



A Woman of Valor

What is it that makes one marriage succeed and another fail? Marriage is a gift from God and including Him at the center of our marriages will do much to strengthen those bonds. But another key to a successful marriage can be found in the Hebrew word we use for marriage.

The Hebrew term for marriage is *kiddushin*, meaning “sanctification.” It comes from the root word *kadosh*, or “holy,” which in biblical thought means “separateness.” In the Jewish faith, men and women consecrate each other through marriage and set each other apart from all others.

Being holy, or set apart, is something that God commanded His people when they left Egypt and were made into a holy nation and people. The laws given to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai were designed to help them become that holy nation. Holiness was developed through the daily practices of sanctified living.

So, too, with marriage. We express our “set apartness” for each other through acting with respect and consideration for the other’s needs and circumstances.

A Jewish tradition that underscores this respect and honor that a husband is to show his wife is the blessing that is given at each Sabbath meal when the husband recites Proverbs 31, extolling his wife’s noble character.

Imagine how a wife must feel when her husband praises her “*as worth far more than rubies*,” as someone who “*speaks with wisdom*,” and as one who brings honor to the entire household.

Certainly, a marriage built upon a foundation of honor and respect — and of being acknowledged from the beginning as “set apart” from all other relationships — has a better chance of surviving.

If you have been given the gift of marriage, consider the ways you can show your partner honor and respect. How do you let your spouse know he or she is valued? What is one thing you can do this week to express your appreciation for your spouse?



Photo: Ary Scheffer, 1857

*“Many women do noble things,
but you surpass them all”*

— PROVERBS 31:29



Rachel: A Woman of Compassion

According to Jewish tradition, all the patriarchs and matriarchs are buried in the cave of Machpelah in Hebron... all except one: Rachel.

Rachel's husband Jacob buried her on the road near Bethlehem because he foresaw a future when the Jewish people would be exiled from their homeland, and would need her. Here's why.

Jewish tradition records a wild debate up in heaven. As the Jews were being exiled from their land, all of the holiest souls tried to intercede before God on their behalf.

Abraham spoke first, saying, "I overcame my nature and was prepared to sacrifice my only son. Won't you remember my devotion and have mercy on my children?"

Then Isaac tried: "When I realized that my father had been commanded to slaughter me, I faithfully accepted my fate. Won't you remember my strength and have mercy on my children?"

Next, came Jacob: "I suffered so much in my lifetime. I had to work for Laban, escape from Esau, and I suffered so much raising my children. Now they are being led like sheep to the slaughter. Won't you remember my pain and redeem them?"

Then Moses stated his case: "Wasn't I a loyal shepherd for Israel all the years in the desert? I didn't even get to enter the Holy Land, but brought them dutifully to its entrance. And now they go into exile – won't you listen to my cries?"

Finally, Mother Rachel came before God: "Master of the Universe, you know that Jacob loved me most and worked for my father for seven years in order to marry me. When the time of my marriage came, my father switched my sister for me and I didn't begrudge my sister and I didn't let her be shamed. I had compassion for my sister; won't you have mercy on my children?"

Immediately, God's mercy was awakened and He said: "For you, Rachel, I will bring Israel back, as it says: *'Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded... Your children will return to their own land'*" (Jeremiah 31:16–17).

From all the holy souls that tried to save the Jewish people, only Rachel's plea was answered. Why? Because of her unselfish, unwavering compassion for another human being.

The message is clear: When we treat others with tremendous compassion, God will treat us with nothing less.



*"Restrain your voice from weeping
and your eyes from tears,
for your work will be rewarded,"
declares the LORD.*

— JEREMIAH 31:16

Miriam: A Woman of Faith

One of the most joyous moments in the Exodus story is the singing and rejoicing that occurred just after the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea. This was the climactic moment of what had begun as a wayward prince demanding the freedom of an oppressed people and ended with the most spectacular miracles that the world had ever seen on behalf of the downtrodden Israelites. God's hand was never so apparent, and the people rejoiced for the good that He had done for them.

Let's picture the scene: The Israelites finished crossing the sea, and they watched as their Egyptian enemies got closer. Suddenly, the sea crashed down on the entire Egyptian army! Not only were the Israelites now safe, they were also free!

In thanksgiving, Moses led the people in a beautiful song of praise to God. Just as he finished, his sister Miriam led the women in song. And what's this? They were dancing and making music, too! The question is, where in the world did the women get those timbrels from in the middle of the desert? Did the instruments fall from the sky?

The Jewish sages share a beautiful explanation. They say that the Israelite women, in their great faith, prepared these instruments while in Egypt, while they were still enslaved. Led by Miriam, the women refused to give up hope that the day of salvation would come. Their faith led them to make these instruments, so that when the day came, they would be ready to celebrate!

Miriam's name has two meanings. It comes from the Hebrew word that means *mara*, "bitter." Miriam was born into bitter times of slavery. But the name Miriam is also related to the Hebrew word *meri*, "rebellion."

Miriam rebelled against the bitterness in her life. She would not accept it — she refused to submit to hopelessness or depression. She lived her life with complete faith that the bitterness would be sweetened. And indeed it was!

Let's remember that it's not enough to talk about faith... we need to be willing to act on our faith. That means making life decisions based on faith in God and taking actions that fit His purposes. Our faith must be turned into actions that reflect God's Word and promises.

Maybe it wasn't the parting of the sea that caused Miriam to dance... maybe the sea parted because Miriam began dancing way back in Egypt when she prepared for that day. Remember, while miracles have the ability to inspire faith, it also works the other way around. Our faith has the ability to inspire miracles.



Miriam sang to them:

*"Sing to the LORD,
for he is highly exalted."*

— EXODUS 15:21

Ruth: A Woman of Character

You can tell a lot about people just by watching them interact with others and studying their body language. And it's evident from the Bible story of Ruth that others knew a lot about Ruth's character just by watching her.

After arriving in Bethlehem, widowed and with no means of providing for herself and Naomi, her mother-in-law, Ruth went out into the fields to pick up the leftover grain — a practice known as gleaning. This was an Israelite law that provided a way for the poor and needy, like Ruth and Naomi, to feed themselves.

As Ruth was gleaning, the owner of the field, whose name was Boaz, stopped by to check on the harvesters. He noticed Ruth and asked the workers who the young woman was.

The workers replied, *“She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.’ She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter”* (Ruth 2:6-7).

Impressed by this hard worker, Boaz told Ruth that she could glean in his fields as long as she wanted. Then, he invited her to eat with the harvesters. Not only that, but Boaz told his workers not to bother her, but to drop even more grain for her to gather.

Ruth was overwhelmed, and asked Boaz why he was so kind to her — a foreigner. And Boaz replied, *“I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before”* (v. 11).

How Ruth cared for Naomi was obviously the talk of Bethlehem! Even though she was a stranger among them, the people knew she was a kind, loving, and compassionate woman — just by watching her actions! Ruth's reputation had spread... so that when the harvesters told Boaz who was in his fields, he had already heard about her.

Ruth's life exhibited admirable qualities. She was hardworking, loving, kind, and faithful. She had gained a reputation for these qualities but only because she exhibited them consistently. Wherever she went, Ruth's character remained unchanged.

What do your actions say about your reputation? Remember, a good reputation is something we earn when we consistently live out those qualities we believe in.



Photo: David Wilkie Wynfield, 1879

“May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

— RUTH 2:12

Esther: A Woman of Courage

As queen of Persia, you might expect that Esther had one of the most secure positions in all the empire. But such security came with a price. Queen Esther enjoyed the privileges of her position — as long as she obeyed the king and did nothing to incur his wrath. Her “security” teetered on a delicate balance that could easily tip if she made the wrong move.

So when Mordecai, Esther’s Jewish cousin, informed her of Haman’s plot to kill all the Jews in Persia and begged her to intervene on her people’s behalf, Esther faced a difficult choice. Either she could remain silent, hoping that the king would not discover her secret identity as a Jew, and thus, survive; or she could risk death by appearing before the king, revealing her identity, and seeking relief for her people.

Mordecai’s words surely must have guided her decision: *“Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”* (Esther 4: 13–14).

Esther must have realized that her security did not rest upon her position, or her possessions, or even her husband, the king, but in the One whose name is not mentioned at all in the book: God. And so she made her decision to approach the king, calling upon her fellow Jews to fast and pray for her. And, as she told Mordecai, *“If I perish, I perish”* (v. 16).

We might not face such grave circumstances as Esther did, but God has placed each one of us in unique situations and positions. We all have a choice to make — to remain silent in the face of injustice and suffering to “save” our reputation. Or we can decide, like Esther did, to be courageous and take a stand, no matter what the consequences.

What will you decide? Where will you stand and be accounted for in a time such as this?



Photo: Ernest Normand, 1888

“And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

— ESTHER 4:14