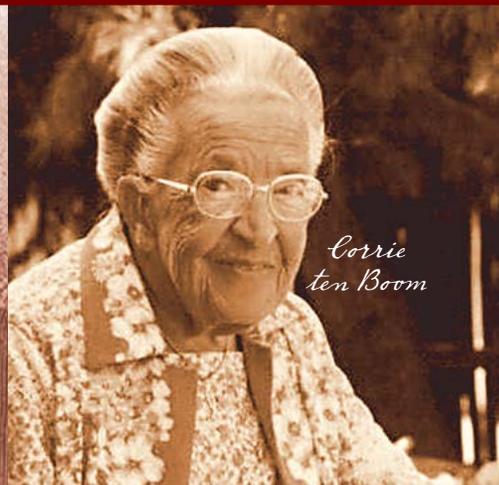


*Ruth Bell  
Graham*



*Susanna  
Wesley*



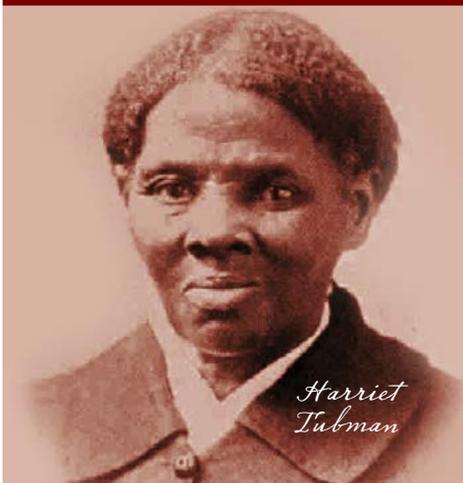
*Corrie  
ten Boom*

# 50 WOMEN

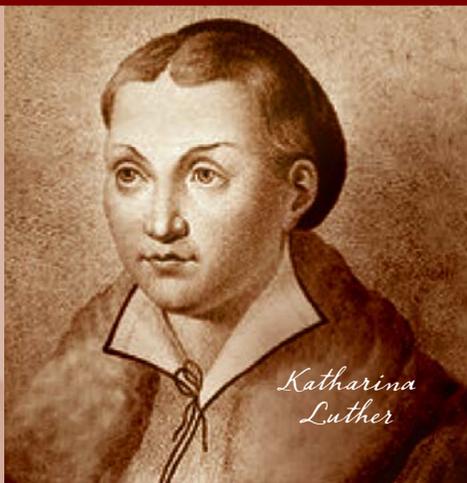
## Every Christian Should Know

5 SESSION STUDY GUIDE

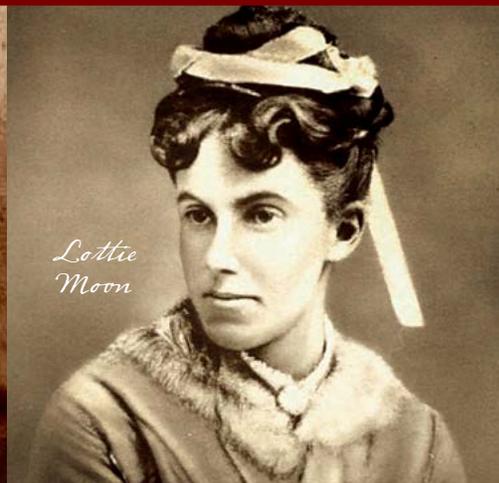
LEARNING FROM HEROINES OF THE FAITH



*Harriet  
Tubman*



*Katharina  
Luther*



*Lottie  
Moon*

“Rich in inspiration and information.”—WARREN W. WIERSBE

MICHELLE DERUSHA



# 50 Women

## Every Christian Should Know

LEARNING FROM HEROINES OF THE FAITH

5 SESSION STUDY GUIDE

Michelle DeRusha



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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



## INTRODUCTION

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The problem with history is that we often assume it doesn't apply to us.

When I began to research and write *50 Women Every Christian Should Know*, I knew the stories of these women would be fascinating, but I didn't expect them to impact my twenty-first-century life. I expected to be informed and educated, and perhaps even entertained, but I didn't expect these women, most of whom have long since passed on, to have the power to change my life. I assumed this book and these women were merely history and simply not applicable to me.

And I was wrong.

In the process of researching and writing this book, I discovered that although we are separated by time, geography and circumstances, the stories of these women are our stories, too. We share similar battles; similar grief, doubts, and questions; similar joys.

In short, I observed my own struggles, flaws, desires, and joys reflected in these stories and in these women's lives. I finally began to understand that these women are not only our heroines, they are also our mentors, our teachers, and our sisters in faith.

These fifty women, though relegated to the pages of history, can teach us valuable lessons about faith, obedience, service, and calling—lessons we can apply to our own twenty-first-century lives, right here, right now.

Let's listen closely to what these women have to say. Let's learn from them and from each other as we study their lives together.

### *A Few Notes about How to Use the Study Guide*

This study guide is intended as a companion to the book *50 Women Every Christian Should Know: Learning from Heroines of the Faith*. Ideally participants in your small group or class will each have their own copy of the book and will read the chapters designated for each session. While it's not necessary that each participant have a copy of this study guide (the facilitator can lead the group discussion by utilizing this guide), if possible, it would be beneficial for participants to have a copy of this guide in hand in order to take notes, brainstorm answers to the questions, and explore the themes more deeply on their own. Please consider printing or making copies of this guide for each member of your group.



## ***Session Format***

This study guide is divided into five sessions, each with its own theme based on specific chapters from *50 Women Every Christian Should Know*. The accompanying chapters in *50 Women Every Christian Should Know* are clearly noted at the beginning of each session. Please encourage your group members to read those chapters prior to attending each session.

Each session in the study guide includes the following components:

**Introduction** – A short essay introducing the theme of the session, which can be read aloud or summarized by the facilitator at the start of each session.

**Conversation Starters** – A selection of questions related to the session’s theme and aimed at encouraging conversation and input from each participant.

**Discussion Questions and Bible Study** – A selection of questions related to the women highlighted in that particular session, prompting discussion of what we can learn today as well as a discussion of select Bible verses that support the session’s theme.

**Closing Prayer** – A prayer based on the week’s theme that can be read aloud at the close of each session.



# SESSION ONE

## WHEN “NO” OPENS THE WAY TO A BIGGER “YES”

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JOSEPHINE BUTLER (CHAPTER 25), MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE (CHAPTER 36),  
GLADYS AYLWARD (CHAPTER 42), RUTH BELL GRAHAM (CHAPTER 49)

We can see now the wisdom of God in allowing us  
to wait so long for the victory.

– *Josephine Butler*

Make the least of all that goes and the most of all that comes.

– *Ruth Bell Graham*

### *Introduction*

What do an advocate for prostitutes in Victorian England, an African-American educator, a missionary in rural China, and the wife of a world-famous evangelist have in common? The answer: perseverance and trust in the face of what seemed like a definitive “no” from God.

Josephine Butler, Mary McLeod Bethune, Gladys Aylward, and Ruth Bell Graham each faced a substantial road block in their calling. Each of these women heard an answer that sounded a lot like “no” at a key point in the journey. But for each of these women, those obstacles—the “no” they heard—turned out not to be a closed door, but a gateway into a bigger “yes” from God.

Josephine Butler advocated for the civil rights of some of the most maligned and marginalized women in Victorian England for *seventeen years* before her work was successful. Later she admitted she was able to “see the wisdom of God in allowing us to wait so long for the victory.” God’s vision, it turned out, was much bigger than her own.

Mary McLeod Bethune set her heart on serving as a missionary in Africa, only to be told by the mission board that “there were no openings for ‘Negro missionaries’ in Africa.” Rather than succumb to bitter disappointment and defeat, Bethune shifted her focus to the education of African-American girls instead. She founded a school that ultimately grew into a thriving college that is still in existence today. “Africans in America needed Christ and school just as much as Negroes in Africa. . . . My life work lay not in Africa, but in my own country,” she said.



When the director of the Inland China Mission informed Gladys Aylward that she was neither smart enough nor young enough to serve as a missionary overseas, she simply shifted her approach. Undeterred, Aylward sharpened her evangelizing skills on London's street corners, worked as a maid to save money, and then purchased the cheapest ticket possible on the Trans-Siberian Railroad to China. There she founded an orphanage and dedicated the rest of her life as a missionary in rural China.

Ruth Bell Graham's deepest desire was to serve as a missionary in Tibet. She never stepped foot in that country and instead married evangelist Billy Graham. She sacrificed much in marrying a world-famous evangelist, including her privacy. Yet as her biographer noted, in ministering primarily to one, Ruth Graham ministered to the world.

It's easy to understand when God says no to half-baked or selfish plans, right? But what about the good, God-minded plans—plans like those of Josephine Butler, Mary Bethune, Gladys Aylward, and Ruth Graham? Why does it seem as though sometimes God says no to the good plans, too?

We assume that if our intentions are honorable and if we are patient and faithful, it will all work out. But sometimes our plans don't unfold exactly as we envision. Sometimes it seems like a door closes, or an obstacle stands in the way, or the path turns sharply in another direction. Sometimes we wonder why God says no to our plans.

The truth is that God's timetable is different than ours because God's timetable is eternity, while ours is finite—at least while we are here on earth. His perspective is much vaster than ours, and because of that, sometimes God asks us to wait months or even years before his plan for us is fulfilled.

We see in Scripture that God also closes doors in order to protect us from unseen dangers or to teach us valuable lessons. Sometimes he uses that period of uncertainty to grow our trust in him or to deepen our relationship with him. Sometimes he uses an unexpected turn in the path, a waiting period, or a daunting obstacle to help us identify and solidify our true calling.

In this session we'll take a look at a few key passages in Scripture in order to discern some of the reasons that God says no. We'll also discover that while God does sometimes say no, in his no there is often a bigger yes, waiting to be revealed.



## *Conversation Starters*

1. Describe a time, either in the past or the present, when it seemed like God said no to you or to something in your life.

How did you feel? How did you react? What was the outcome of the situation?

2. Describe a time in your life when God had you wait on something or when he changed the direction of your path.

What do you think God's purpose was in that waiting period or direction change?

What did you learn during that waiting period or during the time your life's direction changed course?



## *Discussion Questions and Bible Study*

1. Did you relate to any of these four women—Josephine Butler, Mary McLeod Bethune, Gladys Aylward, or Ruth Graham Bell—or any aspect of their story? Did anything in particular about their stories appeal to you or resonate with you?
2. What do you think gave these women the courage to persevere in the face of adversity—especially when it seemed like the door had firmly closed?
3. What role might grief have played in Josephine Butler’s calling? Do you think God can use our grief and suffering for a greater good?



4. How do you think Mary McLeod Bethune was able to resist succumbing to bitterness, hatred, and resentment in the face of such pervasive racism?

5. Gladys Aylward said she wasn't "God's first choice" for the work she did in China. Have you ever felt like you weren't God's first choice for a particular job here on earth?

6. Ruth Bell Graham did not live with regrets. Instead her philosophy was, "Make the least of all that goes and the most of all that comes." What do you think gave Ruth the strength to live by that philosophy?

Are you a "look forward, not backward" kind of person like Ruth, or do you struggle with regret?

- 
7. Have you ever considered that in ministering to your spouse or your family that you might, in some small way, be “ministering to the world”?

Do you ever yearn to make a greater contribution to God’s kingdom on earth than what you are doing right now?

How might you foster a greater sense of contentment and acceptance in your present service?

8. Read Exodus 13:17–18.

Why might God have led the Israelites on a longer route *around* the Philistine country rather than through it, though that way was shorter?

Were the Israelites aware of the fact that God was leading them on the longer route because he was protecting them? Did God tell his people the reason for the detour?

What might we extrapolate from this story about the reasons God might detain us, make us wait, or lead us along an unexpected path?

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9. Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them” (NLT).

Think about the stories and the lives of the four women we read for today. In what ways did God cause everything to work together for their good?

How did God use even grief, suffering, disappointment, and challenges for the good of these four women and their ministry?

How might God be using the obstacles and challenges you are facing in your own life right now for your good?

10. Read Jeremiah 29:1–13.

Why do you think Jeremiah encouraged the exiled Israelites to build houses, settle down, plant gardens, and start families in Babylon?

What did Josephine Butler, Mary McLeod Bethune, Gladys Aylward, and Ruth Graham do to “build houses and plant gardens” during their periods of waiting, uncertainty, and distress?

If you are struggling through a period of uncertainty or facing a difficult obstacle, what’s one small step you might take to keep moving forward right now?

Why do you think God had his people wait in exile in Babylon for seventy years? What was the point of the exile? Why do you think God sometimes has us wait in a period of uncertainty?



### *Closing Prayer*

Lord, sometimes we think we hear a “no” from you, and we interpret it as a road block or a dead-end. We get discouraged; we feel disappointed and frustrated by what seems to be a major impediment in our path. Lord, forgive our blindness in these moments; forgive our inability to see that you are still working in our best interests. Open our eyes, Lord, and give us the courage and foresight to understand that even when we cannot clearly see the path ahead, you are with us, both leading the way and protecting us from behind. Help us have patience and faith in the possibility that your “no” is leading to a bigger “yes” that has yet to be revealed. We ask this in your son Jesus’s name. Amen.



## SESSION TWO

### OBEDIENCE ISN'T ALWAYS CONVENIENT OR COMFORTABLE

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HARRIET BEECHER STOWE (CHAPTER 21),  
CATHERINE BOOTH (CHAPTER 26),  
IDA SCUDDER (CHAPTER 34), DOROTHY DAY (CHAPTER 41)

I have not yet been willing to be a fool for Christ. Now I will be one.

– *Catherine Booth*

It is out of our common lives, filled with ordinary actions, that we are supposed to increase in love, to become saints.

– *Dorothy Day*

#### *Introduction*

For a long time Harriet Beecher Stowe was content to write what was called “parlor literature”—light, often humorous sketches meant to entertain the literary crowd of the day. She’d found a place among the men and women who gathered in parlors to discuss literature, the arts, and culture, and she was comfortable there. That all changed when the Fugitive Slave Law was passed in 1850, and Stowe found herself incensed. As the number of kidnappings and forced re-enslavements increased daily as a result of the law, Stowe could no longer keep quiet.

To write about slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 would be a little like writing about the pro-life/pro-choice debate or the gay marriage debate today. Slavery was the hot button political, social, and ethical issue of the day. Stowe knew that to write a book like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was to step boldly into the fray, and it was not a role she embraced eagerly. Yet she wrote to her editor, admitting that while she dreaded even the thought of writing about slavery, she felt the time had come “when even a woman or a child who can speak a word for freedom and humanity is bound to speak.”

*Harriet Beecher Stowe said yes, even when she was afraid.*

Catherine Booth also stepped boldly into a role she feared. When she heard God ask her to



trust him, she obeyed, standing before a podium to do what she feared and dreaded most: preaching. To step in front of that congregation with her heart pounding and her hands trembling was an act of trust—the experience was neither comfortable nor convenient.

As it turned out, God’s timing of Booth’s foray into preaching was not an accident. Just weeks after her first speaking engagement, Catherine’s husband William fell ill, and she was faced with the formidable task of assuming his itinerant preaching duties. As she admitted later, “It was not I that did this but the Holy Spirit. With four little children . . . it looked like an inopportune time, did it not, to begin to preach. . . . I never imagined the life of publicity or trial it would lead to. . . . All I did was to take the first step.”

*Catherine Booth said yes, even when she felt unqualified.*

Ida Scudder had her life plan all worked out. She wasn’t going to serve as a missionary like her parents and grandparents; she’d seen and experienced enough of that kind of life as a child. Instead, she vowed to marry a wealthy American and settle into a comfortable, worry-free life.

But God had a different plan in mind for Ida Scudder—and in changing her life’s direction from marriage to missionary, he made her path straight toward him. God’s vision for Ida Scudder was so much bigger than the vision she’d created for herself, and when she opened herself to the will of God, she made a lasting impact on thousands. The hospital and medical school she founded in 1902 is one of India’s largest hospitals today.

*Ida Scudder said yes, even when God’s plan didn’t match her own.*

Dorothy Day was called to serve the people society considered the lowest of the low – the homeless, the alcoholics, the drug addicts, the mentally ill. When she founded *The Catholic Worker*, which began as a radical newspaper and later grew into a social justice movement, Day was criticized for serving the kind of people many others considered undeserving of help. She was accused of helping “drunks and freeloaders” and neglecting the “deserving poor.”

But Day didn’t see it that way. She believed everyone was invited into God’s grace, no matter what their status in life, no strings attached. That’s radical obedience, but it’s also an inconvenient obedience. Day regularly invited the homeless and destitute into her home, to live with her and her young daughter. They dined at the same table, slept in beds and on sofas right down the hallway, shared a bathroom and brushed their teeth at her sink. For Dorothy Day, there were no boundaries and no limitations because all were her brothers and sisters in Christ.

*When Jesus said, “Love your neighbor,” Dorothy Day said yes.*

These four women offer radical examples of obedience, but the truth is, most of what God calls us to do in our everyday lives is small and nearly unnoticeable. Yet even in the small things, God often asks us to step into places we normally wouldn’t want to step or to do things we wouldn’t typically want to do. Obedience isn’t always comfortable or convenient.

God may ask us to walk through a period of grief or suffering with a friend. He may ask us to love a difficult child. He may ask us to support a loved one who is suffering from addiction. He may ask us to forgive someone who has hurt or harmed us.

God asks us to obey his will in myriad ways every single day, knowing that obeying him will not be comfortable or convenient. He gives us a choice to obey or not. The question is, will we answer yes?



## *Conversation Starters*

1. Discuss a time, either in the past or the present, when God called you into a place of uncomfortable or inconvenient obedience.

How did you feel? How did you react? What was the outcome of the situation? Why do you think God called you to this particular place or this particular action?

2. Can you think of an occasion in your life in which you felt the Holy Spirit nudge you in a particular direction or toward a particular action, and you said no?

What might some of the reasons have been behind that decision? Have you ever looked back at that moment in regret? Did you learn anything from that experience?



## *Discussion Questions and Bible Study*

1. What challenges did each woman face in being obedient, and how was her obedience inconvenient?
2. Talk about the people who supported each of these women. How might a support system, or even the encouragement of just one person, help you answer God's call obediently?
3. Harriet Beecher Stowe was called out of her comfortable place—writing what she knew—into an unfamiliar arena fraught with conflict and controversy. How did Stowe's own personal experiences, especially her experience of grief, influence her decision to step boldly in the fray?

How might drawing on your personal experiences give you the courage to obey, even when God is asking you to do something difficult?

- 
4. Catherine Booth obeyed God's call by stepping into a situation—public speaking and preaching—that terrified her. Why do think God calls us into situations in which we feel unqualified or insecure?

Have you ever felt unqualified to serve in a particular position or situation? Why do you think God called you there, and what did you learn from the experience?

5. Ida Scudder had her life plan all worked out, but God turned that plan on its head and directed her toward a life of mission work instead. Have you ever experienced a similar (though perhaps less dramatic) situation? Has God ever redirected your path or your plans in a way you never expected?

What do you think God's purpose was in redirecting your course?

6. Dorothy Day's obedience to God resulted in an extreme transformation of her life. Have you ever felt God calling you to do something wildly radical?

If not, what do you think you would do *if* God called you to do something wildly radical?

What might cause you to hesitate to follow through and say yes?

What if God took complete control of your life and showed you exactly what he wanted you to do. How does that possibility make you feel?

- 
7. How is God asking you to be obedient right now, and what's one small step you can take this week toward saying yes?

8. Read Luke 1:26–38.

Talk about the reality of Mary's situation as a young, unwed woman who finds herself pregnant, as a virgin, with the Son of God. Can you imagine, even for a moment, how you might feel in that situation? What kinds of feelings and thoughts might Mary have been experiencing in that moment?

9. When the angel Gabriel explains to Mary how the Holy Spirit will come upon her and she will later give birth to the Son of God, Mary simply responds, "I am the Lord's servant. . . . May your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1:38).

Think of what we know about the rest of Mary's life as it is depicted in the New Testament. What were some of the circumstances in which she stayed true to this statement of trust and obedience [further reading: Matt. 12:46–50; John 19:25–27]?

10. Read 2 John 1:6. What's one practical, concrete way you can obey God's command to "walk in love" today?



### *Closing Prayer*

Gracious God, forgive us our anxiety and fear and our hesitation and unwillingness to trust and obey you. We are weak, Lord—you know that. We depend on you to strengthen and encourage us. Lord, show us all the ways, both big and small, that you would have us obey you today. Make your will known to each one of us, and give us the courage and willingness to step into both the familiar and the unfamiliar to shine your light and love on those around us. We ask this in your son Jesus's name. Amen.



## SESSION THREE

### GOD CALLS US TO SERVE RIGHT WHERE WE ARE

KATHARINA LUTHER (CHAPTER 6), SUSANNA WESLEY (CHAPTER 12),  
THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX (CHAPTER 35), CORRIE TEN BOOM (CHAPTER 39)

I am content to fill a little space if God be glorified.

– *Susanna Wesley*

In my Little Way, there is nothing but very ordinary things.

– *Thérèse of Lisieux*

#### ***Introduction***

Up to this point in our study we've talked about women who have accomplished big things in their faith and in their service to God. Gladys Aylward served as a missionary in rural China, risked her life rescuing orphans, and served as a spy in the war. Harriet Beecher Stowe penned *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one of the best-known, most widely read novels in American literature. Catherine Booth helped to found the Salvation Army, an organization that has served millions in its 150 years of operation. Together these three women alone impacted thousands of lives.

These radical, dramatic acts of obedience and service might leave some of us feeling a little less-than. Perhaps at this point you're wondering if you're doing enough in your ordinary, everyday life. Maybe your role as a mother, wife, grandmother, professional, retiree, or local volunteer seems lacking in comparison.

Put those thoughts to rest immediately. The women we'll discuss this week—Katharina Luther, Susanna Wesley, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Corrie ten Boom—are included in this book of Christian heroines to remind us of an important truth: there is more than one way to serve God.

It's easy to get caught up in the glamorous, media-worthy stories, because those are the stories that “sell.” But the truth is, more often than not God asks us to serve him and his people exactly where we are—right here, right now.

Take Katharina Luther, for example. She ran a busy household that included six of her own



children and four adopted orphans. She also managed a working farm and served behind-the-scenes as Luther's confidante and advisor. Katharina was the quintessential housewife—times ten. But the way she served was far from glamorous. Her story is not the stuff of which books are written or movies are made. In fact, if she hadn't married one of the most famous men in Christian history, we would have never heard of Katharina Luther. She served God by serving in her own household—not on another continent, not even down the street or in a local soup kitchen—but in her own home, on her own farm, and in her own backyard.

The same is true for Susanna Wesley. We would not know the name Susanna Wesley were it not for her famous sons, Charles and John. Compared to some of the other women featured in this book, Susanna Wesley served a small role, and yet she teaches us valuable lessons about the sacred work of parenting.

Thérèse of Lisieux had grand ambitions as a young child. She burned with a fire to serve God, a point she made readily clear to Pope Leo XIII when she had the opportunity to speak with him as a young girl. Even when she was finally admitted to the Carmelite order as a nun, young Therese still wasn't satisfied. She yearned to be more—a priest, an apostle, a martyr, a doctor of the church . . . anything other than an ordinary nun. Yet God had Thérèse exactly where he wanted her, and over time she learned to serve in small ways and in small acts—a practice she came to call the “Little Way.”

Although her circumstances were much different from Katharina Luther's, Susanna Wesley's, and Thérèse of Lisieux's, Corrie ten Boom is included in this week's discussion because she offers a powerful example of serving in the moment—no matter what the present moment brings. Corrie ten Boom and her sister Betsie endured unspeakable suffering in prison and in German concentration camps, yet they persevered in courage and faith, sharing God's Word and serving their “neighbors”—their fellow inmates—with compassion and love. Clearly neither Corrie nor her sister would have chosen those circumstances for themselves, but they allowed God to use them for his purposes, even in the midst of chaos, suffering, and death.

God calls some of us to serve in radical, dramatic ways and circumstances. But more often than not, he calls most of us to serve right where we are: in our own homes and workplaces, in our own neighborhoods and churches. Sometimes serving God doesn't look like much at all, at least in terms of what the world defines as success, ambition, or accomplishment. But God sees how you serve him, and every act of service, from the most radical to the smallest, seemingly inconsequential gesture, is an act of praise to him.



## *Conversation Starters*

1. Do you ever feel as though the work you are doing for God is insignificant or doesn't "count"?

Have you ever yearned to do something bigger or more radical to serve God?

Be honest (it's okay!): Do you ever feel resentful of the duties and responsibilities (e.g., family, work, etc.) that you perceive as holding you back from pursuing your heart's ambition to serve God?

2. Have you ever considered that your ordinary, everyday work might be a means for you to honor, praise, and serve God?

What might honoring and serving God right where you are look like for you at this point in your life?



## *Discussion Questions and Bible Study*

1. How did the women whose stories we read for this week—Katharina Luther, Susanna Wesley, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Corrie ten Boom—struggle with feelings of insignificance? Did any of the women seem more satisfied or content in their roles than the others? If so, what can we learn from them?
  
2. We might be tempted to diminish Katharina Luther's and Susanna Wesley's contributions to Christian history because they don't have the kind of notoriety of some of the more recognizable names in the book. Do you think women like Katharina and Susanna should be included in a book of Christian heroines? Why or why not? What can we learn from their stories?
  
3. Thérèse of Lisieux found her place in what she called the "Little Way"—in doing small, nearly unnoticeable acts of service and love for her neighbor. In fact, a saying that we often attribute to Mother Teresa actually originates with Thérèse of Lisieux: "Not everyone can do great things, but all of us can do small things in great love." How might this quote and Thérèse of Lisieux's "Little Way" offer you a new perspective or approach to your daily work?

Can you list two or three small things you could do in great love in your own everyday life?

- 
4. Sometimes God asks us to step into a difficult or challenging place or to act with courage and faith during a particularly dark time. Is there a person in your life to whom you could turn or lean on—like Corrie ten Boom leaned on her sister Betsie—for support and encouragement as you walk through a difficult time? Who might your Betsie be?

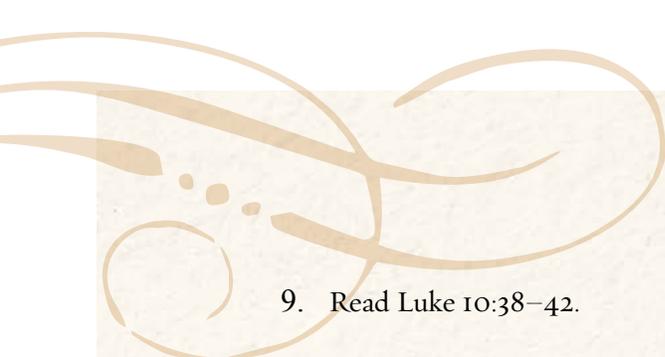
What role did community play in Corrie and Betsie ten Boom's situation?

Do you have a community that could sustain you during a difficult time? And if not, where could you look for such a community—or could you perhaps begin to grow and lead such a community yourself?

5. Despite the fact that she was raising and educating more than a dozen children, Susanna Wesley occasionally felt unsatisfied with her contributions to society. At one point when her daughter Emilia read her a story about a Danish missionary, Susanna felt less-than and lacking in comparison. What did she decide to do as a result?

Like Susanna, what small change could you make within your own sphere of influence in order to better serve your loved ones, your friends, your neighbors, or even a stranger?





9. Read Luke 10:38–42.

Who do you relate more to in this story—Mary or Martha?

Of the women we read about for today—Katharina, Susanna, Thérèse, and Corrie—which seem more “Martha-like” and which seem more “Mary-like” in their approach to service?

What do you think Jesus meant when he said Mary had chosen “what is better”? According to Jesus, what is the better thing, and why is it better?

According to the example Jesus offers in this story, how does he define service? Have you ever considered that serving God might include quiet attention, prayer, and presence in the moment?

10. What’s one small but practical way you can practice a Mary-type service in your life right now?

### *Closing Prayer*

Lord, please show us all of the ways we might serve you right here, right now, in this season of our lives. Use these small acts of service to help us grow in our love for our neighbors and for you. Lord, release us from the expectation that we need to earn your love through our own good works. Help us understand and accept in our hearts that it is your grace alone that saves us. And finally, gracious God, we ask that you help us see when listening quietly, prayerfully, and attentively might be the very best way to serve you. We ask this in your son Jesus’s name. Amen.



## SESSION FOUR

### GOD USES IMPERFECT PEOPLE

TERESA OF AVILA (CHAPTER 7), LOTTIE MOON (CHAPTER 30),  
DOROTHY SAYERS (CHAPTER 40), SIMONE WEIL (CHAPTER 43)

I do not know that I am much good at speaking about religious life,  
being a great deal stronger on doctrine than on practice.

– *Dorothy Sayers*

Even though I couldn't make myself want to become a nun, I saw that was  
the best and safest thing to do; and so, little by little, I decided to bully myself  
into doing it.

– *Teresa of Avila*

#### *Introduction*

The problem with a word like “heroine” is that it creates a separation, a hierarchy of sorts. We might be tempted to put a “heroine of the faith” on a pedestal. She’s someone to admire and honor, yes, but we might also be tempted to idolize her a bit. “Heroine” connotes someone who is above us—perhaps someone smarter or more ambitious, accomplished, or successful than we are. A heroine doesn’t make mistakes.

Or does she?

The fact is, every one of these fifty women was human, which means they were all imperfect, flawed, and fallible. They made mistakes—often big mistakes. Yet it’s their imperfections that also make these women accessible and relatable. We see ourselves in their stories, and we can learn from both their triumphs and their travails.

Teresa of Avila, for instance, was probably one of the least likely candidates for the convent. A wild child with an inclination toward vanity and materialism, she enjoyed fancy clothes, parties, her suitors, and her friends. Unlike the other nuns in *50 Women*, Teresa of Avila didn’t set out to dedicate her life to God. In fact, she ended up in the convent because her father put her there in order to save her reputation. Yet little by little, God transformed and renewed Teresa’s heart and mind. By the time she died, Teresa of Avila had founded sixteen Carmelite convents and penned



*Interior Castle*, which is still one of the most widely read Christian texts more than 400 years after her death.

The chapter on Lottie Moon is entitled “The Unlikely Missionary” for a good reason. Born on a slave-labor tobacco plantation, Lottie Moon was not only affluent, she was an agnostic who struggled with skepticism and deep spiritual doubt for many years. God transformed her doubt into determination, resulting in the birth of a missionary fund that has raised more than three billion dollars since it was founded by Lottie Moon in 1888.

Mystery writer Dorothy Sayers not only had no interest in writing Christian literature, she also harbored a dark secret for most of her life: she’d born a son as a young, unmarried woman. Her own parents never knew the existence of the child, who was raised by Dorothy’s cousin. Dorothy herself was also a bit of a diva, with a fiery temper and a stubborn streak. Yet God used her gift as a writer—and particularly her no-nonsense, pragmatic approach to retelling Bible stories—to reach a new audience of readers who traditionally held religion and faith at arm’s length.

Social activist Simone Weil was raised an atheist and struggled with religion and faith for most of her short life. She never considered herself a Christian and was never baptized in the church. Yet God used Simone Weil in powerful ways to bring attention to the plight of the working poor in France. And he continues to use her to challenge us to dig deeply into issues of social, ethical, and spiritual significance—issues that are still at the forefront of conversation and debate today.

These four women and many others in the book illustrate the fact that God can and will use each one of us in uniquely different ways – no matter our history or our current circumstances.

You might assume God won’t or can’t use you because you’re “just a \_\_\_\_\_.” Or that God can’t or won’t use you because you have an ugly past, or have made bad choices or mistakes. But these four women (and, in fact, every woman featured in this book) turn that notion on its head. No matter who you are or what you’ve been in the past, God can and will use you for the good of his kingdom.

The definition of a “Christian heroine” is far broader than we might imagine. The women featured in this book are Christian heroines, but the truth is, you are a Christian heroine too. That’s right, you—serving God in your ordinary, everyday life; in your home, your church, your workplace, your neighborhood. You who are flawed and fallible, God can and will use you . . . if you allow him to.



## *Conversation Starters*

1. Fill in the blank: Sometimes I assume God can't use me to further his kingdom on earth because I'm just a \_\_\_\_\_.

Look hard at your life and be honest: what's one way God has used you for his good in the role you wrote in the blank space above?

2. Think about one of your flaws for a minute. Has God ever used something you consider a flaw to bring good to a situation or to impact a person or a situation in a positive way?



## *Discussion Questions and Bible Study*

1. Do any of the four women we read about for today's session (or any of the women in the book) challenge your idea or definition of a "Christian heroine"? Why or why not?

Were you surprised by the inclusion of any particular woman or women in this book of Christian heroines?

2. Did you make any assumptions about the women in this chapter or the book in general that were dismantled when you read about their lives? Please give an example.
3. Lottie Moon, Simone Weil, and a number of others in the book (Mother Teresa, for example) wrestled with doubt and even unbelief on their spiritual journeys. Do you find the fact that some of these spiritual leaders struggled in their faith comforting or unnerving?

What can we learn from the spiritual struggles of these women, and how might the darker parts of these stories inform our own faith journey?



4. Teresa of Avila did not intend to live out her life as a nun in a convent, but that is the path God guided her toward. Has God ever sent you in an unexpected direction? And if yes, what were the results, and what do you think was the reason for the detour?

5. Dorothy Sayers had a no-nonsense attitude and was businesslike and unemotional in her interactions with people. How did God use those qualities in her writing to benefit her readers?

6. Simone Weil did not consider herself a Christian. She believed in God and Jesus, yet she struggled with her place in the church and with the role of the church in general. Do you think Weil should have been included in this book of “heroines of the faith”? Why or why not?

Have you ever learned something relevant to your faith from someone outside the church or from a person outside of the Christian faith? Do you think God uses non-Christians and non-believers to teach us?





10. We know God uses us in spite of our flaws. But sometimes, such as in the cases of Rahab and the four women we read about this week, God actually *uses* our very flaws—or what we might consider our flaws—to further his kingdom on earth.

How did God use Rahab's position as a prostitute and the location of her home as an advantage?

How did God use Teresa of Avila's boldness and confidence—qualities that landed her in the convent in the first place—as an advantage later?

How did God use Dorothy Sayers's no-nonsense, forthright style as an advantage when she began to write for a Christian audience?

What's one quality you might consider a flaw in yourself that God could (or already has) use to further his kingdom?

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11. Read Matthew 1:1–6. Did you learn anything about Rahab in this genealogy that was not apparent when you read her story in Joshua 2? Are you surprised that Jesus’s lineage includes a prostitute? What does this tell you about God? What might this tell you about your own spiritual journey?

### *Closing Prayer*

Lord, thank you for using these women to illustrate how you are able and willing to use each of us, flaws and all, for your glory. Please forgive us for how often we allow our fears of inadequacy and imperfection to prohibit us from fully realizing our calling. Show us, Lord, how you would like us to use our gifts to further your kingdom here on earth. Show us how even our weaknesses can be used for good. We ask this in your son Jesus’s name. Amen.



# SESSION FIVE

## SHARE YOUR STORY

ANNE BRADSTREET (CHAPTER 10), JARENA LEE (CHAPTER 16),  
AMY CARMICHAEL (CHAPTER 33), MADELEINE L'ENGLE (CHAPTER 48)

The Lord gave his handmaiden power to speak for his great name.

– *Jarena Lee*

We are so afraid to offend, so afraid of stark truth, that we write delicately, not honestly.

– *Amy Carmichael*

### *Introduction*

Have you ever listened to a friend's story and realized her words resonated perfectly with your own life? Have you ever heard someone share the deepest part of herself and realized she had described your exact feelings—feelings you'd worried were unique only to you? Have you ever read a memoir or a personal essay or even a newspaper editorial and realized the author had perfectly put your own thoughts into words?

*That* is the power of story.

Stories unite us, connect us, and create community. Stories foster compassion and empathy. Stories help us see into our own souls and help us know ourselves in new ways. We see ourselves in someone else's story, and we know we are not alone.

The stories of the women in this book are accessible because they are stories not of saints and not of perfect, Christian women, but of real women. These women were poets, preachers, journalists, teachers, writers, speakers, wives, mothers, and sisters. Many were far ahead of their time, and many faced formidable challenges on their spiritual journeys. Many of these women shared their stories publicly in their own lifetimes, in spite of fierce objections. Others penned their thoughts quietly for themselves and their loved ones only.

Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet, for example, bravely penned her thoughts in poems and journals, most of which she kept secret until after her death. These intimate writings not only offer us a rare look at the life of a woman living in colonial America, Bradstreet's honest confessions and questions also allow us the opportunity to wrestle authentically with our own faith.



Likewise African-American preacher Jarena Lee published her life story at her own expense, in spite of the vocal objections of her male peers. Today Lee's story is considered the first spiritual autobiography ever written by an African-American woman, and a rare look at the extraordinary life she led as a black, female itinerant preacher in eighteenth-century America.

Nineteenth-century missionary Amy Carmichael wrote so matter-of-factly about the atrocities she witnessed in India that her publisher returned her manuscript, citing it as too negative and discouraging. When Carmichael refused to make the text more "palatable," the publisher delayed printing the book for several years. Yet Carmichael kept writing, believing that it was important to tell the whole, stark truth in order to spur others to action.

Madeleine L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, believed her responsibility as a writer was to present reality accurately, including the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. Her job, she argued, was to draw people to the light of Christ, not by blatant evangelizing or "loudly discrediting what they believe . . . but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they will want with all their hearts to know the source of it."

You might look at women like Madeleine L'Engle, Amy Carmichael, Jarena Lee, and Anne Bradstreet and think, "My story is just ordinary, nothing special." Not true. No matter what your story is, no matter which path God has you on right now, no matter what obstacles or challenges you are facing, someone else can relate; someone else can benefit from your story and your life experience. Your story matters, and we need to hear it.

In fact, we need to hear your *whole* story. Not just the pretty, shiny, fancy parts. Not just the moments when you make the right decision, or offer grace or parent with patience or turn the other cheek, but the moments when you fail to do so, too.

Because these are the moments that make you real. These are moments that earn others' trust, gratitude, and empathy. These are the moments that assure others that you are flawed, just like they are. These are the moments that have others nodding their heads in recognition and encourage them to be courageously authentic, too.

The key to a powerful, meaningful, life-transforming story is authenticity—the willingness to let down our guard, to be brave and real, flaws and all. Our stories have the potential to impact and transform others, but first and foremost, they must be real, authentic, and true.

"If something inside you is real, we will probably find it interesting and it will probably be universal," says writer Anne Lamott. "Write toward vulnerability . . . worry about being unavailable; worry about being absent or fraudulent. Risk being unliked. Tell the truth as you understand it."

Lamott's advice is meant for writers, but it's applicable to life in general as well. Share your story—your *whole* story. Risk vulnerability. Tell the truth. Risk being unliked.

It's not easy. But if it's real, if it's the truth, it will undoubtedly be universal. And your vulnerability, your honesty, will give others permission to share their whole story, too.





## *Discussion Questions and Bible Study*

1. Anne Bradstreet stated that her intention for writing was “to declare the truth, not to set forth myself, but the glory of God.” Yet her personal writing—the poems, journal entries, and letters that were released after her death—reveals another, deeper intention: she wrote so that her children would know “what was your living mother’s mind.” Why do you think Bradstreet kept these thoughts private and shared them only after she was gone?

Do you journal? And if so, what do you plan to do with your journals? Will you destroy them, or will you allow your children and others to read them later?

What do you see as the purpose or benefit of journaling? How is journaling different from writing you might share publicly?



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5. Madeleine L'Engle's most famous book, *A Wrinkle in Time*, was rejected more than two dozen times, often because publishers felt it dealt too overtly with the problem of evil, especially for a children's book. L'Engle insisted that her responsibility as a writer was to present reality accurately, including the ugly parts. Even fiction, she argued, should "search for a deeper reality, for the truth that will make us more free."

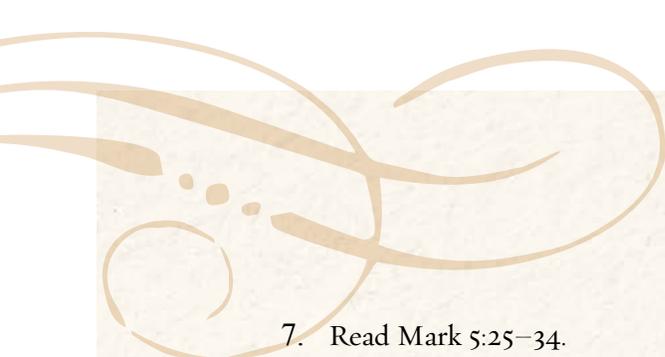
Can you think of an experience in your life in which telling the truth—even a hard truth—made you free?

Has hearing someone else's hard truth ever liberated you from a burden you had been carrying?

6. Read Genesis 3:1–13.

After Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they heard God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the evening, and they hid (v. 8). Then God called to the man, "Where are you?" (v. 9). Knowing that God is omniscient and omnipresent, we know that he must have been aware of Adam and Eve's whereabouts in the garden, as well as the sin they had committed, yet God still asked Adam, "Where are you?"

Why do you think God asked Adam that particular question? How did Adam answer? How might this biblical story be connected to our discussion of story and truth?



7. Read Mark 5:25–34.

The woman who had been bleeding for twelve years sought Jesus’s healing by touching the hem of his cloak. Jesus could have let the woman walk away unnoticed, yet he called into the crowd, “Who touched my clothes?” (v. 30). “Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth” (v. 33).

Why do you think Jesus called the woman out from the crowd when he could have simply let her walk away undetected?

Do you think the woman’s personal story—and the fact that she told the “whole truth”—is an important detail in this account? How might the woman’s truth-telling be connected to her being healed and freed from her suffering?

8. Paul tells the Ephesians, “Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body” (4:25).

How does putting off falsehood and speaking truthfully to your neighbor create connection and community within the body of Christ?

Are you ever tempted to present a “Pinterest-perfect” version of yourself, either on social media or in real life? What is fueling your desire to play the part of the perfect mother/wife/employee/friend? How might throwing off this “falsehood” encourage others in their spiritual journey as well?



9. Read Matthew 5:14–16.

How might sharing your authentic, honest story be a way to “let your light shine”?

How might hiding or suppressing your authentic story be like hiding a lamp beneath a bowl?

Have you ever considered that your story, even its ugly, flawed parts, might be a way to shine the light of Jesus into someone else’s life? Can you think of one person in your life who might benefit from hearing your story?

### *Closing Prayer*

Gracious God, thank you for giving each of us our own unique story that we can share with others to strengthen and encourage. Our stories are evidence of your light shining through us, and it is a humbling honor to be able to share the gift of your work in us with others. Lord, we ask that you give us the courage to share honestly and truthfully, knowing that even the hard parts of our stories can be used to glorify you. We ask this in your Son Jesus’s name. Amen.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MICHELLE DERUSHA is the author of *50 Women Every Christian Should Know: Learning from Heroines of the Faith* and *Spiritual Misfit: A Memoir of Uneasy Faith*. She lives with her husband and their two boys in Nebraska.

Michelle invites you to connect with her at [www.MichelleDeRusha.com](http://www.MichelleDeRusha.com).

## THE INSPIRING STORIES OF THE WOMEN WHO HELPED TO SHAPE OUR FAITH

Throughout history, countless women have boldly stepped out in faith and courage, leaving their indelible mark on those around them and on the kingdom of God. In lively prose Michelle DeRusha tells their stories, bringing into focus fifty incredible heroines of the faith. From Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Ávila, and Anne Hutchinson to Susanna Wesley, Harriet Tubman, and Corrie ten Boom, these admirable women live again under DeRusha's expert pen. These engaging narratives are a potent reminder to us that we are not alone, the battles we face today are not new, and God is always with us in the midst of the struggle.

“This book is rich in inspiration and information. Reading it opened my eyes, broadened my vision, and challenged my faith. I highly recommend it to both men and women!”

—WARREN W. WIERSBE, author and former pastor of the Moody Church, Chicago

“Fifty women who teach us that famous isn't about how many people know your name and that brave often looks like pressing on even when you're afraid. My daughter and I are both indebted to Michelle for introducing us to many women we'd never met before and are sure never to forget.”

—LISA-JO BAKER, community manager for (in)courage and author of *Surprised by Motherhood*

“In the face of some of the same questions, temptations, and doubts we encounter today, these women were pioneers. Their stories give the church of today—men and women alike—a courageous and brave example of living faith and of living out faith, the evidence of things unseen.”

—DEIDRA RIGGS, managing editor of *The High Calling* and founder of *Jumping Tandem*

“In this thoroughly researched and well-written work, Michelle DeRusha invites us into the lives of fifty women whose stories are *our* stories. This book inspired me, challenged me, and made me feel so proud to be a woman who belongs to Jesus.”

—JENNIFER DUKES LEE, author of *Love Idol*

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