

Walking with Biblical Women of Courage

IMAGINATIVE STUDIES FOR BIBLE MEDITATION

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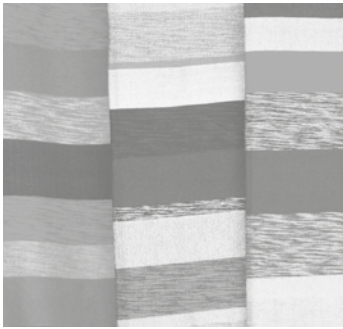
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Introduction

The following reflective monologues and studies are based on biblical accounts of women in the Old and New Testaments, and are intended for groups who meet together to grow in their relationships with God and each other, or for individual use. First the Bible passage about the woman to be studied is read by the group. Then they read the reflective monologue which is written as if the woman herself is speaking.

There are several types of Christian meditation; one of them is to 'enter' the scripture using the imagination. Imaginative reflection on the Bible is not a new concept; it was practiced by St Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. It can be a powerful way for God to speak to us, for imaginative meditation involves not only the mind, but also the emotions.

Superficially, we may feel very different to these women who lived so long ago but, as we hear their stories, we discover that we share much in common: joy and heartache; love and jealousy; difficult choices; the need for patience, wisdom and courage. Courage is a quality we all need and it comes in many different forms: courage to endure and adapt; courage to live under threat; courage to face a difficult future; courage to speak or stand out; courage to follow our convictions; courage to take on a challenging role; courage to sacrifice self for the sake of others. We read in 1 Corinthians 16:13–14, 'Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong. And do everything with love.' As we prayerfully reflect on the lives of these lesser-known biblical women, a transformative work of the Holy Spirit takes place within, enabling us to become more courageous, more loving, more Christlike. We see God's wonderful grace, his undeserved favour and blessing, touching the lives of these women, and discover that this same grace is available to us.

Although the monologues follow the biblical accounts, not every detail will be true. After all, we are imagining, filling in the gaps with the possible. This need not be a problem, for it is precisely what we do when we tell Bible stories to children; we embellish the story to capture the child's imagination with the purpose of teaching the child spiritual truths. This is exactly what we are doing here.

Points for reflection and discussion follow the monologues, enabling issues to be explored and spiritual growth to take place. All questions may be considered or just a few, depending on the time available and the requirements of the group or individual. We discover the truth of Paul's words to Timothy: 'All scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realise what is wrong in our lives... God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work' (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Sometimes verses are suggested for meditation: this involves a slow, deliberate and prayerful consideration of the verses, plumbing their depths. Like imaginative contemplation, it allows scripture to work in us. We grow in our relationship with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Finally, there is the opportunity to record what God has been saying to us and the implications for our individual spiritual journeys. After all, in coming to God's word, we want not only to learn, but also to change and to grow, so that we are not just 'hearers' of the word but 'doers'.

The monologues can be used in groups without the discussion element as a means of initiating a time of silent reflection or led meditation. They can also stand alone effectively in many other contexts; for example, individuals can use them in private meditation, or the monologues can be read to larger groups, such as congregations.

The facilitator

You will need to ensure that there are pens and paper and a variety of translations and paraphrases of the Bible.

It will be your responsibility to introduce the study and to find someone to read the reflective monologue. Try to ask someone gifted in reading aloud.

It is advisable to read through the discussion questions, including the Bible references, before your group meets. This will help you to facilitate the discussion better. Ensure you also allow enough time for personal reflection at the end. It may be helpful to play quiet music while individuals are completing their personal reflection.

Jephthah's Daughter

Introduction

- Read Judges 11:29–38. (You may like to read all of Judges 11.)
 - Ask God to speak to you through these episodes. You could use the words from 2 Thessalonians 2:16–17: ‘Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal comfort and a wonderful hope, comfort you and strengthen you in every good thing you do and say.’
 - Sit back, relax and close your eyes. Imagine the scene as someone reads the monologue.
-

Monologue

‘He’s coming!’ came the shout. I had been waiting with my drum, practising the celebratory dance that I had learnt, for my father had led the Israelites from Gilead to fight the Ammonites, who had made war against us, and the Israelites had defeated them. This was his homecoming and I was full of excitement. My father is a great warrior and I have always adored him. I am his only daughter, indeed his only child; he calls me the apple of his eye.

We have been living in Gilead for a relatively short period of time, previously living east in the land of Tob. My father spoke little of his childhood and family, but I had gleaned that he was the offspring of a man named Gilead and a prostitute. My grandfather had brought up my father with his wife’s sons, and all had gone smoothly while they were young. However, once they fully realised the situation, the

brothers turned against my father, not wanting him to have any part in the inheritance. Perhaps, too, they were envious of his physical prowess. Finally, they drove him away and my father settled in Tob. A born leader, he had gathered followers around him in Tob. Some of these men made me nervous: they were so rough. That was the environment in which I grew up and where I thought I would live out my life.

But we left that life behind us, for when the Ammonites waged war on Israel, it was to my father that the elders of Gilead turned. They knew that there was no one like him to lead them and to win men's loyalty, for not only was he an outstanding warrior, he was also a great strategist and negotiator. 'Talk first' was his motto, and if that failed, take strong action. My father loved to recount how the elders had begged him to come back and be their leader and how he had reminded them of the way he had been treated by his family in the past. How could they expect him to lead men into battle when they had driven him away? He made a bargain with them: if he did as they wished and the Lord gave them the victory, he would remain their leader after the fighting was over. Of course they had to agree, so desperate were they for his help.

When we had arrived in Gilead, my father's leadership was proclaimed before God. At first he tried to avoid further fighting by reasoning with the Ammonites, but to no avail. He believed that they were in the wrong and he was justified in fighting them. The Lord would judge between them.

So this homecoming was more than a victory for Israel, it was a personal triumph for my father, who was now judge of Israel, leader of the very people who had rejected him. How thrilled I was when I saw my father in the distance! I rushed out of the house beating my drum, my laughter and singing mingling, as I performed my triumphant dance. How delighted he would be to see me twirl and spin, and to know the luxuries of home life once again after the deprivations of warfare!

As our eyes met, a look of horror came over his face and a strangled cry came from his throat. With one strong movement he tore his clothes and fell to the floor. I stopped singing and ran to him. What could have happened to cause him such great and sudden distress?

‘Oh my beloved daughter, you have taken me to the depths of despair. You have brought calamity on me. For I have promised the Lord and I cannot go back on my word,’ he wept as he spoke.

‘Father, tell me, what is it? What can I possibly have done?’ I asked in confusion, tears falling down my face as I knelt beside him. His sobs were violent, wracking his body. What had reduced my warrior father to this?

‘Tell me, tell me,’ I urged.

The truth emerged: my father had experienced the Spirit of the Lord coming upon him and in his exhilaration he had vowed to the Lord that, if the Lord gave him victory over the Ammonites, whatever came through the door to meet him on his return from war would be sacrificed as a burnt offering.

‘And it was me,’ I whispered in horror, ‘not an animal, it was me.’ I fell into his arms and we wept together. ‘Oh father, oh father,’ I groaned.

I took his anguished face in my hands and spoke to him falteringly between our sobs. For those few minutes our roles were reversed as I comforted the man who had always comforted me, as I sought to strengthen the man who had always given me strength.

My words came out slowly as I attempted to maintain my control. ‘Father, you have made a vow to the Lord—and he has given you victory over the Ammonites—you must keep your side of the bargain—for look how the Lord has enabled us to be a land at peace. I am the price that must be paid for that peace. But first—let me go with my friends up into the mountains for two months—let us weep

together for all that will never be—for the marriage I will not have—for the children I will never bear. Let us grieve for the experiences that we will never share together. I need time—time to be with them—time to come to terms with this reality—so that when I come back, I can go to my death with resolution.’

He has agreed, and here I am, preparing the little I will need to take. My friends, who have become sisters to me since we moved to Gilead, are doing the same in their homes. We will meet soon; we will know freedom and friendship; we will laugh and weep together and I will leave them with precious memories. I will prepare myself, then return and go willingly to my death, sparing my father the agony of seeing me being dragged to the altar. I am terrified. I will be terrified. I will want to run and hide, but I will not... God be my help.

Footnote

We end the monologue here. Jephthah’s daughter does as she promised her father: ‘When she returned home, her father kept the vow he had made, and she died a virgin’ (Judges 11:39). Many scholars believe from these words that he therefore went through with his vow. This view is supported by the fact that a lament commemorated this event: ‘the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year’ (Judges 11:40, ESV). Human sacrifice was forbidden to the Israelites.¹ However, many of the surrounding cultures practised this terrible custom. The book of Judges records how the Lord’s people displeased him greatly by taking on the customs of the nations around them. There was a steady moral deterioration; the book of Judges concluding with the words, ‘Everyone did what was right in their own eyes’ (Judges 21:25, ESV). On the other hand, there are scholars who interpret the sacrifice as figurative, believing that Jephthah’s daughter was not killed but instead had to remain a virgin and thus sacrificed becoming a mother, meaning that Jephthah’s line came to an end. They believe that Jephthah, knowing Israel’s history and laws, would not have gone as far as a literal sacrifice.

Reflection and discussion

- Did any words or phrases stand out for you?
- It was a custom for the women to dance when the men returned from victorious battles. It was one of the few occasions when women could dance and sing in public. What role does celebration play in our personal, church and community lives? Are there ways we could engage in celebratory activities as a means of drawing people together?
- Jephthah's daughter showed immense courage when she discovered what her father had vowed. Her response is immediate in the biblical narrative: God had given the Israelites victory, so her father should keep his vow. There are many people who suffer, even to the point of death, because of the foolish or deluded decisions of others. Often these are the more vulnerable members of society. Can you think of examples? Many women are powerless and therefore abused in different ways across the world. Bring these people and situations to God in prayer.
- Jephthah's daughter's courage was also shown in the way that she approached death. She wanted to have some say in what she saw as the inevitable and so asked for two months to enjoy the beauty and freedom of the countryside and the joy of friendship, to remember what had been and to prepare herself for what was to come. She wanted time to grieve the experiences that she would never have, so that when death came she could face it with resignation. Share your reactions to her courage. What does she teach us about facing our own mortality?
- The Bible indicates that vows are to be taken seriously and should not be made except after careful consideration. Read Numbers 30:1-2 and Deuteronomy 23:21. Jesus implies that vows are not really necessary if we are living as people of integrity, for our 'yes' or 'no' should be sufficient. Read Jesus' words taken from

the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:33–37. What do you think Jesus meant by the words, ‘Simply let your “Yes” be “Yes” and your “No”, “No”; anything beyond this comes from the evil one?’ (v. 37, NIV)


- James warns us to be careful what we say. Read James 1:26 and 3:2–12. We need to guard against being impulsive or foolish in our speech and watch what we verbally commit ourselves to so that we can be people of our word. In what practical ways can we follow this advice? Read Ephesians 4:29 and 31.
- Jephthah’s daughter knew her father’s strengths and weaknesses, his bitterness, his leadership skills, his military expertise, his ambition and his folly, yet she still showed respect for the promise that he had made to the Lord. This was a ‘love [that] covers a multitude of sins’ (1 Peter 4:8). What does respecting and honouring people look like in practice?
- If only Jephthah had realised that the Lord, who is full of mercy, desired him to be merciful. Being obedient to his laws and having a contrite heart were far more important to God than burnt offerings and sacrifices. Read 1 Samuel 15:22 and Psalm 51:16–17. What do these verses have to say to us today?
- Jephthah failed to understand the nature of the God he worshipped—a God who is much more interested in our care for others than our rigid following of regulations. How do we perceive God? How does this reflect in our attitude to him, ourselves and others? Read Ephesians 4:32. Perhaps we, like Jephthah, fail to recognise God’s desire and power to give us a fresh start. Read Isaiah 1:18. During the week take time to meditate on Psalm 103:7–18, praying that God will reveal his character more and more to you.
- Jephthah tried to bargain with God: if God gave him the victory, he would sacrifice whatever came out of his home first. The result was

tragic for him. We cannot bargain with God. In what ways have we been, or are we, tempted to do this, even if only subconsciously? God tells us through the prophet Jeremiah to, 'Ask for the old, godly way, and walk in it. Travel its path and you will find rest for your souls' (Jeremiah 6:16). What do you understand by 'the old, godly way'?

- The friends of Jephthah's daughter both comforted her and grieved with her. Why is it important to follow the command to 'mourn with those who mourn' (Romans 12:15, NIV)? An annual four-day remembrance was set up for young Israelite women to go away to 'lament the fate of Jephthah's daughter' (Judges 11:40). How can we both give and receive support on the anniversaries of sad occasions in our lives?

Conclusion

Take time to pray through your findings. What might God be saying to you? Is anything particularly relevant to your life at the moment? Write down what you have learnt and refer back to it regularly in the days ahead so that it becomes part of your thinking, reacting and lifestyle.



We're all called to everyday courage: the ability to persevere in suffering, resilience in the face of disappointment and loss, strength to take on difficult roles. *Walking with Biblical Women of Courage* is an encouraging and empowering collection of meditative monologues told from the perspectives of women from both the Old and New Testaments. The monologues are followed by questions designed for either individual or group exploration and reflection.

Fiona Stratta's background is in speech and language therapy. She now works with children and teenagers as a speech and drama teacher and also as a tutor. Her books first emerged when she endured a prolonged period of ill health which led her to engage with meditative approaches to Bible reading. She is the author of *Walking with Old Testament Women* and *Walking with Gospel Women*, both for BRF.

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