SUSANNA

#me too

A Biblical Tale of Sexual Assault and Its Aftermath

A Study for Youth & Adults

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SUSANNA: #METOO
A BIBLICAL TALE OF SEXUAL ASSAULT AND ITS AFTERMATH

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INTRODUCTION

The story of Susanna is a companion story to the book of Daniel. In Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, it is included as Chapter 13 of Daniel. Protestants, however, consider the story apocryphal as it does not appear in any Hebrew texts.

Though the story is set in Babylon during The Exile (587-538 BC), it, like Daniel, was likely written during the Hellenistic (Greek) Period (333-160 BC). It was a popular morality tale up through the early 20th century and inspired several works of art beginning around 1470.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR STUDY LEADERS

The following study presents the text of Susanna alongside commentary and questions for each passage. A complete copy of the text appears on the last two pages of the study and can be photocopied for use by the group. To be fully prepared to lead discussion, study leaders should read the entire text and commentary ahead of time and answer the questions for themselves.

The study is designed to be undertaken by senior high youth, women, or men in small group settings. Questions appear in the margin with a notation that some questions are specifically intended for women, some for men, and some for youth. Study leaders should determine in advance which questions will be used with their particular group.

Please note: this study contains some very heavy topics (voyeurism, sexual assault, and the death penalty). While the study can be used with any group, having a group who already know each other and have a level of trust will likely produce the deepest and most insightful conversations. Conducting the study in one sitting is probably best, but if the group seriously engages each question, it may require two or more sessions to complete the entire study.
A man named Joakim once lived in Babylon. His wife Susanna, Hilkiak’s daughter, was very beautiful and honored the Lord. Her parents were good people, and they taught their daughter according to the Law from Moses.

Joakim was very rich, and he had a large private garden next to his home. The Jews came to him because he was the most honored among them.

In 587 BC, the Babylonians under the command of King Nebuchadnezzar, sacked Jerusalem and destroyed Solomon’s Temple. They deported the Jewish aristocracy and learned classes to Babylon in what came to be called “The Babylonian Exile.”

Joakim is Jewish. His name means “lifted by Jehovah.” That he is a wealthy Jew living in captivity in Babylon reinforces the idea that he has been elevated or blessed by God. His father-in-law is Hilkiak, which means “my portion is Yah” or, in other words, “devoted to God.” Hilkiak’s daughter’s name is Susanna (or Shoshana), which means “lily” (likely a reference to her beauty). Her parents are identified as righteous and, as a result, Susanna is well-trained in the Law of Moses.

Babylon was known for its lush and beautiful gardens. Though a desert city, its proximity to the Euphrates River allowed for cultivation of trees and other vegetation.

As a man of wealth, Joakim was popular with his fellow Jews in exile. The text suggests that his door was always open to them.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

**VERSES 1-4**

**MEN & WOMEN:**

If you are engaged, married, or have been seriously dating someone for a long time, share briefly with the group about how you met your significant other, what attracted you, and what happened when you met their family for the first time.

What qualities did you (or do you) look for in a mate? What role did (does) physical attractiveness, religious background, and upbringing play in your search and decision to commit? If you are a parent, what qualities do (or did) you hope your own children would/won’t take into account when dating or selecting a spouse?

**YOUTH:**

What qualities do you look for in someone you would like to date? What role does physical attractiveness, religious background, and social upbringing play in your search? Are you more likely to date someone who you have been friends with for some time, or approach a relative stranger who you find attractive?

**IMAGE:** A copy of a bas relief from the 7th century BC.
Two elders among the people had been appointed as judges that year. It was about them that the Lord had spoken: “Lawless disorder has come out of Babylon, from elders, from judges who were supposed to guide the people.” These men spent a lot of time at Joakim’s house, and all the people with lawsuits came to them.

Among those who found a comfortable place within Joakim’s walls were two elders. The age of adulthood for Jewish males is twelve, so these “elders” could have been as young as their thirties or forties. That they were appointed as judges suggests that they were well versed in the law of Moses and respected by the community.

The quote attributed to God regarding the character of these two judges (v.5) was likely an epitaph. Perhaps the reader is to intuit that it comes from the prophet Daniel.

The two judges are at Joakim’s house so frequently that people just know to go there to find them if they have a case that needs to be decided.

When the people went away in the middle of the day, Susanna would walk around her husband’s private garden. Every day the two elders would see her coming in and walking around, and they desired her sexually. They ceased thinking clearly, neither looking to heaven nor caring about justice. Both of them thought about her and nothing else, but they didn’t tell each other their craving, because they were ashamed to admit how they desired her and wanted to be with her. But they were on the lookout every day, eager to get a glimpse of her.

The public activity at Joakim’s house is suspended each day at lunchtime (the host’s hospitality does not seem to extend to feeding the whole community every day!). The break in activity provides Joakim’s wife a small window in which to enjoy her own house and garden.

The rules of Jewish modesty severely restricted the interaction of men and women, who were still considered “property” (either of their father or their husband). Women were often prescribed to be veiled in public and only allowed to speak to other women or to their husband.

By virtue of their position, it is easy to think that the elders had the authority to declare when everyone should leave for lunch. This also meant that they were often the last to leave. This put them in the position of being present whenever Susanna would arrive for her daily walk in the garden. Though surely coincidental at first, it is not too much of a stretch to believe that these men eventually chose to delay their departure until her arrival.

STUDY QUESTIONS

VERSSES 5-6

ALL:
What are our cultural feelings about judges? Do they have a place of honor in our culture? Are they generally trusted? Do we consider their verdicts fair? Share examples from the news, TV and film, or from personal experience.

VERSSES 7-12

ALL:
What does it mean to have a “crush” on someone? Who have been your crushes over the years? How many were from afar and how many did you reveal your feelings to? What were the results? What is the difference between “having a crush” on someone and “lusting after” them?
The reader is not told the marital status of the two elders, though it would have been unusual for them not to have been married or widowers. The reader does however know that Susanna is married, and so the law of Moses and decorum dictated that she was unavailable to them. Yet they clearly lusted after her. And their lust was so strong that it began to affect both their prayer life and their ability to administer justice. One might surmise that their own lust began to make them sympathetic to adulterers and the like. That they didn’t speak of their feelings to one another out of shame, goes to show that they were aware that their thoughts were out of line with their faith and their pledge to administer justice and uphold the law. That they both desired to “seduce her,” shows that at some point they had made the conscious choice to break the law.

13 One said to the other, “It’s time for lunch. Let’s go home.” They split up and left, but doubling back, they met again at the same place. They started asking each other for an explanation, and so each confessed his desire. Then they plotted together for a time when they would be able to find her alone.

These verses mark a turning point in the narrative. Up until this point the men had been silently lusting after Susanna in their hearts and in their minds. But on this day both men decide to act on their lust.

When they confront one another, they both confess. This should have been the moment that they talked each other out of acting on their impure impulses. Instead, they decide to collude with one another, believing that their advances will have a greater chance of succeeding if they approach her together.

Either man, if he had simply held to his principles, was in a position to stop the other man from acting immorally. Yet, as is all too common in instances of gang rape and sexual assault, the two men, desiring the same thing, embolden one another.

ALL continued:

What are the barriers that exist that keep us from being with the people we lust after? Why do those barriers exist?

Have you ever adjusted your routine so that you could intersect someone you lusted after or had a crush on? What did you hope to get out of it?

WOMEN:

Have you ever experienced sexual harassment or an unwanted advance? When and where did it happen, and what form did it take?

As a woman, what do you do in your daily life to protect yourself? When are you most on the alert and where do you feel most safe and secure?

STUDY QUESTIONS

VERSES 13-14

ALL:

The passage says that the two men decided to act on their lust on the same day and that they encountered and then questioned each other. They both confessed.

Do you have a friend that you feel that you could confide in if you were having thoughts about acting on your feelings toward someone who is not available to you?

What do you think you would say if one of your friends came to you and shared that they were thinking about acting in this way?

Had the men been following their faith and not their impulses, how should the conversation between them gone? What could have/should have been said?
When they were watching closely for the right moment, Susanna came by, just as she had the day before and the day before that, alone with her two female servants. She wanted to bathe in the privacy of the garden, since it was hot. No one was there except the two elders, who were hidden and spying on her. She said to her female servants, “Please bring me some olive oil and lotion and lock the gates so I can bathe.” They did just what she said. They locked the gates to the garden and went through the side doors into the house to fetch the things she had wanted. They didn’t see the elders, since they were hiding.

When the female servants went out, the two elders stood up and ran at her. They said, “Look, the gates are locked, and nobody can see us. We desire you, so do what we want and have sex with us.” If you don’t, we’ll swear that you were meeting with a young man, and that’s why you sent your female servants away.”

The text is very clear—Susanna did nothing to invite the two men to sexually assault her. She was accompanied by two maids and was within what she thought was the privacy of her own home. We are not privy to any conversations or interactions that take place prior to this between Susanna and the two men, but we should assume that within the confines of the Jewish context there were none. Up to this point, these two men have been watching Susanna from afar. She has done nothing to encourage their advances.

Their first act of immorality is voyeurism. The reader is not told how long it has been since the two elders conspired together. The passage might be read to suggest that starting on that day they decided to spend every lunch hour hiding in the bushes, watching and waiting for their opportunity. Regardless, their act of voyeurism is the first action that they take on their lustful impulse and, even by itself, is a crime against Susanna.

It could be that Susanna being accompanied by “only two maids” (v.15, emphasis added) was an indication to the two men that she intended to bathe. If this is how we are to read this note, then we are to understand that they seize upon what they see as an opportunity and quickly move into hiding amongst the foliage. Whether this was their first time or hundredth time in the bushes is of no consequence. They have crossed a line, and it puts them in the position to cross another one.

When the maids leave and Susanna begins bathing, the men act again on their impulse and reveal themselves. The text makes it clear that the maids did not knowingly leave Susanna vulnerable. The maids leave as instructed by their mistress and do not see the men who are concealed in the bushes.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

**VERSES 15-21**

**ALL:**

Define voyeurism. What are the ways that people can and do act as voyeurs today? What role has technology played? What role has the media or popular film played?

Define sexual assault. What is the difference between “flirting” and “assault”? What actions conducted by men toward or against women in previous decades (for example: catcalling) are now considered sexual harassment or assault?

What constitutes “consent” in a “consensual relationship?”

**YOUTH:**

What role can drugs and alcohol play in situations where sexual assault may occur?
The blame for what is about to happen falls squarely on the two men, not Susanna and not her maids.

In their delusion, the men have convinced themselves that Susanna shares their affection. They begin by trying to convince her to consent to have intercourse with them. Then they threaten her. They say that they will report her being unfaithful to her husband.

Susanna is both literally and metaphorically in a comprised position. She is naked in the bath. And these two men, so driven by their lust that they have run out of the bushes to accost her, are telling her that she either has to be unfaithful to her husband, or they will accuse her of being unfaithful to her husband.

22 Susanna groaned. “I’m trapped! If I do this, it’s death; but if I don’t, I still won’t escape your plotting. 23 But I’d rather not do this and fall into your hands, than sin in the Lord’s sight.”

Susanna recognizes immediately the impossible position she has been placed in. These two men are men of power and influence in the community. They hold trusted positions. They are friends of her husband. There are two of them and only one of her. And to top it all off, she is naked in the bath.

She has to make a choice. Either she unwillingly consents to their unwanted advances or she screams. As a student of the Law, she knows full well that adultery means death for her. Yet if she screams, she knows already that her side of the story will not be believed and she will still be facing the death penalty. Susanna is clearly the victim here, but she has been made out to be the wrongdoer.

24 So Susanna screamed, and at the same time the two elders called out. 25 One of them ran and opened the gates to the garden.

26 When people in the house heard the shouting in the garden, they ran out through the side doors to see what had happened to Susanna. 27 When the two elders had their say, the servants were very ashamed because nothing like this had ever been said about Susanna.
Susanna has no control over what the men will say, but she does have control over what she will do next. She screams.

Immediately the two men try to cover up their own actions by flipping the script. They run and open the garden door and call for help, drowning out Susanna’s own cries for help. They had already concocted an out for themselves, one that made them out to be the heroes and Susanna the harlot.

When the servants and others in the house rush in, they find Susanna naked and the two judges standing over her in righteous indignation. And though the servants knew Susanna well, and knew that a secret liaison was completely out of character for her, they feel ashamed for their part in the alleged adulterous rendezvous.

In attempting to cover up their own sin, these two men have ruined the reputation of a righteous woman and called into question the reputation of her faithful attendants.

28 The next day when the people came to her husband Joakim, the two elders came too, full of their immoral scheme to have Susanna killed. They said in front of the people, 29 “Call Susanna, Hilkiah’s daughter, who is married to Joakim.” So they called her in. 30 She came with her parents, her children, and all her relatives.

Ironically, the site of the assault also becomes the courthouse where the innocent victim is tried as the guilty perpetrator of a fictitious crime by the very persons who committed the real crime. (Thus is the case with many women who find themselves sexually assaulted by men in positions of authority above them.)

They summon her both by her name and by her relation. By doing so they show that they knew that she is the daughter of a righteous man and the husband of their host. Not only have they sinned against Susanna, but against her gracious husband, her righteous family, and God.

Susanna arrives with her parents, her children, and all her relatives. They have not abandoned her. We might even surmise that she has told them the truth of the incident and that they believe her and are willing to stand by her.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

**VERSES 24-27**

**ALL:**

How do you define “reputation”? What do you think is your reputation among your classmates or co-workers? Why?

What role does a person’s reputation have in the world today?

Have you ever had your reputation unfairly tarnished or know someone who has? What was the outcome?

**VERSES 28-30**

**ALL:**

What effect does simply being charged with a crime have on a person’s psyche and self-esteem? If you were unjustly accused, who do you think would defend you without question? What relationships do you think would always be tarnished?

**WOMEN:**

How do status, appearance, and behavior play into the believability of women?

Can the reputation of family (either the victim or assailant) impact the results of a sexual harassment or assault for a woman? How?
31 Now Susanna was elegant, beautiful in appearance. 32 The criminals ordered the veil that she was wearing to be removed so they could soak in her beauty. 33 But her household and all who saw her were crying. 34 Upon taking the stand in front of everybody, the elders laid their hands on Susanna’s head to give testimony. 35 But she looked up to heaven while crying because she trusted the Lord.

Even in what may be her last appearance before death, the men cannot help but flaunt their power over Susanna. She is veiled, as she would have been in a public appearance, and the judges order her to be unveiled—and for no other reason than for them to look upon her beauty and lust after her even now. Empowered by their position, they lay their hands on her head. And while to them the touch brought a sense of lustful satisfaction, to Susanna it must have felt like acid on her flesh. Even now she was being assaulted by these two men, and in plain view of her family and friends!

Her only appeal now is to God. And Susanna does what her two accusers stopped doing when they started down this path: she looks up to Heaven.

36 The elders said, “While we were walking around the large garden by ourselves, this woman came in with two female servants. She locked the gates of the garden and sent away the female servants. 37 Then a young man, who had been hiding, came and lay with her. 38 We were in a corner of the garden, and when we saw this lawless act, we went running to them. 39 We saw them having sex, but we couldn’t hold on to the man because he was stronger than we were. He opened the gates and ran away. 40 So we grabbed this woman and asked who the young man was, 41 but she wouldn’t tell us. To this we swear.”

The assembly believed them because they were the people’s elders and judges. So they sentenced Susanna to death.

42 Susanna screamed out: “Eternal God, you know what is hidden; you see everything before it happens. 43 You know they’ve lied in this court about me! Look, I’m going to die, although I didn't do any of the things these men accuse in their malice!”
The men lay out their story just as they rehearsed, and in turn the crowd becomes unwitting co-conspirators in the matter. No one questions why the men were in the garden in the first place. No one asks them to describe the young man. They do not ask Susanna to tell her side of the story. And they do not question the integrity of the judges. Without asking a single question, they find Susanna guilty as charged.

Though she was innocent, the court of public opinion had already reached a verdict (probably before she even entered the room). As soon as word got out the day before that the wealthy and beautiful Susanna had been caught with another man, many people likely made up their mind that she was guilty. “Of course a beautiful, wealthy woman would have a secret young lover,” they probably said upon hearing the news. It may have even been as much of a stereotype then as it is today.

Having been found guilty and condemned to death, Susanna—who has been silent up to this point—appeals the verdict. “I am innocent! And these men are liars!” She yells this to God and not to the crowd (who overhears it nonetheless).

The Lord heard her cry. As she was being led away to die, God stirred up the holy spirit of a young man named Daniel. He shouted out loud, “I’m innocent of this woman’s blood!”

All the people turned to him and asked, “What are you saying?!”

He stood among them and said, “Are you so stupid, Israelites, that you’ve sentenced an Israelite woman to death without cross-examining or finding the facts? Go back to court: these men have given false testimony against her.”

Everyone rushed back. The other elders said to Daniel, “Sit here with us and advise us, since God has given you the status of an elder.”

STUDY QUESTIONS
VERSES 31-35

ALL:
What is the power dynamic in the room? Why does the crowd so readily accept the story of the two men? Why do you think that no one asked Susanna her side of the story? What role does the court of public opinion play in situation like this? When it is a he-said-she-said situation, what must the victim do to show that they are the victim? In other words, who has to be able to prove their side of the story and what “evidence” is generally required to convince people? Why does Susanna appeal the verdict to God directly and not to the crowd or the elders?

MEN & WOMEN:
What role do stereotypes play in how we think about such matters? Is there a modern stereotype that includes beautiful wives of wealthy men? Is there a modern stereotype for judges? How is buying into stereotypes dangerous for how we act toward others?
Though her plea falls on deaf ears among the people in the crowd, God hears her cry. As God often does, the Almighty does not intervene directly, but instead prompts a young man in the crowd named Daniel to speak on God’s behalf.

When this story appears within the context of the Book of Daniel, it is easy to recognize the young man’s significance. When the story is orphaned from Daniel (as is the case with Protestant audiences), a brief reminder of Daniel’s story may be in order.

Daniel was one of the young Jewish captives that was taken to Babylon during The Exile. He finds a place in the king’s court where, despite threats to his life from the pagan priests, Daniel holds fast to his Jewish faith. He becomes known by both the Babylonians and the Jews for his righteousness, his unswerving faith, and his abilities as a soothsayer.

So as the crowd is escorting Susanna from the hall to take her to the place of her execution, Daniel speaks up. “Bull honkey!”

The lone voice of descent gets the crowd’s immediate attention. “What did you say?”

“This trial was a farce,” says Daniel. “Where was the cross-examination? Where was the earnest search for truth? Where was justice for this righteous woman? I agree with her. I think these men are liars.”

One voice of reason speaking up against “mob mentality” is enough to give everyone pause. One voice calling for justice and calling the crowd to examine both sides of the matter reminds the crowd that they do in fact value justice.

It does not hurt that the voice who speaks up belongs to a person of righteousness and faith. The crowd, and especially the other elders in the crowd, recognize the character of the one who is speaking up and they take listen.

51 Daniel told them, “Separate them from each other, and I’ll cross-examine them.” 52 When they had been separated from each other, he called in one of the judges and said to him, “The sins you did earlier are catching up to you now at the end of a long evil life. 53 You judged unfairly, sentencing the innocent to death, and letting the guilty go, even though the Lord says, ‘You will not sentence innocent and good people to death.’ 54 Now then, if you really saw this woman, tell me this. Under what tree did you see them having sex?” He said, “Under a clove tree.”

55 Daniel said, “Right! You lied! It’s on your own head! Already God’s angel has orders to cleave you down the middle!”

STUDY QUESTIONS

VERSES 44-50

ALL:
What is “mob mentality? When have you seen it played out to dangerous ends? Who is Daniel and what is his significance in the larger story of the Exile in Babylon? What makes him a man that the crowd will listen to? What does Daniel say that makes him “the voice of reason?”

Daniel does not seem to have any prior relationship with Susanna before the trial. What caring presence can strangers offer during such traumatic circumstances?
Then setting that one aside, he ordered them to bring in the other judge. He said to him, “You’re a Canaanite and not from Judah. Beauty seduced you, and sexual desire twisted your mind. You treated women from Israel this way, and they had sex with you because they were afraid of you. But this woman from Judah wouldn’t tolerate your lawless immorality. So tell me now: Under what tree did you catch them having sex with each other?” He said, “Under a yew.”

Daniel said to him, “Right! You lied too! It’s on your own head. God’s angel waits with his sword to hew you down the middle, to destroy both of you.”

Daniel employs a tactic that is a staple of good detective work—separate the witnesses and see if their stories align.

Daniel now takes on the role of defense attorney. He begins his cross-examination by questioning the credibility of the men themselves. For the first man he points out his recent record as a judge, how he is known for pronouncing “unjust judgments, condemning the innocent and acquitting the guilty” (v.53). For the second man he begins by questioning his lineage, suggesting that he is really of Canaanite descent and not Israelite. He goes on to suggest that this man had a reputation for sexually assaulting young, socially vulnerable women (Israel had fallen 150 years prior to Judah, and so “the daughters of Israel” would have likely been those considered refugees).

Daniel cannot know how much the two men rehearsed their story before the trial. Reason suggests that they spent much of the afternoon and evening going over their fabrication in detail. They likely discussed what the fictitious young man looked like, what he was wearing, where they were standing when they witnessed the alleged encounter, which door he escaped out of when they tried to seize him, and perhaps even why they were in the garden in the first place. He surmises that the one detail they failed to discuss was under what type of tree they supposedly spied the couple, and so this is the question he asks.

Then the whole assembly started shouting out praises to the God who saves those who hope in him. They rose up against the two elders, because Daniel had shown from their own words that they were false witnesses. They treated them in the same way that they had plotted to treat their neighbor. By following the Law from Moses, they killed them. Innocent blood was saved that day.

STUDY QUESTIONS
VERSES 51-59
ALL:
What in the judges’ histories make them unreliable witnesses? How should past actions be viewed in a case like this?
What causes the men’s story to fall apart?
The God of justice prevails. Yet the text does not say that the people repented for their rush to judgment. The two men show no remorse for their actions. They were fully prepared to let an innocent woman be executed to cover their own sin. And this is all too often the case. We see time-and-time again in media reports how the perpetrators of sexual assault are willing to lie, cover-up, deny, and suppress to hide their own guilt.

As allegations of sexual assault come to light, the people around the offender have a choice. Some, fearing “bad press” for their institution, organization, or corporation, become complicit in the sin by helping to cover-up or suppress the truth. Reports are downplayed or ignored, hush money is paid, settlements are reached, and perpetrators are shielded from the consequences of their actions. And in some of the most high profile cases of recent years (Olympic doctors, Catholic priests, media executives), it has been revealed that perpetrators of sexual assault who go unchallenged often go on to commit more crimes. In the story, it seems that Daniel knew that one of the two men was a repeat offender who had never been challenged before.

The other choice that people have when they hear of allegations of sexual assault is to report it immediately and act according. Just as the #MeToo Movement and the Clergy Abuse Scandals have brought to light bad examples, they have also allowed companies and institutions to demonstrate how to act responsibly. In the last year, high profile persons have been suspended, fired, or forced to resign upon the revelation of credible allegations against them. In those cases, the companies have been lauded for their response—that such behavior is counter to the culture and beliefs of their organization. Others have been pre-emptive by emphasizing a zero tolerance policy.

Hilkiah and his wife gave thanks that their daughter Susanna had not been found guilty of a shameful crime. Her husband Joakim and all their relatives also gave thanks. From that day Daniel was honored among the people.

Happy ending, right? Unfortunately the “happy ending” of the Susanna story is not the norm. The reality of sexual assault is that the victim is often left with the shame of the event. Many are made to feel that they in some way invited the assault and therefore are partially to blame. Susanna will also likely face years of rumors about her, especially about her alleged infidelity.

This sense of shame is what sexual predators count on as a tool to silence their victims.
And while God and Daniel swoop in at the last minute to save the day, the real hero of the story is Susanna herself. When attacked, she does not stay silent. She does not let the threats against her force her to become an unwilling participant in the assault nor keep her from calling out for help. When wrongly accused (and convicted), she does not keep silent about her innocence.

This does not diminish Daniel’s important contribution to the story (this chapter appears within a book about Daniel after all!). Daniel sees that the trial and its outcome is unjust. He sees that Susanna was neither given due process nor was there ever a presumption of innocence. And he has the courage to raise his voice and say so.

It certainly helps that Daniel is male (and as such has a voice within the norms of that time and culture). It also helps that he has a reputation for faithfulness and is well regarded in the community. Even though he is young, the elders listen to him. His voice carries weight.

Daniel’s objections are enough to make the crowd realize their own folly. It allows the process to proceed the way that it should have in the first place. And in the midst of a proper investigation the lies of the two men unravel, and it becomes their undoing.

In the end Susanna is exonerated, the men are convicted, and Daniel gains a great reputation. But this is still not the happy ending it appears to be. The community has been shaken. The relationship of Susanna to her husband, her parents who raised her, and her children that she is raising has been harmed. The actions of these two judges has likely called into question all elders and judges in the community. The legal matters decided by these two dishonored judges may also (rightly) be called into question. And at the end of the day, two people have been executed. What is the fallout for their families?

And yet the whole thing might have gone differently if the two men had been able to live by their faith and the law that they had pledged to uphold, and if they had been able to convince themselves that lust is not love and women are not objects to be taken advantage of. Their last chance to change the course of events came when they confronted each other and revealed their feelings about Susanna. In this moment they should have talked each other out of acting on their lust. And yet, their inability to recognize the situation for what it was and take steps to correct their path (as in moving their courtroom someplace else), ultimately leads them to a point where sin compounds sin, and the consequence becomes nothing less than death itself.

**SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES FOR STUDY LEADERS**

- Research and prepare a list of resources in your community for victims of sexual assault. The list should include contact information for hotlines, professional counseling services, and law enforcement.
- Incorporate candles or other visual that allows participants to lift up those victims of sexual assault that they know without naming them aloud.
1 A man named Joakim once lived in Babylon. 2 His wife Susanna, Hilkiah’s daughter, was very beautiful and honored the Lord. 3 Her parents were good people, and they taught their daughter according to the Law from Moses.

4 Joakim was very rich, and he had a large private garden next to his home. The Jews came to him because he was the most honored among them. 5 Two elders among the people had been appointed as judges that year. It was about them that the Lord had spoken: “Lawless disorder has come out of Babylon, from elders, from judges who were supposed to guide the people.” 6 These men spent a lot of time at Joakim’s house, and all the people with lawsuits came to them.

7 When the people went away in the middle of the day, Susanna would walk around her husband’s private garden. 8 Every day the two elders would see her coming in and walking around, and they desired her sexually. 9 They ceased thinking clearly, neither looking to heaven nor caring about justice. 10 Both of them thought about her and nothing else, but they didn’t tell each other their craving, 11 because they were ashamed to admit how they desired her and wanted to be with her. 12 But they were on the lookout every day, eager to get a glimpse of her.

13 One said to the other, “It’s time for lunch. Let’s go home.” They split up and left, 14 but doubling back, they met again at the same place. They started asking each other for an explanation, and so each confessed his desire. Then they plotted together for a time when they would be able to find her alone.

15 When they were watching closely for the right moment, Susanna came by, just as she had the day before and the day before that, alone with her two female servants. She wanted to bathe in the privacy of the garden, since it was hot. 16 No one was there except the two elders, who were hidden and spying on her. 17 She said to her female servants, “Please bring me some olive oil and lotion and lock the gates so I can bathe.” 18 They did just what she said. They locked the gates to the garden and went through the side doors into the house to fetch the things she had wanted. They didn’t see the elders, since they were hiding.

19 When the female servants went out, the two elders stood up and ran at her. 20 They said, “Look, the gates are locked, and nobody can see us. We desire you, so do what we want and have sex with us. 21 If you don’t, we’ll swear that you were meeting with a young man, and that’s why you sent your female servants away.”

22 Susanna groaned. “I’m trapped! If I do this, it’s death; but if I don’t, I still won’t escape your plotting. 23 But I’d rather not do this and fall into your hands, than sin in the Lord’s sight.” 24 So Susanna screamed, and at the same time the two elders called out. 25 One of them ran and opened the gates to the garden.

26 When people in the house heard the shouting in the garden, they ran out through the side doors to see what had happened to Susanna. 27 When the two elders had their say, the servants were very ashamed because nothing like this had ever been said about Susanna.

28 The next day when the people came to her husband Joakim, the two elders came too, full of their immoral scheme to have Susanna killed. They said in front of the people, 29 “Call Susanna, Hilkiah’s daughter, who is married to Joakim.” So they called her in. 30 She came with her parents, her children, and all her relatives.
Now Susanna was elegant, beautiful in appearance. The criminals ordered the veil that she was wearing to be removed so they could soak in her beauty. But her household and all who saw her were crying. Upon taking the stand in front of everybody, the elders laid their hands on Susanna’s head to give testimony. But she looked up to heaven while crying because she trusted the Lord.

The elders said, “While we were walking around the large garden by ourselves, this woman came in with two female servants. She locked the gates of the garden and sent away the female servants. Then a young man, who had been hiding, came and lay with her. We were in a corner of the garden, and when we saw this lawless act, we went running to them. We saw them having sex, but we couldn’t hold on to the man because he was stronger than we were. He opened the gates and ran away. So we grabbed this woman and asked who the young man was, but she wouldn’t tell us. To this we swear.”

The assembly believed them because they were the people’s elders and judges. So they sentenced Susanna to death.

Susanna screamed out: “Eternal God, you know what is hidden; you see everything before it happens. You know they’ve lied in this court about me! Look, I’m going to die, although I didn’t do any of the things these men accuse in their malice!”

The Lord heard her cry. As she was being led away to die, God stirred up the holy spirit of a young man named Daniel. He shouted out loud, “I’m innocent of this woman’s blood!”

All the people turned to him and asked, “What are you saying?!”

He stood among them and said, “Are you so stupid, Israelites, that you’ve sentenced an Israelite woman to death without cross-examining or finding the facts? Go back to court: these men have given false testimony against her.”

Everyone rushed back. The other elders said to Daniel, “Sit here with us and advise us, since God has given you the status of an elder.”

Daniel told them, “Separate them from each other, and I’ll cross-examine them.” When they had been separated from each other, he called in one of the judges and said to him, “The sins you did earlier are catching up to you now at the end of a long evil life. You judged unfairly, sentencing the innocent to death, and letting the guilty go, even though the Lord says, ‘You will not sentence innocent and good people to death.’ Now then, if you really saw this woman, tell me this. Under what tree did you see them having sex?” He said, “Under a yew.”

Daniel said, “Right! You lied! It’s on your own head! Already God’s angel has orders to cleave you down the middle!”

Then setting that one aside, he ordered them to bring in the other judge. He said to him, “You’re a Canaanite and not from Judah. Beauty seduced you, and sexual desire twisted your mind. You treated women from Israel this way, and they had sex with you because they were afraid of you. But this woman from Judah wouldn’t tolerate your lawless immorality. So tell me now: Under what tree did you catch them having sex with each other?” He said, “Under a yew.”

Daniel said to him, “Right! You lied too! It’s on your own head. God’s angel waits with his sword to hew you down the middle, to destroy both of you.”

Then the whole assembly started shouting out praises to the God who saves those who hope in him. They rose up against the two elders, because Daniel had shown from their own words that they were false witnesses. They treated them in the same way that they had plotted to treat their neighbor. By following the Law from Moses, they killed them. Innocent blood was saved that day. Hilkiah and his wife gave thanks that their daughter Susanna had not been found guilty of a shameful crime. Her husband Joakim and all their relatives also gave thanks. From that day Daniel was honored among the people.