no.

And she was a Samaritan. So he was in deep trouble, or would have been. These and other stories that you will find directly challenge the view of women held in the first century. And they powerfully affirm women who were held down on the basis of religious ideas that Jesus, by his example, decisively rejected.

As we move into the history of the church, we see women more as partners of men. And we see role changes in what goes on there. They are allowed to nurture in different ways than they had been before.

Luke is the Gospel writer who is careful to include women in many of his narratives. In the context, where others might use a literary word like men. You know, the men came from the cross came. Luke, quite often, I don't know if anybody has counted the number of times, he'll say men and women.

Men and women on all of these occasions when both were present. He wants us to know that women were active participants with men in the church and the Christian community. Here are some examples.

[ 48 : 22 ] Priscilla, also called Prisca, wife of Aquila, picked up from Paul the teaching of the Ephesian Christians. You know, they appear in a couple of different places in the Bible. They were part of the Roman community and they had to leave.

They were part of the Ephesus, and they went to Ephesus, set up their leather business, I think it was there. And when Paul left Ephesus, he left the ongoing teaching to these two people.

Not Aquila, Priscilla and Aquila, and quite often her name comes first in these examples. Tabitha, who was healed by Peter, is specifically called a disciple.

Mary, the mother of John Mark, hosted members of the Jerusalem community for house group meetings in her home, at risk to herself. And when Peter was let out of prison, he went to her home.

A man visiting a single woman. Now there's nurturing with a few risks. Lydia, Paul's probably his first convert in Europe, was in business and apparently lived alone. She helped Paul launch his first European church with a group of women.

[ 49 : 28 ] Imagine giving us a message. A blatant demonstration of the difference in status of Christian women. Paul and Silas were sheltered in her home on their release from prison.

And again, we have a woman entertaining, a single woman entertaining men in her home, and caring for them when they needed that. Daughters of Philip the deacon, and there were four of them, and they all had the gift of prophecy.

Peter's Pentecost sermon contains these references. And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I shall pour out my spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.

Paul's writings illustrate some of the good relationships he seems to have had with women. He was always careful to give credit when he had been helped.

Although we are not given the detail that we might have liked. And we might have wished that some of his pronouncements had not left us with such a hard impression about his references to behavior.

[ 50 : 31 ] I was actually challenged by my hairdresser about a week ago on this subject when I told her the topic of today's session. She's a member of the Bariatric Catholic Church in Richmond.

And she said, well, how are you going to make St. Paul look good on the subject of women? And I have to say that that was quite a problem for me at one point in my life. I guess it was when I became a member of InterVarsity as an undergraduate at a research station with that group, which was largely filled with the Brethren and Mennonites, with a sprinkling of Baptists and Pentecostals.

And there I found the very vigorous interpretation in a very universal way of some of Paul's writings about women.

And I thought, ooh, why have I never heard this from teachers and preachers that I have been with? And it took me a long time to kind of sort that out. So what I'm going to say now is how I have sorted it out.

And you can take issue with me if you like. Among the most troubling for me are those pronouncements that come from Corinthians and some of the pastoral writings of Timothy. To Timothy, rather.

[ 51 : 49 ] I think that someday we should have some teaching about this from a scholar who knows much more about Greece than I do. There's a hint. Because all of the things that I tried to look up about this gave me Greek words.

The difference between woman and wife. The difference between speaking in church, meaning lecturing, and chattering in church. This kind of stuff.

And I don't know enough Greek and I'm not about to learn it. So let's put that on our list for a future speaker. However, when reading St. Paul's writings, I try to separate the site-specific injunctions, which should be interpreted, should not be interpreted as having universal import, from those statements which directly teach us something about God.

And I think sometimes because we're so glad to have these documents, we're so glad that they survived and have been added to the canon, that we look at everything that Paul wrote as if it is a message for all of us for all time.

And yet he directs his message to specific churches in specific places and in answers sometimes to specific problems. So I think that that is what we need to separate.

[ 52 : 57 ] For instance, a specific church was advised that they needed to deal with the chatter of women in church, which was disruptive to worship. But this does not mean that all women should always be silent in church, because that would prevent them from using gifts like teaching and prophecy, which clearly require speaking, and which were gifts of the Holy Spirit.

There's a lack of congruence. Do you see what I mean between the specific instances and the things that were messages that teach us about God? Paul is the one who gave us the teaching about gifts of the Holy Spirit.

So you will notice that there is no gender distinction about how these gifts are distributed. He didn't say, the men will teach and the women will make the coffee. There has to be, for me, a consistence within those teachings which are given for the whole church.

I think some of us have rightly rebelled against preachers and teachers who have universalized teachings which were intended to answer problems in a very specific church. That said, Paul is also the one who gave us the encouraging message that there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.

Could there be a better description about how old barriers were being taken down and had become irrelevant to the body of Christ? I want to conclude with a return to the theme of nurturing where I started.

[ 54 : 28 ] And a biblical quote from the prophet Isaiah. It comes, you know what Isaiah is like, the woe unto you, chapter after chapter of woes unto you. But also the destruction that is going to happen to God's enemies and the bad things that his people will have to go through in the meantime.

And as we get closer to describing what God really has in mind for his people and what he will do when the tribulations are over, it's almost like ointment for a troubled and engulfing people on the point of giving up hope.

But I want you to think about how God expresses his desire to comfort his people. What is the nurturing image that you hear in this passage?

Rejoice, this is called Rejoice with Jerusalem, the submitting. Before she was in labor, she gave birth. Before her pain came upon her, she delivered his son.

Who has heard of such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment? For as soon as Zion was in labor, she brought forth her children.

[ 55 : 42 ] Shall I bring to the point of birth and not cause to bring forth? Says the Lord. Shall I who caused to bring forth shut the womb? Says your God.

Rejoice with Jerusalem. Be glad for her. All of you who love her. Rejoice with her in joy. All you who mourn over her. That you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breath.

That you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious abundance. For thus says the Lord. Behold I will extend peace to her like a river. And the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream.

And you shall nurse. You shall be carried upon her hip and bounced on her knee. And as one whom his mother comforts. So I will comfort you.

Who needs a goddess? Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[ 56 : 51 ] I'd like to allow a few minutes for Dr. Cranco to the full bag and a bit of it. We haven't been here ten this week at least.

So we don't want to cut for questions too short. But you may be watching the clock. Well, you can decide when you're at. Yes.

Christine, yes, I'm delighted with your presentation. I want to bring back something you didn't mention about the incident of Jesus with the woman caught in adultery.

I thought that was just incredible when he said, you know, he really projects that the law is beyond, it's love. There's nobody from there, neither do I.

And it's that great God that is, yes, that, at least to me, my work, that is, you know, the pillar of what I am.

[ 57 : 54 ] That's a helpful illustration to have. He also lays it on the line with the men. He is aware of their own sin. Yes. Which is maybe not something they expected him to say.

Yes. Thank you. Anybody else? You're all dying to hear what Dr. Packer is saying. So, sorry. Why don't we give him the rest of the time? Would anybody be offended if we let him come up now?

No. No, you won't. Come on, Dr. Packer, your turn.