



THE SAVIOR'S RESPECT FOR Women

By Robert and Marie Lund

In a day when women were generally treated as inferior, John's Gospel reveals that Jesus Christ treated women with compassion and respect and that, as Elder James E. Talmage (1862–1933) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles stated, “the world's greatest champion of woman and womanhood is Jesus the Christ.”¹

This article focuses on the following women in the Gospel of John: (1) Mary, the mother of Jesus (see John 2:1–11; 19:25–27); (2) the Samaritan woman at the well (see John 4:4–30, 39–42); (3) the woman taken in adultery (see John 8:1–11); and (4) Mary Magdalene (see John 20:1–18). Although the life experiences of these women ranged widely, John highlights the Savior's understanding of the varying circumstances of their lives, and he records the blessings that came to each woman because of her faith in Jesus Christ.

By studying Christ's interactions with women in the book of John, we can better understand our potential relationship with Him.

Mary's Faith Preceded the First Public Miracle

John introduces the reader to Mary early in his Gospel. His account of Jesus Christ's first public miracle at the wedding in Cana contains a tribute to Mary's faith.

Mary's position at the wedding was likely one of responsibility.² When the guests "wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine" (John 2:3). This passage suggests that when Mary turned to Jesus Christ for help, she may have been respectfully expecting a miracle.³

In response, Jesus Christ said, "Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come" (John 2:4). In Joseph Smith's inspired rendering of this verse, the Savior asks Mary what she wants Him to do and promises to do it.⁴ The title *woman* may sound harsh and disrespectful to a modern reader; however, its use here by the Savior was likely meant to convey the opposite meaning.⁵ One scholar explains, "'Woman,' or, rather, 'Lady,' is in Greek a title of respect, used even in addressing queens."⁶ It was as though He said to His mother, "My lady, whatsoever you ask of me in faith, I will grant it unto you." This account shows that the Savior was interested in the routine pressures that women faced. Jesus Christ honored His mother by offering to help her with her burdens and responsibilities.

The account then records Mary's continued faith as she directed the servants to obey Jesus Christ: "Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it" (John 2:5). The water pots were filled, and the Savior turned the water into wine in response to Mary's request to help provide for the guests at the wedding. What a beautiful lesson we learn from Mary: when in need, seek after and trust in Jesus Christ, who has all power. Like Mary, Latter-day Saint women today can rely on Jesus Christ in faith when they are feeling overwhelmed with their responsibilities.

This brief account not only teaches the power of Mary's faith but also confirms Jesus Christ's true identity as the Son of God through His first public miracle. The next woman John introduces to the reader is the woman of Samaria.



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Jesus Christ Showed Respect for a Woman from Samaria

The account in John 4 attests to Jesus Christ's respect toward all women, regardless of their nationality or religious background. Some Jews viewed the Samaritans as "more unclean than a Gentile of any other nationality"⁷ and shunned interactions with them. Not only did Jesus Christ set aside the traditions of the day, but Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has acknowledged the honor the Savior bestowed upon this woman: "The first time the Lord acknowledged Himself to be the Christ, it was to a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well."⁸

After traveling in the heat of the day, Jesus Christ stopped to rest and obtain water. The Savior initiated the conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well by asking for a drink. Gradually, through the conversation, she gained a testimony of His divinity. John records that she first addressed Jesus as "a Jew," then "Sir," then "prophet," and finally as "the Christ" (see John 4:9–29). Her increasingly respectful choice of titles indicates that she developed faith in Jesus Christ and was converted.

The Savior taught her that He had "living water" (John 4:10) and that those who drank from it would never thirst. Puzzled, the woman inquired further. Jesus Christ then revealed the Samaritan woman's past life and her present sinful relationship. Although she may have felt embarrassed, perhaps she also felt that Jesus Christ spoke with respect, because she thoughtfully responded, "Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet" (John 4:19). Her sins already revealed, with nothing left to hide, the woman exercised faith in Jesus Christ as He taught her. One of His responses can be a key to gaining salvation: "Woman [or, my lady], believe me" (John 4:21).

Because of her faith, the Samaritan woman received a witness from the Spirit and desired to testify that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah. Leaving her water pot (symbolic of her worldly possessions), she went to the city and proclaimed, "Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" (John 4:29).

Becoming an instrument in God's hands, the Samaritan woman's faith and missionary zeal helped soften the hearts of others to accept Jesus Christ.

By featuring this experience, John shows that the Savior is aware of women and knows the details of their lives. Furthermore, He respects all women regardless of their background. For women who don't feel that they have a relationship with Christ or feel like an outcast in their own society, this account shows that Jesus Christ knows each woman's challenges and can accept and lift her. John's Gospel emphasizes this point by teaching about Christ's compassion for the woman caught in adultery.

Jesus Christ Showed Compassion for the Woman Taken in Adultery

John 8 contrasts the ruthless treatment of the woman by the Pharisees with the gentle respect and compassion that Jesus Christ showed her. Perhaps in an attempt to allow the Pharisees to realize and retract their harsh treatment of the woman, the Savior "stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not" (John 8:6). The act of "writing on the ground was a symbolical action well known in antiquity, signifying unwillingness to deal with the matter in hand."⁹

Nevertheless, the scribes and Pharisees continued to pester Jesus Christ and embarrass the woman. Out of compassion for the woman, Jesus "lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground" (John 8:7-8). Standing exposed and self-condemned, the accusers one by one shamefully filed out, leaving only the adulterous woman to face Jesus.

To her credit, the woman stayed at the side of Jesus Christ instead of fleeing. She likely felt lifted and strengthened by the respect with which Jesus treated her. He asked, "Woman [or, my lady], where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:10-11).¹⁰



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Again, John's Gospel testifies that Jesus Christ treated women with compassion and respect, regardless of their sins. Inasmuch as all have sinned, we can gain great hope from the example of this woman who exercised faith in Jesus Christ. Just as the Savior showed empathy to this woman under troubled and distressful circumstances, He comforted Mary Magdalene when He found her in tears at the garden tomb.

Mary Magdalene Was Chosen as a Witness of the Resurrected Christ

John is the only Gospel author who identifies the first person to see the resurrected Lord, showing that valiant and capable women can receive great spiritual manifestations. John records, "The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre" (John 20:1). Seeing that the stone was taken away, Mary ran to obtain help and to alert the Apostles that Jesus's body was missing. She found Peter and John, who ran to the sepulchre and found only the burial clothes. Then the two Apostles left, leaving Mary alone at the garden tomb.

Mary was weeping in the garden by the sepulchre: the thought of not knowing what had happened to the body of the Lord may have overwhelmed her. Although the Savior appeared and spoke to her, she did not initially recognize Him. But then "Jesus saith unto her, Mary" (John 20:16). Something caused her to know that it was her Savior. "The recognition was instantaneous. Her river of tears became a sea of joy. It is He; he has risen; he lives."¹¹ After witnessing the resurrected Lord, Mary was asked to testify to the Apostles that He was alive.

Although the disciples were initially skeptical (see Luke 24:11), Mary's witness must have had some impact. Later, the disciples were gathered to discuss the events of the day, likely pondering the testimony of Mary, when Jesus "stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you" (John 20:19).



This experience emphasizes Jesus Christ's high regard for women, because Mary Magdalene was chosen as the first person to witness and then be commissioned to testify of the resurrected Savior. The Lord continues to rely on women in our day to stand as witnesses of Him. Elder M. Russell Ballard has declared, "Our dispensation is not without its heroines. Countless women from every continent and walk of life have made dramatic contributions to the cause of Christ. . . . My question is, 'Will you be one of those women? And will you men who hold the priesthood answer the same call?'"¹²

We Can Follow Their Example

Through faith in Jesus Christ, we can follow the example of these women in the writings of John. We can trust that the Savior understands the routine pressures of our lives and can help carry our burdens. We can believe Jesus Christ will lift us notwithstanding our transgressions. In addition, we may know that Christ can succor us in our deepest sorrows, sufferings, and anguish. ■

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NOTES

1. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 3rd ed. (1916), 475.
2. See Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (1965–73), 1:135.
3. See James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 145.
4. See Joseph Smith Translation, John 2:4 (in John 2:4, footnote *a*).
5. See James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 144–45.
6. In J. R. Dummelow, ed., *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (1909), 778.
7. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 172.
8. M. Russell Ballard, "Women of Righteousness," *Ensign*, Apr. 2002, 66.
9. In Dummelow, ed., *Commentary*, 788–89.
10. The Joseph Smith Translation adds that from that moment on, the woman glorified God and believed in Him (see Joseph Smith Translation, John 8:11).
11. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah*, 4 vols. (1979–81), 4:263.
12. M. Russell Ballard, "Women of Righteousness," 69–70.