

Women in the Gospels

Seeing Jesus from their perspective.

September 17, 2024

Three Female Disciples: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna

Introduction

In our first session last week we talked about the state of the culture into which Jesus was born—a culture that openly and largely discriminated against women. But Jesus was in no way constrained by the culture of his day. Women were drawn to this man who was not seeking to dominate and rule them, but to set them free.

In this session we are going to consider three women who are mentioned in the Gospels by name and see how and why they were related to Jesus.

Question:

- How many disciples did Jesus have?
- Did he have women disciples?
- If so, how many of his disciples were women?

Mark 3:14-15 ESV: And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.

Luke 6:13: When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.

What is most unusual is that Jesus allowed and affirmed women as his disciples. Some are named; others are not. Some traveled with him; others did not.

Mark 15:41: In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

Here Mark tells us that these women at the crucifixion who followed Jesus and cared for his needs. They were disciples of Jesus through his entire earthly ministry.

Widows in the time of Jesus

Jewish widows in the time of Jesus had few rights and faced many challenges, including:

- Widows could not own property and were dependent on their husbands.
- Widows were legally subordinate to male relatives, such as their father or son.
- Widows had no paid employment and no welfare benefits.
- Women were generally married young and were under the authority of a man.
- Widows were a major concern in the early Christian community, especially younger widows.

1 Timothy 5: 3 – 11, 14

Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. ⁴But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. ⁵The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. ⁶But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. ⁷Give the people these instructions, so that no one may be open to blame. ⁸Anyone who does not provide for their

relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

⁹No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, ¹⁰and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the Lord's people, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.

¹¹As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. . . ¹⁴So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander.

James 1:27: Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

If you were just making up the story about Jesus, the last thing you would do would be to elevate women in the story. But the gospel writers tell us of the women who were part of Jesus' story and life because this is exactly what happened. It wasn't made up!

Women Who Were Disciples of Jesus

Luke 8:1 – 3

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

Luke seems to assume that Theophilus, to whom his Gospel is addressed, has heard of these women who were specifically named.

What do we learn about these women in this passage from Luke?

- Three are named but there were "many others."
- Many had been cured by Jesus both physically and spiritually (not just Mary Magdalene).
- They provided financial support for the apostles "out of their own means."

Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene is mentioned by name 12 times in the Gospels. She is identified by the wonderful truth that Jesus had delivered her from seven demons.

Was it her fault; was it the evil done to her by others? How long had she been dealing with this demon possession? There are many questions we don't know about her life before Jesus, but there are other stories in the New Testament that describe demon possession in more detail:

- **Mark 5:1 - 5**
They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. ²When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. ³This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. ⁴For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. ⁵Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.
- **Mark 9:17 - 18**
A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."
- **Matthew 15:21 - 22**
Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²²A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

What do we learn about how demon possession manifested itself from these passages?

- Often terrible behavior, scary and strange
- They often would cry out for help
- Had seizure like behavior, foaming at the mouth, becoming rigid, etc.
- People didn't want to be near them – they were ostracized.

(Interestingly, only two females are recorded in the New Testament as being delivered by Jesus: Mary Magdalene and the unnamed daughter in Matthew 15.)

We aren't told what specific symptoms Mary Magdalene had but obviously it was evident in her life, it was well-known, and it was horrible.

What do you think a day was like for Mary Magdalene before she met Jesus?

Though we don't often think about demon possession in the western world, it was real then and is still today. Here is a link to an article that can answer some of your questions about demon possession today and in the time of Jesus. (<https://www.moodymedia.org/ask-pastor-lutzer/archives/question-18/>)

Mary Magdalene's story touches us even centuries later. No doubt she was a powerful witness to the authority and authenticity of Jesus as the true Messiah.

What does Mary Magdalene's story tell you about the power of Jesus? About how he loves and cares for you?

Joanna

Traveling along with Mary Magdalene was Joanna, the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household. Her name appears only twice in the New Testament: Luke 8:3 and 24:10 at the resurrection.

It is likely that through Joanna, Luke learned about Herod's reaction to Jesus, as reported in

Luke 9:7 - 9

Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on. And he was perplexed because some were saying that John had been raised from the dead,⁸ others that Elijah had appeared, and still others that one of the prophets of long ago had come back to life.⁹ But Herod said, "I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?" And he tried to see him.

"As Herod's household manager, Chuza would hold a high rank in Herod Antipas's court. His wife would have access to the court gossip, and her abandonment of court comforts to travel with a controversial rabbi would cause a stir" (*Jesus Through the Eyes of Women*, p. 56).

"In fact, Joanna's decision to become a disciple of Jesus is nothing short of dangerous. Herod is intrigued by Jesus, but he also wants to kill him" (*Jesus Through the Eyes of Women*, p. 57).

Luke 13:31: At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you."

Given all the negative potential for Joanna, why do you think she decided to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

In speaking of Moses, we read:

Hebrews 11:24-27

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.²⁵ He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.

Like Moses, Joanna *chose to be mistreated* rather than enjoy the pleasures of her position. How did she persevere? By seeing him who is invisible.

How can you see what is invisible? It's called an eternal perspective—looking at whatever happens to you through the lens of what will matter in eternity, when you stand before Jesus. When life is hard, can you look beyond the cost of persecution in this life to the glory that will be revealed in Heaven?

Colossians 1:16: For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.

Romans 8:18: I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

How did Moses and Joanna and Paul come to the place of this eternal perspective? Can you and I ever have that same attitude?

We should practice this principle of looking ahead to our reward and seeing Jesus—keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, those eternal eyes.

Hebrews 12:1b – 3

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

2 Timothy 3:12: In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...

What about the financial contributions Joanna and the other women made to meet the needs of the disciples? Luke tells us that these women disciples “were helping to support them (the Twelve and Jesus) out of their own means.” Where did their resources come from?

“Joanna’s high social status also makes clear that the women who traveled with Jesus were not included simply to perform domestic tasks.” (p. 57). “But Luke’s naming of Joanna, in particular, undermines the idea that the women were brought along to keep house for the men” (*Jesus Through the Eyes of Women*, p.58).

Supporting Jesus financially was important for Joanna and the others, and their example should inspire us to make sure we’re supporting the work of Jesus sacrificially, as they did.

Susanna

Susanna is mentioned less often, but she was also likely from a prominent family and well known. Susanna was not a common name, so she was probably well known by her name.

Many Others

Though they may not have been as well known or had as much wealth as the named supporters, cumulatively, the contributions and work of these other women were substantial enough to merit mention.

Singleness

Did Jesus welcome single women to be his disciples? Unquestionably some of these “many others” were single women.

How many of you are single-never married? How many are single either widowed or divorced? Have you allowed your singleness to prevent you from serving Jesus in some way? How do you see your singleness—as a burden or a handicap?

Conclusion

By mentioning these women and giving us this information about them, the Gospel writers—Luke in particular—are telling us a story that was unique especially in that day. Jesus specifically affirmed female discipleship and the same is true today.

Questions:

What, if any, obstacles do we women, as Christ-followers today, face if we truly make it clear by our lives and our words that we are disciples of Jesus Christ?

Have you ever felt the disapproval of others because you, as a woman, have chosen to follow Jesus?

What does it mean to you today to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

References are from the book, *Jesus Through the Eyes of Women* by Rebecca McLaughlin