

The Woman

GOD'S SPIRIT
CAN GUIDE

NEW TESTAMENT WOMEN
HELP YOU MAKE
TODAY'S CHOICES

Alice Mathews



Discovery House.
from Our Daily Bread Ministries

A Woman God's Spirit Can Guide: New Testament Women Help You Make Today's Choices

© 2017 by Alice Mathews

All rights reserved.

Discovery House is affiliated with Our Daily Bread Ministries,
Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Requests for permission to quote from this book should be directed to:
Permissions Department, Discovery House, P.O. Box 3566, Grand Rapids,
MI 49501, or contact us by email at permissionsdept@dhp.org.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the
Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013
by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House
Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Interior design by Beth Shagene

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mathews, Alice, 1930– author.

Title: A woman God's Spirit can guide : New Testament women help you
make today's choices / Alice Mathews.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Discovery House, [2017] | Includes
bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017036646 | ISBN 9781627076760 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Women in the Bible. | Christian women—Religious life.

Classification: LCC BS2445 .M285 2017 | DDC 220.9/2082—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017036646>

Printed in the United States of America

First printing in 2017

Contents

INTRODUCTION

Trusting God's Spirit to Guide Us • 9

1. Joanna

God's Spirit Uses Difficulties to Guide Us • 17

2. Dorcas

God's Spirit Uses Our Abilities to Guide Us • 35

3. The Hungry Greek Widows

God's Spirit Guides Us through
Negative Examples • 47

4. Lydia

God's Spirit Guides Us through Spiritual Dissatisfaction • 63

5. Damaris

God's Spirit Guides Us to Truth in a False Culture • 81

6. Priscilla and Aquila

God's Spirit Guides Us in Stressful Events • 97

7. Phoebe

God's Spirit Guides Us as Servant Leaders • 111

8. Junia[s] and Andronicus

God's Spirit Guides Us through Early
Experiences We Did Not Value • 129

9. Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Lois, and Eunice

God's Spirit Guides Us in Different Paths • 143

10. Euodia and Syntyche

God's Spirit Guides Us to See Ourselves as God's Servants • 163

11. Apphia and Philemon

God's Spirit Guides Us in a Blessed Alliance • 177

**12. Sometimes God's Spirit Guides
Women into Ministry Leadership • 193**

Notes • 213

Acknowledgments • 217

1

Joanna

God's Spirit Uses Difficulties to Guide Us

Dot was my college roommate and best friend. Two years older than I, she modeled a kind of can-do spirit that inspired me even as we did crazy things together, talked deeply about eternal matters, and laughed about human foibles. Dot was petite, but no challenge ever led her to say, “I can’t.” With hands so small they could hardly stretch an octave on the piano, she could hammer out Rachmaninoff’s *Polichinelle* with verve. Once she became convinced that God wanted her to serve as a missionary, she trained in missionary medicine and then earned a pilot’s license to fly a plane. After a brief engagement to a college Hulk, she married her childhood best friend, gentle Charles, and they sailed together for East Africa where they planned to spend a lifetime serving in Eritrea.

In time, God gave them a son, but after Mark’s birth, Dot—indomitable Dot—found that her muscles wouldn’t follow orders. Other symptoms set in, confounding the missionary doctors. Sent to New York for diagnosis, she learned

that she had multiple sclerosis, a disease about which very little was known in the 1950s. Advised to move to Tucson, Arizona, for the dry heat, she and Charles shifted gears and walked away from that missionary dream to a new reality. No longer with a mission agency, they lost that source of income. How could Charles provide for Dot and little Mark? As Dot's disease advanced over the next fifteen years, Charles taught in the public schools while earning a Ph.D., and he eventually became a university history professor. Then on Good Friday in 1971, Dot went to be with Jesus as Charles, a host of other friends, and I mourned the loss of this amazing woman.

We don't understand these twists and turns in life. While Dot's illness dramatically changed the course of their lives, it also eventually led Charles back into church ministry as pastor of a largely Hispanic congregation in Arizona. It wasn't what Dot and Charles had envisioned many years earlier, but through their loss, Charles was still able to live out his calling, and an underserved group of people received pastoral leadership and care from a wise and compassionate shepherd.

Sometimes when we glance into the rearview mirror of life, we can glimpse how God's Spirit has worked through our most difficult experiences to change the course of our lives. That is not to say that God is the author of our suffering or losses. We live in a world shot through with every kind of evil, and the apostle John reminds us that "the world around us is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). As a result, we suffer from many physical and moral pollutions caused by "the evil one." Yet even illness and loss can be redeemed and used by God to change the direction of our lives for a good purpose.

MEET JOANNA, A JEWISH GIRL WHO MARRIED INTO A ROMAN PALACE

Joanna had likely just turned fourteen when she became a wife. Earlier, her wealthy parents had arranged a good marriage for her to an older man, a non-Jew named Chuza, who served as the business manager to King Herod Antipas. That marriage would move her from the family circle to the king's palace and a life apart from that of most of her Jewish friends. But it would also mean learning Roman ways and probably also learning to speak Greek or Latin rather than the Aramaic she had likely used since early childhood.

Joanna's marriage to Chuza took place in the province of Galilee, a region given to Herod Antipas to rule when his father, King Herod the Great, died in 4 BC (Luke 3:1). Not satisfied with the Jewish towns and cities of Galilee, Antipas decided to build a royal city on a major trade route and near famed hot springs. He also wanted to profit from the burgeoning trade in salted fish from the Sea of Galilee. Choosing the best location near the fishing ports required building over an old Jewish graveyard, but Antipas was undeterred. With its sumptuous palace, its amphitheater for theatrical spectacles, and its Roman baths, the new city, named Tiberias for the Emperor Tiberius, was modeled after the great cities of the Roman Empire. But because of its location over a Jewish cemetery, most devout Jews boycotted the city. Antipas was forced to bring in non-Jews to populate his new capital. We have no evidence that Jesus ever entered Tiberias.

Herod Antipas had married a Nabatean princess to cement relations with the nation on his northern border, but

when he later fell in love with the wife of his half brother, Herod Philip, he divorced his wife and married his sister-in-law. (That divorce cost him a war with his unhappy neighbor to the north.) When John the Baptist spoke out against this illegal marriage, which violated God's law (Leviticus 18:16), Antipas had John the Baptist imprisoned. And when the king was charmed by the sensual dancing of his new wife's daughter, he offered her anything she requested. He then had to acquiesce to her macabre request for John's severed head on a platter.

It was into that palace life that young Joanna moved when she married Chuza, the king's business manager. What do we know about Chuza? Politics likely dictated that this non-Jewish business manager needed a Jewish wife. It was customary in those days for marriages to be arranged within social circles, and it's likely that Joanna came from a Jewish family of wealth and power. She was a perfect fit for the king's finance minister. Joanna likely spent the earliest years of her married life in Roman luxury.

AN ILLNESS AND A DRAMATIC CHANGE OF DIRECTION

When we look for Joanna in the Bible, we first meet her in the gospel of Luke:

Jesus began a tour of the nearby towns and villages, preaching and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom of God. He took his twelve disciples with him, along with some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases. Among them were Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons; *Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's business manager*; Susanna; and many others who

were contributing from their own resources to support Jesus and his disciples. (LUKE 8:1–3, emphasis added)

What? An aristocratic woman from King Antipas's palace is touring with Jesus, his male disciples, and some other women? How could this be? Then we notice that Joanna is included among women who had been cured of either a physical disease or a disease of the soul. In Luke 8, we have no further facts about her. We do not learn the nature of her illness or how she came to be healed. Nor do we have any information in the Bible about the time lapse between her marriage to Chuza and the onset of this debilitating illness. It could have been a number of years. Luke simply tells us that she was now part of the Jesus band, going from town to town as Jesus preached the Good News of God's Kingdom.

Think about the huge social gulf Joanna had to cross as she moved from the Herodian upper class of Tiberias, the royal city of the Roman king, to trekking from town to town with Jesus, listening to him teach and watching him heal the sick. Accustomed to palace life and its luxurious amenities, she nevertheless chose to live as part of a rag-tag band of fishermen and others. And there is a reasonably good chance she wouldn't have found a warm welcome among them. As part of the alien Roman aristocracy, hated by most Galileans for the heavy taxes Antipas imposed and the Roman pagan approach to all of life, she might well have been considered "the enemy." But she risked that because she had met her Savior. She realized that Jesus's power to heal was from God whose Kingdom he announced. It was an upside-down Kingdom, contrary to all she knew about palaces and kings and royal rule. He talked about loving not

just your own kind, but also about loving your enemies. He was hard on religious elites, but tender toward those with a contrite spirit. There was also quite a bit about this Kingdom of God that had to do with renouncing status and wealth rather than parading it as proof of God's favor.

Joanna had been a wealthy aristocratic woman in a land of poor and oppressed people. Imagine the risk she took when she crossed over from her elite circle to become one with ordinary folks—those with whom Jesus associated. British New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham notes that for Joanna, “throwing her lot with Jesus was a radical conversion to the poor.”¹ Had it not been for the incurable illness that first drove her to find that Jewish miracle-worker she had heard about, Joanna may have never left her comfortable life in the king's palace. But through her illness, God led her to Jesus. It is the same for us: God's Spirit can use our most difficult challenges to lead us in new and unexpected directions.

THE COMPLEX LIVES OF WOMEN IN FIRST-CENTURY ISRAEL

In the Ancient Near East, women were often sequestered in their homes and kept out of sight. Why? In the legalistic Judaism practiced by the scribes and Pharisees in New Testament times, women were often considered inherently dangerous and corrupt, responsible for the evil in the world because Eve had initiated eating the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:6). Never mind that Adam joined in the feast on the forbidden fruit with no hesitation!²

By first-century moral standards, when women were outside their homes, they were considered to be little more than

a sexual temptation to men. For that reason, some Pharisees were so intent on having no contact with a woman that they would not greet even their own mother if they saw her on the street. In fact, one group of Pharisees was known as “the Bleeding Ones” because they walked around with their eyes closed to keep from seeing a woman in public even from a distance. As a result, they would crash into walls and suffer cuts and bruises. Their resultant bleeding was a mark of their superior moral refusal to be tempted by the sight of a woman.

In addition to being sequestered and deemed a moral threat, women were also considered unworthy of learning God's law. Rabbi Eliezer had declared, “If any man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery” (m. Sota 3:4). Jose ben Johnan of Jerusalem had taught, “He who talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law and at the last will inherit Gehenna” (m. Abot. 1:5). In the eyes of many Jews, teaching a woman Mosaic law was not only unnecessary; it was downright wrong.

In light of such malign attitudes toward women, we may be shocked to learn that some women traveled all around Galilee as part of Jesus's band. Were they bold or simply reckless? How did God's Spirit guide and influence their stunning choices? How is it that they seem to be respected rather than ostracized by their communities? And how did their humble and courageous choice alter their lives?

The women we meet in Luke 8 were far more complex than we sometimes think. What was true for some women was not true for others, and these women could travel publicly with Jesus and his disciples because of who they

were—women of means and privilege. Luke tells us that Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many other women “were contributing from their own resources to support Jesus and his disciples” (Luke 8:3). These were women who had access to wealth and were in a position to contribute generously to Jesus.

Luke tells us that their attachment to Jesus grew out of what he had already done for them: he had healed them. Their gratitude to him led to their decision to use their resources to fund his ministry. So we find these women traveling with Jesus and his male disciples on his tours of the towns and villages near the Sea of Galilee. Did tongues wag? Were the townspeople scandalized? To understand how these women were able to travel with Jesus and his band without scandal or community criticism, we need to know a bit about “benefaction” and how it shielded benefactors from public disapproval in the first century.

New Testament scholar Lynn Cohick tells us that benefaction was gender blind. This allowed a woman to move about freely in public if what she did contributed to the common good. Because Jesus was healing multitudes, these women were making that possible by supporting him financially in his work. Joanna’s social position allowed her to travel freely with Jesus because her financial support was enabling a good thing benefitting so many poorer folks.

But Joanna’s presence with the band might have had another benefit. When we read the early chapters of the gospels by Matthew, Mark, or Luke, we note that everyone was gossiping about this amazing miracle worker, Jesus. Huge crowds followed him wherever he went, and he was kept busy day and night healing the sick and casting demons

out of afflicted people. News of him was on everyone's lips, and even King Antipas was curious and wanted to see Jesus at work (Luke 23:8). While early on many of the scribes and Pharisees condemned Jesus for his actions and teachings, his good works throughout the towns and villages in Galilee protected him from the wrath of those religious leaders. Joanna's connection to the Jesus band may also have garnered the group some protection even from the palace.

But Jesus didn't stay only in Galilee. Each year, he made the journey down to Jerusalem in Judea for one of the great feasts of the nation. It was there that the Jewish religious leaders could scheme for a means of seeing Jesus dead. Not only the twelve disciples but also this band of women accompanied Jesus on those treks to Jerusalem. The story of his last trip to Jerusalem takes up much space in each of the four Gospels. In John's Gospel, for example, two-thirds of the book (from chapter 7:10 through chapter 20) detail those last days of teaching in Jerusalem, then Jesus's arrest, his trial, his crucifixion, and finally his resurrection.

Joanna was part of that group to the end. We find her watching Jesus die on Golgotha (Mark 15:41). Had you been in her situation, what might you have felt at that time? With the other women, she had invested her resources in his ministry, but now he was dying on a cross. He had rescued them from debilitating diseases. He had taught them the way to God. He had given them hope for God's Kingdom. But now? Joanna and the other women could do nothing but watch the slow, agonizing death of their Lord.

But even in his death, these women had one more ministry to perform: his body must be anointed properly. It would be risky. In fact, doing so might well incur the wrath of

Jerusalem's Roman governor. But it had to be done—and they *wanted* to do it. Their love for Jesus compelled them to give his body a proper burial. Luke tells us:

As his body was taken away, the women from Galilee followed and saw the tomb where his body was placed. Then they went home and prepared spices and ointments to anoint his body. But by the time they were finished the Sabbath had begun, so they rested as required by the law. (LUKE 23:55–56)

Then before dawn, the morning after the Sabbath had ended, these women were on their way back to the tomb to complete the task before them.

They faced what seemed to be an impossible situation. The Jewish religious leaders had insisted that the tomb be sealed and a Roman guard posted in front of it so that the followers of Jesus could not steal the body and insist that Jesus was once again alive. How would these women deal with that sealed cave and the Roman soldiers? That was their dilemma.

But these women were determined! Nothing, including the potential threats and unknown obstacles before them, could keep them from that sealed tomb. Who were the women bent on this dangerous mission? Combining lists from the four gospels, we know that the group included Mary of Magdala; Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward; Susanna; Mary the mother of Jesus; Mary the wife of Clopas; Mary the mother of James; Mary the mother of Joses; and the mother of Zebedee's sons. Except for Mary Magdalene and Susanna, all of these women were married and most were mothers of adult sons. Of all the witnesses to

the crucifixion, they were most constant throughout Jesus's suffering and death. They were last at the cross and the tomb, and first as witnesses to Jesus's resurrection.

LAST AT THE TOMB, FIRST TO ANNOUNCE JESUS'S RESURRECTION

Luke reports what happened next:

Very early on Sunday morning the women went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. They found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. So they went in, but they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus. As they stood there puzzled, two men suddenly appeared to them, clothed in dazzling robes.

The women were terrified and bowed with their faces to the ground. Then the men asked, "Why are you looking among the dead for someone who is alive? He isn't here! He is risen from the dead! Remember what he told you back in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men and be crucified, and that he would rise again on the third day."

Then they remembered that he had said this. So they rushed back from the tomb to tell his eleven disciples—and everyone else—what had happened. It was Mary Magdalene, *Joanna*, Mary the mother of James, and several other women who told the apostles what had happened. But the story sounded like nonsense to the men, so they didn't believe it. (LUKE 24:1–11, emphasis added)

Because these women had not flinched in the face of danger, they became the first to announce the resurrection of Jesus to his disciples—most of whom had fled the scene of his

trial and crucifixion, fearing that they would be the next to die a brutal death. Reading the final chapters of each of the Gospels, we see how difficult it was for the eleven disciples—those closest to Jesus throughout his ministry—to comprehend what had really happened. After his resurrection, in appearance after appearance at meals behind locked doors, or out in the open by the seaside, Jesus repeatedly commented on how slow they were to believe what their eyes could plainly see. Here is how Luke describes one such encounter:

The whole group was startled and frightened, thinking they were seeing a ghost!

“Why are you frightened?” [Jesus] asked. “Why are your hearts filled with doubt? Look at my hands. Look at my feet. You can see that it’s really me. Touch me and make sure that I am not a ghost, because ghosts don’t have bodies, as you see that I do.” . . . Still they stood there in disbelief, filled with joy and wonder. (LUKE 24:37–39, 41)

Not so with the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee, Joanna among them. And God rewarded their fidelity with proof positive from the angels who instructed them at the empty tomb. What was the source of their fidelity? In every case, these women had a personal experience of God’s love and grace through the actions of God’s Son, Jesus. For Joanna and others, it was the healing touch that delivered them from debilitating illness. In the words of an old chorus sung in churches back in the 1950s,

*“How can I do less
than give him my best
and live for him completely,
After all he’s done for me?”*

Touched by God's grace, these women never wavered in their commitment to Jesus's welfare in both life and death. Their reward was to become the first evangelists, the first to announce Jesus's resurrection and the grace of God this would provide to all who believe in him.

Jesus's story moves on. After forty days appearing here and there (at one point, to more than five hundred of his followers at a single time, as recorded 1 Corinthians 15:6), Jesus commissioned his followers with these words:

“I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (MATTHEW 28:18–20)

In his last time with his followers, he promised them,

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And 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)

As they watched, Jesus was taken up into a cloud so they could no longer see him. Returning to Jerusalem and to the upstairs room where they had been staying, “they all met together and were constantly united in prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women, and the brothers of Jesus” (Acts 1:14).

Note that the women had not returned to Galilee to pick up their former lives. They had not disappeared. They were faithful to Jesus's final instructions—to remain in Jerusalem

until God's Spirit had come upon them for ministry. The growing group, now numbering 120, prayed earnestly for this. Acts 2 describes the scene in that upstairs room:

On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit. (ACTS 2:1–4)

Luke is clear that all 120 men and women in that room were filled by the Holy Spirit. They then poured out into the streets of Jerusalem with the astounding news about Jesus.

We don't hear about most of these women again, nor do we hear of most of the original male disciples. The story of the early church shifts to Peter, and then to Paul throughout the rest of the New Testament. But if we continue reading in Acts 2, we learn that as each one was filled with the Holy Spirit, he or she "began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability" (v. 2:4). Why? For a very important reason!

Pentecost was one of the three major Jewish feasts each year, and Jews from all over the known world made the trip to Jerusalem for the celebrations. Jerusalem in the first century was a relatively small city with no more than 55,000 residents. But at the time of the great feasts, the incoming pilgrims more than tripled the population to around 180,000. God's timing was perfect!

At that time there were devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem. When they heard the loud noise, everyone

came running, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers.

They were completely amazed. “How can this be?” they exclaimed. “These people are all from Galilee, and yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages! Here we are—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt and the areas of Libya around Cyrene, visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans, and Arabs. And we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!” (Acts 2:5–11)

Little Jerusalem was packed with people from every part of the known world. Only on one of the three great pilgrimage feasts of the Jewish year would the city have had such an audience for the sermon Peter preached about Jesus. A week earlier or a week later, the town would have shrunk to its normal population. But not at Pentecost! The whole world had representatives who could hear that Good News in their own language. The Galilean women were part of that proclamation band, gifted by God's Spirit to spread the word about Jesus to those who would carry it thousands of miles as they returned home.

GOD'S SPIRIT AT WORK

How did God's Spirit lead Joanna and the other women? In their case, God began with their clear and obvious need. Each of them had some kind of disease from which they needed to be healed. Jesus met their need and cured them. For Joanna, Jesus not only changed her physically, but his

life and teachings changed her emotionally and spiritually, giving her new values and a new purpose in life.

In response to the grace these women received from Jesus, they left the comfort of their well-to-do homes to travel with and minister to him throughout Galilee and back and forth to Jerusalem for the great Jewish feasts. When the disciples fled for fear of the Jewish religious leaders, the women remained visible and constant—at the cross, at the tomb, and after Jesus’s resurrection and ascension. For their fidelity they were included in that first band of Spirit-filled men and women who shared the Good News with folks who would carry it to the ends of their known world.

Imagine the giant step of faith Joanna took when she left a palace to travel around the Galilean countryside with a ragtag band of fishermen and hangers-on. Can you fathom the gap between her former life and the one she chose as a follower of Jesus? Accustomed to fine foods, costly clothing, and servants to carry out her every wish, she nevertheless embraced a new life of service to others. But for her, this step led to a richness no palace could provide. In the beginning of her walk with Jesus, she could not know what opportunities or challenges might lie ahead. We’ll meet Joanna again later in this book, in a life that carried her beyond her wildest imaginings. In Galilee, she knew only that she had met the Savior of the world and he had forever changed her life.

God’s Spirit often uses our deep needs as a springboard to guide us into the new life we can have in Jesus Christ. When we experience that new life, we respond with love and gratitude, just as the women did who traveled with Jesus. Like them, we want to serve God’s Kingdom with whatever

gifts we've been given. For most of us, embracing a life of service will likely not require a change as dramatic as the one Joanna experienced. But when God's Spirit guides us, we often do end up going through doors of opportunity that take us by surprise. In the process, we discover gifts within ourselves we had no idea we possessed. Or we become aware of opportunities we would not have considered earlier. We find ourselves in situations that astonish us with their new possibilities. When that happens, we can be assured that it is God at work, guiding us into new avenues of service for our Lord. Who knows what that door of opportunity might be for you?



QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What stands out most to you about the story of Joanna and the other women in Jesus's band? In what ways does their story encourage you or challenge you?
2. How do you respond to the idea that God's Spirit uses our difficulties to guide us? Overall, is it an idea that you find distressing or comforting? Why?
3. In what ways, if any, would you say God's Spirit has used past difficulties to guide you? What unforeseen opportunities or growth did you experience as a result?
4. In what ways might God's Spirit be using any current difficulties to guide you in this season of life—to draw you closer to Jesus, to grow your faith and gifts, or to open new opportunities for service?