

Bible Study for Men

Discovering Joseph of Nazareth

by David L. Robertson

The idea for this Bible study came from a personal conviction that there are very few biblical or theological resources available that help address the issues men face in these times. Currently, many approaches to men's studies use Jungian archetypes, myths, and fairy tales. While these approaches are helpful, we need to develop resources that draw primarily on our biblical tradition.

This Bible study on Joseph, Mary's husband, can help men make connections between what was going on in Joseph's life and what is happening with them today. The biblical story is centered around relationships and deals with love, marriage, birth, fatherhood, paternity (lineage), faith, God, dreams, and social class. Through the study's questions and process, participants can explore how Joseph might have felt and then begin to talk about their own feelings and their own lives. Men can find meaning for their lives through this and other life stories of men of the Bible.

Some Observations about Men

The Bible study process presented here was shaped by some observations concerning men. (They are merely observations and are not indicative of every man's experience.) The first observation is that men are hurting. The hurt they are feeling is very broad and takes form in many ways. It may be grief over



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the death of a spouse, pain related to divorce or to a failed relationship, or complicated feelings connected to a spouse's miscarriage. It may be anguish over sexual abuse, emotional abuse, or the roller-coaster feelings connected with growing up with an alcoholic parent. The list of situations in which men experience hurt and pain is endless.

A second observation is that men, by the very nature of their socialization, have learned to intellectualize their experiences and feelings. This ability to intellectualize is, in some situations, a valuable strength. But one of the results has been that men frequently have a hard time knowing

how, when, and with whom to share their feelings. As a man in pastoral ministry, I am learning first-hand that to get at the “stuff of life” with men is a long-term and sometimes arduous process.

A third observation concerns the spiritual life. It is generally difficult for men to pray and to develop and strengthen their souls, their faith, their connection with scripture, and their relationship with God. Many men struggle to talk to God about their lives, loved ones, and emotions.

Describing the Method

The approach used in this Bible study is non-patriarchal. Its starting point is that the stories of men in the Bible must not be used to vindicate the particularly destructive patterns of patriarchy. They must never be used to perpetuate, justify, or normalize any actions or behaviours that are abusive, violent, or demeaning toward men or women. Rather, the method developed here uses the stories of men like Joseph to help men reflect on their faith journey and begin a process of discovery that will help them to define themselves in terms other than those provided by current manifestations of patriarchy. The method draws on and encourages the use of the work of female biblical and theological scholars. Their scholarship brings a deeper understanding to men and women and a more profound appreciation for each other.

The basis for this approach is largely experiential. It assumes that each participant has knowledge, skills, and experiences that will enrich the process. There is sufficient flexibility in the model that leaders can build in more historical background concerning the biblical text. However, the main purpose of the method is to provide a way for the participants to discover and realize the value of their own knowledge, experience, and feelings, rather than to emphasize the historical, contextual material.

In conducting this Bible study, attention needs to be given to participants who, when asked how they feel, begin with the words “I think...” Such a response does not “come from the gut.” Men sometimes need to be reminded gently to begin with the words “I feel...” The study questions provided with this Bible study are designed with this in mind and attempt to create a balance between intellect and feeling.

The Bible Study

(approx. 2 hours)

Reading the Story

The participants were invited to form small groups. Everyone was asked to read the story of Joseph recorded in Matthew 1:17–25 and 2:11–15, 19–23.

Meeting Joseph

After reading the biblical story, the small groups discussed the following questions:

- What can we learn about Joseph?
- What does the text imply about Joseph?
- What was life like for Joseph?
- How do you believe Joseph felt?

Then the participants were asked to share their ideas and questions in plenary.

Here are some of the participants’ observations about Joseph:

- He was a quiet man, faithful, obedient, and responsible.
- He said “yes” to God.
- He was concerned with what is right.
- He came from a long list of “begats” but was not permitted to “beget” (that is, he came from a long line of paternity, but he was not permitted to father this special child).
- He followed his dreams.

PROGRAM

- He married Mary but (according to some theologians) was not permitted to consummate the marriage.
- He was in the shadows, away from the manger and the baby.
- He was a refugee.
- His life was out of control.
- After he settled in Nazareth, we hear nothing of him again.

As a result of their discussion, the participants were able to suggest that Joseph must have felt angry, confused, hurt, frustrated, out of control, and in love. He must have been caring, compassionate, and courageous.

Connecting Joseph's Story with Ours

With these observations in mind, the men were then invited to ponder the following questions, again working in small groups:

- Given what you have learned about Joseph, what connections do you make between what Joseph experienced and what men experience today?
- What experiences do you have in common with Joseph? If you feel comfortable, share your answers with others in your group.

The discussion questions were deliberately phrased in general terms so that the participants could decide for themselves how personal they wished to be during their discussion.

Once again, the participants were invited into plenary to share their responses to the questions.

The men made many connections between the biblical story and their own lives. Several participants noted that it is possible today for children to be conceived through fertilization processes. Some men made connections between the silent, stiff, and distant figure of Joseph in the

typical nativity scene and the silent, stiff, and distant lives of contemporary men. Others made the observation that when their children were born they were not permitted in the delivery room with their spouses. Like Joseph, they felt that they were in the shadows. They acknowledged that conditions and attitudes have changed a great deal so that men can now be present when their children are born. These men wondered if Joseph was present at Jesus' birth. A few men wondered where Joseph was when the Magi arrived.

The participants discussed the current societal expectation that men be totally in control of their lives and emotions. They observed that, in contrast to this, Joseph was not in control of his life. They wondered whether Joseph expected to be in control too. Shouldn't he have expected to father his own child, to consummate his marriage, to be responsible, to "do the right thing," to perform his duties? Yet, the men observed, in order to say "yes" to God, to follow his dreams, Joseph needed to let go of most, if not all, of these expectations.

Good News from Joseph's Story

While remaining in plenary, the participants were asked to respond to the following questions:

- What does this story say about Joseph's relationship with God?
- What good news or strength can we gather from Joseph's story?

Responding to these two questions, the participants affirmed that Joseph was faithful, responsible, caring, loving, willing to let go of control, and willing to let God work in his life. Joseph followed his dreams into exile and discovered the ferment of new life wherever he was.

Concluding the Session

New discoveries were summed up through the following discussion questions:

- What wisdom can we learn from Joseph?
- What images from Joseph's life give us new sight, or new ways of understanding our faith and our relationship with God?
- Where is God leading men today?
- What is becoming for men the ferment of new life? **E**

When this article appeared in fall 1993, **David L. Robertson** was in team ministry with his spouse Susan Lukey, serving the four congregations of Brooks/Rolling Hills Pastoral Charge. Currently David and Susan are in team ministry with the people of High River United Church in High River, Alberta. As part of his staff time, David coordinates the Men's Ministry program.

Resources

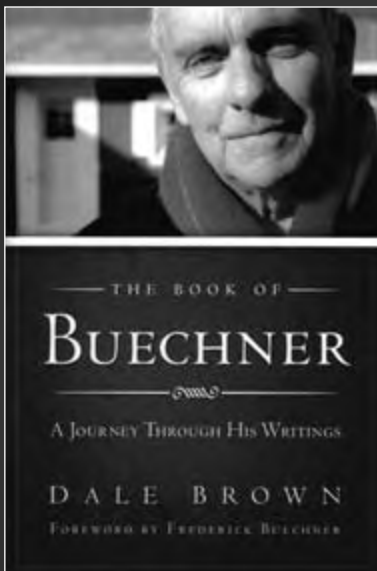
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