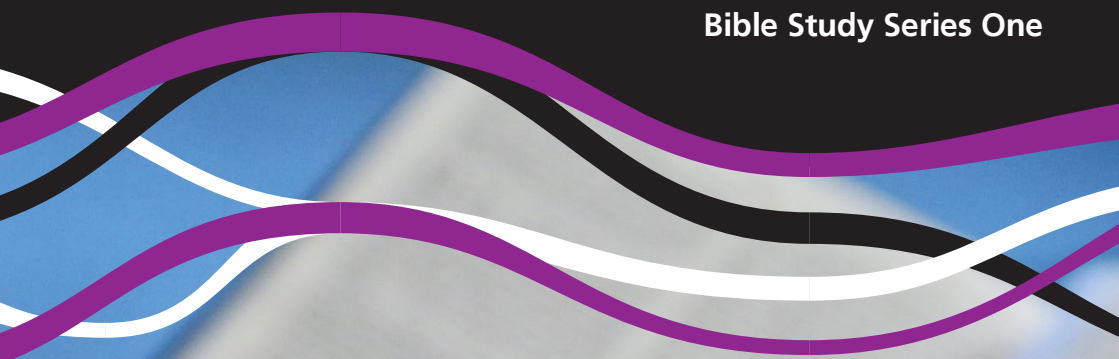


# Thursdays in Black Bible Studies

Listening, Learning and  
Responding to the Word of God

Bible Study Series One



World Council  
of Churches

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Cover design: Tick Tock Design  
Book design and typesetting: Tick Tock Design

ISBN: 978-2-8254-1779-9

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## Introduction

In every country, sexual and gender-based violence is a tragic reality. This violence is frequently hidden, and victims are often silent, fearing stigma and further violence.

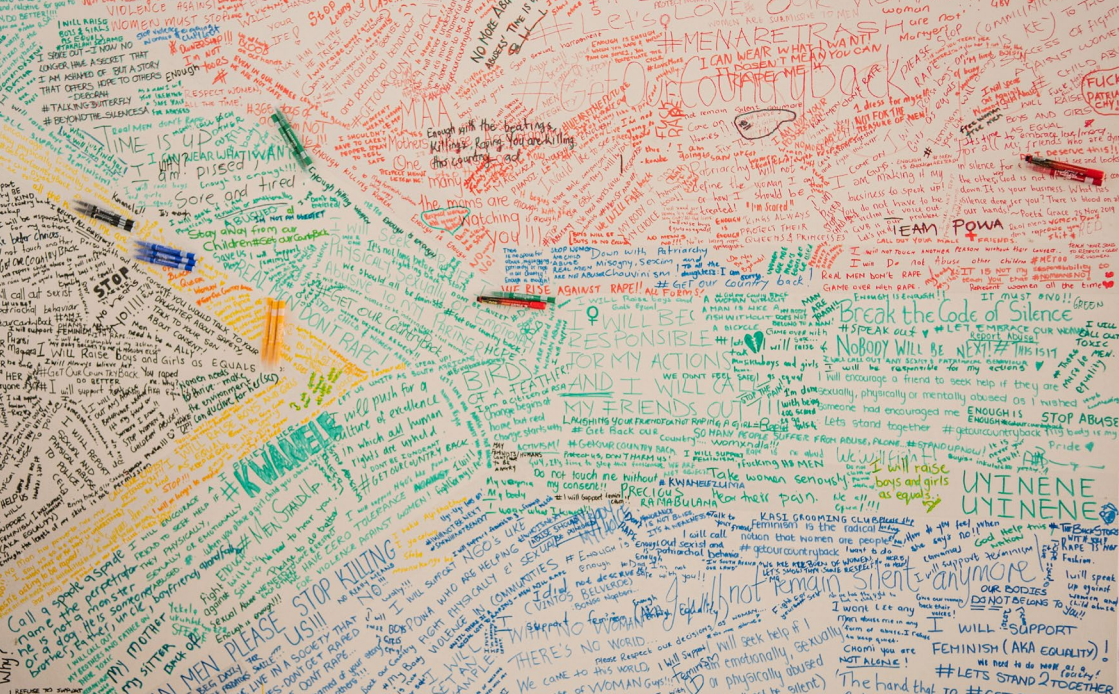
The Thursdays in Black movement makes this tragic violence visible, supporting victims and actions of resistance and resilience, and standing up together in solidarity towards a world without rape and violence.

Led by Thursdays in Black Ambassadors – leaders in their communities committed to being visible and outspoken against such violence – a series of Bible studies are being prepared for individual and congregational reflection on sexual and gender-based violence. Such reflection will help us listen to the word of God and apply our faith and vision of justice, peace, and love in our contexts today. This first series of reflections address critical topics in our societies and Christian communities that contribute to or respond to gender-based violence and provide diverse perspectives from our wide ecumenical fellowship.

A core group of Thursdays in Black Ambassadors oversaw this Bible study series: Anders Göranzon, Claudia Bandixen, and Karen Georgia Thompson.

Join our movement by wearing black on Thursdays. Wear a pin to declare you are part of the global movement resisting attitudes and practices that permit rape and violence. Show your respect for women who are resilient in the face of injustice and violence. Encourage others to join you.

Thursdays in Black: [www.oikoumene.org/thursdays-in-black](http://www.oikoumene.org/thursdays-in-black)



## Speak Out Boldly

Suzan Mark Zira

### Scripture

#### Numbers 27:1–11

<sup>1</sup> Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hepher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasse son of Joseph, a member of the Manassite clans. The names of his daughters were: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. <sup>2</sup> They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said, <sup>3</sup> “Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the LORD in the company of Korah but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. <sup>4</sup> Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father’s brothers.”

<sup>5</sup> Moses brought their case before the LORD. <sup>6</sup> And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>7</sup> The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you

*shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them.* <sup>8</sup> *You shall also say to the Israelites, "If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter.* <sup>9</sup> *If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers.* <sup>10</sup> *If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers.* <sup>11</sup> *And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the LORD commanded Moses."*

## The Text in Its Context

Normally, land inheritance in Israel would pass from a father to his sons, not to his daughters. This passage contains the story of the daughters of Zelophehad presenting their case to receive their father's inheritance rather than having it pass on to other Israelite clans, and to have the Lord's determination in their favour.

We are urged to imitate these daughters of Zelophehad, heroines of faith. By asking an unusual thing, these five remarkable young women are a picture for us of faith in action. Their father had died in the wilderness, part of that generation which God had said would not enter into the land into which Israel is about to enter. Zelophehad's daughters remind Moses that their father had not been part of the rebellion of Korah. Thus, though he had died in the wilderness, he was not part of those who had forfeited their inheritance, and so they ask for that inheritance.

This story takes place in the wilderness, just before the Israelites entered into the promised land. Therefore, all that is being done, is done in faith; Israel does not yet have an inch of land. The Israelites are simply trusting in God's promise that they will have the land and, acting in faith, are already dividing it up among themselves.

Zelophehad's name will be lost among the tribes of Israel and the clans of Manasseh, and his daughters feel that everything is against them. Yet, no one had ever contemplated a situation like this before. Moved by courage, boldness, and faith, the young women realize that there might be a chance—if they ask—that they could have their inheritance.



Faith is key here. As in any age, faith is the watchword for blessing. There is nothing from God that will come into one's life apart from the channel of faith. No blessing, no achievement, no victory can ever be one's own, except if one takes it by faith. As such, faith in the age of our scripture passage, and in our own age, is the key to obtaining God's blessing.

These young women are aware that God had promised Israel an inheritance in the land of Canaan. They know this history, and knowledge is power. They know that the promise involved a land flowing with milk and honey; a land of beauty, fruitfulness, and blessing. And they desire to have the part of this promise that belonged to them. They are determined, despite discouraging cultural and religious factors—the cultural gender discrimination of the law and customs of Israel that said that their father had lost the family inheritance because he had no male child.

## **The Text in Our Context**

In Israel, all inheritances were to be passed to a male, regardless of age and status. The system was completely unfair to women. This kind of cultural gender discriminative norm is what women are experiencing throughout Nigeria. Women are denied the right to the inheritance of either their father or their husband.

In Nigeria, especially in the north-eastern part of the country where I live, traditional cultural norms deny women the right of inheritance and ownership. This has long been the major reason that women live in poverty and are marginalized. Women are considered part of a man's property. This has made many women vulnerable during the ongoing insurgency in the country, especially in the Northeast.

In terms of education, males are educated more than females, as society gives more educational opportunities to boys and young men. Only female students are expelled from school if they are found to be sexually active, while their male counterparts may continue with their studies. Rape of women is so rampant because of the culture of silence. Indeed, the plight of women in this region cannot be overemphasized.

This passage has given us an example of how women can, by faith, boldly raise and talk about their situation, and end up as agents of change—something ev-

ery woman can become. Keeping quiet will never bring about change. Women must talk about how they are feeling, with boldness, by faith, against the culture of silence and suffering. Faith challenges tradition; we must therefore be ready to move in new ways against universally accepted ideas and traditionally held views. If we would walk by faith, we must make choices that take us off the commonly accepted path.

These women's act of faith formed the basis of a new principle, a new law. A whole new area of action opened up. We need daughters of Zelophehad of our time, who can take bold steps of faith that bring about new understanding about the treatment of women. Women need to have faith to act against cultural norms that work against them. Keeping quiet is equal to supporting the evil. Women, speak out for your rights; men, speak out for women's rights. Jesus said, if you have faith, even small like a grain of mustard, it will remove mountains, it will cause trees to be cast into the sea and other things to happen. When we begin to exercise faith, we encourage someone else to exercise faith too. Who knows what God is going to do in our time through us? God is calling on us to live by faith. This is God's way of changing human history.

## Questions

The people of Israel numbered over a million, yet the daughters of Zelophehad appear before the leader and the people to make known their demand. It must have been an unusual circumstance and sight for the women of Israel in particular.

- What do you think made them act in this unusual way?
- What made them think they ever had a chance to inherit this land?
- Why were they determined to ask for this when they knew it went against the law?
- What was it that made them hope like this?
- Do you have experiences in your context that are like those of the daughters of Zelophehad?
- Are there examples from your context when women have acted in the same way as the daughters of Zelophehad?



## Activities

These young women took time to talk about their plight and situation and, in the end, came up with an agreement and understanding that the promised land was a gift of God's grace to the people of Israel, which meant it had nothing to do with the realm of custom and law. Grace is not one's right; it is a gift that is for all, unless we bring culture into it. Therefore, we should speak out; keeping quiet will not solve or end women's plight.

- Find an example in your context where you as a group could make a difference regarding the plight of women, either by taking action or by raising your voices.

## Resources

Adeyemo, Tokunboh, ed. *Africa Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.

Adeyemo, Tokunboh, ed. *Sharhin Littafi Mai Tsarki Don Afirka*. Jos: Africa Christian Textbooks, 2019.

Henry, Matthew. *Complete Commentary on the Bible*.

*NIV Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

## Prayer

*Our Father, awaken our faith anew. Teach us to take our burden to you in faith and speak out. Lord, teach us to walk by faith. In Christ's name, Amen.*

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**Suzan Mark Zira** is a female theologian from Nigeria and a member of the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria (EYN). She served as principal of EYN's John Guli Bible School for 17 years and is the current academic dean of Kulp Theological Seminary in Adamawa State, Nigeria. She was director of EYN's Women's Fellowship for six years and Women's Ministry for four years. She also led the Mission 21 Women's Network in Africa for six years.



## Gender, Economics, and Structural Injustice

Amanda Khozi Mukwashi

### Scripture

#### *Ruth 1:6–13*

*<sup>6</sup> Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. <sup>7</sup> So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. <sup>8</sup> But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup> The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. <sup>10</sup> They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” <sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? <sup>12</sup> Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was*

*hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons,<sup>13</sup> would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.”*

## The Text in Its Context

The Book of Ruth relates that Ruth and Orpah, two women of Moab, had married two sons of Elimelech and Naomi, Judeans who had settled in Moab to escape a famine in Judah. The husbands of all three women die; Naomi plans to return to her native Bethlehem and urges her daughters-in-law to return to their families.

The Book of Ruth was written in Hebrew sometime in the 6th–4th centuries BCE. The culture and practice at the time meant that women were permanently and solidly on the cultural margins. If they were without a husband or a son, they were left stateless, unprotected, and vulnerable in their communities. Naomi knew the fate that awaited widows and did not want to see her daughters-in-law become outcasts dependent on the mercy of their husbands’ extended families. Instead, Naomi believed that if her daughters-in-law returned home to their families, they would be looked after, or they would find other men to marry and bear sons, giving them new opportunity for social protection. In these societies, social, gender, and economic injustices were deliberately structural and therefore embedded in the norms of community life.

The injustice faced by all three women was not an accident, since women were seen as little more than objects—voiceless and largely defined by their relationships to the men in their lives. The system in operation perpetuated a lack of rights and benefits, with no opportunity for women to flourish in their own right.

## The Text in Our Context

Poverty and injustices today are not an accident. Economic systems are built with a deliberate structure; they are designed to keep vulnerable communities in a state of poverty, and women are hardest hit. Over the centuries, many Western economies have been perfected to create wealth and power that serves the few at the expense of billions of lives across the world. Evidence collated by

the UN, the World Bank, and other global institutions inform us that millions of women take the brunt of the consequences of social, economic, and political inequalities and injustices.

Many of the countries in which we at Christian Aid work, have experienced high levels of economic growth and falling poverty rates. Yet, notional economic success can mask severe pockets of poverty, growing levels of inequality, or the destruction of the natural world. And although market mechanisms, fundamental to economic growth, have been vital for lifting some people out of poverty, they are rarely able to address the needs of the hardest to reach.

For some in the global South, the dogmatic pursuit of economic growth is, far from being part of the solution, part of the problem: a form of neoliberal globalization that “has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God’s creation.”<sup>1</sup> By asking the question “What enables a truly human life?” we can see the economy as a tool that should exist to facilitate human and planetary flourishing. Our economic system should be judged by its potential for sustaining life, both of people and planet, in ways that support the common good.

Today, the world faces some of the most serious economic, environmental, social, and political challenges it has ever faced. Across the world, citizens are calling for governments to implement policies to address these issues, but again and again, governments tell them the same thing: “We don’t have the money.” At the same time, it is a fact that governments worldwide tolerate widespread tax evasion and avoidance—and that malevolent actors routinely steal from government funds. Indeed, it is estimated that 416 billion US dollars is lost every year to IFFs or illicit financial flows,<sup>2</sup> that is, illegal or harmful movements of money or capital from one country to another.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Accra Confession,” 2004, World Communion of Reformed Churches, <http://wrcr.ch/accra/the-accra-confession>, quoted in Christian Aid, *An Unquenchable Thirst for More: Faith and Economic Growth*, December 2017, <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-01/An-Unquenchable-Thirst-Dec2017.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Christian Aid, *Trapped in Illicit Finance: How Abusive Tax and Trade Practices Harm Human Rights*, September 2019, <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-09/trapped-in-illicit-finance-report-sep2019.pdf>.

The impact on women and girls has been disproportionate, leaving them bearing the brunt of poverty, climate change, health pandemics, conflict, and fragility. Women are the primary victims of violence. Violence takes different forms and manifests itself in poverty, displacement, and a lack of access to essential healthcare services, education, and shelter. Nearly one in three women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence by any perpetrator in their lifetime.<sup>3</sup>

The challenges faced by Ruth and Naomi were structural and based on a cultural context that placed women as second-class citizens of their nations, communities, and families. More than two thousand years later, while there has been progress on a number of fronts, women continue to be at the mercy of systemic structures, norms, and practices that keep them poor, powerless, and voiceless.

The Bible tells us that Ruth and Naomi managed to find a way through the different rules and practices in order to gain the security and protection that they needed. They worked together as two women to achieve the desired results. In this 21st century of the Common Era, there is much that we can learn from their strategies that will contribute to transforming our lives and the lives of future generations—standing in solidarity with one another and presenting our petitions before God in agreement. God tells us that where two or three are gathered in God’s name, God is there with them; that whatever is bound on earth is also bound in heaven. There is power and strength in women of faith coming together in prayer and action as we respond to the call in Micah 6:8 to “do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with [our] God.”

From a position of humbleness, Ruth, a migrant and foreigner, was to be elevated to be one of the women in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:5. There are millions of women who are displaced, who have not lived in their home for many years, and who do not know when they will next have a place to call home. Yet, through the scriptures, both in the Hebrew Bible and in the accounts of the life of Jesus, God is revealed as one who is concerned about the fatherless, the widows, and those who are socially excluded.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

As followers of Christ, we have a duty to continue this work and reach out to others, contributing to lifting them out of poverty, to helping to bring down structures that keep people vulnerable, and to creating spaces for everyone's voice to be heard. From a faith perspective, our work on gender justice motivates us to walk together, to provide support and accompaniment, to build solidarity and improve networks of support, and to nourish community life with spiritual and pastoral care, with empathy, love, compassion, and neighbourliness—during and beyond the current crisis.

## Questions

- How can we reconstruct the conversation around a just economy, especially one that starts with self-assessment and moves towards a global transformation?
- Financial debt including climate debt, defined by policies developed in wealthy economies, shapes the realities of the global South. Debt within developed economies is very different to debt in developing nations. Therefore, how can we examine who owes whom, and for what?
- How can we confront corporate powers—beyond academic economists, bankers, et al. and including religious powers and practices—that contribute to continued inequalities and injustices?
- How can we cross the divide of race, ethnicity, and wealth to stand in solidarity as women across the world? Looking at how decolonization has shaped and influenced different levels and layers of privilege, what do we understand by the concept of privilege, and how can we restore that which has been taken—dignity?

## Activities

- Think of and list cultural practices that women face. Share them and discuss the damage that they do to women's wellbeing. Talk about how such practices contribute to violence against women and how they dehumanize women and girls.
- Reflect on the life of Jesus and how, during his earthly ministry, he reached out to those who were socially excluded and marginalized, including women. What can we learn from Jesus' actions? Discuss as a group.



- Jesus saw poverty, inequality, religious and economic oppression, unemployment, depression, the physically ill, and the socially unclean. His heart was moved with compassion, and his sense of what was right drove him to take action. He pronounced what his mission was all about. Consider what this means for the ecumenical mission together.

## Resources

“The Accra Confession.” 2004. World Communion of Reformed Churches. <http://wcrch.ch/accra/the-accra-confession>.

Christian Aid. *Trapped in Illicit Finance: How Abusive Tax and Trade Practices Harm Human Rights*. September 2019. <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-09/trapped-in-illicit-finance-report-sep2019.pdf>.

Christian Aid. *An Unquenchable Thirst for More: Faith and Economic Growth*. December 2017. <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-01/An-Unquenchable-Thirst-Dec2017.pdf>.

## Prayer

*Our God, who changes times and seasons, deposes kings, and sets up kings; who gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; our God, who reveals deep and hidden things, who knows what is in the darkness and with whom light dwells—to our God we give thanks and praise.*

*Oh Lord, give us wisdom to see the context in which we live, reveal to us the solutions that will be pleasing to you, and give us the strength and courage to stand in solidarity with women across the world as together we work to fight poverty, tackle power structures that do harm, and lift our voices in concert and in thanksgiving.*

*Jesus, you walked and lived on this earth, and you sit at the right hand of the Father advocating for each one of us. Help us to walk in your footsteps and be bold in stepping in for those who are socially excluded and marginalized in our communities.*

*Remind us, oh Lord, that we are all created in your image and that we all receive favour before you that is undeserved and unmerit-*

*ed; that your love is offered and extended to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, class, caste, or social-economic status; that the only criteria that matters is to be a member of the human race.*

*Grant us now your peace that surpasses all understanding so that we can be a true manifestation of your love and a testimony of your faithfulness. Amen.*

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**Amanda Khozi Mukwashi** is the chief executive officer of Christian Aid, a global movement of people, churches, and local organizations working to end poverty. Her career spans intergovernmental and non-governmental spaces, including the UN, VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) International, and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa. She is the author of *But Where Are You Really From?* published by SPCK Publishing in 2020.



## Difficult Paths

Anders Göranson

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### Scripture

*Matthew 16:21–23—Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection*

*<sup>21</sup> From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. <sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” <sup>23</sup> But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

### The Text in Its Context

Three of the gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke, traditionally named the synoptic gospels—tell the story of Jesus with a dramaturgy or dramatic composition that builds on how Jesus walks to Jerusalem and climaxes in his death

and resurrection there. Jesus foretells his suffering three times according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke:

1. First foretelling: Matthew 16:21–23, Mark 8:31–33, Luke 9:22
2. Second foretelling: Matthew 17:22–23, Mark 9:30–32, Luke 9:43b–45
3. Third foretelling: Matthew 20:17–19, Mark 10:32–34, Luke 18:31–34

In all four gospels the enemies are identified as “the elders and chief priests and scribes.” For the most part, the gospels were written during a time when there was a growing conflict between Jews and Gentiles within the Jesus movement. It is important to understand that Jesus himself was a Jew; the Jewish community is Jesus’s context. The person who ultimately sentences Jesus to death is a Roman governor.

Jesus is a threat to the powerful, and he is aware of it. The narrator in the synoptic gospels says that when Jesus tells the disciples about his pending suffering and death they either “were greatly distressed” (Matt. 17:23), “they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him” (Mark 9:32) or “they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said” (Luke 18:34).

Just before Jesus talks about his coming suffering, Peter makes a confession when he states that Jesus is the Messiah. All the synoptic gospels report about the confession. One can imagine the state of mind that Peter is in—being together with the Messiah! And then, suddenly, the scene is dramatically changed: Jesus predicts his death. It is not strange that this causes distress and raises a number of questions amongst the disciples.

The only one who tries to intervene is Peter, and he gets a harsh reprimand from Jesus. One can sympathize with Peter. It seems as if he wants to protect Jesus. The question is, why does Jesus reject his help? And why is Jesus so dismissive? One suggestion is that Jesus himself feels an uncertainty and reacts when Peter does not listen to him but rather wants to stop him from following his calling. Jesus is a human being and needs support from those closest to him. He does not need for Peter to question his decision to approach the city; he needs Peter’s support. But he gets something else.

It is also clear that Jesus is convinced he has a calling, a path he must follow. This clarity is evident—not only in this passage but also in the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus is determined to follow the road set before him although he is filled with anxiety.

## The Text in Our Context

We, like Peter and the other disciples, experience sudden shifts in life. Life can be good and safe, and we are filled with gratitude. Then, without warning, things change, and we find ourselves in the deep end. Every person goes through this. It is part of human life, and it happens from an early age.

In the context of gender-based violence, women and children often find themselves in situations when trust and security change into mistrust and fear. One example is when they travel home from school or work. Depending on their context, they must consider which route is safe to take. Just like Jesus is aware of the threats that are present when he approaches Jerusalem, many women and children know when they are in unsafe environments. It can happen in daylight and even more in the dark of night.

Jesus had a task to fulfil. He was not prepared to change plans because there was a threat. In fact, many women and children are forced to change plans because of threats that surround them. There are many girls who cannot attend school because of this. Some young people decide to stay at home during late afternoon or evening in parts of the world where activities are offered at these times because it is not safe to go out. Yet we also have to remember that violence and sexual abuse also is a reality in many homes. This is the case more often for girls than for boys.

Sometimes this is their own choice, but in other instances, parents and others advise girls and young women how they should act to avoid the risk of being harassed. This advice may have to do with how they dress but also with which path they literally walk. Such advice is very problematic since often puts blame on the victim. It often seems as if parents do this to protect their daughters. At the same time, it means that they restrict their daughters' freedom. If one is honest as a parent, one must admit that there are different rules for sons and

daughters. Again, parents make a decision in order to protect their children, but the result is that the children are harmed.

The problem does not lie with women and children. The problem is structural. Men are often—not always but in most cases—the perpetrators of harassment and violence against girls and women. So, it has to do with gender roles. And society does not often prioritize the creation of safe neighbourhoods for all. Sometimes people with authority, like politicians, recommend that people in unsafe areas stay at home. Presumably, this is done out of consideration for these residents, but the result is that some people cannot move as freely as others.

## Questions

### *About the Text*

- Share thoughts about Peter's reaction when Jesus tells the disciples about his coming suffering. Can you identify with Peter? In what way?
- Share thoughts about Jesus's reply. Can you relate to his reaction?

### *About Our Context*

- Think about situations when you have tried to warn someone to keep them from being exposed to danger. In the context of gender-based violence, what is the best strategy? If you are a parent or guardian, how are you acting in relation to your children, or how did you act when they were younger?
- Have you yourself experienced times when others have restricted your possibilities to move freely? How did parents, society do this?

## Activities

- Identify unsafe areas and situations in your context and discuss strategies to make these places and situations safer, especially for women and children. You might bring this to the attention of a group within your congregation/parish.



## Resources

Boobal Batchelor, Valli, ed. *When Pastors Prey. Overcoming Clergy Sexual Abuse of Women*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013. [https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/File/Pages\\_from\\_When\\_Pastors\\_Prey\\_preview.pdf](https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/File/Pages_from_When_Pastors_Prey_preview.pdf).

## Prayer

*Loving God, we come to you in situations when the freedom of some people is being restricted or limited by other people's actions or by structural injustices. Guide us when we seek to navigate in an uncertain terrain. Protect the vulnerable and challenge people with power. In Jesus's name, amen.*

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**The Rev. Dr Anders Göransson** is the general secretary of the Swedish Bible Society. He has been an ordained priest in the Church of Sweden since 1987 and has served in different capacities as a parish priest and as a teacher of homiletics at the Church of Sweden Institute for Pastoral Education. He also worked for seven and a half years in South Africa. He holds a PhD in Ecclesiology from the University of the Free State in South Africa and has been an honorary lecturer at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa.



## Looking and Seeing

Imelda Poole

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### Scripture

#### *Luke 13:10–17—Jesus Heals a Woman Bent Double*

<sup>10</sup> Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. <sup>11</sup> And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. <sup>12</sup> When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” <sup>13</sup> When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. <sup>14</sup> But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” <sup>15</sup> But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? <sup>16</sup> And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years,

*be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”<sup>17</sup> When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.*

## The Text in Its Context

Jesus refers only twice in the gospels to a person being a son or daughter of Abraham. Zacchaeus is called a “son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9), some exegetes would say, because the name “Zacchaeus” means “pure of heart.” Jesus is saying, yes, despite Zacchaeus’s job and supposed isolation, he indeed shall see God. Jesus is saying, Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham, he belongs.

Similarly, this bent woman is a Jew. She is called a “daughter of Abraham” (v. 16). Why? Because she is a Jew? This is obviously known, and everyone there seems to know her. In calling her by that title, Jesus links this woman to all those who received the promise God made to Abraham—that God would be their God.

At that time, a person with physical infirmity was usually set apart. They would be considered unclean, untouchable, like a leper, and not worthy of the full benefits the community had to offer. This was even more noticeable because the bent woman was a *woman*. Simply by calling this woman Abraham’s daughter, Jesus affirms her right to be a full member of the community.

Jesus shows incredible compassion throughout his life and had given many signs that he saw women as equal to men despite the cultural norms of his time. In his actions and relationships he reflected no sense of status dividing one person from another, nor was he anything other than inclusive in his behaviour towards people.

This incident is a reflection of all of these qualities so strongly reflected throughout the life of Jesus. Jesus looks at the crippled woman, and this would have meant bending down towards her. He becomes as she is, shows total empathy, identifies with her condition. She can only see feet and the dirt around her on the streets; she has been crippled for 18 years, half of her likely lifetime in those days. Most importantly, she cannot look people in the eye.

She does not request healing; she has accepted her lot. She is not called by name; she is a nobody—and Jesus makes her into a somebody. He enables her to have life and to have it to the full, both in a physical sense and as a daughter

of Abraham. He sees she has the gift to see God; she is pure of heart. She now sees in the fullest of ways. She stands up, she sees, and she can be who she was born to become.

It was a sabbath. Here we have the dilemma of discerning how to balance the sabbath commandment and the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. This was not, unlike with many of Jesus's miracles on the sabbath, a condemnation by the Pharisees of Jesus for professing himself to be equal to God, that is, forgiving sins before healing someone physically. No, this was simply a condemnation of Jesus for breaking the law on the sabbath.

This was a natural response by Jesus to break open the rationale behind the law: Is the law to help or to hinder? Is the law to control others or to free them for greater love and joy? Jesus reflects, by his action, that the primary purpose of the law is to help the Jew to respond to God's will with love and compassion, or to ignore it. The sabbath was made for a human person to rest and to give to God what is God's. To deny that, is to deny his Father's call to love, and in this situation, the call of God is to heal. Jesus looked at the woman, and he saw her deepest desire; he responded in love.

## The Text in Our Context

Can we see with the eyes of Jesus when we walk the streets day by day? Do we see what he would see all around us?

The bent women and men are everywhere in front of our eyes. People bowed down by the burdens of life, rendered helpless and hopeless by the ills of society that disempower them and exclude them from citizenship and human rights. People bowed down by a neoliberal economy that has developed a yawning gap between the rich and the poor. A global society driven by greed, wealth, and deceit. A global organized crime that preys on those most vulnerable of people, who are so bowed down that they themselves cannot see a way out from such oppression.

How are we called to be "Jesus people" in our world in the face of such oppression? What is our deepest desire as we discern a response to the call of God today? Is the first step to do what Jesus did—to look and to see? Can we see the bent and broken today?

The bent woman might say, can we see her as a modern slave in a factory sweat-shop? Are we blinded by the complex supply chains that hide these realities? Is she hidden from our sight in construction factories where traffickers ply their trade and control thousands of slaves bent down by the burden of debt, unbearable hours of unpaid work, and appalling conditions? Can we see her behind the counter in nail bars, car washes, hotel receptions, trafficked to feed the greed and demands of the rich for a quick fix or for cheap goods, cheap labour, cheap services?

Can we see Jesus in them?

Jesus spent hours in prayer and reflection. Is this a first step to really seeing—to stand back and really see and listen, read, and understand? Is Jesus desiring that we really see and commit ourselves, as he did, to doing his Father's will? Is this a dynamic call to service by responding with love and compassion to the woman bent down in our world today?

What would this call be for us in real truth—can we see?

## **A True Story of the Bent Woman Today**

A few years ago, I was invited by a street woman and her daughter to visit them where they lived in a little nook hidden from sight off a main street. The daughter was eleven when I first met her. The mother and daughter always stayed clean even though they lived on the street. No matter what I did, there was no way the mother was going to help the child go to school. She managed to beat the system. However, the girl, who was bright, was allowed to come to a church English class.

One day we noticed bruises on the girl's arms. Our first step was to speak with the mother in a public place, as she was prone to manic attacks and could be violent. We were not able to bring the daughter to a safe meeting place with social workers. The girl declared the bruises were caused by debris falling on to her arms as she was rummaging for food. The mother was afraid the girl would be taken from her.

The church was providing food for both the mother and the daughter. We worked with a few caring institutions that focused on child protection, and

together we decided to keep a careful watch. The bruises appeared again at a later date, and this time they were more severe.

One night we saw that the mother was taking her child to another part of town. She was forcing her child into sex work in a broken-down car, where the girl had to meet many clients each night. The child and mother were taken away from this place that very night, and after much conversation, the full story of physical and psychological abuse emerged, with an admission of guilt by the mother. Sadly, the girl needed to go into a safe environment, and her mother has not been able to live with her again. The mother understands this and is now housed elsewhere and is coping with life. The girl has come from this terrible, bent state of abuse and vulnerability, and after much therapy and love, is getting along well at university.

In the end, those who cared had to go outside the usual way of working and think outside the box in order to bring this girl out of her prison into freedom. They literally went seeking the truth, and they did see.

Sister Margaret Scharf, OP, invites us to seek the truth and see in her song “Can you see me?” written for the Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans (ACRATH) (<https://acrath.org.au/videopage/can-you-see-me-7/>).

*Can you see me in the things that you purchase,  
In a place where the prices there suit you so well?  
Can you imagine this place where I'm working;  
No food and no breaks, in a sweatshop that's hell?  
Can you see me?*

*Can you see me in the shadows and darkness,  
Where my body is sold for minutes and hours?  
Can you imagine the suffering in sex trade,  
Where dreams are stolen and so is my power?  
Can you see me?*

We also can be inspired by the words of Saint Catherine of Siena: “Be who God meant you to be, and you will set the world on fire. ... We have had enough exhortations to be silent! Cry out with a thousand tongues. ... the world is rotten because of silence.”



## Activities

- Join an anti-trafficking network near you and find out about modern-day slavery.
- Read the reports and books, and watch the videos available on the websites suggested under Resources to educate yourself on the phenomenon of human trafficking.
- Pray for an end to human trafficking. Pope Francis says not to go to bed each night without bringing to mind someone you know who is like this bent woman and excluded from society.
- Join a campaign against human trafficking.
- Check the production and supply chain of what you buy, even if it takes time, and only buy ethically.
- Buy only what you need and be prepared to pay more to buy ethically.
- Raise awareness in conversation about this massive injustice and cruelty in our society today.
- Consider whether you are being called to volunteer in a women's shelter near you.
- Join the House of Prayer of Religious in Europe Networking Against Trafficking and Exploitation (RENATE) at the web link listed under Resources. Read the prayers and join in the actions with prayer.

## Prayers

See the prayers to end human trafficking available from RENATE: <https://www.renate-europe.net/prayer/prayers-to-end-human-trafficking/>

## Resources

Abarim Publications' Biblical Dictionary: The Old Testament Hebrew word: זכך

Catherine of Siena Quotes. Goodreads. Accessed August 24, 2021. [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5794057.Catherine\\_of\\_Siena](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5794057.Catherine_of_Siena).

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**Sister Imelda Poole**, MBE, a native of Great Britain, is a sister of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM). After many years in the field of education and grassroots mission in the United Kingdom, her ministry moved to Albania where the Roman Catholic archbishop of Tiranë-Durrës invited the IBVM to work in the mission against human trafficking. This led to her co-founding Mary Ward Loreto, an NGO that addresses the root causes of trafficking, including poverty, and is involved in the rescue and rehabilitation of survivors of trafficking.

Sr Imelda Poole currently serves as president of Religious in Europe Networking Against Trafficking and Exploitation (RENATE). RENATE has grown from a handful of religious sisters into a leading NGO combatting human trafficking in 31 European countries. It regularly convenes in different European nations to support work across borders in partnership with the many members of RENATE. Presently, Imelda Poole is co-founding the NGOs Mary Ward Loreto UK and Anti Modern Slavery Alliance.



## My Destiny

Winelle Kirton Roberts

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### Scripture

*Luke 2:36–38*

*<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup> then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup> At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.*

### The Text in Its Context

Like other Jewish parents, Joseph and Mary brought their newborn son, Jesus, to be presented in the temple. It was Simeon, a devout and righteous man, and Anna, a prophet, who received and revealed the long-awaited Messiah.

Surprisingly, more personal details are recorded about Anna than about Simeon by the gospel writer Luke. We are aware of Anna's parental and tribal heritage, her marital status, and her age. We also know that, for most of her life, Anna remained in the temple and dedicated herself as an Asherite Hebrew in full devotion to God.

This was a time when the wellbeing and livelihood of Hebrew women was solely dependent on the men in their lives—fathers, husbands, or sons. When Anna experienced the loss of a husband—and, based on the biblical text, had no children—in her context she was not only a woman in mourning but could have been vulnerable, defenceless, and even fearful. But, neither the path of remarrying to appease family (Luke 20:27–40) nor of living in poverty and being at the mercy of society (Acts 6:1–4) was chosen by Anna. Nevertheless, by God's grace, she lived a purposeful destiny.

## The Text in Our Context

There remains yet today, in many cultures, the definition of woman as the daughter, wife, or mother of a male. In many instances the male is the breadwinner or a significant contributor to the finances. Therefore, in times of loss, women, like Anna, can become vulnerable and anxious. As women create their own sense of determination, worth, and definition, they are also empowered by the Holy Spirit to choose what gives meaning to life and affirms usefulness.

Women have come a long way, but they still have to fight against the expectations of society. On the one hand, widows who have resolved to remain single are often pressured to remarry, as they are deemed incomplete without a male figure in their life. On the other hand, the integrity and loyalty of those who choose to remarry are questioned.

God's word gives encouragement to women today to choose their destiny. Widows are admonished to discern God's will for their lives. It is God who directs their time, provides for their wellbeing, and makes a way for affection.

### *Time*

According to Luke, Anna remained single and dedicated herself to full-time ministry. She prayed, she fasted, and she prophesied of the coming Messiah.

Lest one should think that this was a monastic, laborious, and joyless life, remember that the temple was the centre of activity for the whole community. At any given time, hundreds were living and working in the temple of the Lord. Through this dedication to service in the temple, Anna served God and served humanity in ways we may not know.

There are other women in the new covenant who did not live in the temple but chose to use their time in service unto God. Take, for example, Dorcas, whose skill sets gave leadership to other women. We do not know for sure that she was a widow, but we believe that she was.

*<sup>36</sup> Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. <sup>37</sup> At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. <sup>38</sup> Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." <sup>39</sup> So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.—Acts 9:36–39*

In service to God, widows gave of their time praying and helping others. "The real widow, left alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day" (1 Tim. 5:5).

### *Wellbeing*

It is likely that Anna as a member of the household in the temple would have been taken care of through the gifts and offerings presented to the Lord (Num. 18:25–32). For other widows who were unconnected to a male, their plight might have been different. The result was hardship and suffering.

At Zarephath, Elijah met such a woman (1 Kings 17:7–16). Suspicious of Elijah's unreasonable request to give him the meal she was about to prepare, the impoverished and desperate widow told him that it would be the last meal for her and her son, and then they would starve to death. The miraculous provision of meal and oil according to Elijah's prophesy affirmed God's commitment to care for the widows who have struggled to provide for themselves.

A spirit of contentment and generosity can be a testimony of God's providence, like the widow in Luke 21:1–4 who gave back from what little she had: <sup>1</sup> [Jesus] looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; <sup>2</sup> he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. <sup>3</sup> He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; <sup>4</sup> for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

Under the old and new covenants, the religious community was required to take care of daily needs: "You shall not abuse any widow or orphan" (Ex. 22:22), and "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress ..." (James 1:27).

Paul admonished Timothy: "Honour widows who are really widows. If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some repayment to their parents; for this is pleasing in God's sight" (1 Tim. 5:3–4).

There are some widows today who earn their living and can take care of themselves financially. Others experience adversity with the loss of one, or the only, breadwinner of the household. God uses churches and families to meet financial needs.

Often, we forget, however, that the need is much more than a paid utility bill or a bag of groceries, for women also have emotional, recreational, and sexual needs. This is the kind of affection that can be found in marital unions. It is for this reason that widows are free to remarry.

### *Affection*

Anna chose not to remarry. But there are also those who have chosen to remarry and have found fulfilment and purpose in this.

Take for example the story of Elisabeth Elliot. Elisabeth was an influential missionary author and speaker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Elisabeth was born in Belgium in 1926 and moved to the United States of America as a child with her family.

In 1953 Elisabeth married Jim Elliot. They were both missionaries in Ecuador and had one daughter. Jim was murdered in 1956. Elisabeth remained a

missionary there for two years after his death. In 1969 she married Addison Leitch, a professor at a theological seminary. Addison died in 1973. Elisabeth became a professor after his death. In 1977 Elisabeth married Lars Gren, a student at the seminary. This was her longest marriage. She died in 2015 at age 88.

Paul discouraged believers from placing women below the age of 60 on the “list” of widows (1 Tim. 5:9). While Paul encouraged widows to remain single, he also believed that they should be released to remarriage: “<sup>8</sup>To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. <sup>9</sup>But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion” (1 Cor. 7:8–9).

Elisabeth experienced loss, but, unlike Anna, she remarried. Her marriages were affectionate partnerships. She did not stop being a bearer of the good news of Jesus Christ.

The challenge is that others seem to want to choose which path a woman should take. For example, Judah felt a sense of obligation to choose a path for Tamar according to Jewish practices Genesis 38:6–11.

Yet, in the case of Ruth, it was her choice to journey with her mother-in law Naomi (Ruth 1:15–18). Ruth’s remarriage brought her fulfilment through the birth of a son. Ruth 4:13–15). Under the new covenant, women have a choice. For example, as we read in Romans 7:2: “Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband.”

### *Conclusion*

For women, it was and is intensely challenging to lose a spouse. The story of Anna teaches us that, while it would be a time of recalibration and reflection, it is not to be one without hope or help. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, women choose to use their time to serve, being assured that their needs will be taken care of, or to remarry and continue their lives.



## Questions

- How would you imagine the journey of Anna from the loss of her husband to the celebration of the birth of the Redeemer? What may have been her daily thoughts and communication with God?
- Based on the Pauline view on widows expressed in his letter to Timothy, how does the widow know “what is right” (1 Tim. 5:7) for her?
- How does the 21st century church reform stereotypes of widowhood?

## Prayer

*Gracious Lord, you are the God of all. We place before you all those who have experienced the loss of a loved one, like Anna did. Grant them your **shalom** so that they may have the wholeness that you can give. May they be empowered and strengthened by your Spirit to discern and do your will. Amen.*

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Kirton Roberts has taught history, philosophy, ethics, and religion. She is the author of *Created in Their Image: Evangelical Protestantism in Antigua and Barbados, 1834-1914* and contributed entries on Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, and Saint Kitts and Nevis to the *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the Global South* (2018). She is an editor of the *Journal of Moravian History*.

An ordained minister in the Moravian Church, Eastern West Indies Province, Kirton Roberts served in pastoral and administrative positions with her church from 1993 to 2019. At present, she is the pastor of the Geneva Moravian Fellowship in Switzerland. She is married to the Rev. Dr Mikie Roberts, and they have three daughters.



## Profound Poverty and Structural Inequity Examined through Ruth

*"I am because we are; if we are not, then I am not."*

CL Nash

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### Scripture

#### *Ruth 1:1–22*

<sup>1</sup> *In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. <sup>2</sup> The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.*

<sup>3</sup> *Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons.*

<sup>4</sup> *They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup> both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.*

<sup>6</sup> When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. <sup>7</sup> With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

<sup>8</sup> Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. <sup>9</sup> May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” Then she kissed them goodbye, and they wept aloud <sup>10</sup> and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”

<sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?

<sup>12</sup> Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—<sup>13</sup> would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you because the LORD’s hand has turned against me!”

<sup>14</sup> At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

<sup>15</sup> “Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

<sup>16</sup> But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God, my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” <sup>18</sup> When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

<sup>19</sup> So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, “Can this be Naomi?”

<sup>20</sup> “Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. <sup>21</sup> I went away full, but the LORD has

*brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”*

*<sup>22</sup> So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.*

## The Text in Its Context

The Book of Ruth, largely seen as a testament to female solidarity, is also a story of food insecurity that informs our theological principles of justice today. The context for this story begins with the writer informing us of a famine, which prioritizes the issue of food insecurity in the very first verse.

The story immediately introduces the main characters—a married couple and their two sons. The husband dies, and the two sons marry Moabite women. If the daughters-in-law were in their mid-teens when they married as is likely, they would have been around 25 years old when their husbands die after 10 years of marriage (v. 4).

Naomi is in survival mode due to her extreme loss. Her daughter in-law Ruth represents a seed of promise for her. This story serves as a testament of faith because

- Naomi creates survival strategies to benefit both women;
- God’s faithfulness continues even though survival can make us bitter; and
- in working through the bitterness, God creates the conditions for others to reflect that faithfulness back to us.

### *Naomi Creates Survival Strategies*

Naomi is broken-hearted by the losses she has endured, yet she continues to explore survival strategies (vv. 6–7). As she explores her own options, she encourages her daughters-in-law to return home to their people where they can remarry and have a means of support. True community relies on empathy as an expression of God’s love. Remarrying within the family or returning home to the care of her father was the cultural norm for a wife after the death of her husband. When Ruth refuses to return home, Naomi allows her daughter

in-law to accompany her. They arrive in Bethlehem (v. 22) at the start of the harvest. Of interest to note here is that Bethlehem actually means “house of food.”<sup>1</sup> The women leave from a famine to go to a feast of opportunities and new beginnings.

### *Survival Often Breeds Bitterness*

Mere survival, often a sign of tremendous loss, can breed bitterness. Children who are working as sex workers, helping drug traffickers, or toiling in labour camps endure the loss of a joyful childhood during which they might have had the time to be nurtured into adulthood. Adults who do not have enough to pay their basic expenses operate in what we think of as survival mode, in which they have less than they require to survive. This survival mode, when one is deeply aware that one is suffering due to loss, tends to be distressing.

Naomi says, “Call me ‘Mara’ because the Almighty has made my life very bitter” (v. 20). Her bitterness is connected to the loss she has experienced. The Shunammite woman loses her son, and Elisha tells his servant Gehazi that the woman is in “bitter distress” (2 Kings 4:20–27). It is the same word used here in the Book of Ruth.

### *Ruth’s Empathy Challenges the Bitterness*

Ruth has exhibited empathy (v. 16), which is rewarded. Her act of selflessness mirrors the acts of selflessness we often see among the working poor and vulnerable among us. The reader is left to contemplate what Naomi must have done to create such steadfast and unwavering loyalty from Ruth.

More importantly, however, resolving food insecurity requires us to start with empathy. Naomi stopped trying to “urge” Ruth to think of herself first (v. 18). This means that Naomi was convinced of the sincerity of Ruth’s decision to help her.

Like Ruth, we must also be willing to put ourselves at risk. Ruth puts everything at risk for someone who can give her nothing, according to Naomi’s

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2017), 111.

thinking (v. 13). The normal course of action, after a woman's husband dies, is to return to the safety of her father's home and possibly remarry.

## The Text in Our Context

Today, solving issues of food insecurity might require that we put ourselves at risk by including others in our church budgets, our fundraising efforts, and our legislative priorities. The hunger of one leaves us all a little empty.

Profound poverty leaves one feeling abandoned. Those who are impoverished are especially vulnerable because desperate people will often do anything to survive. Naomi's economic precarity without a husband is further exacerbated with the deaths of her sons.

Though this Bible study focuses on chapter one of the Book of Ruth, the brief story has a few additional turns worthy of notice. When she returns to Bethlehem with Ruth, Naomi initiates a process whereby her daughter-in-law marries Boaz, the family kinsman (according to levirate law, Deut. 25:5-10). In a contemporary context, however, we might view Naomi's actions as putting Ruth at risk. Ruth is vulnerable to sexual exploitation—not only by Boaz but by other men who might sense she is sexually available. The encounter on the threshing floor (Ruth 3:3–14) is still debated in theological circles, as the term “feet” is a euphemism for a sexual encounter. Yet, it is through the character of Naomi that we sense she has faith in the wisdom shared with Ruth. We believe Naomi has assurance of her family's reputation, and we believe her belief that God will move them from a position of needy to satisfied with adequate food and security.

For the working poor, but particularly for those whose poverty is tied to racial inequity, this bitterness is palpable. In our contemporary moment, the world is becoming more aware of such issues as the loss of Black Wall Street, a segment of Tulsa, Oklahoma (United States), where white residents burned down the businesses and homes that represented a haven from white supremacy and its oppressive modes of existence. The encroachment of violence upon this thriving city created generations of inequity and poverty. Likewise, Black farmers in the US have endured the loss of thousands of acres due to direct and unapologetic racial structures that provided financial support solely based on race.

Inequity reaches to every social experience, even childbirth. Black maternal morbidity is four times higher than that of white women in both the US and the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> The health inequity has been largely under-reported until recently.

## Questions

Sexual- and gender-based violence is exacerbated by economic disadvantage. People without money are more likely to stay in dangerous situations, often with little hope of getting out safely. But even further, women in the U.S. and in various other countries have critiqued the way domestic violence can be exacerbated by inappropriate usage of Bible text. Women of African descent, for example theologians such as Mercy Oduyoye, Mary Getui, Esther Mombo, and countless others have often had a fraught relationship with the Bible with regard to its usage to justify both racial and gender hierarchies. In addition to texts that are easily read to negate women as fully human, the Bible is often read through a Eurocentric lens that challenges the connectivity that African-descended women have to the Bible. Ruth's story is relatable for any woman who has approached her own metaphorical threshing floor to lay down in vulnerability with hope of rising to the promise of greater survival strategies.

In this text, sexual- and gender-based violence is an implied undercurrent. Some of the questions we should consider are:

- When have you endured the bitterness of loss, only to have the Lord open up new opportunities for you? What have you considered as your own “new harvest” in the midst of a financial drought?
- Can you think of anyone who has endured food-based insecurity? What strategies of survival have they demonstrated that you observed?
- What are strategies to end food insecurity that you fear might put you at risk? How can you overcome that sense of insecurity?

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2 “Black Women in the UK Four Times More Likely to Die in Pregnancy or Childbirth,” *The Guardian* website, 15 January 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jan/15/black-women-in-the-uk-four-times-more-likely-to-die-in-pregnancy-or-childbirth>.



- What are some of the gendered issues of food-based insecurity?
- Are women coerced into pursuing men to secure their survival, and if so, how can this lead to injustice?
- Does the story paint a fair portrait of the vulnerability of these women?
- How might we be contributing to the food insecurity of the most vulnerable in our communities? In the world?
- What steps can we take to eliminate food insecurity?

## Activities to Promote Economic and Food Justice

What are options we can consider for better economic and health outcomes for people who are dealing with food deprivation?

- Identify your local farmers and find ways you and others can support them.
- Consider how the Bible talks about food inequity and our responsibilities. Explore ways that you can leave behind food for others to glean and how you can participate in programs including food banks or soup kitchens used to combat food insecurity.
- Explore the issue of food waste in your local area with your church and include other churches, charity groups, and activists. Invite experts to come and explore ways to eliminate food waste by sharing more with the economically vulnerable.
- Identify your local political representative and ask them to identify programs enacted to address both food waste and food insecurity. Find out how you can be more involved.
- Consider global efforts such as fair trade. Churches can participate and advocate for fair trade activities as a means of providing a global partnership with vulnerable communities and countries. Identify specific ways you and your church can partner with these global efforts.

## Prayer

*Dear Lord,*

*We pray now for those who are made vulnerable by systems of inequity and inequality, which create both material and spiritual bondage. Those who are weighted by unfair systems require Your steady love and courage. But they also require advocates who will speak favour over their lives. We ask that You break the yoke of bondage for those who believe they benefit from unjust systems that also cause them pain in ways they do not yet see.*

*We ask that You would prompt a reckoning with the individualist culture that has permeated Your church. As the African proverb says, “I am because we are – and if we are not, then I am not.” So we also say this today.*

*We look at Naomi who advised against her own interest to demonstrate Your love for those around her. By Your Spirit, please embolden Your disciples across the globe. Help us advocate for Your Spirit of love and not simply our own interests.*

*Bless us to practice a restorative justice, a **mishpat**, that lifts up the needs of the most vulnerable among us: those who are living with racial inequity, those who lack access to opportunities in education, healthcare, housing, and food. Give us wisdom to help women avoid the vulnerability of the threshing floor. May we assist them in securing the promise and restoration they require to live full and healthy lives, unencumbered by hunger and insecurity. Amen.*

## Resources

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Led by Thursdays in Black Ambassadors, these Bible studies were developed for individual and congregational reflection on sexual and gender-based violence. The reflections will help us listen to the word of God and apply our faith and vision of justice, peace and love in our contexts today. The reflections address critical topics that arise in our societies and Christian communities that contribute to or respond to gender-based violence, and provide diverse perspectives from our wide ecumenical fellowship.

The process is overseen by a core group of Thursdays in Black Ambassadors: Anders Göranzon, Claudia Bandixen, and Karen Georgia Thompson.

Religion/Gender-based Violence



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