

2023 Fall Faith Groups



INFLUENCE AND INTRIGUE

The Role of Women in
Israel's History

Guidelines for Faith Groups Discussions

Each session is designed for about one and a half hours, but let the flow of the conversation determine how long each one lasts.

The Bible texts and devotions are provided so that participants may read them before their Faith Group meets each week. They may also be read together at the beginning of each meeting.

We encourage each Faith Group to begin and end each session with prayer. Invite participants to lead or join in the prayers as they feel able to do so.

Each week, look back to how God has been working in your life in light of the previous Faith Group discussion.

Be gracious and supportive of one another in your Faith Group. Remember to keep any personal information that may be shared confidential.

God will be present as you meet! Jesus promised, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." – Matthew 18:20

“Sarah’s Faith”

by Claire Woelfel

(Based on Genesis, chapters 12, 16 through 18:15, and 20 through 23:3)

Sarah was a godly woman who is praised as a woman of faith (Heb. 11:11) and a model for all Christian women (1Peter 3:5-6).

In Sarah, we have womanhood at its very best. But even she struggled with doubt and engaged in manipulation and jealousy, causing pain in her life and in the lives of others.

Sarah, wife of Abraham and mother to Isaac, needed the grace of God in her fractured life, just as we all need God’s grace in our lives also.

Sarah’s desperation for a child led her to take matters into her own hands by giving her maid-servant, Hagar, to Abraham to bear a son for her. Hagar gave birth to a son, Ishmael, and this caused great jealousy, resentment and conflicting loyalties. Sarah struggled with her unbelief as she fixed her eyes on Abraham and herself.

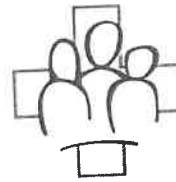
Sarah believed in God, but did not exercise faith regarding God’s promise of a son. In fact, she laughed at God’s promise to her of a son in her old age of 90 and Abraham, 100. But God saw right through her and knew her heart, for nothing can be hidden from the Lord and through Him all things are possible. Sarah came to believe God’s promises.

By faith, Sarah received power to conceive, even though she was far past childbearing age, since she “considered Him faithful who had promised.” (Heb. 11:11)

Our faith grows, like Sarah’s did, when we take our eyes off ourselves and place them on the hands of our living God, for whom nothing is impossible.

All things God has planned for our lives will be accomplished and His purpose will be fulfilled.

Dear Lord, thank You for your kindness and gentleness in helping us with our unbelief and sinfulness. Help us to lift our eyes and open our hearts to Your abundant gifts and purpose for our lives, trusting You always. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



Sharing...What is/was your favorite decade and why.

1. In the ancient world, bearing children was a woman's reason for

_____.

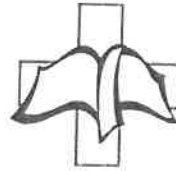
2. The _____ to have children was thought to be entirely the woman's fault.

3. But if Sarah and Abraham were less than gracious and faithful,

_____.

4. God wanted it to be crystal clear that the covenant promise had been given to

_____.



Growing...

1. Have you ever had to follow someone else in faith and trust, as Sarah did Abraham?
2. Why was it deemed so vital for ancient women to bear children? How have today's views of childbearing improved—or deteriorated?
3. Sarah thought her plan to give Hagar to Abraham was faithful, but it backfired on her. How does her experience help us to discern if our plans are in keeping with God's will?
4. What explains Sarah's insecurity around Ishmael, even after Isaac's miraculous birth?
5. In what ways does Sarah's life connect most directly with your own?



Serving...Send a note of thanks to someone this week.

“God Works Through Sinners”

By Dennis Langehaug

(Based on Genesis, chapters 24 and 25:19 through chapter 27)

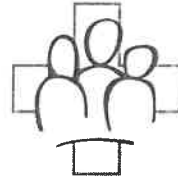
As I read about Rebekah, I found admirable qualities in her. Abraham sent a servant to the kindred of his ancestors to find a wife for Isaac. After a long journey, he showed up with a caravan of camels and, when he reached his destination, he stopped at a well for water. Rebekah met this servant at the well and offered to get water for him and his camels. Then this stranger said to her, “I know a really great guy back home. Would you go with me and marry him?”

The fact that she accepted this invitation and followed him to another land, became the wife of Isaac and the mother of Jacob and Esau is amazing in itself. How often have any of us assented to do something like that in blind faith? I know the apprehension I felt at being called to serve as vice-president of the church. I had my doubts, and needed to pray and talk to my wife. I accepted, but somewhat reluctantly. My willingness didn’t quite match Rebekah’s!

Yet, the Bible also records that Rebekah had serious flaws. Before Esau and Jacob were even born, the LORD told her that “the elder will serve the younger.” That was contrary to the privileges of birthright and unheard of then, but Rebekah assured that it would happen, not in trust, but in deceit. She deceived her husband and betrayed her older son by tricking Isaac into giving his blessing to Jacob, not Esau.

Rebekah was strong in serving God’s purpose, but, like all the characters in the Bible except Jesus, she was a sinner who was determined to get her way, even at a high cost. Yet, God worked out His purpose in her life, strengthened her when it would have been easier to take the safer path and used even her sinful actions to further His saving will.

Lord, give us strength and faith as you did to Rebekah. Grant that we may serve Your will always and not our own. Amen.



Sharing...What was your favorite game as a child? Tell us about it.

1. Beyond her good looks, we find out that Rebekah is incredibly

_____.

2. Chad Bird notes that, "the Hebrew word for wrestling is 'Ratzatz' . . .translated,

' _____'."

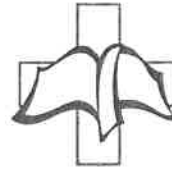
3. What did God say about the twins in Rebekah's womb? "The _____

shall serve the _____."

4. Because of Rebekah's sacrifice, Jacob would go and meet his own wives. And the

twelve sons whom he had would form the _____ of

_____. The promise would go on.



Growing...

1. If you have children, what is your favorite thing about each of them?

2. If you were Rebekah, would the Lord's declaration that the older will serve the younger dictate how you would treat your kids?
 - A. It's unclear if Rebekah shared the Lord's declaration with her husband, Isaac. Would you?

3. Read James 2:1-9. How have you seen favoritism hurt communities and families?

4. Do you think Rebekah was right in conspiring with Jacob to steal Esau's blessing?

5. God seems to choose and work through some questionable characters in Genesis—from Rebekah who plays favorites, to Jacob the cheat, to Abraham and Isaac passing their wives off as their sisters. How should we view such characters? What does that say about God?



Serving... This week perform a random act of kindness of your choice.

"The Struggle is Real, but God is Good"

(Based on Genesis 29-31)

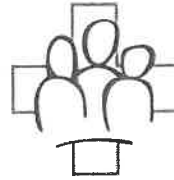
By Sabrina Tracy

The story of Leah and Rachel is familiar to many in the church. These women were faithful, strong, and obedient to the Lord. As Jacob comes into the picture, both Leah and Rachel end up marrying him. First, Laban deceives Jacob after he works for him for seven years by tricking him into marrying Leah. He does not desire Leah, so he works for Laban for another seven years for Rachel as well. This inevitably leads to struggles in human relationships, jealousy, and envy.

Learning and reading about Jacob's desire for Rachel points to his determination to honor his commitment. He worked patiently for another seven years in return for marrying Rachel. Unfortunately, Leah was less loved by Jacob. The Lord saw this and allowed Leah to bear children. In response; Rachel grew jealous and gave her servant to have a child with Jacob. The two sisters continued to bear children with Jacob. God used both Rachel and Leah. He saw their struggles. He blessed both of them.

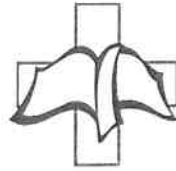
God also sees us in our struggles. Whether it be through family conflict, jealousy, envy or anything else, God sees us and is with us. God doesn't run from us when we are in trouble. He stays right beside us through it all and guides us through it. It is a true gift to be able to go to the Lord when we are struggling. It is my encouragement to you today that when you are struggling, feeling alone, or feeling like God is not seeing you, remember this story of Leah and Rachel. God loved both of them and although there was conflict, He worked through it and blessed the two women.

Heavenly Father, in our struggles, may we humbly come to You knowing that we are loved and cared for even when we are feeling alone. Amen.



Sharing...What is one of your favorite autumn traditions?

1. Women were considered to be _____ of their fathers, husbands, or oldest son.
2. Can you _____ what a mess Jacob’s household must have been?
3. Jacob also gave the teraphim the _____ they deserved.
4. God used them, Leah and Rachel, and their off spring to carry the _____ to the next generation.

**Growing...**

1. Have you experienced sibling rivalry? How does it compare to Leah and Rachel?
2. How might Leah have felt as Laban's deceit sent her into the marriage tent with Jacob?
3. How might Rachel have felt toward her father and her sister as they maneuvered her into a bigamous marriage? (Remember that polygamy was quite common at that time.)
4. Why did God not stop Laban's fraud rather than just granting children to Leah?
5. Was Rachel justified or not in stealing her father's *teraphim* and lying to him about it?
6. Can you think of times in your life when it would be warranted to deceive someone as Rachel deceived Laban?



Serving... Go through your closet and find some clothing to donate. (Wings, DAV, Good Will, etc.)

“Miriam...Desired to Be a Leader”

By Roxanna Boe

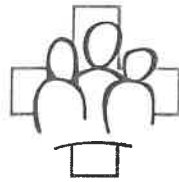
(Based on Exodus, chapters 2-3 and 14 through 15:21; Numbers, chapters 11-12 and chapter 20:1)

The Bible says very little about Miriam, perhaps because she was a woman. In Exodus 4:14, as Moses begged the Lord to send someone else to lead His people out of Egypt, we learn that Aaron is Moses' brother. The Lord told Moses to put the words he received into Aaron's mouth so that he could speak them to the people. It is not until Exodus 15:20 that Miriam is introduced as Aaron's sister—but not Moses'. (Perhaps she was a half-sister to Moses.) After the Lord parted the Red Sea and Moses and the Israelites sang a victory song, Miriam, timbrel in hand, led the women in singing and dancing, “Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

We do not hear of Miriam again until Numbers 12, where she and Aaron claimed to be equals to Moses and criticized him for marrying a Cushite woman. Perhaps they felt so powerful in their own eyes that jealousy grew in their minds and hearts. For their presumption, the Lord afflicted Miriam (but not Aaron!) with leprosy. Aaron begged Moses to ask the Lord to heal her and, in His mercy, He set her outside the camp for seven days. The people did not continue on their journey until Miriam was restored to the community. The only other mention of Miriam is the report of her death in Numbers 20:1.

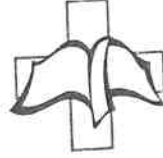
I believe Miriam wanted to be a leader. She had the love of the Lord and the gifts to be a leader. In the early 1980's, my husband served a parish where women were not allowed to vote. How strange that seemed, when many were so active and capable, handling important positions such as Sunday School Superintendent. It had been the tradition there since the church was founded, but fortunately, the prohibition was soon abolished. Women of the church not only participate in all of its activities, but enjoy being full members, not only to vote, but to teach, serve, console and encourage others, and also to praise the Lord just as Miriam did.

Lord God, thank you for using men AND women in Biblical times and now to further Your kingdom and serve You. Amen.



Sharing...What is your favorite holiday and why?

1. Thanks to Miriam's quick thinking, Moses was able to be nursed by his _____.
2. The people of God responded to the Red Sea deliverance by _____.
3. Miriam is described as a _____.
4. Interestingly, Miriam's Hebrew name means, _____ or "rebellious."



Growing...

1. What is your favorite hymn and/or worship song?
2. Read Ephesians 5:19-20. What is your preferred way of expressing praise and thanksgiving to God?
3. Read James 4:1-3. How have you seen jealousy and power struggles affect families?
4. Why do you think only Miriam suffered the punishment of the sibling insurrection?
5. Why do wilderness times in our lives bring out the worst in us? How does God use those times in our spiritual formation?



Serving... Do the "Drive-through Difference" this week and offer to pay for someone else's order.

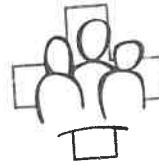
"The Best is Yet to Come"

By Payton Eastman

(Based on the book of Ruth)

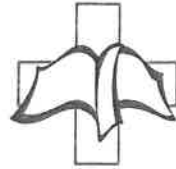
For many years, I summed up the book of Ruth with one verse, "where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay" (chapter 1, verse 16), using this as a catchy caption on cute photos with my husband. But when you study the book of Ruth deeper, you see the true beauty in the story and the deep focus God has on these women. Naomi and Ruth are met with countless hardships—the loss of their husbands and sons, an unfruitful womb, originating from Moab. Naomi is bitter about the hardships she has endured, though the Lord continues to provide. When she lost her husband and sons, God gave her Ruth. When she could not think of a man to raise up children for the family name, God provided Boaz. When childless Ruth married Boaz, God gave the child. The story of Naomi and Ruth helps us to see that God is at work in the worst of times; even through our sin God can and does plot for our glory. The best is yet to come.

Lord, we thank You for the life of Naomi and Ruth. We thank You for showing us how much You love and care for us. Help us always to remember that You have a plan for our life. Turn our eyes to You Lord. In Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.



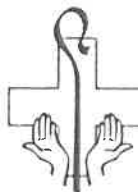
Sharing... Which show/book do you remember most from your childhood?

1. Ruth fits the theme of God _____ unlikely people to serve His will in surprising ways.
2. In terms of Ruth herself, the first thing to remember is that she was from _____, not Israel.
3. A second dynamic in the story is how _____ and ungrateful Naomi is.
4. A third feature of *Ruth* is the _____ presence of God in the story.
5. Maybe the greatest sign of _____ in *Ruth* is that the gambit for Ruth to win Boaz worked.
6. Not only to admit that _____ element in David's heritage, but to write and canonize an entire book about it, is revealing.



Growing...

1. What might be a modern equivalent to *Ruth* featuring a heroine from Moab? How does comparing *Ruth* to our day affect your reading and perception of it?
2. Why do you think Ruth was so loyal to Naomi, despite her coldness and ingratitude?
3. Does it surprise you that Ruth was so willing to follow Naomi's risky and risqué plan to get Boaz to marry her? Why or why not?
4. What does it imply *theologically* that Israel did not deny or try to hide King David's Moabite great-grandmother?
5. How might Ruth's boldness inspire you to take daring, but necessary risks in your life?



Serving...Offer to help a neighbor with some task this week.

"A Desperate Prayer Answered"

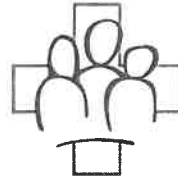
By Tim Piehl

(Based on I Samuel chapters 1 through 4:1)

The inspirational story of Hannah has been passed down for generations as her unwavering faith, persistent prayer, and ultimate surrender to God's will reminds us of the power of trusting in God, even during challenging circumstances. She remained fully devoted to God even though she was unable to bear children. She continued to travel to Shiloh every year, with her husband, to worship God. She made a desperate prayer to God to grant her a child, promising to give the child to God's service. God heard her prayer and granted her a son, Samuel. She took her son to Shiloh and placed him in the service of the Lord under the priest Eli, where he became a great prophet. Hannah offered a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving to God.

In life, we all encounter burdens, seemingly insurmountable obstacles that cause us great distress. However, we are not alone. We must bring these burdens to God in prayer, because God is the only one who can grant comfort and resolution. Not only that, but, like Hannah, opening our hearts before God in true honesty and gratitude allows a closer relationship with God. From God all things are granted and to God all gratitude must be given!

Dear Lord God, may we learn from Hannah's example and approach our own lives with the same devotion, knowing that You are faithful and able to fulfill Your promises in ways that exceed our expectations.



Sharing... What is the best piece of advice you've ever been given?

1. According to 1 Timothy 2:15, women are to be saved through

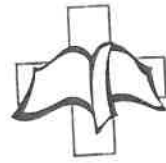
_____!

2. In the Old Testament times, however, it may have _____ like
childbearing was salvation.

3. The people rejected and ignored their leader, and the _____
who had led them out of slavery and given them the promised land.

4. The name *Samuel* sounds like the Hebrew for _____.

5. Mary's song, the _____, found in Luke 1, is a sort of echo of
Hannah's song.



Growing...

1. Read 1 Timothy 2:11-15. What are your feelings towards women in congregational leadership? What do we do with these verses?
2. What are the best qualities or lessons that you have learned from your parents?
3. How and where have you seen life come out of barrenness, either in your own experience or in the world around you?
4. 1 Samuel 1:19 says that "the Lord remembered" Hannah. What does it mean to be "remembered" by the Lord? Does He forget about us?
5. Read the reversals in Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:3-8. What "reversals" would you like to see the Lord enact?



Serving...Volunteer for something at church this week.

"Protect the King"

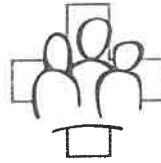
By Austin Willhite

(Based on I Samuel, chapters 18-19 and 25:43-44, II Samuel, chapters 3 and 6 (Michal);
I Samuel 25 (Abigail); II Samuel, chapters 11-12 and I Kings, chapters 1-2 (Bathsheba))

I love playing board games with my family and friends. A particular two-player game that I remember fondly is chess. Most people have a decent understanding of this classic board game. The object of chess is simple. The first player successfully to put the opponent's king in checkmate, that is, trapped without escape, wins. Like any war, there are casualties. Bishops, rooks, knights, and lowly pawns are sacrificed to protect the king. However, there is one piece that is the most powerful, even more so than the king. In my opinion, the most important piece of the whole game is the queen. The queen moves across the board in sweeping gestures, taking down any piece that stands in her way.

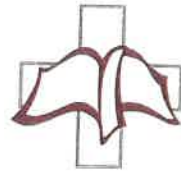
The strong queen of the chess board makes the royal wives of the Biblical texts seem like pawns, and at times, that is how they may have felt. Married to one man today and another tomorrow, all for political power, must have left these women feeling like pieces in a game. Despite their brief mention, these royal women prove their stature in ways just like the queen of chess. While Saul and David struggle playing with the pawns of power and morality, Michal, Abigail, and Bathsheba take their turn. God uses these women to influence the men around them through displays of emotion and bravery. Like true chess players, they execute their moves with precision and thought. They were not naive to the happenings surrounding their kingly husbands and, in many ways, protected them. Like the queen of the chess board, these royal wives were influential in significant ways as God worked through them to fulfill His Word and protect their king.

Gracious God, thank you for the Biblical examples of strong women you worked through for Your glory. Amen.



Sharing... What is your favorite breakfast food?

1. To his discredit, David did not return Michal's _____ or _____.
2. Michal's story is one of the most _____ and infuriating in the whole of the Old Testament.
3. In Hebrew the name "Nabal" means " _____ " and Abigail told David that he had earned the name really well.
4. Ironically, after marrying David, Abigail all but _____ from the Bible.
5. Bathsheba's story is also an _____ account of _____.
6. Rather than confess his _____ and reverse direction, David went into conspiracy mode.
7. All three royal wives _____ at the hands of the men around them.



Growing...

1. Do you find King David's treatment of his wives shocking, predictable, disgusting or...?
2. What message or lessons can we draw from how shamefully Michal was treated?
3. Given everything we know about David, do you think Abigail's lot in life improved when Nabal died and she married him? Why or why not?
4. Given David's callous use of royal power against her, why was Bathsheba so determined that Solomon would have that same royal power?

(Bonus question: Think back to the last Faith Groups study. How might his mother's experience be reflected in how Solomon interacted with his wives?)

5. After a tragic death, a pastor once said, "A long time ago, God decided not to fix the world, but to save it instead." How do the lives of these royal women reflect that belief?



Serving... Practice listening to others this week. What a gift!



A Note About the Music from Austin Wilhite

For each Faith Groups series, Dick Lennes approaches me with a title screen in need of scoring. The themes of the past few series have lent some inspiration to me as I decided what music would be a good fit for the opening. Only having about 15 seconds to make a melody recognizable and immediately relatable to the theme is the challenge. This series was no different. However, as I'm sure you can imagine, there are not many songs about women of the Bible. So, to find something fitting, I turned to the women of Romanticism. This era of music was a pivotal point for women composers and performers. Before this time, it was common for women to publish under a pseudonym of a male relative. As the Romantic era progressed (late 18th to early 19th century), women started getting recognition for their musical accomplishments. The opening piece is a piano etude by Clara Schumann. She was a modern woman of her time and an accomplished musician, becoming more popular than her husband counterpart. I thought her story and music would be a perfect fit for mirroring the women of Bible. I hope this history inspires you as your group works through this Faith Groups series.

