

A F O U R - S E S S I O N B I B L E S T U D Y



The Evangelical Covenant Church

SEXUAL VIOLENCE UNCOVERED



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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Sexual Violence Uncovered. This four-session Bible study can help your small group or church community start or continue conversations about sexual abuse and its prevalence and reverberating effects in our society and churches.

“The large number of rape, physical assault, and stalking victimizations committed against women each year and the early age at which violence starts for many women strongly suggest that violence against women is endemic.”

“1 of 6 U.S. women and 1 of 33 U.S. men have been victims of a completed or attempted rape.”*

These alarming statistics ought to motivate us to bring change in our society and protection to the vulnerable. These instances of abuse break the heart of God and the soul of the victims. Thus, the marring of the image of God is a foundational theme that is a thread throughout this study. We use the Old Testament scriptures to reveal difficult narratives of sexual violence that are often omitted from our pulpits and small group Bible studies. We unpack five key biblical passages: 2 Samuel 11, 2 Samuel 13, Genesis 29, Genesis 16, and Joshua 2. We hope Leah, Rachel, Tamar, Bathsheba, Hagar, and Rahab will help us see sexual violence with new eyes of understanding as we explore their stories. It is our prayer that their stories will translate into your transformed vision for missional impact in your local context.

In an effort to engage various learning styles, we provide opportunities for you to read, listen, watch, and discuss in this study. Sexual Violence Uncovered also includes opportunities to apply the theology being learned to present-day scenarios for a greater depth of understanding. We offer documentaries, videos, sermons, articles, and blogs to engage.

You can add this study to a current small group or start a new group to engage this topic. October, Domestic Violence Awareness Month, is a good thematic occasion to begin this study, but feel free to begin at any time that is appropriate for your group. It can be spread out over four weeks, four months, or another iteration that works for you.

Pay attention to your self-care needs as a facilitator or participant in this study. The content can bring secondary trauma or trigger repressed emotions from unresolved sexual trauma. Pay attention and care for yourself and others as you engage these materials. If you facilitate this bible study, please be prepared to provide pastoral care and counseling or offer referral to clinical therapy as appropriate, if the need arises.

The Evangelical Covenant Church is committed to addressing sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and domestic abuse through the Advocacy for Victims of Abuse initiative. As a church we acknowledge the reality of brokenness and sin in the world, as well as the power of the community to heal brokenness through Jesus Christ. This initiative informs, educates, raises awareness, and brings theological understanding of abuse to our congregations and communities.

Join us in these efforts as you engage this Bible study series in your local church and community!

—Rev. Ramelia Williams, Director of Ministry Initiatives,
Love Mercy Do Justice

—Chris Lee, Advocacy for Victims of Abuse Advocate

*Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes, *Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence against Women: Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 1998). This report is available at: <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183781.pdf>

SEXUAL VIOLENCE: A COMMUNITY ISSUE

BY REV. RAMELIA WILLIAMS

ACTIVITIES

- Read 2 Samuel 13:1-22.
- Watch [this video](#) outlining the movement of the book of 2 Samuel.
- Consider what it means to be part of the [imago Dei](#) (image of God)?
- Read the 2 Samuel 13 Bible study.
- Listen to [this sermon](#), which highlights the reverberating effects of sexual violence on the family and community of those involved.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does the imago Dei influence our responsibility to one another in cases of sexual violence?
2. What are some of the reverberating effects of this incident of sexual violence in David's family?
3. Have you ever played a role in violence inflicted against another person (*i.e., not comforting them, standing on the side of the abuser, silencing/shaming the victim*)?
4. How do these biblical concepts influence your perspective on whether sexual violence is an individual or communal issue?
5. Have you ever heard a sermon preached on this text? What might be some contributing factors as to why it has or has not been preached in your context?

IN OUR CONTEXT

In your small group, interact with these videos and discuss how silence, power, and control, as well as the imago Dei, factor into these real-life examples of sexual violence affecting communities.

- Immigration law in Texas [silences victims](#) of domestic violence.
- Watch the docuseries [The Keepers](#) (*seven episodes*) on the story of Sister Cesnik who suspected sexual violence was happening at the school where she worked. Watch as the members of this small community all participate to protect the favored suspect and silence the whistle blower and the victims.

CLOSING REFLECTION

We are most deeply wounded by others; God has created us so that we are most healed by others.

— Dr. Steven Tracy, author of *Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse*

2 SAMUEL 13:1-22

Second Samuel 13 exposes a distressing storyline of the traumatizing reality of sexual abuse. Violent rape, protest, and silence are all part of the troubling story. Interestingly, the evil behavior of King David's family in this chapter reflects David's own previous immoral behavior (2 Samuel 11). His children become victims of his destructive life choices as they revive his transgressions with impunity.

We begin by learning about the achievements, political exploits, and miracles that accompany David's time in power. The story then transitions to ethical catastrophes that threaten to define his reign. Deceit, humility, repentance, murder, rebellion, and rape are all revealed in the narrative. The vicissitudes of life and the resounding effects of harmful decisions come to bear in King David's family. The naked truths are exposed for generations to witness and to be prepared to challenge the same immoral behavior.

This text finds the image of God being marred in David's daughter Tamar.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. —Genesis 1:26–27, NRSV

The theological concept of imago Dei expresses that we are made in the image of God; made to work alongside God and serve God's people with God's nature and plan in mind. Every human being is created in the image of

God. We are images of God, made by the hands of God. When an image-bearer of God is harmed by abuse, the very God reflected is offended by the damage to this body and soul.

Second Samuel 13:9-11, 14 demonstrates the power and control perpetuated by Amnon upon Tamar's vulnerable body and soul. This [power and control](#) are unjust examples of God's mandate for human beings to have dominion in the earth as image-bearers of God.

Pamela Cooper-White, professor of psychology and religion, writes, "All violence begins with the personal, with the I, and with a point of decision, a crossing of the line, where each of us chooses momentarily to view another living being as an It rather than a Thou. The ultimate purpose of each act of violence, each reduction of another person from a Thou to an It, is to control the other. All violence begins with the objectification of another person."¹

In verses 17, 20-21 the family immediately moves to silence the shame of this travesty against Tamar. They silence her protest of violent rape and incest in the royal family. The silent complicity of servants and the encouraged connivance of Jonadab both play a part in the collusion to make this sexual violation possible. But the loudest silence comes from King David, the one with the privilege, position, power, and responsibility to bring justice and redemption to his daughter. He positions public image and favoritism for his first-born son over abuse and violence perpetrated upon the vulnerable in his home and kingdom. He dares not punish and publicly shame his heir apparent to the throne. This communal silence ultimately grows into bitter rage that brings more harm and victimization to the family (2 Samuel 13:28).

- "Denial of abuse in the family is widespread; people prefer to cling to the image of the family as an institution representing the best of human interaction: nurturance, love, support, protection, and comfort among family members. It is painful to admit that the home [can be] a dangerous place."²
- Rev. Cooper-White takes it a step further, naming that everyone in the community surrounding the victim has a reason to deny the events that took place. A friend or church

member listening to the story does not want to imagine the possibility that it could happen to her or someone she knows. The listening ear that nods in empathetic acknowledgment due to her own personal testimony is battling her own minimization of abuse and repression of violent memories. Non-abusive men may impede an abuse testimony because it seems inconceivable and they cannot relate to the reality of what happened. The perpetrators of violence deny the abuse to escape punishment and shame.³

Sexual violence is a community issue. It is not merely an individual's predicament (2 Samuel 11-16). In this passage, we see individuals who could have advocated for Tamar and stopped the violence. Members of Tamar's community could have rightfully placed the shame of the sexual abuse upon Amnon to bring conviction that could have led to repentance. Silencing the victim, family dysfunction, privilege of the harm do-er, and community denial—these are some of the obstacles that impede holistic healing for survivors of sexual abuse and its shame.

¹Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 42-43.

²Mildred D. Pagelow and Pamela Johnson, "Abuse in the American Family: The Role of Religion," in *Abuse and Religion: When Praying Isn't Enough*, eds. Anne L. Horton and Judith A. Williamson (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1988), 2.

³Pamela Cooper-White, "An Emperor Without Clothes: The Church's Views about Treatment of Domestic Violence," *Pastoral Psychology* 45, 3-20 (1996), page 4.

UNCOVERING THE MALE GAZE

BY CHRIS LEE

ACTIVITIES

- Read Genesis 29:15–30 and 2 Samuel 11:1–5.
- Read the Genesis 29 & 2 Samuel 11 Bible study.
- Listen to [the sermon “Time’s Up”](#) by Chris Neufeld, Davis Community Church.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What unhealthy and unbiblical ideas on women and marriage do you wrestle with? Whether you are male or female, what unhealthy and unbiblical ideas do you currently hold about women and marriage?
2. What are biblical ideas that stand in contrast to the male gaze?
3. How can we better support women in the church, in their relationships, and in their vocations?
4. How has the male gaze affected our interpretations of Bible stories?
5. How do unhealthy views of gender result in environments where male leaders assault and abuse women?

IN OUR CONTEXT

1. Read [this article](#) by the *Washington Post* on Disney princesses and the male gaze.

CLOSING REFLECTION

“Teaching women how to defend themselves against male rapists is not the same as working to change society so that men will not rape.”
—bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*

GENESIS 29:15–30; 2 SAMUEL 11:1–5

In 2017, Apple Inc., the international tech company, opened its new state-of-the-art, \$5 billion, 2.8 million square-foot corporate headquarters to its employees. Boasting multiple restaurants, fitness centers, and on-site health services, Apple Park seemed to offer everything an employee might want—except childcare.

How could such a pressing need for women be disregarded? Whether it was an oversight or not, the lack of daycare puts women who work full-time and women who act as primary caregivers at an enormous disadvantage. Regarding our society’s tendency to both forget and erase women’s needs, journalist Caroline Criado Pérez writes, “The result of this deeply male-dominated culture is that the male experience, the male perspective, has come to be seen as universal, while the female experience—that of half the global population, after all—is seen as, well, niche.”¹ In other words, the male perspective, or the male gaze, renders an entire gender as tangential or even invisible.² The male gaze is evil because it lays the foundation for patriarchy, a world in which men matter and women do not. In patriarchy, women ultimately become tools that serve men—from their material needs to their sexual and emotional desires.

We see the male perspective’s devious nature throughout Scripture.³ In this Bible study we reexamine two passages often associated with sexual sin. When we notice the male gaze in these passages, we will also identify the sexual violence that often results from it.

GENESIS 29:15–30

This passage depicts Jacob’s marriages to Leah and Rachel. Jacob falls madly in love with Rachel and toils seven years for the right to betroth her, but her father, Laban, tricks Jacob into marrying her older sister, Leah. When Jacob confronts Laban about his deceit, Laban somehow manages to defuse the situation, convincing Jacob to work another seven years for the right to marry Rachel.

Whose perspective dominates this narrative? What kind of emotion defines Jacob’s love for Rachel and her

love for him? What do you think Leah's thoughts and emotions were about this situation? Scrutinizing the passage doesn't answer any of these questions. We do not know if Leah was a willing participant or not.

We do not even know how Rachel felt about Jacob. Though the women's perspectives are unclear, the text divulges the men's motivations. Verses 20-21 illuminate Jacob's mindset: "So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her. Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her.'" In two concise sentences, we see Jacob's perspective—and only his. He views Rachel sexually. This is not a mutually giving relationship because Jacob lusts after Rachel's body.

Furthermore, why did Laban deceive Jacob (vv. 25-26)? It's not explicit, but Laban's motivations may have been financial. Consider that Laban freed himself from financial responsibility for both Leah and her slave Zilpah, while also securing another seven years of labor from his nephew. In short, when we dissect the male gaze—how the men see and use women to satisfy their desires—we notice how the women are objectified. Through the male gaze, women are not treated with the *imago Dei* in mind. Instead they are exploited and violated. The male gaze naturally generates violence against women. Marriages become dangerous for women who might be susceptible to domestic violence.

2 SAMUEL 11

A similar circumstance is depicted in 2 Samuel 11, in which we see the devastating effects of the male gaze. While we normally identify David and Bathsheba's actions as adultery, we aren't privy to any of Bathsheba's thoughts or intentions. Yet David's intentions are starkly clear: "From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful" (v. 2). David's gaze is highlighted, and we can see its devious and predatory sexual nature. Bathsheba is a victim of both power dynamics—lacking the agency to say no to her king—and of sexual violence. David commits not adultery but rape. The sexual desire fulfilled here belongs to David, not Bathsheba.

How can we summarize what we've learned? The male gaze inherently distorts God's creative intent for humanity, rendering women to exist mainly for men's

flourishing, not for their own flourishing. When men believe that women exist for them and not for mutual submission and honor, sexual violence and abusive patterns easily develop. It is imperative that we see these cases not as isolated, individualistic events, but as endemic, a programming installed in the way all of us think about and understand the world.

The #MeToo movement has unmasked the evil and violence that arise when patriarchy and misogyny are unaddressed and when men alone determine the world's mechanics. It has also shown us that abuse is rampant in our churches. Recent books such as *Jesus and John Wayne*, by Kristin Kobes du Mez, and *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, by Beth Allison Barr, reveal how historically, the American church has syncretized secular beliefs on gender into Christianity, asserting that these ungodly ideas are gospel truths. The ways we theologize and understand the world have a direct correlation to the rampant sexual abuse that continues to be unaddressed. When sexual assault victims speak up and shed light on their abusers, we must center the victims, not the abusers.

In contrast to the *imago Dei*, which reflects God's worth in humanity, the male gaze seeks to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). To recover the *imago Dei* and expunge the male gaze, the church has a responsibility to renew our minds and transform our understanding of how we understand gender roles in the world (Romans 12:1-2).

¹Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (New York: Abrams, 2019), Apple Books, 32.

²The term male gaze was introduced by film theorist Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," written in 1973. Initially, the male gaze analyzed movies' depiction of women as objects and possessions from a male point of view. Now it is widely used to dissect the objectification and treatment of women by culture as a whole. It's important to note this term refers to a specific concept and does not imply that the male perspective is inherently evil!

³It is important to note that this assertion does not insinuate that there is something inherently untrustworthy or abusive in Scripture. Rather, we can simply point to the fact that the male gaze is an ethical concern that stretches across eons.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

BY CHRIS LEE

ACTIVITIES

- Read Genesis 16:1-16.
- Read the Genesis 16 Bible study.
- Read [this sermon, “The Stories We Do Not Tell,”](#) by Renata Vicente, Greater Love International Church.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How has this reflection changed your views and interpretation of this passage? How does it challenge your interpretations of other similar passages in Scripture?
2. Who are the Hagar's in your church's social location?
3. How do you think fear has affected the church's response to the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements?
4. How does intersectionality challenge and nuance our theology and understanding of Scripture?
5. What characteristics or qualities must the church embrace to combat systemic forces that perpetuate sexual violence and racial inequities against women of color?
6. How can the church be a better ally to sexual assault victims, especially those who are women of color?

IN OUR CONTEXT

1. [Watch “The Urgency of Intersectionality”](#) TedTalk, by Kimberlé Crenshaw.
2. Watch this [panel discussion, “ISBCE Dialogues: Critical Race Theory,”](#) with Emmett Price, Nathan Cartagena, and Korie Edwards.

CLOSING REFLECTION

“Faith has taught me to see the miraculous in everyday life: the miracle of ordinary Black women resisting and rising above evil forces in society, where forces work to destroy and subvert the creative power and energy my mother and grandmother taught me God gave Black women.” —Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*

“If we aren't intersectional, some of us, the most vulnerable, are going to fall through the crack.”
—Kimberlé Crenshaw

GENESIS 16:1-16

Recently, intersectionality and Critical Race Theory (CRT) have dominated conversations about racism and racial reconciliation among both evangelicals and the United States at large.¹ Although many people, including Christian pastors and leaders, misconstrue intersectionality, it is imperative to engage these tools. Though unfairly caricatured and politicized, intersectionality is in fact a legal analytical tool developed within the broader framework of CRT. Understanding this concept helps us not only to missiologically engage and become all things for the gospel (1 Corinthians 9), but also to facilitate liberation and dismantle oppressive systems for all.

Over 30 years ago, legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality in an effort to uncover the multiplying effects of race, gender, and class on women.² **She describes intersectionality as “basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these.”³** The intersections of race, gender, and class pinpoint where in society people are affected by these overlapping, compounding structures. Even in advocacy for sexual assault survivors, women of color are particularly neglected.⁴ In other words, intersectionality is like an MRI scan that identifies the specific locations in the system where inequities exist.

Intersectionality also opens our eyes to the people Jesus describes as “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40). Through the biblical lens, intersectionality can help expose unfair customs, laws, and standards that patriarchal societies have imposed upon women. It highlights the harrowing ways human evil can express itself against easily forgotten and neglected people.

For example, the story of Abraham is foundational to the overarching redemptive narrative in the Bible. Abraham's lineage ultimately produces Jesus, the incarnated Son of God, who takes away the sins of the world. However, we would be remiss to neglect the dark side of Abraham's

life. Because of primogeniture—the custom in which the firstborn son inherits his parents’ estate—Sarai was obligated to bear an heir for Abram. However, Abram and Sarai were old and still childless. Time was running out on God’s promise of children and land. So Sarai offers up her young Egyptian servant Hagar to Abram, hoping that Hagar will produce children for Abram. Then Sarai could claim Hagar’s children by Abram as her own.

Let us pause to consider Hagar’s situation through the lens of intersectionality. First, she is Egyptian, a foreigner in strange lands. Second, she is a slave, without wealth, agency, or recourse. Third, she is young and likely a virgin. While both Hagar and Sarai face inequities, Hagar is subjected to deeper levels of inequality because of her ethnic and class status, while Sarai is protected because of her privilege. Because the law allows it, Sarai gives over Hagar to Abram who rapes and impregnates her. Viewed in the context of intersectionality, verse 4 has a different meaning: “When Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.” Theologian Delores Williams asks, “Could it be that Hagar’s argument with Sarai had nothing to do with her wanting to take over Sarai’s position with Abram, but that Hagar’s resentment was because Sarai’s betrayal of her would become obvious when her pregnancy by Abram became obvious?”⁵ In this reading, Hagar’s behavior stems not from selfishness or arrogance but from resentment toward the social structures that deny her humanity. Rather than combat the system alongside Hagar, Sarai instead submits Hagar to be raped, guarding her own status as matriarch. Relegated to shame and powerlessness, Hagar chooses to run away.

In the desert, Hagar is isolated and has no one to ask for help. Amid her crisis, the God of Abraham sends a messenger, guaranteeing not only her life but also the security of her lineage. God’s actions indicate that it is not enough to merely express condolences or sympathy to the downtrodden and marginalized. They remind us that Jesus came to give us life so that we may live it to the full (John 10:10). One particular interaction is noteworthy and eye-opening. Hagar names Abraham’s God as *el roi* (Genesis 6:13), the God who sees, or the God who provides. The only other people who name God in Scripture are the patriarchs, yet in this instance, an African enslaved servant assumes the authority to do something only her masters can do. Hagar’s naming of God is a breathtaking assertion of dignity and honor,

clearly defining both the *imago Dei* within her and the truth that God’s promise of blessing is for all.

Even if society refuses to acknowledge that God’s blessings are for all, the church knows that God created all people in God’s image and likeness. The church knows that God desires all to be served and saved. Intersectionality reveals the women whom society oppresses and prevents from flourishing and the oppressive forces they must fight against daily. **While the church may not have the political authority or legislative abilities to overturn laws, we can come alongside and advocate for the people whom society has turned their backs on.**

The challenge for us today is both to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We see that systems of oppression continue to perpetuate racial inequities and sexual violence—not only across society but also in the church. We must ask whether we are content to ignore the systemic forces that trap women of color, or will we meet the Hagar’s of our world, as our God did in the desert, recognizing and sometimes even reminding them of their authority and dignity? Are we the people who belong to *el roi*, the God who sees and provides for everyone?

¹George Schroeder, “[Seminary Presidents Reaffirm BFM, Declare CRT Incompatible](#),” Baptist Press, November 30, 2020, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/seminary-presidents-reaffirm-bfm-declare-crt-incompatible/>.

²Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8.

³Kimberlé Crenshaw, “[She Coined the Term ‘Intersectionality’ Over 30 Years Ago. Here’s What It Means to Her Today](#),” interview by Katy Steinmetz, *Time*, February 20, 2020, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/>.

⁴“[Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women](#)” <https://www.nativewomenswilderness.org/mmiw>.

⁵Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 17.

SINNER OR SINNED AGAINST?

BY REV. RAMELIA WILLIAMS

ACTIVITIES

- Read Joshua 2.
- Read [this character sketch](#) of Rahab.
- Watch [this bibliodrama](#) of Rahab's story.
- Read the Joshua 2 Bible study.
- Listen to [this sermon](#) by Jen Wilkin.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Why do you think Rahab risked her life for these spies?
2. How can we make sense of Rahab's faith amid an unjust reality?
3. In Matthew 1:5 we find Jesus's genealogy. What does Rahab's inclusion here tell us about God?
4. How does this new understanding of Rahab "the prostitute" affect your understanding of other "prostitutes" in the Bible?
5. How does this new understanding of Rahab "the prostitute" affect your understanding of "prostitutes" in modern society?
6. In what way do you relate to Rahab's story?

IN OUR CONTEXT

1. ["Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich" docuseries](#) (Netflix 2020)—stories of sex trafficking survivors
2. [Jennifer Araoz's interview on the Today show, telling her story](#) of being groomed and raped by Jeffrey Epstein and his team.
3. [Learn about FREE](#), the anti-sex trafficking initiative of the Covenant.

CLOSING REFLECTION

"Rahab is not a prostitute because she chooses to be a prostitute. She is a prostitute because she is enslaved to the goddess Rahab." —*Boaz Johnson, Covenant minister*

JOSHUA 2

We have traditionally understood Rahab in the book of Joshua to be an indecent woman whose sinful ways landed her in a life of prostitution. In other circles, we have sanitized and glossed over her occupation by focusing on her redemptive act of hiding Joshua's spies. But we have probably made these claims without interrogating her context to understand why she is located on the margins socially and geographically. If we peel back the layers of her ancient context and critically consider her local setting, a deeper truth may be revealed.

A prostitute in the Exodus era of the biblical narrative would have been a victim of religious sex labor. In ancient Near Eastern religions, such as Canaanite religious practice, the name Rahab is associated with a demonic god. Priests used marginalized women and girls, christened "Rahab," as temple prostitutes to worship this god as a form of pagan religious practice. The social location of these Rahabs would relegate them to life on the margins of their community. Being named Rahab was to be destined for subjection to this systemic, institutionalized evil of religious prostitution and a heritage of generational sexual trauma.¹ This systemic injustice, instituted by kings and priests, normalized a legacy of religious sex labor and thus the commodification of sexual performance.

Like other women of her social location, Rahab in Joshua 2 would have been deemed a religious sexual slave. The tempestuous spirit of the Rahab goddess demanded a commodified offering of sexual acts performed in the temple between priests and prostitutes. Priests were entranced during this worship of pagan gods and would have sex with Rahabs. Evil spirits would possess the women who were victimized and the men who abused them in these religious ceremonies. As a marginalized sexual abuse victim, Rahab was not possessed by the love of her community; her body and life were possessed by people who marred the image of God in which she was shaped and created. The commodification of sexual acts in this biblical narrative is reflective of the

sex trafficking we see today. Women and girls on the margins are deemed disposable and thus usable for the demoralizing purposes of those with power and privilege.

Israelite scouts move toward this land full of religious relics of pagan practices. “Go and see” is the instruction they receive as they set out to explore the land of Canaan. “See” represents their posture of discovering people created in the very good image of God. This powerful command leads them to Rahab, a victimized woman whose life is transformed and restored by a God who sees beyond her destitute condition and offers her salvation.² The scouts were able to see her as God sees her. Rahab’s humanity is invaluable to the God who created her in God’s own image. But her humanity and imago Dei are abused by longstanding systems of power and injustice.

Despite the exploitation she experiences, Rahab chooses to provide refuge to the two scouts because she has heard of Yahweh. She has heard of this God who sees, the God who is near people who suffer and delivers them. Her knowledge of God’s character amid the injustices she experiences leads her to act courageously for the redemption of herself and her family.

Rahab is accustomed to bartering sex, but in this case, she opts to exchange civil disobedience for something greater than herself (verses 4-7). She operates on a higher economic and spiritual ground. She lies to the Canaanite soldiers to gain freedom. Rahab and the scouts barter life for life (verses 12-14). She discovers her worth is greater than how her body has been used, when her life is elevated to be valuable enough to be exchanged for the life of one of the beloved people of God. Rahab, a faithful woman, who becomes part of the genealogy of Jesus, foreshadows Christ exchanging his life for the life of his friends.

¹Boaz Johnson, *The Marys of the Bible: The Original #MeToo Movement* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 22-25.

²Johnson, *The Marys of the Bible*, 22-25.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE UNCOVERED

CONCLUSION

In John 8:1-11, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law devise a plan to discredit and likely get Jesus killed. Unfortunately, they also trap and exploit a woman adulterer as a part of their plan. The subtle details reveal their cunning and planning. As Jesus teaches a crowd in the temple court, the Pharisees and teachers drag the woman, who is likely naked, in front of everyone, exposing her to unimaginable shame and ridicule. They ask, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" (v. 4). Will Jesus let this woman die by following that law, or will he try to save her by refusing to obey it?

Many of us are familiar with this story and curious about what Jesus wrote on the ground with his finger. Jesus instructs the Pharisees to throw a stone, but only if they are without sin. One by one, they all leave, until only the woman and Jesus remains. Finally, Jesus tells her that he doesn't condemn her, and asks her to leave (v. 11).

Many of us might have heard a sermon or two that emphasizes Jesus's grace for this woman's sexual sins. However, these Bible studies that have uncovered sexual violence in the Scriptures might lead us to reconsider some of the dynamics in this story.

First, Jesus indeed shows grace to this sinful woman, but Jesus also defends her from evil men who expose her and coerce her into their plans. **Second**, Jesus bends down for most of the interaction with the Pharisees, averting his gaze from the woman and honoring her dignity (v. 6). We can begin to recognize that Jesus was an advocate and ally for women who have suffered from sexual violence and harassment. Be it the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-26), the woman who poured perfume onto Jesus's feet (Luke 7:36-50), or the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), Jesus comes alongside them against a society that oppresses them.

The church today is facing a reckoning. We have failed our children and women, not only because we failed to live up to God's calling to pursue holiness and love, but also because we allowed abuse and violence to pervade

the church. Instead of discipling men to respect the imago Dei in all people, we have made excuses for and protected abusers. Instead of repenting and addressing our corporate sin, we have participated in gaslighting victims and refused to believe their stories. Often, we hide behind fear and don't trust the Holy Spirit to face our corporate failures as the church.

We must do better. **Like Jesus, we must protect women and children from sexual predators. We must believe victims' stories when they break silence, restoring their dignity and honoring their voices. We must become allies and advocates, like Jesus who resisted the Empire and patriarchy, having sent out male and female apostles to build his church. We can do better, Church.** Our hope is that this Bible study, *Uncovering Sexual Violence in the Bible*, will equip your faith family to become advocates and to reprogram our churches to both proclaim the gospel and set free the captives.

RESOURCES

- [Mending the Soul](#) is an opportunity to learn about all forms of abuse, from both a theological and psychological perspective, and to heal in community with other survivors
- Article: ["Where Is God in the Midst of the Suffering of Abuse?"](#) by Steven Tracy
- Article: ["Understanding Domestic Violence."](#) by Steven Tracy
- Book: [The Dinah Project: A Handbook for Congregational Response to Sexual Violence](#), by Monica A. Coleman
- Book: [A Cry for Justice: How the Evil of Domestic Abuse Hides in Your Church](#), by Anna Wood and Jeff Crippen
- Book: [The Great Sex Rescue](#), by Sheila Gregoire
- Book: [The Marys of the Bible: The Original #MeToo Movement](#), by Boaz Johnson
- Podcast: Revelation of unhealthy church culture and teachings on masculinity and sexuality. [What is the Spirit saying to the church as you listen?](#)