

The ONE
YEAR®



THE ONE YEAR®
WOMEN
IN CHRISTIAN
HISTORY
devotional

*Daily Inspirations from God's Work
in the Lives of Women*

RANDY PETERSEN
ROBIN SHREEVES



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The One Year Women in Christian History Devotional: Daily Inspirations from God's Work in the Lives of Women

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Notes

A Note on the Research

INTRODUCTION

The news of Jesus' resurrection came first to women. And women were in the room at Pentecost—leading Peter to quote the prophetic word that “your sons *and daughters* will prophesy.” Historians tell us that the caring ministry of women helped the early church grow, even as it was being persecuted. “What women these Christians have!” exclaimed one fourth-century pagan.

Ever since, at the key junctures of Christian history, women have been there—teaching, healing, writing, praying, nurturing, inspiring, and so on. They have shared their unique gifts with the church, sometimes overcoming great obstacles to do so. This book is a celebration of their work, an examination of their faith, and a challenge to all readers.

One caution: while going through this book, you might find yourself saying, “What’s *she* doing in here?” We may have included women associated with groups or causes you disagree with, or some women you have a low opinion of. You might even doubt whether they’re really Christian.

In putting together this book, we’ve tried to identify women who have been *significant* in Christian history. They’re not perfect, and in some cases they might not even be exemplary. But we hope that our devotional writing will at least make you think, and maybe inspire you to commit yourself to God in a new way—whether following the examples of these historical women or avoiding their errors.

Let’s face it. Over the centuries there have been major disagreements among Christians over the accepted role of women. Please do not see this book as an attempt to sway you to one side or the other. We simply offer you the stories of women who have made a difference in the church and in the world, and we invite you to consider how God has worked in them and through them.

And then consider how God wants to work in and through *you*.

Randy Petersen
Robin Shreeves

JANUARY 1
ON THE MOVE

Priscilla

ACTS 18; ROMANS 16:3; 1 CORINTHIANS 16:19; 2 TIMOTHY 4:19

Moving through the New Testament, you can't get far without meeting Priscilla and her husband, Aquila. They're mentioned in Acts 18 and in three different epistles. Even more amazing, we find them in three different cities. They meet Paul in Corinth. In Ephesus, they counsel the great preacher Apollos. And when Paul writes his letter to the Romans, they're already there, hosting a church in their home.

It all proves tantalizing for a biblical detective, putting together the clues to assemble a dossier on this power couple. First, we note that they are always mentioned in tandem. Whatever they did, they did together. Then we consider their names. Priscilla ("ancient") is a noble Roman family name, and Aquila ("eagle") has ties to the Roman army. We could surmise that they had some family money, and that would explain how they had a house in Rome large enough for a church. It might also suggest that they *owned* the tent-making business that temporarily employed Paul. But that's all guesswork.

We know they were forced to leave Rome when Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews in AD 49. They resettled in Corinth, and that's probably where they became Christians. They went with Paul to Ephesus, but then it seems they went back to Rome for a time.

Travel was rather easy in the first-century Roman Empire. Roads built by the Roman army were often paved, and seas were patrolled by the Roman navy, discouraging pirates. And remember that Priscilla and Aquila made tents, something bought by travelers. It would make sense for them to travel wherever the market was good. But they seemed to be guided by a different economy: Where could they do the most good for God's Kingdom? Sometimes they needed to be at Paul's side, supporting his ministry, and sometimes they needed to nurture believers in other locations.

How many times in your life have you moved? The logistics of relocating can be stressful, but this biblical couple reminds us that God can use us wherever we go. You might think that a job or a school or a family commitment has brought you to your current home, but there's a higher purpose here. God has work for you to do.

Work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you.

JEREMIAH 29:7



JANUARY 2

TEACHING THE TEACHER

Priscilla

ACTS 18; ROMANS 16:3; 1 CORINTHIANS 16:19; 2 TIMOTHY 4:19

One of the curious details about Priscilla and Aquila is that she's usually named first. In a patriarchal culture, it was unusual for a woman to get top billing. Several theories have arisen to explain it. Was she better known among the Christians? Was he a later, reluctant convert? Or does this reflect that her social standing—from a patrician family of Rome—exceeded his?

At the very least, it would indicate that Priscilla was just as involved in ministry as her husband was, and perhaps more so. And that reveals an interesting dynamic in Ephesus when this couple confronted the preacher Apollos.

He was a star, “an eloquent speaker who knew the Scriptures well.” Apollos came from Alexandria, a center of Jewish scholarship. “He taught others about Jesus with an enthusiastic spirit and with accuracy” (Acts 18:24-25). We know he later went to Corinth, where a number of people preferred his preaching to Paul's. He had a gift, and he used it effectively.

But there was a problem. Apollos “knew only about John's baptism” (Acts 18:25). Apparently he preached fervently about repentance, social justice, and Jesus the prophesied Messiah. Perhaps he even preached about the atoning sacrifice of Christ. But the idea of the Holy Spirit indwelling believers—this was new to him. When it came to the thought of resurrection power filling the lives of Christians, well, he wasn't there yet.

Imagine the sheer gall it would take for Priscilla and Aquila to sidle up to this renowned preacher and say, “Nice sermon, but you're missing something.” Yet that is what they did. Apparently their approach was winsome enough to be accepted. Many men in that era (and ours) would find it difficult to be corrected by a woman, but perhaps Priscilla and Aquila together found a gentle way to address the issue. Apollos listened to them, and he became an even more dynamic preacher.

Should you correct every theological error you encounter? Maybe not. But can you find winsome ways to engage others in conversation about what's true? When people are presenting a partial gospel, can you gently fill in what's missing?

Paul challenges us to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Clearly Priscilla and Aquila got that message.

When Priscilla and Aquila heard him preaching boldly in the synagogue, they took him aside and explained the way of God even more accurately.

ACTS 18:26



JANUARY 3

JESUS IN THE HOUSE

Priscilla

ACTS 18; ROMANS 16:3; 1 CORINTHIANS 16:19; 2 TIMOTHY 4:19

In this age of megachurches, we often forget that the church started in people's houses. Oh, the day of Pentecost erupted with preaching to crowds, but soon afterward the converts were meeting in homes (see Acts 2:46). Throughout Acts and the Epistles, we find evidence of "house churches." There was the occasional lecture hall, but generally Christians met in rather small groups. Remember that Jesus said he would be present "where two or three gather in my name" (Matthew 18:20, NIV).

In major cities of the Roman Empire, many workers would live in tenements or shacks, but noble families would have more spacious homes. Typically the entrance to such a house would lead to an open atrium, which would be ideal for group gatherings, holding thirty, fifty, even a hundred people. The early church had a mix of socioeconomic classes: slaves, workers, public officials, and patricians. Those with bigger homes would host church meetings.

Priscilla and Aquila probably had money, whether inherited from their noble families or earned from their tent-making business. In any case, we find them hosting house churches in at least two locations—Rome and Ephesus—and maybe also in Corinth. Imagine how important this would have been for the early church—to have a home in a new community, a place to meet, a foothold.

Wealth is dangerous. Jesus often warned against trusting in money, but he also challenged us to be good stewards of what we have. This stewardship was modeled by Priscilla and Aquila, who used their substantial resources for the good of the church—supporting missionaries, hosting churches, and establishing good relationships all around.

What resources do you have, and how are you using them for God's purposes? Can you use your home for a prayer group? Could you open up a spare room for a traveling missionary? Can you use your business connections to create flexible earning opportunities for Christian ministers (as Priscilla and Aquila may have done for Paul)? Could you consider moving to a new location to start a church there (as Priscilla and Aquila did)?

Don't feel bad about what you have. Use it!

Give my greetings to Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in the ministry of Christ Jesus. . . . Also give my greetings to the church that meets in their home.

ROMANS 16:3, 5

JANUARY 4
STAND BY ME

Phoebe

ROMANS 16:1-2

Paul had just completed his masterwork, the Epistle to the Romans. This was as clear a statement of his theology as he could offer, rich with references to the Jewish Scriptures but showing a new way: grace rather than works, the life of God's Spirit rather than a law-added death. And who would carry this precious cargo to the church in Rome?

Phoebe.

Paul needed someone he could trust, someone respectable enough to be well received in Rome, perhaps someone with the resources to make that journey safely. Phoebe fit the bill, according to the two verses about her that Paul added at the end of the letter.

She lived in Cenchrea, a harbor town just east of Corinth, where Paul was at the time, so the transfer of the document would be easy. Paul called her a “deacon” of the church there (Romans 16:1). This word can be a generic reference to any servant, but it took on an official meaning in the early church that it still has today. So it's possible that Paul was just saying she served that church, but he might have been using this as an official term, presenting the Romans with her résumé. In any case, she was “worthy of honor” (verse 2).

Another fascinating word describing Phoebe in Romans 16:2 is often translated “helper.” In Greek, it's *prostatis*, literally “one who stands in front.” This is the only time the word is used in the New Testament, but elsewhere it means “defender” or even “president.” It's likely that Paul was referring to her as a supporter or patroness of his work. She “stood by him” during his ministry, or even “stood in front of him” to defend against criticism.

Where do you stand? Do you stand beside your church leaders, supporting their ministry—or do you take every opportunity to criticize? Do you stand by those people who are struggling in their faith, helping them to grow—or do you judge them? Do you stand in front of your family and friends, defending them from destructive forces—or do you sit idly by?

Maybe you could be a Phoebe.

Welcome her in the Lord as one who is worthy of honor among God's people. Help her in whatever she needs, for she has been helpful to many, and especially to me.

ROMANS 16:2



JANUARY 5

CLOTHING TIME

Dorcas

ACTS 9:36-42

Has a funeral ever surprised you? Some people live lives of such quiet devotion that no one knows how special they are—until they're gone. Then everyone steps up to tell how helpful the dearly departed soul was. "Wow," you say, as one person after another gets up to talk, "I never knew."

The funeral of Dorcas was something like that. A Christian from the town of Joppa on Israel's coast, "she was always doing kind things for others and helping the poor" (Acts 9:36). When she died, her friends sent for the apostle Peter, who was ministering in a nearby town.

When he came to the viewing, it must have been a surreal sight. The poor widows of the town had flocked to the funeral, and they had brought clothing Dorcas had made for them, which they showed Peter. These were their testaments to the goodness of this woman.

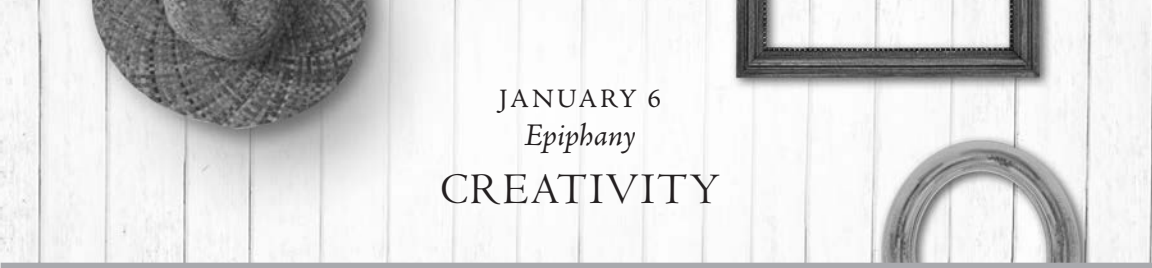
Caring for widows and orphans is an important part of Jewish tradition. In that culture, losing a husband usually meant losing one's income, and so the generous people of the community had to pick up the slack. But Dorcas had done more than merely give alms. She had created items of clothing, very personal gifts, for these needy ones. She wasn't just throwing money at the problem; she was using her creativity to get involved with people. No wonder they showed up at her wake.

Wake turns out to be a good word for it, because Peter prayed for a miracle and got one. After sending the mourners out of the room, he said, "Get up, Tabitha," using her Hebrew name. She sat up. Then he took her out to greet those who were weeping over her death.

How can you use your creative gifts to help others? Of course, creativity means more than singing or painting. It might mean sewing seams or running meetings or tending children or managing budgets. God has dished out all sorts of abilities that we use to build our own homes and careers. But every gift he gives needs to be re-gifted. We receive his love and are to freely share it with others, especially those in need. Dorcas understood this, and as a result, she touched many lives.

The room was filled with widows who were weeping and showing him the coats and other clothes Dorcas had made for them.

ACTS 9:39



JANUARY 6
Epiphany
CREATIVITY

God created. What he created is so awesome that it actually speaks to us and reveals God's existence. "The heavens proclaim the glory of God," says the psalmist (19:1). Millions of stars in the sky, the roaring ocean, birds flying in perfect formation above our heads, even the lone dandelion in the middle of a green lawn all reveal something about God to those who take a moment to look and listen.

We, too, are creative because we are made in God's image. Creative expression has always been a way for God's people to share what they know about him. Words, written by Christians through the centuries and shared with others, have helped to fuel imaginations and bring a deeper understanding of who God is.

In the 1400s, when women were routinely treated as second-class citizens, Christine de Pizan used her poetry to explore the unique traits of women as created by God. Her writings brought light to an important societal issue: the status of women, which was less than God would have it be. Christine's writing influenced her generation.

Many of the familiar hymns of the church were written by women who wanted to express their faith through words and music. When Charlotte Elliott realized that she could come to God without having to fix a few things about herself first, she wrote "Just As I Am," a hymn that a hundred years later became a much-beloved altar call song at evangelistic meetings.

The immense power of love that conquers evil is a central theme of Madeleine L'Engle's, *A Wrinkle in Time*. This twentieth-century adolescent novel has been teaching youth and adults alike about the power of love for more than fifty years and continues to be at the top of YA reading lists—ensuring that its message will be spread for generations to come.

On January 6, many Christians celebrate the magi's visit to the Christ child, often with an explosion of creativity—skits and songs in Holland, practical jokes in England, music and creative cookery in many other traditions. So if you have a poem, song, story, dance, or tweet inside you, offer it up to the Lord. The Creator of your creativity will love it.

*God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God
he created them; male and female he created them.*

GENESIS 1:27

JANUARY 7

MOTHERS KNOW BEST

Eunice and Lois

2 TIMOTHY 1:5

When they healed a lame man, Paul and Barnabas blew the circuits of the people of the backcountry town of Lystra. *Who were these wonder workers?* There was a local legend about two gods coming through in disguise, so when Paul and Barnabas displayed divine power, they were hailed as these gods. Paul had to be Hermes, the messenger, while Barnabas was assumed to be Zeus (see Acts 14:8-20).

When the apostles finally delivered their message about Jesus the Messiah, many received it in faith—including a Jewish woman named Eunice and her mother, Lois. When Paul came back to Lystra a few years later, he connected with Eunice's son, Timothy, who was probably a teenager at this point. Paul eventually took Timothy with him as an assistant (see Acts 16:1-5).

Timothy's father was a Gentile, and he doesn't seem to be a factor in this story. Was Eunice, then, a single mom? Maybe, or maybe her husband just wanted nothing to do with her religion. In either case, it would have been a challenge—eased, no doubt, by Lois's presence.

More than a decade later, Paul wrote two epistles to Timothy, by then a young pastor in Ephesus. The apostle commends Timothy's faith, which "first filled your grandmother Lois and your mother, Eunice" (2 Timothy 1:5). Later Paul notes that Timothy had "been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood" (2 Timothy 3:15). But there was more than just Bible knowledge here. The next verses discuss how Scripture helps and equips us. Elsewhere in the same letter, Paul urges his protégé to be the kind of Christian who "correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15, niv). It seems that Timothy wasn't just drilled in the facts of Scripture; he was bathed in its truth.

Many parents make Bible education an important part of their children's lives. That's great. But we can learn something deeper from Timothy's mother and grandmother. To begin with, they themselves were filled with the faith that they passed on to this boy. It was a reality in their lives, and it became a reality in Timothy's life. That made the Scriptures more than words on a page; they were a passageway to a powerful relationship with Christ.

You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus.

2 TIMOTHY 3:15



JANUARY 8

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCKING

Rhoda

ACTS 12:1-17

It's one of the funniest stories in the Bible, featuring a seemingly scatterbrained servant girl in what you might call a "situation comedy." Her name was Rhoda.

Christians were living in a tense time. While the church was growing, there was also greater persecution. James had been executed. Peter was arrested and imprisoned, awaiting the same fate. The believers met at a home in Jerusalem to pray for him.

The home belonged to Mary, the mother of Mark and thus a relative of Barnabas, as we know from Colossians 4:10. It seems she was an affluent widow originally from Cyprus, and she might have brought Rhoda from there. (There is also some speculation that the Last Supper was held in her home.)

Under high security the night before his trial, Peter felt his chains fall off. The guards were fast asleep. An angel led him out to the streets of the city. From there, Peter found his way to Mary's house and knocked at the outer gate. Enter Rhoda. Answering this middle-of-the-night knock, she was so excited to see Peter that she ran to tell the others . . . and left him out front, still knocking. Inside, the other Christians wouldn't believe her. "You're out of your mind!" they said, but she stuck to her story. Then they heard more knocking and went to see for themselves.

It was not the first time that a Christian was called crazy for delivering good news, nor would it be the last. When the women came back from the empty tomb talking about resurrection, it "sounded like nonsense" to the disciples, before Peter and John raced to the tomb to check it out (Luke 24:11). The apostle Paul, who was also called crazy, wrote that God has "used our foolish preaching to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Rhoda is an early example of a courageous truth teller. She witnessed an answer to prayer and she said so, even though it was far fetched. The history of the Christian church is populated with truth tellers like this, whose simple insistence prompts others to see for themselves. We still need such truth tellers today.

*This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and
God's weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength.*

1 CORINTHIANS 1:25



JANUARY 9
AFRICAN QUEEN

Candace

ACTS 8:26-39

Ethiopia isn't very far from the Middle East, but many ancient folks considered it the end of the earth. There were legends about fierce female warriors who lived south of Egypt's civilized society. And while the Romans conquered the Mediterranean basin, bringing a certain unity to lands from Algeria to Arabia, the Ethiopians remained outside their control, wild and free.

That makes the New Testament story of the Ethiopian eunuch especially interesting (see Acts 8:26-39). This man was the official treasurer in the court of Candace, queen of Ethiopia. Well, *Candace* (or *Kandake*) was actually a title rather than a name, something like *Pharaoh* in Egypt. The eunuch served the Kandake of Ethiopia, whose proper name was probably Amantitere.

But what was this Ethiopian doing in Jerusalem, and why did he have a scroll of the Hebrew Scriptures? More important, what happened when he got back home, after Philip baptized him?

Judaism has a long history in Ethiopia, possibly dating back to the Queen of Sheba. There's a dubious legend that Solomon fathered a child she bore, thus creating a strain of Jewish royal blood in Africa. More likely, Jews just migrated there during times of war or famine. The eunuch was probably a Jew himself, returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. We might wonder if he had bought his Scripture scroll there and was taking it back to a Jewish community in Ethiopia. Otherwise, it would be strange to travel with such a rare and precious item.

According to tradition, the newly baptized eunuch returned home and evangelized many Ethiopians, including the Kandake. With royal influence, Christianity gained a strong foothold in the area. The warrior-queen had met the Prince of Peace.

In the opening verses of the book of Acts, Jesus tells his disciples that they will be witnesses for him "in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). For seven chapters, the disciples are holed up in Jerusalem, but chapter 8 explodes outward. A revival occurs in Samaria, Philip meets a traveler on a road in Judea, and this man takes the message back to his queen in a mysterious region known by many as the end of the earth.

We are witnesses of a truth that moves ever outward.

You will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

ACTS 1:8

JANUARY 10
R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Junia

ROMANS 16:7

Paul called her “highly respected among the apostles,” but Junia hasn’t gotten much respect from translators. To be fair, the Greek name used in Romans 16:7 could be either masculine or feminine, and thus many scholars assume that Paul was praising “Junias,” a man. Yet the name is found hundreds of times in other Greek literature, and is always feminine.

The next complication concerns the phrase “among the apostles.” Linguistically, this could mean merely that the apostles knew Junia and respected her. An alternate reading would include Junia (and Andronicus, probably her husband) as “apostles” themselves. This would reflect Paul’s larger sense of the term *apostle*—not just the original twelve disciples or a small group of leaders, but everyone who carries the gospel to new places.

As Jews who became Christians before Paul did, this couple might have been in Jerusalem at Pentecost, when the church was born. Perhaps they were among the three thousand new believers that day. Then maybe they carried that message back home and started a church. Was that “home church” in Rome, or did they plant churches in different cities (as Paul did)? All we know is that they had been in prison with Paul at one point, possibly in Ephesus, and that they were ministering in Rome when Paul wrote his epistle.

So how important was Junia? In the modern debate about women in church leadership, she could be hailed as a female apostle or dismissed as only one of numerous women working faithfully for the church. But let’s be careful about dismissing. Whether she herself was considered an apostle or not, she was still “highly respected” for the work she did.

Any debate about Christian leadership must be shaped by the upside-down nature of our faith. The humble are exalted. We follow a Master who washed feet. We lead by serving. So we could guess that Junia was not trying to win respect. She was just serving the Lord, going where he called, sharing his truth—even if that meant being thrown into prison. Christian leadership is not about fame or acclaim or titles. Humble service is what earns the lasting respect of all those who follow Christ—not just in the first century, but now as well.

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews, who were in prison with me. They are highly respected among the apostles and became followers of Christ before I did.

ROMANS 16:7



JANUARY 11

CAREER MOVE

Lydia

ACTS 16:11-40

She was in sales, and business was good. No, we don't have Lydia's profit-loss statement, but all the signs are there. She came from Thyatira, a city in Asia Minor known for its purple dye. Throughout the Roman Empire, purple fabric was a luxury item, and Lydia was part of that industry. But when we meet her in Acts 16, she's in Philippi, Macedonia, far from her hometown. Was she a field rep for the purple-dye industry, opening up the European market for her Thyatira-based company? Or was she an independent merchant, taking advantage of the latest fashion trends to build her own career? We can assume she was doing pretty well, since she owned a house in Philippi large enough to host visitors.

Lydia is described as a "God worshiper" (or God fearer), the term for a Gentile who attended Jewish services. Perhaps she had connected with the synagogue back home in Thyatira, and now, in Philippi, she had sought out others who would also pray to the God of the Jews.

As Paul shared his insights about Jesus the Messiah, Lydia was apparently the first to respond. You might say she "opened up the European market" for the gospel, since she's usually considered the first Christian convert on that continent. Paul and his associates—Silas, Luke, and Timothy—were invited to stay at her home, giving them a base of operations during their stay in Philippi.

That's all we know about this businesswoman—just a few verses in Acts 16. But we know a lot more about the church she started. After Paul preached that day, Lydia *was* the Philippian church. A short while later, a jailer and his family would trust in Christ, and perhaps a former fortune-teller, but how many others joined this church in the short time Paul and his team were there? Yet, a decade later, Paul would write a joy-filled epistle to this group.

Do you think Lydia might have applied her business acumen to the growing of a new church? When God gets ahold of our lives, he changes us, but he also uses our talents and experience in a whole new way.

*You have been my partners in spreading the Good News about
Christ from the time you first heard it until now.*

PHILIPPIANS 1:5

JANUARY 12

BAD FOR BUSINESS

The Fortune-Teller of Philippi

ACTS 16:16-24

Human trafficking is a shameful blight on the modern world, but there's nothing new about it. Paul and Silas encountered it in Philippi, and they responded with the power of God.

A young woman was enslaved by men and forced to tell fortunes. Clearly her slavery was spiritual as well as physical. She was demon possessed, and her handlers were using her supernatural powers to make money. The Greek text actually calls her demon a "python spirit." Such snakes were associated with magical powers and Greek gods (especially Apollo). Perhaps she even used a snake as part of her act.

It's interesting that she (or her demon) was the aggressor with Paul and Silas. They were just going to the river to pray, but she followed them, shouting that they were "servants of the Most High God" (Acts 16:17). This behavior went on for days until Paul took action, ordering the demon to leave her.

There's some light wordplay in Luke's telling of this story. In verse 18, we learn that the demon "went out" of her; in verse 19, her handlers realize that their profits just "went out" as well. The same word in Greek is used to describe both situations, and that makes sense. They were making money on her misery. Her healing was bad for their business.

We never hear about this slave girl again. Paul and Silas were taken to court, beaten, and thrown in jail, but what happened to her? Was she released from her slavery, now that she was no longer profitable? Did she become part of the church that later received Paul's epistle? Did she take it to heart when she heard, "I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns" (Philippians 1:6)?

Look around and you'll see lots of people enslaved in various ways: spiritually, mentally, and physically. We may be called to offer them freedom, wholeness, and help in the name of Jesus Christ, but it's seldom easy. And there are some folks who won't like what Jesus does. For those who make a practice of using and abusing people, Jesus is bad for business.

She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved."

ACTS 16:17

JANUARY 13
TEAMMATES

Euodia and Syntyche

PHILIPPIANS 4:2-3

A cynic might say that Christian history is all about church fights. In the first few centuries, disputes over various heresies shaped Christian theology. Later, church splits made big news—the East-West Schism, the Protestant Reformation, the Methodist movement, Pentecostalism, etc. In each case, there have been faithful people on both sides, each side believing that the other was terribly wrong.

We see a glimpse of this in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Two women were disagreeing. We know nothing about the details of this tiff, but it was important enough for Paul to mention. We don’t even know who Euodia and Syntyche were, apart from what Paul tells us. They had worked side by side with Paul in spreading the gospel, but now they were working against each other.

From clues in Acts 16, we might guess that these women were hosting or leading house churches. It’s even possible that one of these women was also known as Lydia, the woman who had opened her home to the apostles on their initial visit.

Now Paul urges them to “Settle your disagreement”—literally to “be of the same mind” (Philippians 4:2). Was the dispute personal, procedural, or doctrinal? We know of other church rifts based on a Jew-Gentile division, or on policies regarding holidays or what food could be eaten, but these themes don’t appear in Philippians. What does appear is the beautiful hymn to the humility of Christ in chapter 2. There, the people are urged to “be of the same mind” and to share the mind of Christ. Perhaps the Euodia-Syntyche dispute was merely a matter of “complaining and arguing” between two people who liked to get their own way (Philippians 2:14).

Note that Paul does not take sides, nor does he criticize the character of either woman. Instead, he affirms them for their past efforts. He also asks for some mediation from his “true partner” (Philippians 4:3). The Greek word he uses is *syzygus*, which could be a name, but it also means “teammate,” a fellow ox pulling a plow. This could be Timothy or Epaphroditus, both mentioned already in this epistle—or it could refer to the whole church. All of us can step up and bring peace to contentious situations, affirming the contenders but also calling them to abandon their pride and to agree to pull together in the Lord’s work.

Please, because you belong to the Lord, settle your disagreement.

PHILIPPIANS 4:2



JANUARY 14

OVERCOMING EXPECTATIONS

Women ran from Jesus' empty tomb with a tale of resurrection. Sadly, "the story sounded like nonsense to the men" (Luke 24:11). We learn two important things there: (1) that men don't always take women seriously, and (2) that God does. Throughout history, God has entrusted important work to women, though they've often had to fight against cultural expectations to carry it out.

Consider Perpetua, a young noblewoman, and Felicitas, her maid. Both faced brutal death before a cheering crowd. Their heroism in that arena inspired many Christians in the difficult years that followed. There were well-known male leaders of the church in that time—Origen, Tertullian, Irenaeus—but these two women captured imaginations as no one else could. No one expected them to make the ultimate sacrifice. Perpetua's own father begged her to back down—surely people would understand her family commitments—but she remained true to her faith . . . and paid the price.

Our history is full of queens and ladies who were expected merely to look pretty, bear heirs, and wave to the people. In numerous cases, these women overstepped those perceived boundaries, using their wealth and power to do good, building the church or helping the poor.

Plenty of commoners made uncommon contributions too. Joan of Arc was a poor teenager who sensed God's call and led an army—unheard of for a young girl! Phillis Wheatley was sold as a slave in colonial America but learned to read and write, becoming an influential Christian poet. An Albanian nun devoted her life to the "poorest of the poor" in Calcutta and became the world changer we know as Mother Teresa.

At a certain point, however, we run into the paradox of Christian history: *real Christians don't seek fame, just service*. That means there are vast numbers of faithful servants—women and men alike—whose names will never appear in history books, despite the great things they did.

One of them is our friend Peggy Parker, who passed away in 2010. Chances are, you've never heard of her, because she quietly served as a pastor of small Methodist churches; the devoted mother of a special-needs child; and an encourager of pretty much everyone who crossed her path . . . including us. She never cared much about people's expectations; she had work to do.

And so do we.

I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.

PHILIPPIANS 4:13



JANUARY 15
ON THE SPOT

Deacons Arrested by Pliny

AD 112

The governor had a problem. He didn't want to be a tyrant—and yet he had an illegal cult meeting in his district—the *Christians*. Should he crack down on this group? He wrote to the emperor for official guidance.

The police were getting lots of tips about secret Christian meetings. Some tips were just gossip, but others proved true. Officials had arrested two women who were called “deacons,” apparently with some sort of responsibilities in this forbidden sect. Under torture, these women added to Governor Pliny's developing knowledge of the church.

“On a certain day they get together before dawn,” he wrote to Emperor Trajan, “to offer hymns to Christ as God, and to take vows together—not to commit crimes but to *abstain* from theft, adultery, and cheating. Then they gather again to eat, and it's just ordinary, harmless food.” Reading between the lines, we might understand Pliny's plight. *These are good people! Why are we arresting them?* That attitude was supported by the emperor's response—basically, “Don't bother the Christians if they don't bother you.”

Consider these two anonymous women. We might assume they were simply doing their jobs when they were nabbed. Were they planning the next meeting or just cleaning up after the last one? Perhaps they were sticking around to pray with someone who proved to be a snitch. In any case, they were suddenly “on the spot,” interrogated by the governor's henchmen.

Were there any secrets they needed to withhold under torture? Maybe. But it is the nature of Christianity to share freely with others, so we might guess that these women eagerly told their captors all about their weekly meetings. *We are so excited about Jesus that we can't stay away! Why don't you join us next week?*

Nowadays it's easy for Christians to feel embattled, fighting for our rights as believers, but we don't get that attitude from these two deacons. It seems that their winsome response to interrogation confirmed the good feeling that the governor (and emperor) already had about Christianity—and it might have given their fellow Christians some breathing room.

In the same way, the women [wives of deacons or women who serve as deacons] are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

JANUARY 16
WHAT I AM

Perpetua

CA. 180–203

Perpetua was a young Christian noblewoman in Carthage around the year 200. The authorities were demanding that everyone show their loyalty by offering a sacrifice to the “divine” spirit of the Roman emperor. Devout Christians refused to do this—Jesus was their only Lord. Though she had recently given birth, Perpetua refused to sacrifice, and she was arrested.

Her father visited her in prison and begged her to recant. *Didn't she realize that Christians were being hauled off to the city arena to face wild animals or gladiators in front of bloodthirsty mobs? Wouldn't she consider her little baby or her aging papa and save herself?*

“Look at this vase,” she told him, “or that pitcher. Can it be called by any other name than what it is?”

“No,” he responded.

“Then I can't say I'm anything other than what I am, a Christian.”

Despite the pleas of her father and brother, she stood trial before the governor and refused to perform the sacrifice. “Are you a Christian?” he asked point-blank.

“Yes, I am.”

Sentenced to face the beasts in the arena, she was still “in high spirits,” as observers reported. She understood this as her calling—to die for Christ. Her own diary of her arrest, imprisonment, trial, and preparation for martyrdom was widely distributed among the early Christians, inspiring many to remain faithful in tough times. (It is one of the earliest Christian documents we have written by a woman.) Of course it was another writer who added a vivid account of her death. Despite official attempts to shame and humiliate her, Perpetua stood strong to the end, even guiding the sword of a trembling gladiator to her throat.

Perpetua might ask each of us, “What are you? A Christian? A faithful servant? One who is called to honor Christ with your life—in your work, in your relationships, in your worship? If that is truly what you are, why would you let any obstacle stop you?” We often feel pressure to hide our faith from others, to deny that we know Jesus, but how can we say we're anything other than what we are: followers of Jesus?

It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.

GALATIANS 2:20



JANUARY 17

INSIDE STORY

Felicitas

CA. 180–203

In the early years, some Roman critics attacked Christianity as a low-class religion, welcoming slaves and women along with noblemen. “Guilty as charged,” responded the Christians, who continued to treat slaves and slave owners as equals despite the objections of snooty scribes.

So when some Christians were rounded up in Carthage around AD 200 for failing to offer a sacrifice in honor of the emperor’s divine spirit, the group included both the upper-class Perpetua (see yesterday’s entry) and her slave, Felicitas.

The slave girl had a problem: she was eight months pregnant. Since the Romans had a law against executing pregnant women, she worried that she might lose the opportunity to die along with her friends. Two days before their scheduled execution, the imprisoned believers prayed about this—and immediately Felicitas felt labor pains. The premature birth was difficult, but she successfully bore a daughter, who was then given to a Christian friend.

An assistant guard snidely commented on her painful delivery. “You think this is bad? Wait till you’re tossed to the beasts. Should have thought of that before you refused to sacrifice.”

The slave girl responded with dignity: “My current pain I suffer alone. But then, someone else will be inside me, and he will suffer for me, just as I’ll be suffering for him.”

Felicitas rejoiced that she could go with her friends into martyrdom, and she knew that Jesus would be with them—*inside* them—as they suffered. Yes, their experience in the arena was brutal, facing wild beasts and then gladiators, but these believers helped each other. The slave stood side by side with her mistress, and at that moment class and wealth were irrelevant. All that mattered was their devotion to Jesus.

Suffering can be a lonely ordeal, in the third century or the twenty-first. But Felicitas grasped a secret that helped her get through it, as it can help us today. Jesus suffers our sorrow with us, and he brings us ultimate joy.

My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

GALATIANS 2:20



JANUARY 18
CHOICES

Perpetua and Felicitas

D. 203

Perpetua and Felicitas were commanded to pay homage to the Roman emperor by offering a sacrifice to his “divine” spirit. As devout Christians, they clearly understood this as idolatry.

Both had good reasons to stay alive. Perpetua’s father begged her to reconsider, for his sake and for her infant son. With her upper-class estate, she could possibly provide funds and meeting space for the church for years to come. Felicitas had just given birth to a daughter. Didn’t she have an obligation to stay and nurture that little girl?

Many of us today would take a practical approach: compromise now on this little sacrifice in order to accomplish a greater good later. We do this in many ways in the routines of our lives. We pay homage to the gods of our age—money, celebrity, technology, pleasure—sometimes ignoring the spiritual issues involved. You might take a higher-paying job, even though it would limit your church involvement. You might chat with a friend about tabloid headlines rather than truly listening to her needs. Every day we make choices about what altar we’re going to sacrifice upon.

For Perpetua and Felicitas, the choice was clear, as it was for hundreds of other early church martyrs. They worshiped *Jesus*—not the emperor, not the empire, not personal comfort, not even their own families—and they felt privileged to suffer for him. The ancient account calls their date in the arena “their victory day.” They strode into the stadium “joyfully as though they were going to heaven.” It describes Perpetua “with a glowing face and a calm step, God’s beloved, the bride of Christ, putting down everyone’s stare by her own intense gaze.” Perpetua and Felicitas were confident they had made the right choice.

Consider this: long before TV or Internet, how could you get a message across to thousands of people at once? By acting it out in a stadium. These faithful women demonstrated their eternal love for Christ in a painful but effective way. And their sacrifice helped to win an empire.

Don’t be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world.

1 PETER 4:12-13

JANUARY 19

TEST THE SPIRITS

Maximilla

D. 179

The verdict is still out on Maximilla. She and her colleague Priscilla were either courageous prophets or dangerous heretics. They belonged to a Christian sect that emerged in the late 100s in Phrygia (part of modern-day Turkey). The group became known as Montanists (after Montanus, their founder), but they called themselves “spiritual” Christians, setting themselves apart from other “carnal” Christians.

You could imagine that this wouldn’t go over well with all those other Christians. Always mindful of Christ’s return, the Montanists mandated a strict lifestyle. They also believed that the Holy Spirit was still giving messages through prophets—such as Maximilla and Priscilla.

The established church felt threatened, and many Christian leaders harshly criticized this movement. Hippolytus asserted that the Montanists were deceived by these two so-called prophetesses, exalting them above the apostles. While he acknowledged that the Montanists agreed with the established church on the main points of faith, he was uneasy with their “novelties”—including females in leadership and their diet of radishes. Some had problems with the fact that Maximilla and Priscilla had left their husbands. Other critics accepted that the group was experiencing supernatural power but assumed it was demonic. Two bishops tried to exorcise the prophetesses.

Maximilla seems to have been the most vocal of the Montanist leaders. She is reported to have said, “The Lord sent me as a devotee, revealer, and interpreter of this promise and covenant. I was compelled, willing or unwilling, to learn the knowledge of God.” Rejected by official church leaders, she complained, “I am driven from the sheep like a wolf. I am not a wolf. I am Word and Spirit and Power.” She predicted that, after her death, the end would come for the Christian church. That didn’t quite happen. She died in 179.

So what are we to make of this woman? What can we learn from her? Christian historians still disagree on her legacy, so we’re not going to solve that matter on these pages. Our challenge, however, is always to “test the spirits,” as John told us (1 John 4:1, NIV). Turn away from those voices that do not express the truth and grace and love of Jesus. Open up to those that do.

*Do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit.
You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from
God. For there are many false prophets in the world.*

1 JOHN 4:1



JANUARY 20

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

It's never been so easy to figure out where your friends stand on social issues. Just log on to Facebook on any given day, and you'll find any and every cause being championed by your friends—often causes that are in opposition to each other.

Even your Christian friends may have differing views on what social responsibility involves. Take environmentalism, for instance. Some may see it as focusing on “Mother Earth” and taking attention away from God, while others may seek to honor and obey the Creator by finding renewable energy sources and conserving open space.

Women have always been involved in social-responsibility issues, and often their faith has been a driving force.

The Bible tells of Joanna, who was a financial supporter of Jesus' ministry (see Luke 8:2-3). Long before she fully realized who Jesus was, she personally saw the importance of what Jesus could do for people when he cured her ailments. She took on the responsibility of funding Jesus and his apostles so they could help others as they had helped her.

Ida Scudder was an American doctor who became a medical missionary to India around the year 1900, fighting against the diseases that many of the women there contracted. She realized that she couldn't do it by herself, and so she founded a medical school for girls (which later went coed) to ensure that future generations would have medical care.

Then there's Jessie Ames, who organized women to speak out against racism in the South in the 1930s. Through their efforts, big changes were made.

Jesus had a lot to say about social responsibility. Even more important, he was the best example of a socially responsible person we have. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, looked beyond a person's nationality or race, practiced nonviolence, and literally gave himself to save the world.

A debate has raged for some time: Is it more important to help people or to preach the gospel to them? The service-filled lives of countless women and men in Christian history make it clear how shortsighted that question is. We honor Christ by helping those he helped. And we help people by sharing Christ with them. We must never ignore people's spiritual needs, but neither should we downplay their physical needs. Jesus calls us to minister to both.

The godly care about the rights of the poor; the wicked don't care at all.

PROVERBS 29:7



JANUARY 21

WHERE THE ACTION IS

Flavia Domitilla

CA. 65–100

Three generations of Roman women bore the name Flavia Domitilla. Domitilla the Older was married to Vespasian, a general who became emperor in AD 69 after a four-way struggle for control of Rome. She had two sons, Titus and Domitian (who both became emperors), and a daughter, Domitilla the Younger, who gave birth to our third Flavia Domitilla, who became a saint. For twenty-seven years, these women were wives, sisters, daughters, and nieces of the most powerful men in Rome. This was where the action was.

As you might have figured out, Saint Flavia Domitilla was a Christian. This was a problem once her uncle, Emperor Domitian (81–96), began aggressively promoting the classic worship of the god Jupiter. Still, legend has it, Flavia Domitilla used her estate to hide Christians, host worship services, and provide sacred burial.

As one story goes, Uncle Domitian hatched a plan to kill all Christians and Jews. He just needed a senate vote to confirm it. But Domitilla helped her husband, then serving as Rome's consul, to make a courageous choice, giving up his office in order to delay that vote. It worked. The murderous plan was put on hold as the senate went about electing a new consul, but apparently both Domitilla and her husband were revealed as Christians—he was killed; she was exiled to a volcanic island.

Imagine growing up in the epicenter of imperial power, participating in political intrigue, and then suddenly being exiled. Was she grateful for the peace and quiet, or did she long to make more of a difference? Where do you find yourself these days—where the action is, or where it isn't? Are you struggling to stay true to Christ amid tough challenges, or are you wondering if there are any challenges left for you?

About that same time, another Christian was exiled to another remote island. The apostle John used his downtime to listen to Jesus, and he wrote the book of Revelation to help believers deal with Domitian's reign. That seemed to be the secret of Saint Flavia Domitilla: whether in excitement or exile, keep listening to Jesus.

[I am] your partner in suffering and in God's Kingdom and in the patient endurance to which Jesus calls us. I was exiled . . . for preaching the word of God and for my testimony about Jesus.

REVELATION 1:9

JANUARY 22
MUSIC MAIDEN

Cecilia

SECOND OR THIRD CENTURY

What will you be known for? Is there some trait, some activity, some contribution that future generations will remember about you? In the case of a Roman girl named Cecilia, it was singing. She became a patron saint of music in the Catholic church and beyond.

Despite a rich tradition surrounding her, there's very little we actually know for sure about Cecilia. She lived in the second century . . . or the third. She was martyred in Rome . . . or maybe Sicily. Her death is commemorated on September 16 . . . or August 11 . . . or maybe November 22.

A fanciful story about her circulated during the fifth century. It involved the arranged marriage of Cecilia to a pagan named Valerian, who soon became a Christian, along with his brother. The two brothers were arrested and killed for their faith. Before Cecilia could be arrested, she arranged for her house to be used for Christian worship in the years to come. Authorities tried to kill her in various ways, but she hung on for three days—during which time she was preaching to visitors . . . and singing.

How much is fact and how much is fancy? It's hard to say. But the music is one morsel of this legend that has stuck. It was said that Cecilia heard heavenly music when she married Valerian—perhaps a foretaste of the groom's conversion? And her deathbed crooning inspired the faithful, not only then and there, but throughout the centuries. Raphael painted her, Chaucer wrote about her, and Handel hailed her in music. Some say Paul Simon's pop song "Cecilia" invokes this saint as his muse.

So . . . what will you be known for? All the money you've earned or the people you've touched? The house you live in or how you use it to show hospitality? Your power in the neighborhood or your love for your neighbors?

Or maybe, like Cecilia, you'll be remembered for the songs in your heart and the praises on your lips.

*I will hold my head high above my enemies who surround me. At his sanctuary
I will offer sacrifices with shouts of joy, singing and praising the LORD with music.*

PSALM 27:6



JANUARY 23

LIGHT THE DARKNESS

Nino

FOURTH CENTURY

She was a stranger in a strange land, and yet her quiet devotion won a nation to Christ. Her name was Nino, and while many legends have circulated about her, we'll try to stick to the basic story.

It was the AD 320s, in the kingdom then known as Iberia, now part of Georgia, tucked between Turkey and Russia. A very early historical document calls Nino a "captive woman," a slave transported from somewhere in the Roman Empire to this outlying land. Her life of virtue and prayer gained the attention of the Iberians, and she explained that she worshiped Christ. This was a god they had never heard of.

A desperate mother sought a cure for her sick baby, and Nino prayed for healing. When the child was cured, word went out through the nation. Soon the queen, who had a serious illness, visited Nino and was healed. The king was overjoyed and wanted to pay this wonder-working slave, but the queen wisely explained that the only way to reward Nino was to worship Christ, her God.

The king refused at first, but shortly afterward, he was out hunting when a strange darkness enveloped him. As the ancient historian explains it, "Suddenly his spirit, tormented by despair of being rescued, was lit up by a thought: 'If indeed that Christ whom the Captive had preached to his Wife was God, then let Him now deliver him from this darkness, that he too might forsake all other gods to worship Him.'" Before he could even utter that thought, "the light of day was restored to the world."

He kept his vow, learning the way of Christ from Nino and leading the whole nation into faith. He even contacted Constantine, emperor of the newly Christianized Roman Empire, asking him to send a bishop and priests. And all this because of one woman who lived out her faith in less-than-ideal circumstances.

Influence is a curious thing. It's hard to know when you'll have an impact on others. When you show a simple kindness? When you pray for your neighbors or coworkers? When you humbly but courageously speak up about your faith? Nino did all these things, and God used her efforts mightily.

Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people.

PHILIPPIANS 2:15



JANUARY 24

ADVENTURE STORY

The Story of Thecla

SECOND CENTURY

It might be considered the first Christian romance novel. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* recounts the adventures of a young woman who follows the apostle Paul through Asia Minor. It is clearly fiction, but its astonishingly early date (about AD 160) leaves some scholars wondering if it contains a germ of historical truth. For instance, it gives a vivid description of Paul (medium size, balding, crooked legs, bulbous knees, large eyes, brows that meet, a protruding nose) that might reflect an ancient eyewitness account, since it was written less than a century after Paul's death.

As the story goes, Thecla was sitting at her window in Iconium when she heard Paul preaching in a nearby house. Transfixed by his message, she committed herself to faith and to lifelong virginity—which was a problem for her fiancé, who arranged to have Paul arrested. Thecla sneaked out to visit Paul in prison, and upon his release, she followed him as he carried the gospel to other towns.

She herself was later imprisoned for refusing the advances of a nobleman, and she was condemned to face wild beasts in the arena . . . except one lioness took a liking to her and fought off the other beasts. In another account, Thecla plunged into a pond with vicious sea lions to baptize herself, and the sea lions were miraculously killed.

Whether she really existed or not, Thecla serves as an example of an independent but faithful woman. This “runaway bride” stared down violence and humiliation in order to devote her life fully to God. Her story reminds us a bit of Daniel and friends—saved from lions and from almost-certain death, she took the opportunity to preach about Jesus as “a refuge to the tempest-tossed, a solace to the afflicted,” and the women of the town cheered her release, saying, “There is one God, the God of Thecla.”

Maybe your life is an adventure too. Okay, so you're not jumping in a pool with ravenous sea lions, but you do have issues. Miracles are still wrought by the God of Thecla and Paul—sometimes the precious miracles of everyday life, and sometimes immense miracles beyond our wildest fantasies.

He rescues and saves his people; he performs miraculous signs and wonders in the heavens and on earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions.

DANIEL 6:27

JANUARY 25
SMALL WONDER

Blandina

D. 177

Things turned very ugly very fast for the Christians in Lyon. The year was AD 177. Bishop Irenaeus had been well respected, and the church had been tolerated—but suddenly there was open hostility. Christians were banned from the public markets. Some were arrested on trumped-up charges. Mobs protested against them.

Some of this was based on ignorance. Christianity was seen as a perverted sect, guilty of incest, child sacrifice, and cannibalism—since they preached “brotherly love” and partook of the “body and blood of the Son.” Enemies spread vicious rumors, and the mob believed them. So did the Roman officials, who tried and condemned many Christians.

The imprisoned Christians also fell victim to budget cuts. Gladiator games were getting expensive. It was much cheaper to send convicted criminals (in this case, Christians) into the arena against the wild beasts.

Among these Christian “criminals” was a slave girl named Blandina, who amazed everyone with her endurance, even wearing out her torturers. By one report, they were “weary and exhausted. They themselves admitted that they were beaten, that there was nothing further they could do to her, and they were surprised that she was still breathing for her entire body was broken and torn.” She simply would not deny her faith in Jesus.

Even in the arena she prayed fervently and confidently, and the animals wouldn’t touch her . . . on the first day. They had to take her back to the prison, where she greatly inspired the other believers, “tiny, weak, and insignificant as she was,” according to one ancient writer. She finally succumbed on another day in the arena, where she was attacked by a bull.

Consider this: we know nothing about Blandina’s life. Surely she had friends, a family, daily tasks, and perhaps some responsibility in her church fellowship. But we don’t know any of that. We know only how well she handled suffering.

When you go through difficult times, it’s easy to feel “tiny, weak, and insignificant,” but maybe that’s when you’ll have the greatest influence. Like Blandina, you can inspire others with the tenacity of your faith.

Even when we are weighed down with troubles, it is for your comfort and salvation! For when we ourselves are comforted, we will certainly comfort you. Then you can patiently endure the same things we suffer.



JANUARY 26

THREE SISTERS

Agape, Chionia, Irene

D. ABOUT 310

In the first decade of the 300s, Emperor Diocletian launched a last vicious attack against Christianity, trying to rid the empire of this pesky menace once and for all. Christians had endured several periods of persecution in the previous two-and-a-half centuries, but this was the worst yet.

In the middle of all this were three sisters from the town of Thessalonica—Agape, Chionia, and Irene. (The first and third were named for the Christian virtues of love and peace. *Chionia* is the Greek word for “snowy.”) As often happens with ancient saints, there are several legends about them, but all depict a trio of devout young women.

As the story goes, they refused to participate in sacrificing to the pagan gods of Rome, and this got them in trouble with the authorities. One other problem was that they possessed illegal Christian books. (This was before the church had officially gathered the New Testament, so these “sacred texts” probably included the gospels and the letters of Paul, as well as more recent instruction.) When the sisters refused to sacrifice, eat the sacrificial food, or give up their books, the first two women were burned to death. In a perverse punishment, Irene, who had committed her virginity to God, was sent to a brothel, but she died before she could be defiled. (There are different stories of how this happened, but it’s generally seen as God’s protection of her purity.)

Nowadays there are many Christian books, including this one, that aren’t worth dying for. But what about the Bible itself? Would you risk your life just to own a copy of God’s Word? Would you risk your reputation to carry it to work? Would you risk a relationship to quote a potentially helpful verse to a friend?

These three sisters knew that the Scriptures were not just a badge to wear or a flag to wave, but a line of connection to God. These writings kept them focused on the one person who was worth living and dying for. They can do the same for us.

The word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.

HEBREWS 4:12



JANUARY 27

ON THE MARTYRDOM OF WOMEN

It's remarkable how many of the early church's martyrs were women. This is surprising on two counts. First, for most of Christian history, men have held the key roles in church leadership, so you might expect women to be overlooked in the writing of that history. In fact, some modern historians complain that this is indeed the case. But it doesn't seem to be true with martyrdom. For every Polycarp there's a Perpetua.

A second surprise has to do with Roman sensibilities. Compared with the Greek civilization that preceded it, Roman culture had a relatively high view of the value of women. If you trace the intrigues of the first-century imperial court, you find a number of prominent women wielding power. They were still the power *behind* the throne, but they held considerable sway. It was the power of matrons that held together the noble households of Rome.

So why were so many Christian women arrested and tortured for their faith? Why were they killed in public in the most humiliating ways? You would think that Roman gentility would go easy on the women. Not so.

We must not underestimate the simple bloodlust and mob mania of the Roman persecutors, but there are other factors as well. Women were prominent in the early church, both in numbers and in power. Slaves and working-class people of both genders were coming to Christianity, but also a number of noblewomen. We get a few examples of that in the book of Acts, and it continues through history. The Roman historian Tacitus told of a judge's wife, Pomponia Graecina, who was accused of "foreign superstition" and handed over to her husband for trial. She was most likely a convert to Christianity.

Maybe the Romans felt threatened by this "liberation movement"—for slaves, for workers, for women. Maybe they thought the persecution of women would specifically discourage other women from converting.

If so, it backfired. The crowds in the arenas saw women of great strength and courage standing up for their faith against the most horrendous terrors. Perpetua, Blandina, and many others spoke out about their faith and acted it out in dramatic ways. In so doing, they became powerful examples for all Christ followers to come.

Women who claim to be devoted to God should make themselves attractive by the good things they do.

JANUARY 28

CINDERELLA STORY

Helena

CA. 248–CA. 327

As we piece together the story of Helena, it begins to sound like a fairy tale—until it goes horribly wrong. She was a commoner who wed a prince. Ancient sources call her a “stablemaid,” and the “prince” was Constantius, a general with hopes of becoming Rome’s emperor. One legend says Helena and Constantius were wearing matching bracelets when they met—a sign that this was a match made in heaven. She bore him a son, Constantine.

But then the love story sours. When Constantine was still a teenager, his father dumped Helena for a new wife who aided his political ambitions. Was this the end for Helena? Hardly. Her son was still being groomed for greatness, so she stayed near him in the court of Emperor Diocletian as he rose through the ranks. There she had a front-row seat to one of the most amazing religious turnarounds in history.

For two and a half centuries, the Roman Empire had persecuted Christians. In fact, Emperor Diocletian was conducting the toughest persecution yet. But when he died, there was a power struggle involving several other generals and Constantine, who had succeeded his dying father. Before an important battle, Constantine saw a vision of Jesus predicting victory. This led to his conversion, and as he consolidated his power and became emperor, he made Christianity the official religion of Rome. Within a mere fifteen years, Christians had gone from prisons to palaces.

And Helena herself was finally a queen. Constantine publicly honored his mother in many ways, perhaps trying to make up for his father’s rejection. It’s not clear when exactly she became a Christian, but she apparently did, since later in life she took a special interest in the Holy Land, finding biblical sites and rebuilding churches.

How does the arc of your life compare with Helena’s? Have you seen some dramatic ups and downs too? Is your story a fairy tale or a horror flick—or both? Whether you’re a queen or a stablemaid, a lovesick teen or a single mom, God has plans for you, and these plans will not be thwarted.

“I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.”

JEREMIAH 29:11



JANUARY 29

THE EXPLORER

Helena

CA. 248–CA. 327

The Holy Land had been under Roman rule for nearly four centuries, but the Roman authorities didn't care much about the events that made it holy. Several Jewish rebellions had sprung up there before being crushed by Rome's military might. And then there was this Jesus movement that had started there—but it had been persecuted by Rome almost from its beginning.

Yet now things were different. The new emperor, Constantine, was a Christian, and he made Christianity the official religion of the realm. His mother, Helena, held unusual power for a queen mum, and she took on the challenge of restoring the holy sites of Christianity. This meant travel and research and some excavation, an impressive pursuit for a woman reportedly in her seventies.

The results were also impressive: the building of churches at the site of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, resurrection in Jerusalem, and elsewhere. She's also credited with finding holy artifacts, including pieces of the cross. All sorts of legends surround her regarding the magical power of this "true cross." (Apparently there were many fake pieces, but supposedly only the pieces of the true cross could heal people.)

If you have difficulty with this, good. The second commandment forbids the worship of any "graven image" (Exodus 20:4, *KJV*). God knew that we humans like to trust in material things, and indeed many religions throughout history have granted divine power to temples and statues and other things. But history shows that Christians aren't immune from this temptation either. We can applaud Helena's efforts to honor the origins of Christianity, but we must remember that God alone deserves our worship, not the sites and trinkets of our faith.

Modern-day believers might take a challenge from this as well. What do we consider holy? The church building, or the worship that goes on there? The leather-bound Bible on the shelf, or the words inside it? The way things have always been done, or the way God wants us to serve him today?

You must not have any other god but me. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods.

EXODUS 20:3-5



JANUARY 30
MARRIAGE

The Bible contains very few examples of good marriages. Go ahead: try to come up with a list of five. With Adam's blaming, Sarah's jealousy, Rebekah's scheming, Jacob's favoritism, and so on, we don't find many pairings worth emulating. Okay, Priscilla and Aquila show up, but we have precious little information about them—other than the fact that they were *together*. Whether hosting a church, working with Paul, or tutoring Apollos, they were a team. But the data on other biblical marriages is either negative or nonexistent.

We find more of the same as we scan church history. Many prominent Christians were unmarried, and many others had spouses who were anonymous or nearly so. Yet here and there we find marriages where both partners are known to history. What can we learn from them?

These marriages seem to come in two varieties. Some follow the teamwork model, as presented by Priscilla and Aquila. Consider Ann and Adoniram Judson, among the first American missionaries sent overseas. They pioneered mission work in Burma and inspired many missionary couples to follow. A generation later, Catherine Booth was clearly a teammate of her husband, William, in founding the Salvation Army. Both of the Booths preached and led meetings. They also worked together in organizing the sort of relief efforts that the organization is still known for.

Other wives have attained fame for their strong and unique support of their famous husbands. Katharina von Bora, a former nun, married the reformer Martin Luther. Their marriage itself was a Protestant strike against Catholic tradition, but Katie was no trophy wife. Matching Martin's fiery temperament, she brought some order to his chaotic life. In a different way, Sarah Edwards provided support for her husband, the brilliant scholar-preacher Jonathan Edwards. He drew from her deep faith and wisdom as well as her organizational ability. There are many other wives who surely deserve half the credit for the achievements of their well-known husbands, and yet they remain rather invisible to history.

Shouldn't we consider both of these models "teamwork"? Whether the husband and wife step side by side into ministry, or whether one uses supportive gifts to bolster the other, they are serving God together. In our marriages, then, it's not so important who gets the most attention, but how well God is served.

Again I say, each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

JANUARY 31
SACRIFICES

Paula

347–404

Married young to a wealthy man, Paula enjoyed what her husband's money could provide. She dressed in silk, adorned herself in gold, and was carried from place to place by servants. But when Paula became a Christian, she gave up all the luxuries.

Paula was a widow in her early thirties when she converted. In the following years she used her inherited wealth for the church's needs. But her sacrifice did not end with giving away her wealth—she also turned to a life of deprivation.

She ate only bread and oil and drank only water. It's said she rarely bathed or slept. Eventually she dedicated her life to financially supporting and serving Jerome, a Bible scholar working on a Latin translation of the Bible. To help him, she left her home and her young children.

This raises some challenging questions for us. Was Paula's life of self-imposed deprivation necessary to serve God? Paula must have thought so, and maybe that's how God was leading her, but does he want that for all of us? Most of us would understand giving money to help a ministry, even in substantial amounts, especially if we were left (as Paula was) with a sizable inheritance. But the rest of it, particularly leaving her children, seems a little crazy. Yet Jerome's translation of the Bible was so important, and Paula's support so integral to its completion, that calling her sacrifices crazy might be too harsh.

Sacrifice is an uncomfortable word. God asks all of us to make sacrifices, to give up some of our comforts for him. He might even ask us to do something that seems a little crazy. So the challenge remains: What sort of sacrifice is God calling you to make? Money? Time? Relationships?

You may never know the lasting effects of those sacrifices. Over the ages, the Bible has been carefully translated and passed down through the efforts of many faithful people, and Paula was one of them. Like her, you have no idea what the results of your sacrifice might be, but you know God does.

*Don't forget to do good and to share with those in need.
These are the sacrifices that please God.*

HEBREWS 13:16