

The Great Canadian Bible Study 2014

Lessons from the Widows

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This year for the Great Canadian Bible Study, we will not be looking at one particular woman but rather several women with one trait in common. Jesus seemed to have a great, compassionate heart toward the widow of his day. In his parables he holds them up as models and examples. He had compassion and brought hope and healing to some, while blessed by another. Some widows were weak and vulnerable while others show wisdom and a tenacious spirit. My prayer is that together we will glean the lessons that Jesus would have us learn as we study their stories.

Let us begin with a quiet reflection on **Psalm 68: 4 – 6**. Read it a couple of times and share what is revealed about God's heart in these short verses.

Background information on the Widow

The words of Scripture associated with the widow can shed light on their social plight and vulnerability. How does Lamentations 1: 1 – 2 give a sense of what the widow might have faced and felt? Also quickly explore Job 22: 8 - 11; Job 24: 1 – 4; II Kings 4:1; Isaiah 10: 1 – 3.

In the social structure of that ancient time, the widow had few if any property rights once her husband had died. Her ties to her own family were broken and she was often left vulnerable to the will of her husband's family. She became to be identified with the poorest of the poor along with the orphan and the stranger and often suffered exploitation. God reveals his compassion for these most vulnerable ones in society. When Israel was once in a powerless condition, God had mercy on her and delivered her from oppression in Egypt so God called her to remember that grace and imitate their God who was not only the father of the orphan, but the legal defender of the widow and the guardian of her property (Exodus 22: 21 – 24; Deuteronomy 10: 17 – 19; Prov. 15:25).

1. What social structures did God through the Old Testament law put in place to help protect the widow? Deut. 14: 28 – 29, Deut. 24: 17 – 24; Deut. 26: 12 - 14
2. How does God feel about those who take advantage of the widow? (Mark 12: 38 – 40)
Do you see any evidence today of widows being vulnerable and thus exploited in Canada? Other countries?

In India today thousands of widows are thrown out of their families because they are believed to bring bad luck after their husband's death. They travel to the holy city of Varanasi to beg for money from pilgrims who may pay them a penny or two to offer prayers. They live on their own in decrepit ghettos and are prevented from participating in any religious festival and other community events. (This is not true of every Indian family, but the practice is still prevalent).

The widow is a symbol of the most vulnerable of the vulnerable, the poorest of the poor and the one most dependent upon the goodness of others. She is also a symbol for us of complete and utter dependency upon God. God desires us to fully lean and trust in him. So we will now look at four widows from the book of Luke and the lessons Jesus would have us discover through their stories.

I. Anna, the Prophet and a Widow

Read Luke 2: 36 – 38.

1. What is Anna's story from this text and how would you envision her life after her husband died?
2. Do you think that she chose not to remarry? (She would likely have been around the age of 20 – 22 when she was widowed) Why or how did she end up devoting her life to prayer in the temple? Do you imagine that she was lonely or what was her community?
3. Why do you think God chose Anna with the blessing of seeing the Messiah? Why or how did she recognize Jesus for who he was and would become? How did she become a blessing to Jesus?

We do not hear the words that Anna proclaimed but we know that it inspired praise and thanksgiving grounded in the hope of redemption. The Greek imperfect tense found in verse 38 indicates that she **kept on** praising God and **kept on** telling people. The word *anthomologeomai* indicate a continual public expressing of praise or thanksgiving. *What a witness Anna is to the need to continually worship in praise and thanksgiving, not just in our private worship but to publically express that joy to our communities!!!!*

The word, redemption is also revealing (Greek *lutrosis*) for in this context, rather than a commercial sense of redeeming for a price, it connotes the experience of being liberated from an oppressive situation.

4. How might the reality of oppression been experienced by this widow? Why would the hope of redemption be even more meaningful to her?
5. What in Anna's story could connect to your story or what does she model for us? Consider the words "devotion" "thanksgiving" "hope" "sacrifice".

II. The Widow of Nain

Everything about Nain is insignificant. It was a small town six miles southwest of Nazareth whose name meant "green pasture". It could signify that it was an agricultural community and perhaps land had been left to the son and farmed by him after his father's passing. The woman herself is insignificant in that she is not named or described. Yet Jesus notices her plight, offers compassion and does a very significant act of grace.

Read Luke 7: 11 - 17

1. What was the plight of this widow that was magnified by the death of her son?
2. "A large crowd from the town was with her" – what does this tell us about the character of the woman?
3. Why do you think Jesus took notice of this particular woman? Did the woman ask or beseech anything of Jesus? What moved Jesus' heart to compassion and to action?
4. Why did Jesus touch the coffin and what was the result? What did it cost Jesus to raise her son? (Consider laws regarding clean and unclean)
5. This is the first record of Jesus bringing a person back to life. What perspective do you gain regarding the authoritative nature of Jesus? How did people respond to him?
6. Share how Jesus met a need in you in a unique or caring way. Have you felt that God cared about your specific situation even before you asked?

The widow in this story is **only** known for her need. She is not a woman of great faith or powerful prayer. We do not know if she attended the temple regularly or worshipped often. All we know is that she was a woman in great need and that Jesus had compassion and met that need. *What does that tell you about Jesus' compassion toward your needs? What does that tell you about the compassion you must show to others in need?*

III. The Parable of the Persistent Widow

Read Luke 18:1 – 8

This parable deals primarily with prayer and the nature of God. This parable often gets misinterpreted, by emphasizing the widow's persistence (hence the title). However, the point of the parable is that God is **not** like an unjust judge and you do not have to plead and beg to get him to listen to you. The parable shows a widow, the least powerful, least influential person in society pitted against one of the most powerful people of society. In the eyes of God, her prayers are as valid as any others. There is no distinction – no value judgment. She has every right to plead her case before God and God will hear and answer that prayer.

1. How do you personally define prayer and share with one another what your prayer life looks and feels like. (This is not a competition of spirituality but an honest sharing of how we talk and listen to God). Do you feel like you come to God out of a position of strength or a place of weakness and what does that mean for you?
2. How often to you pray for justice issues? How does this parable call us to broaden the issues that we bring before God with passion and longing?
3. What gives you confidence that God has heard your prayers?
4. Are there times when you feel like you have to beg God for answers or pray over and over in order to get the desired action such as salvation or healing for a loved one?
5. What is the difference between being persistent and being a nag as a measure of faith? How is this feisty widow an example and how can this story encourage you in your prayer life? How does she encourage you in seeking justice?

IV. The Widow who gave out of Poverty

Read Luke 21: 1 – 4:

The poverty of a widow extended far beyond financial poverty. Many would be socially poor, having lost family and community. They were certainly politically poor in the sense of having little to no power to influence their personal situation or change society. They were destitute in power and incredibly vulnerable to the bankers and creditors, to cheats and creeps. They were "esteem" poor, having lost any sense of identity and value to society. Yet, they could still be spiritually rich by understanding their true purpose and value. Anna found her identity in dedicating her life to prayer and prophecy. The Widow from Nain was shown how precious and valued she was as Jesus met her greatest need. The tenacious widow of the parable found the strength within to fight for her place before the judge and now we have a widow who placed ultimate value in offering and sacrifice over possession. Our situation in life need not determine our spiritual heart or dignity as God's beloved.

1. In what aspects of your life do you feel quite rich and blessed? Some examples are: rich in time, in good health, in talents and skills, material blessings, power of influence, hospitality, life experience, strong sense of value, esteem and dignity.
2. How have you been able to give out of that richness to bless others? (It takes humility to share how you have helped others so try to be honest)
3. In what aspects of your life do you feel quite poor and impoverished? Do you have a sense of how you might give or have given to others out of that poverty?
4. What does it mean for you to give **all** for God? Is it possible or idealistic? What does sacrificially giving mean for you and how do you know if you've given "enough"?

Is it easier to give out of wealth or out of poverty? In many ways it feels easier to give out of our poverty than out of our riches. After all, what do we have to lose if we give the only penny we have? It wasn't going to make that big a difference for us anyway! But how does a millionaire give everything and when is enough? We have to get past the specific details and down to **the principles of heart. Read II Corinthians 8: 1 – 7** and see how Paul caught onto the theme of giving out of poverty and how it applied to the early church.

Catching the vision of what God is doing certainly helps us to give fully toward that vision. Giving comes from a heart of passion, not obligation. When we grasp what God is planning to do and how we can be part of that mission, our giving easily moves from an attitude of sacrifice (do I have to???) to generosity (what an opportunity!) When we respond with a heart of love and worship as we embrace God's vision, we will give our all!

In closing

The widow, in her destitution, poverty and great need has taught us so much about loving God, not from a place of confidence but a place of open vulnerability and dependence. We are each widows in a place of poverty, weakness and powerlessness apart from the love and grace of God. As Israel was redeemed from oppression and called therefore to have compassion on the widow and orphan, so we along with the early church must define the essence of true religion as demonstrating compassion to the poor and needy. With Anna in praise and thanksgiving, we celebrate the hope of redemption and catch the vision of the Messiah. With the persistent widow, we pray and pray and pray against injustice and with the model of the widow's might give our all to the cause of God's kingdom come and will be done. In the words of Paul in II Corinthians 8:15 "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." Amen, may it be so.

The Great Canadian Bible study (GCBS) is a project of Canadian Baptist Women who want to reach out to the widows and orphans, the raped and rejected, the sick and the vulnerable women of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The situation of civil war continues to worsen and women continue to be the target of brutality and violence as the pawns of war. If you demoralize and break down a family, you break down a country. Our work with the church of the DRC is a small light making a great difference in the lives of women who have found hope through the support groups and services. Those participating in this Bible Study are invited to give an offering to support the ministry in the DRC that cares for women who have suffered from rape and sexual violence. The offering may be sent to your Provincial Treasurer designated for the 2014 GCBS mission project. Please be generous so that our light can shine even brighter!