

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE TEMPTATIONS OF THREE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IN THE SCRIPTURES

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INTRODUCTION

Dozens of books line the shelves of libraries and bookstores offering advice to the woman who desires to grow as a leader. They cover such topics as discovering one's strengths, pinpointing weaknesses, and communicating effectively – all-important issues that can help a woman become a more effective leader. However, despite the abundance of available advice, few address the common temptations that every leader faces that can potentially destroy effectiveness. Surrendering to these temptations nearly guarantees a leader's downfall, and can lead to lifelong regret. To prevent this downward spiral, it is imperative that those who desire to lead with excellence examine the mistakes of men and women from the past, and learn from them. There are many men in the Scriptures who fell to temptation and offer leadership examples. However, this paper will concentrate on women in the Scriptures who offer leadership lessons for today.

Three of the earliest women leaders mentioned in Scripture faced temptation, fell, and lived to regret their decisions. Eve listened and believed the father of lies, paving the road toward sin. Miriam arrogantly dared to question her brother's authority. Sarah abused her position of influence and tried to seize control from God. Each woman faced grievous consequences because of her sin.

By studying the mistakes these Old Testament women made, and the consequences they felt, today's woman in leadership will be able to recognize how these temptations occur even

today. She will then be better equipped to avoid common enticements, and, as a result, become an even more effective leader.

PART 1

EVE'S PROGRESSION TO SIN

Eve's entrance into the world was unique, unlike any of the generations of women following her. Created divinely through the careful fashioning from Adam's rib, she lived in a perfect world of freedom, love, and peace. Few rules were set in place, making life a wonderful adventure, surrounded by the evidence of God's creative glory. Eve's full access to this amazing world was no doubt a source of great joy. The woman placed in the Garden of Eden enjoyed liberties successive generations would never experience. Imagine walking uninhibited through the land, unafraid of the powerful animals and wild creatures. Walking and talking daily with the Creator, Eve experienced God's perfect design for human beings.

Not only did Eve enjoy freedom, she also enjoyed leadership alongside her husband. God gave Adam and Eve authority to rule over the earth and "over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen. 1:28).¹ The Lord clearly gave authority to both the first man and woman, along with His blessing. God's original divine plan allowed a woman to share mutual authority and leadership with man.²

Adam and Eve were free to eat anything they desired from the trees and shrubs, with the exception of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Eating from the forbidden tree would result in death, the Lord plainly declared to Adam (Gen. 2:17). In this perfectly created

¹All Scripture references and quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

²Deborah Gill and Barbara Cavaness, *God's Women Then and Now* (Springfield, MO: Grace & Truth, 2004), 42.

world, disobedience to the Almighty God would seem unlikely. Yet a tiny seed of doubt was all it took to lead to the sinful act of disobedience.

Working through the serpent, Satan openly questioned the Word of God, inviting Eve to do the same. Satan disputed God's declaration, replacing the consequence of sin with the possibility of being like God. The first woman leader fell to temptation, and chose to act willfully against her Maker. Eve sinned, ate the fruit, and shared a piece of the fruit with her husband, who also sinned against God. The consequences of this act of disobedience occur even today. For Eve and the women following her, childbirth would now bring pain; for Adam, work became laborious and difficult. Another consequence changed the dynamics of their previous mutual authority. Eve's desire would be for her husband, who would rule over her. The sin of the first couple, then, led to male domination of women. Even today, many cultures view women in a demeaning way, as being inferior to men. The sin of Adam and Eve corrupted God's plan of perfect companionship into a plan of submission.³

Eve progressed through definite steps to reach the point of sin. First, Eve listened to the voice of Satan. Allowing Satan to plant a seed of doubt, Eve considered an alternative to God's truth. Second, Eve viewed the fruit, and saw that it was good and pleasing to the eye. The appetite for pleasure lured her to surrender to fleshly appetite. Third, Eve allowed her desire to be more like God to lead her to sin against God. Like Eve, leaders today face similar temptations to make decisions based on listening to wrong voices, desiring what is pleasurable to the flesh, and hungering for positions of greater authority, which can lead to making poor moral choices.

To counteract this, those in leadership must first learn to discern, and then choose to listen to God's voice, rather than the voice of the deceiver. Satan cleverly disguises his voice to

³Deborah Gill and Barbara Cavaness, *God's Women Then and Now* (Springfield, MO: Grace & Truth, 2004), 42.

mimic intelligence, planting seeds of doubt. It is vital that leaders consult God's Word to discern the real voice of truth and silence the voice of doubt, skillfully employed by Satan.

A second step in Eve's downfall was giving in to pleasure. When Eve saw that the fruit looked good, she ate it. The Scriptures state that other trees in the garden were also pleasing and good for food (see Gen. 2:9). Eve's palate enjoyed the abundant cuisine provided by God in the Garden of Eden. When confronted with what she did not have, she desired the forbidden, mistakenly believing that her current provisions were not enough. This deceptive belief crops up among today's leaders as well. God provides both physical and spiritual nourishment. Believing that He withholds something better does not align with the Word of God. The Lord promises to satisfy desires with good things (see Ps. 103:5) and meet every need (see Phil. 4:19).

The final step on the path of temptation was Eve's desire to obtain a powerful position, equal with God. Satan told Eve she would receive the knowledge of good and evil if she disobeyed the Lord's command. Leaders today also face the temptation to make decisions based on the promise of gaining more status and power. The more knowledge gained, the more the leader feels powerful. The path then leads to acting independently of God, and making wrong choices. Paul admonished the saints to have the same attitude as Christ, who "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped" (Phil. 2:6). Eve's temptation still resonates today: to obtain more knowledge and power in order to gain status in a world that idolizes such a leader. With a right perspective, the Christian leader will humble himself or herself under the authority of God, following the example of Jesus. Doing so will safeguard the leader from falling to many of the temptations Eve succumbed to in the Garden.

PART 2

MIRIAM'S JEALOUSY AND PRIDE

Miriam exhibited leadership traits from an early age. Keeping an eye on her brother's basket floating in the Nile, Miriam carefully guarded Moses. When Pharaoh's daughter found the baby, Miriam quickly stepped forward and offered assistance. Her ingenious proposal would place Moses back in the arms of his own mother. Miriam responded quickly and decisively in a precarious situation.

The next biblical reference to Miriam identifies her as a prophetess (see Ex. 15:20). Prophetesses were leaders in Israel who proclaimed the will and purposes of God.⁴ Miriam the prophetess led the women in singing of the glory of God displayed at the crossing of the Red Sea. With tambourine and dancing Miriam sang praises, as recorded in Exodus 15:21. She served as a leader among the Israelites and women.

Miriam was probably at least ninety years old when the Israelites crossed the sea. However, age does not guarantee leadership maturity. After Moses married a Cushite woman, Miriam and her brother Aaron began to oppose Moses (Num. 12:1). Using the marriage as an excuse, Miriam and Aaron questioned Moses' leadership ability. Moses was extremely humble – in stark contrast to Miriam (see Numbers 12:3). Miriam submitted to the temptations of jealousy and pride, resulting in punishment. The Lord's anger resulted in her contracting leprosy. After

⁴Herbert Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 112.

seven days' confinement outside the camp, Miriam returned to the Israelites without further mention of her leadership in the Scriptures.

As Miriam's example shows, leaders must carefully guard against the twin temptations of jealousy and pride toward others in authority. Ezekiel advises leaders to turn away from all offenses, so that sin will not lead to their downfall (see Ezek. 18:30). The Lord clearly hates pride and arrogance (see Prov. 8:13), and allows a leader to be disciplined, if necessary, to wipe this sin from his or her life. A leader's removal from authority purposes to realign the leader's heart to humbleness, ridding the stronghold of pride from the soul.

There are two types of pride, mentioned in the Scriptures, that are permissible in a leader's life: the pride in humble circumstances (see James 1:9), and the pride of carrying one's own load, without comparison to others (see Gal. 6:4). The Lord considers these types of pride admirable. Leaders should learn from Miriam's example and turn away from any other form of pride, allowing the Lord to bless their humility and exalt them at the proper time.

PART 3

SARAH'S TEMPTATION TO SEIZE CONTROL AND ABUSE

Abraham's assets included an abundance of livestock, silver, and gold (see Gen. 13:2). His assets were considerable in his day, gaining him recognition as a mighty prince (see Gen. 23:5). As Abraham's wife, Sarah enjoyed the status of princess. Even the root of Sarah's name means "to rule."⁵ Her descendants, listed in the genealogy of her grandson, Esau, show a royal

⁵Herbert Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 156.

heritage as kings (see Gen. 36:31-40).⁶ Sarah, the mother of future nations and kings (see Gen. 17:16), was considered a leader and had great influence in her day.

Unfortunately, Sarah was not immune to temptation. Leaders may choose to use their influence to hinder God's plans. Abraham and Sarah were promised a child who would produce generations of descendants. As Sarah surely passed through the woman's menopausal journey, she began to doubt the Lord's ability to give her a child. The physical evidence of Sarah's aging body diminished her hopes of ever giving birth to a child of her own.

Impatient with God's timing and doubting His promise, Sarah took matters into her own hands. Sarah gave her maidservant, Hagar, to Abraham in hopes of producing an heir. Sarah acted upon her belief that God was not doing His job. Her decision to do the Lord's work for Him resulted in later heartache.

Waiting on God can be difficult for leaders. By their very nature, leaders thrive on action; the act of waiting can run counter to their instincts. Leaders are generally doers, used to taking decisive action to resolve ministry and organizational issues. Mistaken thinking can lead the leader to conclude that God put him or her in a leadership position solely to get a job done. When called upon to wait, allowing the Lord to accomplish His purposes, the impatience level rises, and the leader falls prey to seizing control from God.

Holding steadfastly to God's promises can be difficult, but the Lord promises to bless those who wait patiently. He longs to show His graciousness and compassion to those who wait (see Isa.30:18).

⁶Ibid.

Once Sarah realized the error of her decision, she mistreated the very woman whom she once thought held the answer. As Hagar's pregnancy became evident, Sarah abused her own authority, causing Hagar to flee to the desert.

When those in authority mistreat others under their leadership, their followers may withdraw from the leader. Followers retreat through physical or emotional withdrawal, resulting in the leader's lack of influence. The leader may erroneously assume that mistreatment produces effective control, without considering God's Word. In Ezekiel 34, the Lord rebuked Israel's shepherds for their harsh and brutal treatment of His flock. The flock scattered, becoming prey to other nations. The harsh treatment did not go unpunished. The Lord held the shepherds accountable and removed them from leadership.

Jesus provided the perfect example of the right approach for the one in leadership. He humbled Himself to wash the feet of those who served with Him, as well as to give Himself as the ultimate sacrifice on the cross. Christ instructed His disciples to be a servant to those they led (see Matt. 20:25). One of Christ's disciples later wrote further instructions to leaders, instructing them to lead with humility, be an example to the flock, and not lord their authority over others (see 1 Pet. 5:3, 5). The servant leader has much greater impact than the abusive leader. Servant leadership produces a harvest of loyalty and excellence throughout the ministry and organization.

CONCLUSION

As observed, three women leaders mentioned in the earliest pages of the Scriptures demonstrate the consequences of ill-fated decisions. Today's woman in leadership can learn from their mistakes, avoiding the same temptations and reaping a more positive outcome.

The sin of Eve teaches the woman to attune her ear toward the voice of her Creator, straining to drown out the volume from competing voices. The Father's still, small voice will guide as one seeks to obey His laws alone, reaping abundant blessings for the obedient. The leader also observes the consequence of giving in to desire and striving for more power, as demonstrated by Eve.

Miriam demonstrates the consequence of pride in the life of a leader. Humility must be an integral part of a leader's character. Without it, the leader may be tempted to question and confront superiors in a prideful way, which quickly starts one toward a downward spiral. The leader loses credibility and influence, and may face humiliating consequences.

Finally, the fallout from Sarah's lack of patience can teach leaders much about the importance of waiting on God. God will never forsake His promises. Although waiting can be difficult, trusting the Lord's timing and treating others with a servant's heart will result in devotion and allegiance from those the leader serves.

These common temptations lure leaders from generation to generation. Awareness and knowledge of the bait used by Satan will help the leader withstand temptation and overcome victoriously, serving and glorifying God.

SOURCES CONSULTED

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