

MYSTERY



Blessed Are Who? Bible Character Backgrounds

Use these character backgrounds as reference as you engage the kids in learning more about Jesus' beatitudes. Each character has been chosen to illuminate how the beatitudes play out in the world so that we can work towards solving the mystery of what it means to be truly blessed.

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Esther

Key Scripture: Esther 1 - Esther 10

We can learn a lot about something from what it leaves behind. We learn about dinosaurs from the bones they left behind. We learn about ancient civilizations from the ruins they left behind. We learn about Esther from the story she left behind, the story passed down by her people—the Jews living in exile from their homeland.

These are the people who Esther saved. During the 400s BCE Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) ruled over the vast Persian empire. At the end of a series of extravagant feasts, held in order to display the king's great wealth, the original queen, Vashti, refused to allow herself to also be displayed as property. In order to prevent other women from following in Vashti's rebellious example, Ahasuerus and his advisors had her removed from her seat of power. Ahasuerus was in need of a new queen and had the most beautiful women of the land brought before him.

At that time Esther lived with her older cousin Mordecai in Persia because she had been orphaned. Both were Jewish exiles of the tribe of Benjamin. Ahasuerus chose Esther as his new queen, although she kept her Jewish heritage a secret. Around that time, Mordecai anonymously prevented the king from being assassinated.

Soon after Ahasuerus appointed a man named Haman as his chief advisor. All who met Haman were supposed to bow before him but when Mordecai met him, he refused. Haman used this incident to convince the king of the rebelliousness of the Jewish people and a decree was made that the Jews in Persia were to be destroyed. Esther had a choice, she could attempt to hide her heritage completely or she could stand up for her people and her cousin. Even the queen could be killed for going before the king without being summoned, but Esther did so anyway.

She dined with Ahasuerus and Haman and revealed that she was a Jew. The night before Ahasuerus had also learned what Mordecai had done to save his life. Ahasuerus was overcome by Esther's courage and by Mordecai's dedication and released a new decree that the Jewish people in

Persia had the full support of not only the queen but also the king. Haman was executed and replaced by Mordecai.

Key Beatitude: Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy (Matthew 5:7 NRSV)

Right from the start, we have to understand how radical Jesus' beatitudes really are. Esther was not merciful. She gives to Haman the same punishment that Haman had intended for Mordecai and all of the Jewish people. She extends that punishment to Haman's family and all those who conspired against the Jewish people throughout the Persian Empire. So how does Esther's story exemplify Jesus' beatitude about mercy? The old justice of an eye for an eye has been thrown out. The Jewish people had been treated ruthlessly for generations on end, so Esther grasped the power she could find to ruthlessly protect them. This is how God's justice is portrayed throughout the Old Testament. Yet, Jesus' world-changing teachings and incredible love create the possibility for a new way. He envisions a new kingdom where Esther's bold courage in the face of threat and uncertainty—her love—can be used to build up others rather than to fight others. Queen Esther protected the vulnerable within a dangerous kingdom. King Jesus creates a new kingdom where the vulnerable are already safe.

Special Prayers: As you learn about Esther, you're invited to choose a prayer to repeat throughout the day. The goal is to memorize the simple prayer so that it is there for you and your kids whenever you might need it in life, just like God. You can choose between the more challenging prayer poem and the rhyming kid's poem:

Esther Kid's Prayer

Help us to help others to see,
We are all children of the Most High King.
I'm who you made me to be,
I'll share this truth till we're all soarin'.
Amen.

Esther Prayer Poem

Give us the courage to turn ill will to your will.
When we stand with you God, mercy multiplies.
Where we dwell with you God, hurt renews to hope.
Amen.

Learning Objectives for the Kids:

- ❖ Because Esther and Mordecai were from a different country and had a different faith, they were treated differently and sometimes that treatment was mean or dangerous.
- ❖ Esther and Mordecai never gave up faith that God was with them.
- ❖ Esther could have hidden her faith and been safe but instead she stood up for what she believed and for her family.
- ❖ Jesus has taught us to create a world where people who are different are loved and appreciated.
- ❖ Faith in Jesus means that we no longer have to fight one another; we can always find a way live together. In this way we are all blessed more than can be measured!



Mary Magdalene

Key Scripture: **John 20:1-18**

In the gospels of Luke and Mark we learn that Mary Magdalene (Mary of Magdala) had been healed by Jesus and then became one of his closest followers. She may also be the same Mary who lovingly anointed Jesus' feet with oil and her own hair in the gospels of Luke and John.

What we know for certain is that Mary stayed by Jesus' side throughout his crucifixion. When others were frightened away, she and several other women remained. Mary Magdalene was one of the few people who continued alongside the dead body of Jesus as it was laid in a tomb. When Mary returned later to the tomb she found it empty. Although depictions of this discovery and Mary's sharing of the news with the disciples differ among the gospels, we know for certain that Mary Magdalene first laid eyes on the risen Jesus.

In John she brings Peter and another disciple to the empty tomb, but while they return home in bewilderment she remains. With tears running down her face, Mary enters the tomb to find two angels ready to greet her. They ask her why she is crying and she affirms her dedication to Jesus even after his death by deploring them to help her find his body. Leaving the tomb, Mary encounters a strange man who also asks her why she cries. She again asks where she can find Jesus. The man answers her by calling out her name.

Upon hearing him say "Mary" she recognizes the risen Jesus and falls to his feet. Jesus then appoints Mary as his first apostle by sending her out to share the news of his resurrection. Mary is chosen as the first drop of water that will grow into a tidal wave of good news spreading across the world. Mary encounters the empty tomb with a heart that is profoundly saddened yet still filled with love for Jesus. Her heart is chosen as the model for spreading that love as it bursts with the realization of God's promises through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

Key Beatitude: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God (Matthew 5:8 NRSV)

From Mary we learn that a pure heart is certainly not an empty heart—it's full! Jesus' empty tomb should forever be associated with full hearts among his followers. Mary followed Jesus perhaps more loyally than any other and so exemplifies a pure and whole heart. Even in the depths of sadness after Jesus' death, her heart remained full of love. From Mary we also learn that a heart that is full and pure isn't plain but streaked and bursting with color. Grief and joy, fear and hope, helplessness and faith all go into filling a pure heart. Although we cannot see God with our own eyes like Mary, she still shares with us the vision of a God-filled heart. With that kind of heart, your eyes should be set on sharing God's love.

Special Prayers: As you learn about Mary, you're invited to choose a prayer to repeat throughout the day. The goal is to memorize the simple prayer so that it is there for you and your kids whenever you might need it in life, just like God. You can choose between the more challenging prayer poem and the rhyming kid's poem:

Mary Kid's Prayer

Help us to believe with hearts that sing.
We are filled by your love till we're overflowing.
This is the joy that the good news brings!
Amen.

Mary Prayer Poem

Make me bright. Make me bold.
Let my beauty show for others to see.
I have been painted over by your love.
I am a masterpiece of your goodness,
a showcase of your brilliance.
Amen.

Learning Objectives for the Kids:

- ❖ When Jesus was arrested, some of his followers ran away and some stayed with him like Mary. Jesus' love for all of his followers continued.
- ❖ When Jesus died, all of his followers were sad including Mary.
- ❖ When Jesus came back to life he didn't want his followers to be sad any more but he also didn't want them to keep their happiness to themselves. They had to share the good news.
- ❖ Jesus chose Mary as the first person to send out with the good news because her heart never stopped being filled with his love.
- ❖ Jesus' resurrection is so amazing that our hearts should be pure like Mary's. That means they should be so full of all the emotions of life and love that Jesus shared with us that they are overflowing! In this way we are all blessed more than can be measured!



Deborah

Key Scripture: Judges 4 - Judges 5

During the 1100s BCE Deborah served as the fourth judge of Israel after the exodus from Egypt but before the monarchy was established at Jerusalem. In that time the judges served variously as prophets, warriors, informal leaders, and as literal judges. Deborah fulfilled all of these roles.

We enter Deborah's story by learning that she dispensed judgment about the people's problems from beneath a palm tree between Benjamin and Bethel. The king of Canaan, Jabin, had conquered the people of Israel and ruled over them for twenty years. Deborah was called by God to end that oppression.

She ordered a commander named Barak to summon an army to overthrow Jabin. He agreed on one condition, that she march at the head of the army along with him. She agreed on one condition, that it be made known that through God a woman was responsible for the coming victory and not a man. From among the twelve tribes of Israel, Naphtali and Zebulun answered the call and gathered for war on Mount Tabor.

Jabin's commander, the fearsome Sisera, summoned a formidable army including 900 chariots of iron to put down the rebellious forces at Mount Tabor. In that time, 900 chariots might have been seen as an invincible force. What followed was a stunning victory for the Israelites as their force of peasants overwhelmed an army of well-trained and well-equipped soldiers. The Biblical account even suggests that God intervened with torrents of rain to disable the enemy chariots.

Sisera fled on foot as he was pursued by the Israelites and took refuge in a nearby land. A woman there named Jael took in Sisera and when his guard was dropped, assassinated him with a tent spike. With that, the cruel rein of Jabin under the iron fist of Sisera was effectively ended by a woman, as Deborah prophesied. Jael showed Barak what she had done and with the threat of Sisera ended, Barak and Deborah were able to easily subdue and overthrow Jabin and liberate Israel. Together they sang Deborah's song about the victory which became an anthem of hope for Israel.

Key Beatitude: Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5 NRSV)

If you're looking for superman in the Bible, you just found her. Clark Kent is the mild mannered reporter / superhuman hero. Deborah is the mild-mannered musician / superfaithful hero. Deborah rescues a nation in peril, restores faith and justice to the land, inspires others to bravely serve, and even gets her own theme song. All she's missing is the cape. Deborah helps us to understand that meekness is strength built from humbly putting your gifts to the best use. Deborah can't leap over buildings or shoot lasers from her eyes, so what are her gifts? Deborah is confident, wise, and brave. She deeply cares for others and is willing to put her life on the line to help them. This care is not reserved for the wealthy or powerful but directed at the common people all around her. Above all, Deborah is faithful to God. Whether you want to use the metaphor of solid stones building up to a strong tower or rich soil, fertilizer, water, and sunlight growing a great tree these are the gifts that make Deborah meek and great.

Special Prayers: As you learn about Deborah, you're invited to choose a prayer to repeat throughout the day. The goal is to memorize the simple prayer so that it is there for you and your kids whenever you might need it in life, just like God. You can choose between the more challenging prayer poem and the rhyming kid's poem:

Deborah Kid's Prayer

Help us to have humble hearts.
Make mine beat like a justice drum.
As you build your great kingdom,
I will become one of its parts.
Amen.

Deborah Prayer Poem

You make me strong. I lean on your might.
You make me wise. I'm nourished by your righteousness.
You make me brave. I am filled with a fierceness for your fairness.
Amen.

Learning Objectives for Kids:

- ❖ Deborah did a lot. She helped others solve their problems. She shared God's words with the people. She fought for justice. She created music that the people could use to praise God.
- ❖ Deborah did not do these things for riches and power. Deborah did all this because ordinary people like her needed her help.
- ❖ God does the most amazing things in the world through everyday people who care about doing what's right.
- ❖ We all have gifts to share with others and that God uses to make the world better.
- ❖ Jesus challenges us all to find what we are best at and to use those gifts not to make ourselves great but to make the world great for everybody. In this way we are all blessed more than can be measured!



Tabitha

Key Scripture: **Acts 9:36-42**

Tabitha lived in Joppa, a port city in ancient Israel. This was the time just after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Israel was still under Roman rule and so Tabitha was also called Dorcas in the common language of the empire and the region, Greek. Tabitha was renowned for her charity and devotion to serving others. She may have been very wealthy or she may have been poor but what we know for certain is that wealth only mattered to Tabitha in as much as it could be shared to relieve those in need.

Tabitha died. She grew ill and passed away. The apostle Peter was nearby and heard of Tabitha's death from many who loved her. They brought Peter to her body. Peter brought Tabitha back to life. Together they walked out among the people and many turned to belief in Jesus.

Obviously Tabitha was a special person. Peter must have encountered many funerals and many friends and family in mourning but, as far as we know, he only ever brought back Tabitha. But that's not what makes her special. Tabitha was so beloved that her admirers and friends sought out the miracle worker Peter to undo death and bring her back to them. But that's still not what makes her special. Tabitha served others. That's what makes her special.

She wasn't a miracle worker. She wasn't a queen like Esther, an apostle like Mary, or a warrior prophet like Deborah. She was simply someone who served. In fact the Bible does not tell us whether Tabitha believed in or even knew of Jesus or whether she was ever baptized. We can safely assume that she did believe in Jesus, yet the mere fact that she was charitable is enough indication from Holy Scripture for us to know that Tabitha was a truly special follower of Jesus.

Key Beatitude: **Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3 NRSV).**

Being poor in spirit does not necessarily mean that someone is poor by worldly standards. In other words, being poor in spirit is not the same as

being the opposite of wealthy. Indeed, this beatitude pushes us to understand wealth as something beyond money or possessions. We are talking about spirit. What kind of spirit did Tabitha have? Whether she was rich or poor, her spirit was charitable. Perhaps being poor in spirit means that you give so much of yourself to others that you have little left. Perhaps being poor in spirit means that life circumstances—hardship or persecution—have so diminished your spirit that you feel empty or without worth. Both were Tabitha’s sort of people. Both sort of people were her friends and companions. In the Lutheran church we use a word called accompaniment. The basic idea is that you embody a willingness to live alongside others who you sometimes serve, sometimes serve with, and sometimes are served by. You never consider yourself greater than the person beside you. You cultivate a spirit that is poor in boasting and rich in empathy. That sounds a whole lot like Tabitha.

Special Prayers: As you learn about Tabitha, you’re invited to choose a prayer to repeat throughout the day. The goal is to memorize the simple prayer so that it is there for you and your kids whenever you might need it in life, just like God. You can choose between the more challenging prayer poem and the rhyming kid’s poem:

Tabitha Kid’s Prayer

Help others to love what is best in me,
not my riches but the gifts I share.
I promise to be someone who cares.
I know your gifts have set me free.
Amen.

Tabitha Prayer Poem

I am sewn to you Holy Spirit.
Where I am frayed, you fringe me with faith.
Where I am torn, you tie me to yourself.
Where I am worn through, you weave me wholly into you.
Amen.

Learning Objectives for the Kids:

- ❖ Tabitha devoted her life to helping others. She cared that the hungry had food to eat and that everyone had clothes to wear.
- ❖ Tabitha was very popular but this wasn't because she was rich or pretty or had the best things. Tabitha was popular because she truly cared about other people and worked hard to help them.
- ❖ Tabitha's example was so important that Peter even brought her back to life so that her example could continue and spread.
- ❖ Tabitha didn't change the whole world; she helped people right where she lived and that is just as important. Lots of people helping right where they are can change the world.
- ❖ Jesus showed us that the people we should focus on are the most in need and that the people we should be like are those who use what they have to help others. If we all took that message to heart, we would have heaven on earth. In this way we are all blessed more than can be measured!



Miriam

Key Scripture: Exodus 2:1-10; Exodus 15

When she was very young Miriam watched her baby brother float down the river in a basket. But Miriam didn't just watch. She followed that basket from the edge of the Nile River all the way into the palace of Pharaoh—the very man who had sentenced that baby to death.

What sort of blind courage or love must it have taken for Miriam to do that? As a toddler she was already fearless. Miriam watched as Pharaoh's daughter picked up her baby brother and when the woman asked for a nurse Miriam rushed to bring back her mother. Thus Miriam ensured that Moses would be protected and well-raised.

Jewish tradition holds that Miriam was a prophet from a very early age but the Bible does not reveal Miriam's role as a prophet until she helps her brother lead the Israelites across the Red Sea and to safety. There she leads the people in a song of thanksgiving and praise for God's deliverance. We don't know much more about Miriam.

In Numbers 12 she is punished with leprosy for questioning Moses' special status with God. Jewish tradition also holds that she miraculously provided the Israelites with wells of water as they wandered through the wilderness and until she died of old age. Stories have also arisen up about her selfless support for Moses with their brother Aaron as Moses repeatedly confronted Pharaoh seeking the liberation of the Israelites. All this combines to make Miriam a symbol. She symbolizes devotion to family. She symbolizes the unnamed heroes who struggle for God's deliverance. She symbolizes joyful praise to God. The fearless toddler protecting her brother symbolizes the possibility for any child to grow into greatness with God.

Key Beatitude: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God (Matthew 5:9 NRSV).

Peacemakers don't make peace out of nothing. Peace would not even need to be made if conflict and suffering did not exist. Miriam is part of the

incredible family that led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness into a promised land. But even then the promised land had to be fought for. And then Israel struggled to become a kingdom. And then the kingdom strayed from God or was conquered, again and again. Miriam and her siblings accomplished much but still left much to be accomplished. The struggle to realize God's promise that all people can and should live in peace and with justice stretches over millennium and continues to this day. We are all children of God and all called to be peacemakers. We are all called to lead and carry others to the promised land. We are all called to continue building the kingdom that Jesus promises throughout the beatitudes.

Special Prayers: As you learn about Miriam, you're invited to choose a prayer to repeat throughout the day. The goal is to memorize the simple prayer so that it is there for you and your kids whenever you might need it in life, just like God. You can choose between the more challenging prayer poem and the rhyming kid's poem:

Miriam Kid's Prayer

I'm a peacemaker.
I am God's own.
I am called to fix what is broken
To make the pieces whole.
Amen.

Miriam Prayer Poem

Make me fearless.
Speak the words that stir my soul.
Sing the melody that moves my innermost self.
God, you say "dance with me"
and my heart leaps into your arms.
Amen.

Learning Objectives for Kids:

- ❖ Miriam really loved and looked out for her family.
- ❖ This fearless loyalty and love extended to all of her people.
- ❖ Miriam and her people were slaves in Egypt but God did not want slavery to continue so God directed the siblings Miriam, Aaron, and Moses to lead their people to freedom.
- ❖ Even though Miriam started working for freedom when she was very young and continued her whole life alongside her brothers, the work was never completely finished.
- ❖ Jesus challenges us all to be peacemakers and to work so that everyone can have peace and be liberated. This is a challenge so big that it has been going on for thousands of years and everyone everywhere is called to get to work. But the good news is that Jesus has given us everything we need to make his dream a reality. In this way we are all blessed more than can be measured!

