Wise Women of the Bible

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Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.

What’s in Your Teaching Guide

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:
➤ to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
➤ to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
➤ to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

Teacher Helps

Bible Background
The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material. This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.

Teaching Outline
provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

Teacher Options

The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

Focus Paragraphs
are printed in italics at the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide. These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

You Can Choose!
There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.
Bible Background

**Deborah the Warrior**

Every story in Judges begins with a statement that the Israelites “did evil,” a reference to their worship of the Canaanite deities, Baal and Asherah. God then sends an oppressor who torments the people via occupation, taxation, or military threat. The people eventually cry out under the oppression, and God sends a deliverer. The deliverer defeats the oppressor through battle, and a period of peace follows.

Deborah’s story follows this pattern precisely. The Israelites did evil (4:1). God handed them over to Jabin, king of Hazor, and his general Sisera (4:2). After twenty years of oppression, the people cried out (4:3). God appointed Deborah to deliver them (4:4–5:30). And a period of peace followed (5:31).

In Judges 4:4, the narrator describes Deborah as a prophetess, the “wife of Lappidoth,” and a judge. She is the only deliverer in the book of Judges who is also identified as a prophetess.

Although most translations identify Deborah as the “wife of Lappidoth,” the Hebrew text allows for another possibility. The word **lappidot** means “fires,” and it might function as an adjective describing Deborah as a “fiery woman” (Niditch, 62). This description certainly suits Deborah, who moved Israel to action with her stirring words.

Deborah’s judgeship is unique. Like the other judges, she functions as a military deliverer, but unlike the other judges, she also serves as an arbiter. The people of Israel came to Deborah’s palm tree between Ramah and Bethel, and she rendered judgments over them.

Deborah shatters the stereotypical portrayal of a “traditional” Hebrew woman. She was a military leader, a prophet, and a judge. She was not famous because of children she bore or because of her husband (if indeed she was even married). No one challenged her leadership because she was a woman. On the contrary, she was revered as a wise woman who ably led Israel through a difficult time.

The fact that Deborah summoned Barak indicates that she, not Barak, was the true military leader. As a prophet, she spoke for God, and God commanded Barak to assemble troops at Mount Tabor. God said, “I will draw out Sisera...and I will give him into your hand” (v. 7). The victory was assured; God would fight on behalf of Israel.

But Barak refused to go without Deborah (4:8). Why he balked is uncertain. Was he afraid? Did he not trust what Deborah told him? Did he believe that she had to be on the battlefield, uttering her prophecy in order for the words to come true (Boling, 96)? Perhaps Barak thought
his troops would not believe him if he called them to fight a battle they would surely lose. Regardless, Deborah agreed to go with Barak, but she rebuked him for his faithlessness, declaring that a woman, not he, would get the glory of killing Sisera (v. 9).

So Deborah went with Barak to Kadesh, and he summoned the armies of Naphtali and Zebulun. They marched to Mount Tabor where they would meet Sisera's army in battle.

At this point, the narrator inserts a detail that interrupts the battle story. Heber the Kenite had emigrated from Midian to Canaan, and his people camped near Kedesh at the Oak of Zaanim (i.e., Elon-bezaanannim) (v. 11). Although seemingly unimportant, this notice anticipates the heroism of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, who killed Sisera with a tent peg (4:17-22). Her story fulfills Deborah's words that a woman would earn the glory in the battle.

Sisera assembled his 900 chariots at the Wadi Kishon, and Deborah commanded Barak, “Up! For this is the day on which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. The LORD is indeed going out before you” (v. 14).

At Deborah's command, Barak led the troops forward. According to the Song of Deborah (5:19-22), God caused rain to fall during the battle, and the Wadi Kishon—ordinarily a dry riverbed—turned into a raging torrent. Sisera's chariots became bogged down in the mud and useless in battle. Without their chariots, the Canaanites no longer had the advantage. The Lord caused panic amongst Sisera's troops and Sisera fled (vv. 15-17).

Deborah the Mother

Scholars consider the Song of Deborah (Judg 5) one of the oldest pieces of literature in the Bible. Important events were often recorded in song before they were recorded in prose because a song form makes the story easier to recall. Thus, Judges 5 is thought to be much older than Judges 4.

Unfortunately, poetry in any language is difficult to interpret. That, combined with the antiquity of the Hebrew, makes translation and interpretation of Deborah's song even more challenging. Different English translations are likely to read quite differently.
Judges 5:1 says, “Then Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang on that day....” Although Barak receives credit alongside Deborah, because Deborah's name appears first and since the verb “sang” is in the feminine form, Deborah was most likely the actual author of the song (Niditch, 78).

After the call to sing (vv. 2-3), the song proper begins in verses 4-5 with a description of God coming in power. God's arrival causes the earth to tremble, rain to pour, and mountains to quake. The song is filled with water imagery (see also vv. 17, 19, 21). God bursts forth like a storm god raging against Israel's enemies (Ackerman, 56-61). These verses probably recall God leading Israel from Sinai through the wilderness into Canaan during Moses' and Joshua's day.

Verse 6 lauds Shamgar, who defeated the Philistines with an oxgoad (Judg 3:31), and Jael, who killed Sisera with her tent peg (4:17-23). But these days were dark; people were afraid of traveling in caravans and stayed on the main roads for safety's sake. Although the NRSV translation of verse 7 suggests prosperity, most other translations render the verse negatively. For example, the NIV says, “Villagers in Israel would not fight; they held back until I, Deborah, arose, until I arose, a mother in Israel” (see also ESV, HCSB, KJV, NLT). The idea seems to be that the villagers were afraid to fight or that the villages were deserted because of fear until Deborah arose and called them to battle. Like a mother comforting a fearful child, Deborah gave courage to the oppressed in Israel.

Verses 6-8 describe how Israel abandoned the Lord for other gods, leading to their oppression. They were vastly outnumbered and their enemies had superior weaponry. Yet many were willing to fight, even against such horrible odds. Such persons gave hope to Israel.

A Way to Begin

Today we begin a study of “Wise Women of the Bible.” The women we will study displayed their wisdom through teaching, leading, and advocating for others. Begin the session by exploring qualities of good leaders and of influential women.

- **Good and Godly Leaders**
  Ask participants to name characteristics of a good or godly leader. Write responses on the board. Discuss which characteristics they think are most (and least) important.

  Today we’re going to study a person who led Israel in the days of the Judges. This leader was unique in many ways and demonstrated extraordinary qualities of leadership.

- **Influential Women**
  Ask participants to think of an influential woman in their lives. Ask for volunteers to share this woman’s story by answering the following questions.

  **Questions**
  - Who is (or was) this woman?
  - Why is (or was) she influential?
  - What characteristics about her stand out?

  Today we’re going to discuss an influential woman from the Bible. This woman was a mother, a prophet, a judge, and a military commander. The fact that she is remembered in both narrative and song tells us just how influential she was.
A Way to Explore Scripture

Often in sermons and Sunday school we emphasize male heroes of the Bible since they are plentiful. In this lesson, we have an opportunity to highlight a female, particularly one who doesn’t fit the stereotype of a biblical woman. Many participants may be unaware of Deborah. Some will find her story encouraging and hopeful. Others may find that it challenges their preconceptions of women’s roles in society and the church.

○ Reading Deborah’s Story
Read Judges 4:4-16; 5:4-9. Ask the following questions.

Questions
➤ What was the situation in Israel in the days of Deborah and Barak?
➤ What roles did Deborah play as a leader in Israel? (If necessary, guide the class to Judges 4:4-6 so they can see that she was a prophetess, wife [though discuss the alternative translation “woman of fire”], judge, and military leader.)
➤ When you think of the typical Israelite woman, what sorts of roles come to mind? Why do you think Deborah was different?
➤ Why do you think Barak refused to go to battle without Deborah? (The text doesn’t give a conclusive answer, but we can certainly think about possibilities.)
➤ What do you think of Deborah’s rebuke in Judges 4:9?
➤ How was the battle itself won? (Refer to Judg 4:14-15; 5:4-5, 19-22, if necessary.)

○ Roles
Before class, provide a sufficient number of copies of the resource page “Roles,” cut in half so each person receives the information for either Deborah or Barak.

Summarize the story’s background by explaining that Israel had begun worshiping the Canaanite deities Baal and Asherah, so God sent Jabin, king of Hazor, to oppress them. Israel suffered for twenty years under Jabin, but finally the people cried out to God for help and God sent Deborah to deliver them.

Divide the class into two groups. Distribute the resource pages and ask each group to investigate their assigned character. Give them fifteen to twenty minutes to discuss among themselves. As necessary, visit each group and clarify the text for them using information provided in the “Bible Background” section.

After each group has had time to consider the assigned character, bring the class back together and ask each group to report their findings. Allow the class to dialogue about the roles of each character and especially about the significance of Deborah as a woman.

○ A Mother in Israel?
Judges 5:7 says that Deborah “arose as a mother in Israel.” In what sense is Deborah a motherly figure, especially since the writer says nothing about any actual children she might have had? What personal experiences might help a mother to lead, settle disputes, or encourage anxious warriors?
A Way to End

The story of Deborah invites us to reevaluate our preconceptions about women in leadership. Even though Deborah is the only female judge in the book of Judges, the fact that Israel willingly followed her leadership and remembered her both in song and narrative indicates that her womanly status was not a barrier. What does Deborah’s story mean for us? Does it suggest anything about women in leadership today?

Deborah as Leader
Ask participants to list qualities of Deborah’s leadership. If you began your session listing the qualities of a godly leader, have participants identify which qualities Deborah demonstrated. If not, list the qualities on the board as participants cite them.

Women in Leadership
Discuss women in leadership roles, particularly in the church. Keep in mind that this subject might be emotional for some. The issue of women’s leadership in the church is still debated among many, and members of your class might disagree. Deborah played roles typically held by men in Israel (prophet, judge, military leader). What relevance does her story have for women in leadership today?

Both the Old and New Testaments portray women in many roles. They are mothers, wives, prophets, wise women, deacons, judges, etc. Yet some passages in the Bible seem to limit women. For example, women were not allowed to be priests in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the evidence is ambiguous: women must prophesy with their heads covered (1 Cor 11:5) or stay silent (1 Cor 14:34); some women served as deacons or taught (Rom 16:1; Acts 18:26), but they are also commanded not to teach (1 Tim 2:12).

Questions
➤ Are the passages that prohibit women from leadership universal rules that apply to every time and culture, or are they culturally conditioned? Explain.
➤ How can Christians discern when the Bible is describing time-bound cultural details and when it is establishing a rule for all times and places?

Deborah’s Daughters
Discuss how your class can encourage the leadership of young women in your congregation.

Resources
Bible Background

Pharaoh’s Tyranny

As the book of Exodus begins, the Hebrews are enslaved, despised by the pharaoh, and exceedingly numerous. Compared to the positive situation at the end of Genesis, everything has changed. A new king ruled over Egypt—a king who “did not know Joseph” (Ex 1:8). The new pharaoh claimed that the Hebrews were more numerous and more powerful than the Egyptians (v. 9). Capitalizing on fear—both his own and his people’s—he warned that the Hebrews would continue to increase, join Egypt’s enemies in war, and eventually flee from the land. The biblical writer never identifies this pharaoh by name. Neither does he name the pharaoh who later resisted Moses. Scholars can only speculate about who these pharaohs were. The current consensus is that the “Pharaoh of the Oppression” was probably Seti I and that the “Pharaoh of the Exodus” was his son, Ramesses II.

In an attempt to control the Hebrew population, the Egyptians imposed harsh labor on them (v. 10). The more they oppressed them, however, the more the Hebrews multiplied (v. 12).

The Resistance of Shiphrah and Puah

The narrator introduces the two heroines in verse 15. Shiphrah’s name means “beautiful,” and Puah’s name means “girl” or “shining one.” Ironically, the powerful pharaoh remains unidentified throughout the story, but the lowly Hebrew midwives are remembered by name (Fretheim, 34).

After the failure of harsh oppression, the pharaoh came up with a new plan. He commanded two Hebrew midwives to kill all Hebrew males at birth (Ex 1:16). Literally, the text says, “When you look upon the stones, if it is a boy, kill him but if it is a girl you shall let her live.” The “stones” might be a reference to the birthing stool women used during childbirth. Essentially, a woman squatted or knelt upon large bricks or stones as she gave birth. There is another possible interpretation, however. Since the Hebrew word “stones” is specifically dual in number, it must refer to “a pair of stones.” Therefore, a more likely interpretation is “when you look upon the testicles” (Durham, 12). In other words, “When you see that it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl you shall let her live.”

Several questions arise in these two verses. First, why did the pharaoh command Hebrew midwives to kill Hebrew children? It seems strange that an Egyptian would assume compliance from Hebrew midwives. But perhaps the pharaoh believed that the women feared him so much that they would do as he said. Practically speaking, Hebrew midwives were the only ones in a position to kill the babies at birth. The murders
would be an “inside job,” so to speak, and no one would be the wiser. Although some interpreters have tried to argue that Shiphrah and Puah were Egyptian women (thereby making pharaoh’s charge a bit more plausible), the women’s names are clearly Hebrew. Besides, why would Egyptian midwives service Hebrew women?

Another point to consider is how only two midwives could serve the Hebrews, since they were so “numerous.” To be sure, we do not know the exact number of Hebrew slaves. We cannot say exactly how many midwives the Hebrews would have needed. Even so, the pharaoh certainly believed the Hebrew population had exploded—even to the point of becoming more numerous than the native Egyptians (v. 9). Furthermore, though Shiphrah and Puah are the only midwives discussed in this chapter, that doesn’t mean they were the only midwives available to the population.

Finally, why kill only the males? Perhaps the pharaoh believed that males were more likely to rebel and would have the strength to do so. Females could be controlled, enslaved, and used as concubines. Ironically, although the pharaoh feared the males, he should have feared the females. In Exodus 1–2, the ones who thwart the pharaoh’s plans are all female: Shiphrah, Puah, Moses’ mother, Moses’ sister, and pharaoh’s own daughter!

The pharaoh expected Shiphrah and Puah to fear him. But instead, the two women feared God. For this reason, they did not obey the pharaoh. Instead, they made sure the male babies lived.

We don’t know how long it took the pharaoh to realize the midwives were disobeying him. Eventually, however, he called them in and asked them why they allowed the males to live. Shiphrah and Puah responded creatively: “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them” (Ex 1:18-19). The gist of Shiphrah and Puah’s lie is that they could not get to the Hebrew women in time to kill the sons. But the two women also played upon pharaoh’s negative and altogether inhumane view of the Hebrews. In essence, the midwives say, “The Hebrew women are beasts!” By describing the Hebrew women as animals—giving birth rapidly and prolifically—Shiphrah and Puah excused their noncompliance while at the same time placating the pharaoh by means of his own intolerance (Frymer-Kensky, 25).

God “dealt well with the midwives” (Ex 1:20), and as a result the Hebrews

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Outline

**For Teaching**

*Introduction:* Shiphrah and Puah stood against the most powerful person in the world: the pharaoh of Egypt. They were just ordinary women who recognized evil when they saw it and refused to participate in it. Certainly, God rewarded them later, but when they decided to thwart the pharaoh, they had no way of knowing what the consequences would be. Their fear of God turned them into courageous women who risked everything to save lives.

I. Pharaoh’s Tyranny (Ex 1:8-10)
   A. A New King Arises (v. 8)
   B. The Pharaoh’s Fear (v. 9)
   C. The Pharaoh’s Plan (v. 10)

II. The Resistance of Shiphrah and Puah (Ex 1:15-21)
   A. Introduction of Shiphrah and Puah (v. 15)
   B. Pharaoh’s Command (v. 16)
   C. The Midwives’ Fear (v. 17)
   D. Pharaoh’s Question (v. 18)
   E. The Midwives’ Response (v. 19)
   F. The Lord’s Blessings (vv. 20-21)
      a. The Lord dealt well with the midwives.
      b. The Lord multiplied the people and made them very strong.
      c. The Lord gave the midwives families (literally, “made them houses”).

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Teaching Guide 9
Courage in the Face of Corruption

Relate a story about someone who stood up against corruption and immorality. You might choose to tell the stories cited in the “Resources” section of the three women *Time Magazine* named “Person of the Year” in 2002. All three of these women stood up against corruption. All three of them suffered both personally and professionally for it. They had the courage to say no to those in power, and in so doing brought evil to its knees.

Today we will consider two ordinary women who stood up against one of the most powerful rulers in the ancient Near East, risking their own lives to protect others. Shiphrah and Puah’s heroism sets the stage for the rest of the book of Exodus. These two women—not an army or a mighty warrior—thwarted the pharaoh’s murderous demands. They stood up against a man who could have killed them for their disobedience. The fact that their names are recorded in Exodus 1 and the pharaoh’s is not tells us just how significant Shiphrah and Puah were to their people. They were ordinary women who did an extraordinary thing.

A Way to Begin

We enjoy hearing stories about people who stand up against corruption and immorality. Such stories restore our faith that no matter how bad things are, at least someone cares enough to try to change them. Remind participants of such stories and examples to set the stage for today’s lesson.

Courage in the Face of Corruption

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Corrupt Leadership

Brainstorm characteristics of leaders who are immoral, dishonest, or abuse their power. List responses on the board. Discuss which characteristics are most troubling, and why.

Keep in mind that not all leaders make mistakes because they are bent on evil or are inherently “ungodly.” Leaders are human and, like all of us, they make mistakes, succumb to temptations, forget their priorities, and sin. We should always stand up for what is right, but we must also extend grace to those who fail.

King Quotations

Read one or all of the following quotations by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.:

- “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”
- “He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.”
- “History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.”

Ask participants to reflect on the quotation(s) and discuss its (their) significance.
Using information from the “Bible Background” section, explain the new, difficult situation in which the Hebrews found themselves in Exodus 1.

Read Exodus 1:8-10. Why did the pharaoh fear the Hebrews? Is it possible he also feared something else (loss of power, prestige, etc.)? Were these fears legitimate?

Read Exodus 1:15-16. After his initial plan failed, the pharaoh approached two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, and ordered them to kill any baby boys they helped deliver.

Questions
➤ Why do you think the midwives’ names are given but the pharaoh’s is not?
➤ Why do you think the pharaoh expected the Hebrew women to comply?
➤ Why was the pharaoh willing to let the Hebrew girls live but not the boys?

Read Exodus 1:17-19. Shiphrah and Puah feared God, not the pharaoh. Instead of killing the boy babies, they made sure they survived. Pharaoh summoned the two women and demanded an accounting.

Question
➤ What does it mean to “fear God”?

Read Exodus 1:20-21. God “dealt well” with Shiphrah and Puah (Ex 1:20), and the Hebrews multiplied. Because the midwives saved the families of their fellow Hebrews, God gave them families. Literally, God made them “houses,” meaning they were the foremothers of a line of descendants, much like kings fathered dynasties.

Questions
➤ Why do you think God rewarded Shiphrah and Puah in this way?
➤ In a society where houses were typically established by fathers, what is the significance of these women establishing houses?

Interviews
Early in the week, enlist three volunteers to prepare to role-play Pharaoh, Shiphrah, and Puah.

Provide them copies of the resource page “Interviews.” Encourage them to “ham it up” through snide comments about their opponent(s), etc.

Invite a volunteer to read Exodus 1:8-10, 15-21. Using information from the “Bible Background” section, explain the new, difficult situation in which the Hebrews found themselves.

Conduct an interview with the three volunteers you enlisted previously.

Two ordinary midwives delivered Israel from the pharaoh long before Moses ever picked up his staff. Their story illustrates how to say no to corrupt leadership. At the same time, it reminds us that opposing evil is a very dangerous business.

A Way to Explore Scripture
A Way to End

*Shiphrah and Puah risked their lives to oppose the pharaoh. Their decision to obey God and not pharaoh saved the lives of countless Hebrew boys. When confronted by the pharaoh, the two midwives wisely and creatively responded, managing to thwart the pharaoh without angering him even more. Encourage participants to consider how they can express godly opposition in a world where evil and sin abound.*

○ **Case Studies**

Brainstorm situations in which participants might have to take a risk in order to oppose immoral or corrupt leadership. These might include dishonest business practices, sexual exploitation or abuse, résumé-padding, bribes, violations of the public trust, etc.

Have participants consider these situations and imagine how they might respond if they became aware of them.

**Questions**

➤ How can ordinary people stand up against injustice?

➤ How can the story of the Hebrew midwives encourage us to resist injustice?

○ **Godly Opposition**

We see brokenness and sinfulness all around us in our society. Although we expect our leaders to be moral, the fact is that human beings make mistakes. We see evidence of corruption and dishonesty in schools, churches, communities, work places, and families. When faced with people who undermine trust and misuse power, we might be tempted to retaliate, or even worse, we might choose to do nothing because we fear reprisal.

**Questions**

➤ What are some practical ways we can express godly opposition when a leader fails?

➤ How do we find the courage to resist?

➤ When is it the right time to resist?

➤ What if we know we can’t stop the evil, but only slow it down? Is it still worth it to try?

**Resources**


Bible Background

**Joab’s Plan**

Absalom’s rebellion began when David’s firstborn, Amnon, raped his half-sister, Tamar (2 Sam 13). When David heard of it, he did nothing to address the crime. Tamar’s full brother, Absalom, sought revenge, however. He killed Amnon two years later. David was devastated over Amnon’s death. Absalom fled to Geshur, where he lived for three years (2 Sam 13:38).

Second Samuel 14:1 says, “Now Joab son of Zeruiah perceived that the king’s mind was on Absalom.” Many translations render the verse positively, as in “the king’s heart longed after Absalom,” suggesting that David missed his son and wanted him to return. The events of this chapter suggest otherwise. If David really wanted Absalom to come home, why did Joab have to concoct a ruse to persuade him? Why, when Absalom did return, did David refuse to see him (2 Sam 14:24). Perhaps a better translation is “the king’s mind was against Absalom.” In other words, David had not forgiven his son and had no plans to reconcile (Alter, 274).

Joab probably decided to use this woman as an intermediary because he doubted David would listen to him. He chose a “wise woman” because such women were known for their skill in mediation.

Joab “put the words into her mouth” (v. 3) and sent the woman to David. Some interpreters think the woman herself contributed nothing to her conversation with David. She was simply an actress playing a part (Bellis, 135-37). Although this might be true of her initial story (14:5-7), clearly, the woman had to improvise and contribute her own wisdom in the subsequent dialogue with David (14:8-18).

**The Woman’s Story**

The woman came as a supplicant, throwing herself on the ground before David and crying out for help (v. 4). Then she began her story. She told the king she was a widow and that her two sons fought in a field. Because there was no one to intervene, one son killed the other. Her family insisted the murderer be put to death according to the law of blood vengeance. But because this would annihilate her dead husband’s only heir, the woman claimed that keeping her husband’s name alive was more important than blood vengeance (vv. 5-7).

On one level, the woman’s story echoes that of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4: two sons are alone in a field; one murders
the other, and blood vengeance is an issue. On another level, the story is also about David, Amnon, and Absalom. David failed to intervene after Tamar was raped. Absalom murdered Amnon and brought bloodguilt upon himself. But Absalom was also David’s heir apparent, so enacting blood vengeance threatened the throne and Israel’s future. Of course, the parallels are not exact. But clearly, the woman’s story evokes David’s situation.

David Dissembles and the Woman Persists
Initially, David tried to put the woman off, telling her to go home while he decided what to do (v. 8). But the woman was not so easily dissuaded. Thinking, perhaps, that David feared that bloodguilt might fall upon him should he pardon the murderous son, she assured David that his throne would be guiltless (v. 9).

In reply, the king promised the woman that he would punish anyone who tried to accuse her (v. 10). The woman then reminded the king that her own life was not the concern. She asked the king to protect her son from vengeance. She demanded that David pardon her son. David finally conceded. Swearing an oath, David said, “Not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground” (v. 11). Ironically, David’s son Absalom would eventually die because of his hair (2 Sam 18:9).

The Sting
Then the woman divulges the real reason for her visit: forcing David to reconsider the situation with Absalom. In a stinging rebuke, the woman exposed David’s hypocrisy (v. 14). If the king was willing to pardon her son, why was he unwilling to pardon his own—especially since he was putting his own people at risk? Quoting a proverb, “We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up” (v. 14), the wise woman reminded David that Amnon’s death was permanent and unfixable. Keeping Absalom in exile would not bring Amnon back. The second part of verse 14 is more difficult to understand because the language is cryptic. David might have been afraid that if he pardoned Absalom and allowed him to return home, God would kill him for not enacting blood vengeance. The woman
might have been assuring David that God would not take away the king’s life (Alter, 278; Robinson, 226).

After her bluntly worded message, the woman reverted to her original story (vv. 15-17). Perhaps she saw anger in David’s eyes and retreated to the safety of her cover story to placate him. She certainly filled her speech with ingratiating language, telling David he was “like the angel of God, discerning good and evil.”

But David no longer bought her story. He sensed deception and took his own turn to speak freely, demanding that the woman tell him what he wanted to know: “Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?” (vv. 18-19).

The woman replied truthfully. Joab was indeed the perpetrator. But she explained that Joab was only trying to change “the course of affairs.” Perhaps David glared at her, because she groveled before him, proclaiming that his wisdom was like the wisdom of the angel of God (v. 19-20).

David did as Joab requested and brought Absalom home (v. 21). But when Absalom arrived in Jerusalem, David refused to see him (v. 24). Joab and the wise woman had won the battle but lost the war. David refused to be reconciled to Absalom and the results were disastrous. After four years of planning and recruiting, Absalom launched a revolt against his father.

A Way to Begin

*Today’s lesson is about a wise woman who spun a tale, hoping it would bring reconciliation between a father and a son. Begin the session by raising awareness of the need for reconciliation and of possible strategies for being reconciled with one another.*

**Memorable Stories**

Ask participants to think of stories (fictional or not) that had a profound influence on them. Be ready to share your own example. Have them share their stories and explain the influence they had.

Stories can reveal truth in ways that simply describing the facts cannot. People are naturally drawn to stories because we can relate to characters and their experiences better than we can to propositional statements and facts. That is why most of us remember the illustrations in a sermon better than the points the preacher made. That is why we teach children best by telling them stories.

Today, we will discuss a biblical text in which a story plays an important role, changing the course of events in David’s life.

**Ultimate Forgiveness**

Relate the story of Mary Johnson, as told in the *Daily Mail* article listed in the “Resources” section. Her story has a wonderfully happy ending. She discovered that true healing comes from reconciliation and forgiveness. Today we are studying a story about reconciliation between a father and a son.

**Irreconcilable Differences**

Ask participants to identify situations that have resulted in irreconcilable differences. Political squabbles in Washington are an obvious example, but also look for more personal, day-to-day issues. Write these situations on the board without commentary.

Sometimes conflict runs so deep that reconciliation seems impossible. It requires that both (or all) sides be willing to concede and forgive. Today’s lesson is about a father and son in need of reconciliation and a wise woman who gave them that opportunity.
A Way to Explore Scripture

Reconciliation is hard work. It often demands great creativity in addition to maturity and forbearance on the part of the parties involved. Explore how the wise woman attempted to bring reconciliation to David and Absalom. What can we learn from this woman’s efforts?

Teaching with the Outline

Summarize the events in 2 Samuel 13 as described in the “Bible Background” section. Use the “Outline for Teaching” as a guide for discussing the lesson.

2 Samuel 14:1-3

➤ Why do you think Joab did not want to speak to David himself?
➤ Why did Joab instruct the woman to play the role of a widow rather than directly confront David about Absalom?

2 Samuel 14:4-7

➤ How does the woman’s story parallel the situation of David and Absalom? How does it differ?
➤ Do you think David saw himself in the woman’s situation? Why or why not?

2 Samuel 14:8-11

➤ Why do you think David initially stalled by telling the woman to go home?
➤ What guilt could come upon David if he gave a ruling concerning this woman’s remaining son? (See v. 9.)
➤ Why do you think David finally conceded and promised to protect the woman’s son? Compassion? Something else?

2 Samuel 14:12-20

➤ The woman accuses David of devising evil against his own people by refusing to bring Absalom home. Why should Absalom’s exile matter to David’s people?

➤ Why do you think the woman compares David to “the angel of God discerning, good and evil”? Was she trying to flatter him? Could she have been speaking ironically?
➤ What do you think tipped David off that Joab was behind all of this?
➤ Why do you think David refused to reconcile with Absalom? (See v. 24.)

Through the Eyes of the Characters

Summarize the events in 2 Samuel 13 as described in the “Bible Background” section.

Read 2 Samuel 14 in its entirety. (Have volunteers read a paragraph apiece.) Point out that David refused to see Absalom, so true reconciliation never took place, and that Absalom ultimately launched a rebellion against his father.

Divide the class into four groups. Assign each group Joab, the wise woman, David, or Absalom. Give each group copies of the appropriate section of the resource page “Through the Eyes of the Characters.” Have each group reread the biblical text and discuss the questions provided.

Bring the class back together. Have each group share its findings.

Reconciliation is hard work. It often demands great creativity in addition to maturity and forbearance on the part of the parties involved. Explore how the wise woman attempted to bring reconciliation to David and Absalom. What can we learn from this woman’s efforts?
Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Ask the following questions to help the class relate the text to their own lives.

Questions
➤ How can believers work creatively to help people be reconciled with each other and with God? Offer specific examples.
➤ What if attempts at reconciliation fail—or make things worse?
➤ What situations in my life require reconciliation?
➤ What situations in the life of my church or community require reconciliation?

What Can We Do?

Invite participants to reflect on specific conflicts that need reconciliation in your city, community, church, small group, school, families, etc. List these on the board.

As people name examples, ask what steps need to take place to bring about reconciliation in these conflicts. Finally, ask what we could do (individually or as a group) to make this situation better.

Prayer will certainly be suggested. Guide participants toward concrete actions as well. For example, if a conflict in the church needs reconciling, your class could sponsor a time for opposing parties to come together to pray and discuss the problems.

Resources


Several important events lead up to the rebellion of Sheba and the resulting encounter between Joab and the wise woman of Abel of Beth-maacah. After Absalom’s rebellion, David’s return to power was marred by unresolved conflict between the northern tribes, who had remained loyal to David, and the Judahites of the south, who had followed Absalom (2 Sam 19:42-44). A “scoundrel” named Sheba, son of Bichri, capitalized upon the conflict, calling upon the northern tribes to rebel against David (2 Sam. 20:1-2).

When David returned to Jerusalem, he fired Joab and replaced him with Amasa, the former commander of Absalom’s army. He probably did this in an effort to appease the Judahites (2 Sam 19:14-15). Of course, this did not sit well with Joab. David commanded Amasa to pursue Sheba, but for some reason, Amasa was delayed (2 Sam. 20:4-5). Frustrated, David sent Joab’s brother, Abishai, after the rebel (2 Sam 20:6). Joab joined his brother, and when the army met up with Amasa, Joab brutally assassinated him on the road (2 Sam 20:7-13). With his rival eliminated, Joab took up the command of the army and pursued Sheba.

Sheba’s Arrival in Abel-Beth-maacah
Sheba, accompanied by his own clan, traveled through the northern territories, presumably to garner additional supporters. They took refuge in the city of Abel (2 Sam 20:14). Abel, meaning “brook,” was apparently a common name for cities. Therefore, the biblical passage further identified the place as “Abel of Beth-maacah” (Alter, 325). This is similar to what we might do if someone said they lived in Abilene. We might ask, “Which one? Abilene in Kansas or Abilene in Texas?” Abel of Beth-maacah was located in the northern region of Israel, near the city of Dan (Robinson, 261).

The Siege
Joab and his army pursued Sheba to the gates of the city. Immediately they began building a siege mound, a pile of dirt and stone built up against the wall to gain access to the city. As Joab’s men began battering at the gates, a voice cried out from above (v. 15). A wise woman who lived in the city demanded that Joab speak with her (v. 16). Given what we know of Joab’s character, the fact that this woman would dare to face him at the city wall is all the more remarkable.

The repetition of her cry, “Listen! Listen!” (v. 16), probably indicates that she had to make quite a commotion to get the army’s attention. Although the text does not say so, this woman probably risked her own life. She stood between two armies bent on destroying one another. It would have been easy for Joab to ignore the woman completely—or to have one of his archers cut her down. But
Joab approached the wall to speak to her. She clearly had great authority to convince a commander to make himself equally vulnerable (v. 17).

The woman demanded that Joab listen to her. She rebuked him with a proverb: “They used to say in the old days, ‘Let them inquire at Abel’; and so they would settle a matter” (v. 18). Although the exact meaning of the proverb is obscured by archaic language, the woman seems to identify her city as one where disputes were resolved. It is a place where “peaceable and faithful” people reside. It is a revered city, a principal city—a “mother” in Israel (Alter, 326). Would Joab kill his own mother? Why then would he dare to “swallow up” a city that was the heritage of the Lord (v. 19)?

**Joab’s Answer**

Joab responded with a profanity-laced denial (v. 20). English translations soften the language, using the words “Far be it from me.” But the Hebrew is actually much stronger. Biblical translators often smooth over raw language in the original texts, much as modern censors bleep out cursing on television. Bibles were originally printed to be read aloud in worship, however, and worshipers do not expect coarse language to pepper a religious service!

In effect, Joab declared that he had not come to destroy the city, although, in reality, he had. With a bit of backpedaling, he claimed that all he wanted was Sheba, the traitor. “Give him up alone, and I will withdraw from the city,” Joab countered (v. 21).

**A Man Loses His Head**

The woman accepted Joab’s request and promised to throw Sheba’s head over the wall. Returning to her people, she convinced them of the wisdom of this compromise, and Sheba was beheaded. Cartledge notes that this woman acted “either from inherent authority or from supreme confidence” (631). She promised to hand over Sheba in return for Joab’s peaceful withdrawal. But she didn’t tell Joab that she would consult with the (male) elders and get back with him. On the contrary, she boldly promised, “His
A Way to Begin

The story of the wise woman of Abel illustrates the power of compromise. In the midst of a threatening situation, this woman successfully intervened and prevented the destruction of her city. Although blood was shed, ultimately one man’s death spared everyone else from a violent battle. It wasn’t a perfect compromise, but it was the best option at the time.

Survivor

Divide the class up into groups of five or six. Distribute copies of the resource page “Survivor.” Give the groups ten to fifteen minutes to complete the exercise, then have them share their conclusions with the class.

Questions

➤ How did your group make the decisions?
➤ Did certain members influence decisions made by the group? If so, how?
➤ How could better decisions have been made?
➤ Did people listen to each other? If not, why not?
➤ How did you manage disagreements?
➤ What kinds of behavior helped or hindered the group?
➤ What did you learn about the functioning of this group?

Compromise

Ask participants to share about a time they had to compromise in order to keep the peace. Be prepared to share your own example to get the ball rolling.

Questions

➤ Was the peaceful resolution worth the compromise you had to make? Explain.
➤ Did everyone concede something, or was the “compromise” one-sided?
➤ Did the peace take hold or did a similar conflict arise later?
➤ Who benefited most from the compromise?
➤ In retrospect, can you think of a better solution to the original conflict?

In today’s lesson, a wise woman struck a compromise that saved her city.

Today’s lesson is about a compromise that prevented a blood bath. One woman stood between two armies intent on slaughtering one another. With only her voice as a weapon, the wise woman of Abel orchestrated a peaceful solution.
A Way to Explore Scripture

The story of Joab and the wise woman of Abel is not complicated: Sheba and his army take refuge in a northern city. Joab and his army besiege the city. The wise woman intervenes to protect her city from violence, and the compromise is to behead Sheba. What can we learn about wisdom, risk, and compromise from the unnamed heroine of this story?

Threats

Today’s passage involves one of several conflicts that followed Absalom’s rebellion. To see the wisdom of the compromise described in our text, we need to understand what the problems were. Each of the characters in the story faced a threat. Most responded with violence but, at least in one case, the violence was limited.

Read 2 Samuel 20:1-4. David faced the threat of rebellion. Discuss how David responded. (Verse 4 is a little ambiguous without the context. In essence, David’s response to Sheba’s threat was to gather his army.)

Read 2 Samuel 19:13 and 20:7-10. Explain that Amasa was the commander over Absalom’s army when Absalom rebelled against David. By asking Amasa to take Joab’s place, David accomplished two things: (1) he gained the trust of those who had been in Amasa’s army and (2) he fired Joab, thus punishing him for killing Absalom. Discuss the threat David’s actions posed for Joab and how he responded to this threat.

Read 2 Samuel 20:14-21. Discuss the threat to the city of Abel. How did the wise woman of Abel respond to this threat? Of course, the simple answer is that she convinced the city to behead Sheba, but encourage participants to look more carefully at the text. What steps did the woman take before Sheba was beheaded? How did she manage to convince Joab to consider a solution other than destroying the city?

Read 2 Samuel 20:22. Obviously, the threat to Sheba was death. By executing Sheba, however, the city was spared a battle in which many more would have died.

Questions

➤ Do you think this justifies Sheba’s death in this case? Why or why not?
➤ Was there any other solution available to the city of Abel?
➤ Note that nothing is said about the fate of Sheba’s followers. What do you suppose happened to them? How do you think they felt about the wise woman’s compromise?

Questions for Discussion

Using information provided in the “Bible Background” section, explain the series of events leading up to Joab’s siege of Abel. Read 2 Samuel 20:14-20.

Questions

➤ What clues identify this wise woman as a person of authority? What clues suggest she was a leader in her community?
➤ What do you think was the basis of the wise woman’s authoritative leadership?
➤ What was gained in the compromise the wise woman negotiated? What was lost?
➤ Could there have been a better outcome? Explain.
➤ How should Christians proceed when it doesn’t seem possible for everyone to “win”? How can we be sure to take the welfare of all sides into account?
Lesson 4

A Way to End

The resolution in 2 Samuel 20 comes when Sheba loses his head. Obviously, such a solution would not be acceptable in our day and time. Then again, most of us have never faced a siege. We do, however, face conflict and find ourselves in situations that require compromise. How will we respond when conflict swirls around us and there are no easy solutions?

❍ Stalemate
Ask participants to consider situations such as those suggested below and offer possible responses. Is there a way to compromise that would be satisfying to both parties? Or is it an issue for which there is no compromise?

➤ Your seventeen-year-old daughter wants to get a tattoo.
➤ Your recently widowed mother wants to come live with you.
➤ Your boss wants you to do more traveling as part of your job, but you have young children and you want to be at home more.
➤ You’ve been asked to serve on another church committee but you are burned out.

Questions
➤ How can we tell when compromise is possible?
➤ Is it ever appropriate to “pull rank” and make a unilateral decision? Explain.
➤ Is it ever appropriate to “roll over” and let the other party do as it pleases? Explain.

❍ Worth Fighting For
The wise woman took bold action to save her city. For what people or causes are we willing to take bold action?

❍ Finding Peace in the Midst of the Storm
Sometimes conflicts are so deeply rooted that compromise is difficult, if not impossible. For example, you might have a job you absolutely hate, but you can’t quit because nothing else is available, and you can’t afford to lose your income. Or you know your children are not being treated fairly by your ex-spouse, but you have to abide by the visitation rights in the divorce decree.

Discuss how Christians can find peace in the midst of conflict with no clear solutions.

Resources


The words of Lemuel’s mother stand out in the book of Proverbs because they are the only overt example of a woman instructing a man in this biblical book. Women teaching men is a rarity in the Old Testament, but it is not completely unheard of. In Judges 13, for example, Samson’s mother communicates to her husband the divine instructions she receives from an angel, and the prophetess Huldah instructs Hilkiah, the high priest, in 2 Kings 22. Elsewhere in the book of Proverbs, fathers instruct their sons, although sons are also admonished to heed their mothers (Prov 1:8; 2:1; 4:1, etc.). Wisdom, personified as a woman, calls for young men to pursue her (Prov 8:1-9:6). And in chapter 31 a woman advises her son on how to rule wisely as a king.

Verse 1 introduces the king and his mother. Unfortunately, the identity of these two remains shrouded in mystery. No king by the name of Lemuel appears elsewhere in the Bible, and the name itself is difficult to translate. One suggestion is that Lemuel means “belonging to God” (McKane, 408). Regardless, this king’s identity is unknown. And since we do not know who Lemuel was, we also do not know who his mother was.

Another problem is the word “oracle.” The Hebrew term massa’ usually refers to words spoken by a prophet. But the words recorded here seem more like teaching than prophecy. Thus, most translations include the alternative reading “The words of King Lemuel of Massa” in a footnote. If Massa is a location, then it might refer to an area in northern Arabia (see Prov 30:1; Gen 25:14; McKane, 644). Regardless, the words that follow the introduction are words spoken by Lemuel’s mother. And her words offer sage advice.

Wise Words about Women
The mother begins with a call for her son to heed. Although the NRSV translates the admonition with a negative “No, my son!”, the Hebrew word actually means “what.” “What, my son! What, son of my womb! What, son of my vows!” The NRSV sounds like a prohibition: “Don’t do these things, my son.” But the Hebrew sounds more like an exclamation of disgust in the face of wrongs already committed: “What have you done?” The mother’s last exclamation, “What, son of my vows!” might suggest that she had made a vow to God in exchange for fertility, much the way Hannah prayed for her son (1 Sam 1:11).

Verse 3 is a prohibition: “Do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings.” Lemuel’s mother warns him about the dangers of seduction. Should he engage in sexual promiscuity, he not only demonstrates...
bad judgment, but also undermines his own authority.

One king in particular exemplified the dangers of giving his strength to women: Solomon. Solomon’s fixation on pleasing his wives was one of many reasons his kingdom fell apart (1 Kings 11:1-8). But Lemuel’s mother could be warning her son about more than mere physical seduction. Elsewhere in Proverbs, folly is personified as a promiscuous woman. For example, Proverbs 7:6-27 portrays folly as a prostitute who cunningly lures her victims to their demise. Perhaps Lemuel’s mother also was cautioning him not to fall victim to folly, but instead to pursue wisdom.

Wise Words about the Dangers and Benefits of Alcohol
Lemuel’s mother next admonishes her son to avoid alcohol because he is a king. Alcohol can impede good judgment and cause a ruler to pervert justice. For this reason, kings should avoid it at all costs. It is not accidental that Lemuel’s mother equates abuse of alcohol with abuse of justice. Her warning points to the dangers of excess and greed. The Hebrew Scriptures consistently depict gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual depravity as vices of the wealthy. Those who indulged themselves in these pursuits often did so at the expense of others. The books of the prophets abound with examples of rulers abusing justice and oppressing the poor while they themselves prospered, drinking fine wine and growing fat (Isa 5:8-12; 22-23; 28:1-8; Am 2:8; 4:1; 6:1-7; Mic 3:1-4; Zeph 1:7-13). Thus, Lemuel’s mother cautions her son to avoid the excesses of the wealthy and powerful.

The mother’s next words might be a bit difficult for some readers to swallow. Describing alcohol as a sedative for those who suffer, Lemuel’s mother recommends it for those who are in misery. Obviously people in the biblical world were not prohibitionists. Alcohol was part of their everyday diet. In fact, it played a role in virtually every religious festival, particularly Passover. Ancient peoples also used wine for medicinal purposes (see 1 Tim 5:23).

The ancient Hebrews accepted the consumption of alcohol, but drunkenness was explicitly forbidden and its dangers well documented in Proverbs (Prov 20:1; 23:20, 29-35). But moderate drinking was considered normal and even beneficial for those in less enviable circumstances.

Wise Words about Speaking for the Rights of Others
The mother’s final admonition is to take action on behalf of the oppressed. Literally, she says, “Open your mouth! Open your mouth for the silent one!” The king should speak up for those who cannot speak. He must use his power to enact justice for his people.
The kings of Israel and Judah were not supposed to be despots like their counterparts in other Ancient Near Eastern countries. They were, instead, to be the champions of the defenseless. The king was required to write a copy of the law and study it every day for the rest of his life so he would not vaunt himself over his people (Deut 17:18-20). He was supposed to be a paragon of righteousness and justice—the supreme keeper of the law. Indeed, when the prophets spoke of the ideal king, they said he would be clothed with righteousness and justice (Isa 11:1-5; 16:5).

Unfortunately, few kings came close to this ideal, and most did quite the opposite. In fact, the Old Testament commend only one king for following the law completely: King Josiah of Judah (2 Kings 23:25).

A Way to Begin

Today’s lesson involves the advice a mother gives to her son. Help participants to reflect on episodes of giving or receiving advice, and the dynamic that often accompanies the imparting of wisdom from one generation to another.

=Sage Advice=

Ask participants to share wisdom or advice they have received from a mother, grandmother, sister, or female friend. What did this woman say? Did they follow the advice? Why or why not?

Today we will read the words of an ancient queen mother who offered her royal son some wise advice.

=Parental Advice=

Invite parents in your class to discuss the sorts of advice they have given their children at various stages of life: starting kindergarten, entering middle school, upon taking their first job, upon getting married, etc. Discuss both the nature of the advice and their child’s openness to receiving it.

Questions

➤ When is parental advice most welcomed? When is it least welcomed?
➤ What advice from your parents has helped you the most?
➤ What advice do you wish your parents had given you?

=Materialism and Complacency=

Whether we realize it or not, most of us are wealthy compared to the rest of the world. We may claim to be “middle class” and complain of our financial straits, but if we make more than $25,000 a year, we are not poor by global standards.

Invite participants to offer examples of wealth in our society and list them on the board. Press them to identify symbols of “middle-class” wealth. For example, merely owning a car can be an indication of wealth, and most of us probably own multiple cars. Help them think of examples in various categories: food, comfort, entertainment, luxury, leisure, etc. Discuss how wealth and materialism in our culture might numb us to poverty and suffering.

Our lesson today emphasizes that those who are in positions of power and wealth should seek to stand up for those who are voiceless.
A Way to Explore Scripture

The words of Lemuel’s mother are fairly straightforward in that she warns her son to avoid excess and to advocate for the oppressed. But how should we apply this woman’s godly wisdom in our context? Help participants discern the timeless principles that lie behind what Lemuel’s mother taught him.

 Wise Leadership for Dummies

Divide the class into three groups. Distribute to each group copies of the appropriate section of the resource page “Wise Leadership for Dummies.” Have each group follow the instructions on the worksheet. Bring the class together and have each group share its findings.

 Wisdom for Today

Read Proverbs 31:2-3. Discuss what this word of advice might mean. Ask participants to think of biblical examples of rulers who “[gave] their strength to women.”

Question

➤ None of us are kings with harems to tempt us. What might Lemuel’s mother admonish us to avoid with regard to “[giving] our strength”?

Read Proverbs 31:4-7. Discuss how alcohol might cause a ruler to pervert justice. In our society, we still see the consequences of alcohol abuse. It can tear families apart, ruin careers, and destroy a person’s health. But even though Lemuel’s mother tells him to avoid strong drink and wine, she also commands him to supply it to those who are suffering.

Questions

➤ What do you think about this advice?
➤ While we might feel uncomfortable using alcohol as Lemuel’s mother suggests, are there other ways we might apply her advice to offer relief to those who suffer?

Guide the class to suggest realistic ways we could comfort those who are poor or suffering. (For example, we might donate blankets to local shelters as winter approaches.)

Read Proverbs 31:8-9. Lemuel’s mother admonishes her son to speak for those who cannot speak, to speak for the rights of those who are destitute, to enact justice, and to defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Questions

➤ How have we been silent in this regard? Have we stood by and said nothing when a fellow human was treated unjustly? Have we turned the other way to avoid looking upon someone’s suffering?
➤ How can we open our mouths to enact justice?
A Way to End

Lemuel’s mother offered her son some excellent advice. We have no way of knowing whether or not he took it to heart. Conclude the lesson by emphasizing the need for all of us to take these words to heart and apply them in our lives.

❖ Heirlooms
Instead of the family silver, Lemuel’s mother passed down wise words to her son. What heirlooms in words could you offer someone special to you? Distribute paper and pens or pencils for each participant. Ask them to think of words of wisdom they would like to pass down to a child, grandchild, colleague, or friend.

Ask a few volunteers to share what they wrote with the class. Encourage the participants to pass their words of wisdom on to the intended recipient.

❖ Words into Action
Research needs in your community or church. If possible, type all the information into a document that you can distribute to the class members.

Explain how, having heard Lemuel’s mother admonish her son to speak out on behalf of others and to enact justice, it would be easy for us to nod our heads in agreement but do nothing. How can we instead put her words into action?

Share the list of opportunities to the class. Attempt to reach a consensus on one or two things you could undertake as a class project.

❖ Do Not Give Your Strength to…
Lemuel’s mother commanded her son not to give his strength to women. He should not waste his energy on things that would distract him from ruling well. She also warned him to avoid alcohol for the same reason.

Questions
➢ What activities sap our strength and distract us from what is really important?
➢ What can we do to remove these distractions, or at least lessen them?

Challenge participants to suggest practical solutions rather than idealistic ones. (Note: Some participants might be struggling with hidden addictions that they cannot share. Be sure to remind the class that there are professional resources to aid those who suffer from addiction.)

Resource
ROLES

Deborah

Read Judges 4:4-16; 5:4-9

(1) What do these verses reveal about Deborah’s character? Who was she? Try to describe her as thoroughly as possible. What did she do—and why?

(2) When you think of the typical Israelite woman, what roles do you think she played in society, family, politics, etc.?

(3) What role(s) did Deborah play in the story? How does Deborah conform to the traditional roles that women in Israel played? How does she challenge the stereotype?

(4) What surprises you about Deborah? Why?

(5) If you could describe Deborah with one adjective, what would it be? Why?

(6) Read 1 Samuel 12:11 and Hebrews 11:32. Why do you think Barak was remembered but Deborah was forgotten?

Barak

Read Judges 4:4-16; 5:4-9

(1) What do these verses reveal about Barak’s character? Who was he? Try to describe him as thoroughly as possible. What did he do—and why?

(2) When you think of the typical Israelite man, what roles do you think he played in society, family, politics, etc.?

(3) What role(s) did Barak play in the story? How does Barak conform to the traditional roles that men in Israel played? How does he challenge the stereotype?

(4) What surprises you about Barak? Why?

(5) If you could describe Barak with one adjective, what would it be? Why?

(6) Read 1 Samuel 12:11 and Hebrews 11:32. Why do you think Barak was remembered but Deborah was forgotten?
INTERVIEWS

Using information from the Learner’s Study Guide, prepare to role-play an interview in which you will be asked the following questions:

**Pharaoh**

• What exactly troubled you about the Hebrews? What threat did they pose?

• Why did you ask Hebrew women to kill Hebrew babies?

• Why did you ask the midwives to kill only the male babies?

**Shiphrah and Puah**

• Why did you fear God and not Pharaoh?

• What did you think of Pharaoh’s command?

• Why didn’t you obey him? Weren’t you afraid for your life?

• What did you mean when you told Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them” (Ex 1:19)?

• God was good to you as a result of what you did. Can you tell us about that?
THROUGH THE EYES OF THE CHARACTERS

Joab
(1) Did Joab simply want Absalom where he could keep an eye on him? What other reasons might Joab have had for bringing Absalom home?
(2) Why do you think Joab chose to influence David via the wise woman of Tekoa rather than confronting the king himself?
(3) Why did he ask the woman to tell a fictional story?
(4) Ultimately, Joab’s plan backfired when David refused to see Absalom and Absalom launched his revolt. Do you think Joab should have attempted to reconcile David and Absalom in the first place? Why or why not?

The Wise Woman
(1) Some think the wise woman of Tekoa was not really wise since Joab “put the words into her mouth” (2 Sam 14:3). What do you think? Was the wise woman truly wise or was she merely an actress?
(2) In what ways does the wise woman’s story parallel the events in David’s and Absalom’s lives?
(3) How do the two stories differ?
(4) Does the fact that David ultimately refused to see Absalom mean that the wise woman failed? Why or why not?

Absalom
(1) Absalom killed his brother, Amnon, resulting in his estrangement from David. Do you think Absalom was justified in killing Amnon to avenge the rape of his sister, Tamar? Why or why not?
(2) What might Absalom have felt toward his father when he did nothing about the rape of Tamar?
(3) After Amnon’s death, Absalom was the heir apparent. Why do you think he launched a rebellion instead of biding his time and succeeding his father peacefully?
(4) What do you think would have happened had David welcomed Absalom home immediately? Would Absalom still have rebelled? Would Absalom have succeeded David?

David
(1) Why do you think David took no action against Amnon after the rape of Tamar?
(2) Had David punished Amnon, how might things have been different?
(3) Why did David do nothing to punish Amnon for his misdeeds, yet exile Absalom for his? Why do you think he reacted to his two sons differently?
(4) David eventually gave in to Joab’s pressure and agreed to let Absalom return. But then he refused to see him. Why do you think he did this?
You and your companions have just survived the crash of a small plane. Both the pilot and copilot were killed in the crash. It is mid-January, and you are in Northern Canada. The daily temperature is 25 below zero, and the nighttime temperature is 40 below. There is snow on the ground, and the countryside is wooded with several creeks crisscrossing the area. The nearest town is 20 miles away. You are all dressed in city clothes appropriate for a business meeting. Your group of survivors managed to salvage the following items:

- a ball of steel wool
- a small ax
- a loaded .45-caliber pistol
- a can of Crisco shortening
- several newspapers (one per person)
- a cigarette lighter (without fluid)
- an extra shirt and pair of pants for each survivor
- one quart of 100-proof whiskey
- a compass
- family-size chocolate bars (one per person)

Your task as a group is to list these ten items in order of importance for your survival. List the uses for each. You must come to an agreement as a group.

Chapter 1: Don’t Expend Your Energy Chasing after Foolish Things

Read my advice in Proverbs 31:2-3. My first word of advice to my son was to avoid wasting his time on things that will only sap his strength, such as women. Women are good, of course. I am a woman. But my son must avoid obsessing over them and accumulating them and wining and dining them. Women can be distractions, and a good ruler must not be distracted.

I realize that you, dear reader, might not be distracted by women. However, like everyone, you might deplete your strength on things that are a waste of time. Identify those distractions. How can you work to remove those distractions from your life?


• Who was the dummy?
• How did he fail to follow my advice?
• What were the results?
• Discuss how you can avoid making the same mistakes.

Chapter 2: Don’t Let Your Obsessions Consume You

Read my advice in Proverbs 31:4-7. Alcohol can create problems for those who are running a kingdom. Who wants a drunk for a king? The wisdom of my advice is obvious, but it goes deeper than alcoholism. We can be so consumed by an addiction or an obsession that we end up making horrible decisions that create injustices for others.

I’ve received a few negative reviews regarding my other advice (vv. 6-7). Some have accused me of condoning alcohol abuse for those in poverty. That was certainly not my intent! What I meant was that it is the king’s responsibility to comfort those who suffer. In our day, alcohol could provide relief from physical and mental suffering. You, my dears, have many resources we didn’t have: medications, psychological counseling, shelters, and food closets. Use them well to ease the suffering of others.

Read the story of a dummy who didn’t follow my advice: 1 Kings 21:1-16.

• Who was the dummy?
• How did he fail to follow my advice?
• What were the results?
• Discuss how you can avoid making the same mistakes.

Chapter 3: Speak Out against Injustice

Read my advice in Proverbs 31:8-9. Some think the kings of Israel had complete dominion over the people, but that is not so. Look at Deuteronomy 17:18-20. The king must be the supreme keeper of God’s law. He is not above it; on the contrary, he is supposed to uphold it by enacting justice.

So I told my son he must speak and not be silent in the face of oppression and poverty. He must speak out for the rights of others, especially for those who are voiceless.


• Who were the dummies?
• How did they fail to follow my advice?
• What were the results?
• Discuss how you can avoid making the same mistakes.