

The Woman: Susanna – faithfulness and obedience to God



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610, Schloss Weißenstein, Bavaria, Germany

Susanna (sometimes called Daniel 13) 15-23

The story of Susanna is included in some Bibles as Daniel 13 but elsewhere is an apocryphal book which can be found easily enough in online Bible sites. The story of Susanna may help us to think about the story of St Winefride, and the story of St Winefride may help us reflect further about the story of Susanna.

Susanna is the faithful wife of a rich man who had a large house and garden and who was often visited by Jewish elders. Susanna often goes into the garden to walk and to bathe and the wicked elders spy on her and are overcome with lust. They therefore plan to force her, by blackmailing her into doing what they want or being put to death for adultery.

Once, while they were watching for an opportune day, she went in as before with only two maids, and wished to bathe in the garden, for it was a hot day. No one was there except the two elders, who had hidden themselves and were watching her. She said to her maids, “Bring me olive oil and ointments, and shut the garden doors so that I can bathe.” They did as she told them: they shut the doors of the garden and went out by the side doors to bring what they had been commanded; they did not see the elders, because they were hiding.

When the maids had gone out, the two elders got up and ran to her. They said, “Look, the garden doors are shut, and no one can see us. We are burning with desire for you; so give your consent, and lie with us. If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and this was why you sent your maids away.”

Susanna groaned and said, “I am completely trapped. For if I do this, it will mean death for me; if I do not, I cannot escape your hands. I choose not to do it; I will fall into your hands, rather than sin in the sight of the Lord.”

Susanna chooses to refuse the elders and let them do their worst. She chooses to remain faithful to her husband and to God and to keep the commandments, trusting in God to vindicate her. The young Daniel is moved to stand up for her and to question the elders separately, exposing their lies and confirming the truth of her faithfulness and steadfastness.

Some questions to think about:

- How do you think the story of Susanna illuminates the story of St Winefride or vice versa?
- How does the famous classical painting above (by a female artist) get across the emotions and power of the story?
- Have a look at the painting of Susanna by Francesco Hayez (below). Who is looking at her? How does *this* painting make you feel?
- How do you think the stories of Susanna and Winefride could be used as ways into discussing difficult issues about power, sex and sexual faithfulness with young people today?
- While Susanna is a story about lust, power and lies, it is also a story about faithfulness and obedience to God. How can we make our discussions about power and sex in today’s society also include the importance of keeping God’s commandments and being obedient to God’s will for us?
- Who are the Daniels of today in speaking up for victims and enabling women (other others) to tell their stories?
- How do you think the stories of Susanna and Winefride open up questions today about how men treat women, and difficult issues around things like consent, faithfulness, rape, and revenge porn?



Francesco Hayez – Susanna at her Bath 1850 The Yorck Project (2002)