

# EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED

*WOMEN'S SURPRISING INTERACTIONS WITH JESUS*

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# NOT WHAT THEY EXPECTED

He was not what they expected. In the first century, the Jews expected a warrior who would overcome their oppressor Rome. They expected a king who would bring back their nation's glory. They expected a Messiah who did what they wanted him to do.

Instead Jesus came poor and humble, yet with an independent streak that they didn't understand. Instead of killing, He healed. Instead of bringing the nation together, He divided families. Instead of using His divine power for His own glory, He used it to bring glory to His Father in heaven. Instead of answering all their questions, He often asked them. Instead of judging them, He forgave their sins. Instead of parroting what the rabbis taught, He taught the words of God with divine authority.

Though some grew angry, jealous, and hateful at what He said and did, others began to expect the unexpected. Even those who knew and loved Him best were surprised by His unexpected responses. The people never knew exactly what to expect from Him. They only knew that He was full of grace and truth. Whatever He said or did was prompted by love and compassion. They needed what He offered and they flocked to Him for more.

He gave hope to the poor, the sick, the disabled, and the disenfranchised of all kinds of people—including the women. Although some taught that women were not to be seen or heard, Jesus disagreed. He gave women purpose, status, and validity. After years of being ignored and marginalized, they could find

an inexpressible joy. They could discover a place to serve and embrace a deeper, fuller meaning for their lives.

He offers us as women today the same opportunity. He calls us to experience the same purpose. We, too, can find joy beyond what we have ever known. We can each discover a place where we can serve and experience that abundant life He promises. Let's sit at the feet of Jesus like many other women did of long ago. We can expect to be surprised by Jesus but one thing is certain—we will never meet anyone who cares for us more than He does. Come with me as we learn more from the One who loves us beyond our wildest dreams and our greatest expectations.

- \* Use the review questions at the end of each chapter for your own personal study or group discussion. Check out the "A Little Background" section for more information about some cultural and/or historical aspect of the chapter. Discover some ideas in the "Above and Beyond" section to inspire you to do something to make a difference in your world like Jesus and His followers did in theirs.

After Chapter 13 is the "Enhancing Your Study" section with some suggestions for further enrichment in your Bible class.

# CLASHING AGAINST CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS



To fully appreciate how Jesus changed the world for us as women, we have to understand what the world was like before He came. In ancient cultures, women could find significance in their families as wives and mothers. In family relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and brothers and sisters, girls and women could feel treasured and loved. But even in the family circle, daughters were often valued less than sons and wives could be treated as property.

At that time women were often seen as sex objects and inferior beings. It was not until Jesus came that some of these attitudes began to change. He clashed against the taken-for-granted beliefs that relegated women to an inferior status. He taught that women were not to be seen as sex objects even in a man's thoughts. He demonstrated that while the earthly family was important, relationships in the family of God were more important and that each member could be valuable in His kingdom.

Through His interactions with women, He showed women how they should value themselves. He served as an example for men how they should treat women. He paved the way for the loving, yet pure brother/sister relationships in Christ that we can enjoy in the church today. How blessed we are that He came to save each one of us when the time was right!

## **THE TIME WAS RIGHT**

When Jesus was born about 2,000 years ago, what was the world like that He entered? At that time the Roman Empire ruled over

not only His birthplace of Bethlehem, but over much of the known world. The Emperor Augustus brought in the *pax romana* (Roman peace), an era of economic prosperity, stable government, and improved communications. The Romans built roads that crisscrossed the empire, eventually paving the way for missionary travel of the early church.

Greek culture played an important role in Roman life, most notably the market place *koine* Greek language, which was spoken all over the empire. This Greek for the common man would eventually become the language of the New Testament. All these factors combined to make it an opportune time for Christ's arrival. Jesus came on the scene when the time was right (Galatians 4:4-7). For women, it was not a moment too soon.

### **NOT A FEMALE-FRIENDLY WORLD**

In the Greco-Roman world before Jesus came, abortion, suicide, and gladiatorial games were commonplace. Life was cheap and a girl's life was considered even cheaper. In fact, it was life-threatening for females. Both Greek and Roman cultures practiced infanticide and abandoned newborn babies without guilt or remorse. Girls were more often left to die by exposure because a son was more valued than a daughter. So the world Jesus entered was not always "female-friendly."

The culture of Jesus' time was overwhelmingly patriarchal. Greek women managed the home as wives and mothers in separate "women's quarters," considered off-limits to others and sometimes even kept under lock and key. This confinement was necessary to protect the legitimacy of children, because the society was so sexually immoral.<sup>1</sup> Demosthenes, an Athenian statesman, argued that female companions were kept for pleasure, concubines for personal care, and wives for legitimate children.<sup>2</sup>

At the time of Christ, few women learned how to read or write so most of what we know about their lives is filtered through men's eyes. The Greek philosopher Plato spoke of "the natural

partnership of the sexes,” upholding the equality of male and female.<sup>3</sup> However, most Athenian men were rather biased with a low opinion of females. The philosopher Aristotle concluded that women were incomplete males and inferior to men by nature.<sup>4</sup> Euripides, a classical playwright, mirrored his culture’s attitude toward women when his female character Phaedra bemoaned her fate: “I was but woman, a thing the world detests.”<sup>5</sup> Homer, poet of the *Odyssey*, put it bluntly, “Think all women false.”<sup>6</sup>

### **UNDER A MAN’S THUMB**

Roman women in some ways were more liberated than their Greek sisters. The independence of some women in the Greco-Roman culture varied according to their locale, wealth, and status in their community. As time went on, the few more affluent and influential women became active in business, politics, and their pagan religions.

While it may seem that the status of women would be elevated through the worship of goddesses in Greek and Roman mythology, women as pagan priestesses instead sold their bodies as prostitutes in temples of their gods. The male pagan deities could be wantonly misogynistic. The religious ceremonies often were brazenly obscene, including drunken orgies, erotic fertility rites, and perverted homosexual practices.<sup>7</sup>

Most Roman women were still dominated by the men in their lives. Livy, a Roman historian, wrote that “Never, while their men survive, is feminine subjection shaken off.”<sup>8</sup> Since marriages were arranged, a woman felt conveyed from her father’s household to her husband’s. If a wife didn’t please her husband, she could be returned to her family or transferred to some other husband. Under the Roman law of *manus*, a husband had control of his wife and all her possessions. She only owned the clothes on her back.<sup>9</sup> With the rights of *paterfamilias*, he had the absolute authority to execute his wife and children if he felt it was necessary.<sup>10</sup> This male domination went back hundreds of years to ancient pagan cultures.

**WOMEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT WORLD**

In most ancient pagan cultures during the Old Testament, men dominated their households with an iron fist. Many could dispose of their wives at will. Remember how the Medo-Persian ruler Xerxes deposed his wife Vashti when she displeased him (Esther 1:10-12). In the cultures of the Babylonians, Philistines, Egyptians, and others, often women were given a degraded role and treated like property similar to herds or slaves.

In vivid contrast, a distinctive sense of the dignity and purpose of women permeates the Hebrew Scriptures. It emphasizes the vital role women play in nurturing and teaching children alongside their husbands (Proverbs 6:20-23). The celebration of the noble woman's priceless value in Proverbs 31 is unique in all of ancient Near Eastern literature (Proverbs 31:10-31). The prophet Isaiah used tender feminine imagery and applied it to God (Isaiah 49:15; 66:13).

In Jewish culture, women were given somewhat more honor and opportunity than in other ancient societies. The personhood of woman is illustrated by the distinction given to the patriarch's wives, Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, along with other noteworthy women and their stories. Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, and the prophetess and judge Deborah served as leaders in Israel. Moses' mother Jochebed and the queen Esther boldly risked their lives to ultimately save God's people. Throughout Israel's history, God used women like these to work His purpose.

In some ways, Old Testament law dictated that women share equal identity with men as persons. *Both* fathers and mothers were to be treated with equal respect by their children (Exodus 20:12). *Both* parents shared in the accusations of a rebellious child (Deuteronomy 21:18-21). *Both* female and male were accountable in adultery to an equal punishment (Deuteronomy 22:22).

However, in other ways the Old Testament Jewish world seemed to reflect the cultural norms of its day. Legally a woman had few



rights. The right to divorce was at the discretion of the husband, but not the wife (Deuteronomy 24:1). Rarely did a Hebrew woman own land, but when there was no male heir in the family the women heirs were given equal rights (Numbers 27:1-11). Women were under the control of their fathers or brothers until they married and then came under the authority of their husbands. Remember how Laban’s daughters Rachel and Leah felt their father had “sold” them (Genesis 31:15). The laws, culture, and attitudes reflected that it was indeed a man’s world.

### **RABBINIC RESTRICTIONS**

By the time Jesus was born, the Jewish culture was in some ways as badly biased against women as that of the Greco-Romans. It was during the rabbinic period of Hebrew history (ca. 400 B.C. to ca A.D. 300) when many attitudes in the culture around them tended to devalue women. Women might have been esteemed in first-century Jewish society in theory, but not in practice.

Perhaps as a reaction to Hellenism, which brought a growing freedom to some women in society, Jewish women were restricted even further in their everyday life. A man’s primary role was seen as a public one. A woman’s place was perceived to be confined in the family sphere at home. She was allowed to go to the synagogue to pray or hear a sermon, as well as attend a wedding, visit relatives, or a house of mourning. If she ventured out, she was heavily veiled and prohibited from talking to men. Otherwise, she would be regarded as a prostitute or a witch.<sup>11</sup>

At this time the rabbinic oral law, recorded in the Talmud and Mishnah, became very important in explaining the application of regulations and interpretations of laws. While not all rabbinic writings about women were negative, those that were greatly impacted Jewish thought and custom. For example, the Talmud proclaimed, “he that talks much with women brings evil upon himself, neglects the study of the Torah, and at last will inherit Gehenna”<sup>12</sup>

Other rabbinic teachings included stipulations that only men could sing or chant in worship.<sup>13</sup> Women were discouraged from learning the law, which was considered a special privilege for a Jew. Rabbis debated whether a man could divorce his wife only for immorality or for a trivial offense like burning his dinner.<sup>14</sup> It is uncertain how many of these regulations were followed, but they demonstrate how influential they were in the culture against women. Clearly, the time for Jesus had come.

### **JESUS THE REVOLUTIONARY**

The low status of woman experienced for centuries was dramatically challenged by the appearance of Jesus Christ. Set against a cultural background that depersonalized them, Jesus' unexpected validation of women upended the religious establishment of His day. Underlying His ministry was the radical belief that every human had tremendous purpose and value. He was truly revolutionary in the way He treated women. He welcomed women as well as men to become His followers. He accepted the support of women as He traveled. He taught women spiritual truths about His mission. He used women in His parables and illustrations, seldom using them as negative examples.

He treated women with respect and dignity, even those who were considered morally or physically outcast. He was never too busy to heal their sick, bless their children, forgive their sin, and raise their dead. He never denigrated women but instead He restored their honor and virtue.

Author Dorothy Valcarcel aptly explains how Jesus valued women:

Instead of pigeonholing women the way society had, He looked at each woman as unique. No one ever heard Jesus trivialize one of their problems by calling it a "woman-thing." He didn't smooth-talk women, or flatter them to get their attention. And he didn't tell them what they wanted to hear—he told them what they needed

to know. What's more, He did not believe what many of the women thought about themselves, because so often their own view had been grossly distorted by others. What Jesus did was to focus His attention on each woman's greatest need, and then He met that need—in ways they never expected."<sup>15</sup>

### **THINKING IT THROUGH**

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1. What were some factors shaping the world to make Jesus' arrival at "the right time"? How did these factors also impact the early church?
2. How was the Greco-Roman world not a female-friendly world? How does the philosophy that "life is cheap" play out in our world today?
3. Why did Greek men believe they should keep women confined? What was the moral climate at that time that bred that belief?
4. What was the general consensus of ancient Greek philosophers concerning women? What are some examples of their beliefs?
5. Why wasn't the status of womanhood elevated through the worship of Greek and Roman goddesses? How do you think the status of women in other cultures compared to those in Israel?
6. What were some specific laws that enabled Roman husbands to dominate their wives? Why do you think they were given so much control in that society?
7. How did the Hebrew Scriptures affirm Jewish women in their roles and opportunities during the Old Testament period?
8. In what ways did the Hebrew patriarchal society and culture during that period sometimes give women in Israel few rights?
9. What are some ways that Jewish women were restricted in everyday life during the rabbinic period? What were some

behaviors expected of a Jewish woman if she ventured out of her home?

10. How did Jesus overturn the prejudicial customs of His day regarding women?

### **A LITTLE BACKGROUND: Luke's Portrayal of Women**

Luke provides a rich tapestry of the ways Jesus interacted with women. Woven into the physician's distinctive gospel narrative are accounts of how Jesus geared His message to appeal not only to men, but also women. Since Luke was a Gentile, he could appreciate how the gospel was for everyone, not only women, but also other disenfranchised groups such as the poor, diseased, disabled, and demon-possessed as well as children and social outcasts.

Far more women appear in Luke's gospel than any other. In his narrative about the infancy of John the Baptist and Jesus, Elizabeth's and Mary's detailed accounts seem to be drawn from the women's perspectives. It is possible that later in life Mary provided her eyewitness account directly to Luke.

Luke also seemed to pair episodes and illustrations, at times paralleling events involving women and men. Filled with the Holy Spirit, both Elizabeth and Zechariah praised God (Luke 1:41-45; 67-79). In the temple, both Simeon and Anna prophesied about the Christ-child (2:25-38). Before Jesus was driven out of Nazareth, He taught about how God blessed two Gentiles—the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian (4:25-27). In Capernaum, Jesus healed both a demon-possessed man and Simon's mother-in-law (4:33-39). Both the son of the woman of Nain as well as the daughter of Jairus were raised to life (7:11-17; 8:49-56). In the parables of the mustard seed and leaven, and also in the lost sheep and lost coin, a man or woman is alternated in each story (13:18-21; 15:1-10). Clearly Luke highlighted God's love for both genders and emphasized Jesus' concern and compassion in relating to both.

**ABOVE AND BEYOND: Going the Second Mile**

Above and beyond—sounds like a new budget airline, right? But actually it goes more “out of this world” than that. It refers to a heavenly-based lifestyle that Jesus lived and one that we should imitate.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus zeroed in on the principle of going the second mile. In those days of Roman occupation, a soldier could force any subject of the Empire to carry his pack a mile. Jesus challenged His listeners to *go another mile* with the heavy burden (Matthew 5:41). Going the second mile was an unexpected sacrifice, something that most people would not be eager to do. As an example, Jesus went the second mile, far above and beyond for us (Romans 5:6-8).

This second mile service distinguishes us from the world because it makes God’s love real in our everyday lives. Jesus lived His life this way and His followers mirrored it in different ways in the early church. Women found purpose and validity in devoted service as the church grew. For example, some women were noted for utilizing their God-given gifts (Acts 9:36-39; 21:8-9; 2 Timothy 1:5). The apostle Paul worked alongside women in the church and commended their diligence and faithfulness to God. His affectionate personal greetings in his epistles show not only his warm regard for his fellow women co-workers but also his appreciation of their valuable service to the Lord’s work (Romans 16:1-16).

Representative of these women is Lydia, Paul’s first recorded convert in Europe. Immediately after her baptism, she went above and beyond by offering her home in hospitality to Paul and his companions (Acts 16:14-15). If they had been previously lodging in an inn before, they no doubt were grateful to leave it. Most inns featured prostitution as part of the system. What a welcome refuge to stay with fellow believers! Then later Lydia went further and offered her home as a meeting place for the Philippian believers (Acts 16:40).

Lydia didn't wait to be of service. She opened her eyes, saw an opportunity and seized it. She met a need with the resources she had and went the second mile. The same can be true of us.

That is our challenge in service—to do what we can where we are with what we have. When we intentionally look and listen for opportunities, it can be overwhelming because there are so many needs. We can't do it all. It's impossible for us to do everything but God doesn't expect us to do that. He will provide what we need so that we can do something *above and beyond* (2 Corinthians 9:8).