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LESSONS LEARNED FROM BIBLICAL WOMEN

by Karen Myers

By studying the lives of women in both the Old and New Testaments, we can learn valuable lessons for our lives today. Two Old Testament women we will study this quarter held exalted positions—Queen Esther and Queen Jezebel. In contrast, two New Testament women we will study were of such low estate they were not even named in their respective accounts. Each of lessons 2 through 12 will be a study of two biblical women. Some lessons will show how the two women were alike, and other lessons will contrast the two.

Although most of the judges in the Old Testament were men, God called one woman to judge Israel: Deborah. She was a courageous woman with strong faith in God. In addition to being a judge, she led the Israelite army into a battle, which they won with God’s help. Another courageous woman, Jael, was instrumental in killing the leader of that Canaanite army, Sisera. These two women are the focus of lesson 5.

Lesson 11, which emphasizes the importance of mothering, features Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Jochebed, the mother of Moses. Since Mary is well-known, let us consider Jochebed for a moment. Knowing she had only a few short years with her son before turning him over to the Egyptian princess, she must have felt an urgency to teach him about the one true God. No doubt she taught him the importance of respecting and serving God. In addition, she probably explained what idols were and that they were not to be worshiped, emphasizing that only God was to be worshiped. She would also have explained Moses’ Hebrew heritage to him.

Although we do not know what teaching methods Jochebed used to impart this knowledge to such a young child, she did a superb job; Moses remembered his mother’s lessons all his life. The writer of Hebrews said, “By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (Hebrews 11:34–35). Jochebed’s loving, dedicated teaching trumped all the years of training from the influential, idol-worshiping Egyptian scholars.

Jochebed had no way of knowing her son would become the man whom God had chosen to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage. Her desire was for her son to know and worship God in spite of the godless environment in which he would grow up in Egypt. We do not know whether Jochebed lived to see Israel’s deliverance from Egypt under her son’s leadership. But her desire that Moses love and serve God was fulfilled. From Jochebed we learn the importance of teaching even young children about God.

As we study the lives of these and other women and develop strong courage and faith in God, we too can have a positive influence on the people around us as we follow the leading of the Lord and trust in His Word.
EASTER LESSON

An Easter lesson is provided on April 1. For those teachers who prefer to continue the study of women in the Bible, a lesson on Deborah and Jael is available for download at this URL:

FOCUS VERSE

James 1:17
Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

LESSON TEXT

Genesis 2:18–24
18 And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.
19 And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.
20 And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him.
21 And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof;
22 And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.
23 And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.
24 Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.
Contested Views in Complicated Times

On January 21, 2017, more than one million people marched in cities around the world under a broad banner of women’s rights. While the press and United States presidential staffers bogged in a debate over the size of the crowds, politicians, actors, and activists took to the microphone to declare a number of causes ranging from equal pay for women to unfettered accesses to abortion to protests of the U. S. presidential election results.

Meanwhile a divisive social media conversation ensued that in many cases pitted friends, neighbors, and family members at opposing sides. Perhaps the endless debates became more complicated because of the broad range of causes that became associated with the general nature of the protest. Lines blurred as the conversation morphed continually from issues of women’s rights to cultural issues to any number of political hot topics.

Whatever a person’s politics, the incendiary week of January 20 revealed a stark reality: we live in complicated times. Maybe it did not take a worldwide march to reveal that point, but as communities became embroiled in the controversial topics, the degree of just how contested these issues have become reached a fever pitch.

In these complex times where Christians are often categorized in any number of stereotypes, it is all the more important to look to God’s Word as our standard for beliefs. No voice rises above His Word to determine truth. His Word celebrates women as valuable vessels made in His image. Despite the chaos of voices around us, the student of Scripture has only to look to God’s Word for direction. In word and in action we can honor Him as we honor one another according to His Word—a simple but powerful source of direction in complicated times.

OUTLINE

I. GOD GIVES GIFTS
A. The Gifts of Love
B. The Gifts of Life

II. WOMEN ARE GIFTS OF GOD
A. Eve Was God’s Gift to Adam
B. Eve Gives Us Direction Today for Serving God
C. Eve Gives Us Direction Today for Our Relationships

III. GOD’S GIFTS ARE GREAT

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

The Bible speaks of the two Adams. The first man Adam was made in the image of God, the conclusion and glory of the six days of Creation. He was the finishing work of God’s thoughts and the reflection of God’s person. He was made in God’s image and in His likeness. He was made after the figure of Christ who was to come.

“Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come” (Romans 5:1).

Christ was the second Adam. He was in the mind of God from the foundation of the world (I Peter 1:17–20). He was in the mind of God before Adam was created in the Garden of Eden. The Lord of glory became flesh and dwelled among us so that we could behold Him and become one with Him.

But not only was Adam in the mind of God, so too was Eve. She was God’s gift to the First Adam and through their union all of the earth was blessed. In addition, all the daughters of Eve are also God’s gift and they too hold the potential for great blessing.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. GOD GIVES GIFTS

The Bible declares that God is love (I John...
For love to be known, it must be expressed. God expressed His love over and over in all that He manifested in Creation. God’s expressions of love are in the form of gifts. The greatest of these was the gift of Christ (John 3:16).

A. The Gifts of Love

Every good gift. God, who is identified as love and light, delights in giving good gifts. He so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son (John 3:16). His pleasure is to give His little flock the kingdom (Luke 12:32). God gives good things. James wrote, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (James 1:17).

It is God’s nature to give good and perfect gifts. Good gifts enlighten. They brighten lives with joy, peace, and satisfaction. They lift the spirit, express love, and endear the heart. God’s gifts are always appropriate, timely, and highly beneficial. They are welcomed and cherished. Consider the wise men who blessed and sustained the family of Jesus with their diverse gifts. They were men led by light and love to give good gifts to Jesus: gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). Their gifts sustained the lives of Jesus and His family while they were in Egypt.

The Garden of Eden. God presented Adam with many gifts. He lived in an environment saturated with God’s gifts. Everything he saw, touched, ate, and experienced in the Garden of Eden was a gift from God. God’s gifts to Adam included life in a paradise and the strength to work, intellect in an aura of innocence, and the blessings of conscientious choice. He had dominion over all God created. Because he walked and talked daily with his creator, he was equipped to handle it all. The gifts were endless and potentially eternal. Each was significant. But last, and most important, was the gift of the woman.

B. The Gifts of Life

The three great gifts. The greatest of the many gifts God gave Adam were life, His presence, and Eve. The gift of life can come only from above. It is a gift of light and love. Life is God’s breath in us, which created us as living souls. Life is the mother of all gifts, the essence of God’s love. The spirit of life is the glory of the creative power of God. The creative process was by the spoken word of God. But the three greatest gifts were given by the personal touch of God’s hands-on presence. The greatest gifts are those personally presented in love and light.

To Adam’s life, God added His presence. He walked and talked with Adam daily in the Garden of Eden. Nothing can take the place of God’s presence. The wonder of God’s presence is a well of refreshing, springing up continually unto life more abundantly and eternal. Without question, the most difficult aspect of life for Adam outside the Garden was the sense of living outside His daily presence.

Adam’s crowning gift. Made in God’s image as Adam was, Eve was God’s crowning gift to Him. She was the ultimate symbol of what a perfect gift should be. She fulfilled the needs of God and man, was loved by both, and lived a life of purpose. Eve was God’s final creation. As God surveyed all He had made, He observed that “it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). This statement is an accolade above the previous expressions of “good” for all that had been created before Eve. (See Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.)

II. WOMEN ARE GIFTS OF GOD

Women are, and should always be, viewed as a gift from God. Both Adam and Eve were created in the image of God:

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” (Genesis 1:27). Both man and woman were equal in the sight of God. Both were personally responsible to God though their roles in life were different. Neither was complete without the other, for neither could fulfill the purpose of God in creation without the other. Into Adam was breathed the gift of life, but the privilege and responsibility to continue that life was through Eve. She was the chosen vessel though which children should be born to sustain life, both physically in this world and ultimately in the spiritual world to come.
A. Eve Was God’s Gift to Adam

God made Eve for Adam. She was good for Adam because she was from within him, but she was also from God, who was above him. Her origin was Adam’s rib, but her making was of God.

Eve was made especially for Adam and bonded to him in marriage. They were one in spirit, fully mature flesh and bone, husband and wife, united by the Spirit of God as the first couple. They were in love, united by love to express love. Husbands and wives who are true companions love each other, function together with purpose, and live with the blessing and sanction of God, who is love. The union of the first couple as one flesh was what God intended marriage to be. The initial three-fold cord of marriage was man, woman, and God. That cord is not easily broken.

Eve was conceived in the mind of God, uniquely created, and presented to Adam as a glorious, one-of-a-kind gift-bride. She ultimately became the source of the gift of life to all humanity. She was more than just a bride to Adam. She was part of Adam, out of Adam, and therefore part of all that Adam was to God. They were to be one flesh fulfilling the will of God in His complete plan for humanity. Eve was created to be Adam’s helper (“a helper suitable for him” NIV; “a helper who is just right for him” NLT). Her qualities and abilities would complement those of Adam, thus allowing them to fulfill all that God had in mind when He created the universe and humanity.

In addition to being Adam’s wife, Eve was destined to become the mother of all living human beings (Genesis 3:20). The seven billion plus inhabitants of the world today, plus all who have preceded them, trace their origin to Eve. Had sin not entered into the picture, all would have lived eternally in the utopia of Eden with its atmosphere of love and blessing in the presence of God. Sin changed the utopia but not the love of God or the motherhood of Eve.

In child bearing, Eve ultimately brought to birth, many generations later, the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ (I Timothy 2:15). Thus, following the original sin in the Garden that changed the relationship of God to His creation for all time, Eve became the source of the hope of eternal life. The bride of Jesus Christ is made righteous by the atoning death of the Lamb of God. That Lamb was the offspring of Eve. She was part of God’s redemptive plan for humanity.

B. Eve Gives Us Direction Today for Serving God

Our society has developed the term trailblazer to indicate someone who does something for the first time and creates a path for others to follow. The connotation is usually complimentary, suggesting the individual has done a service to others by opening a door for future progress. While it is difficult to apply contemporary terms to ancient biblical culture, consider the experiences of Eve and Adam as the first humans. Experiences we take for granted today would have been new, strange, and perhaps unsettling. In some sense they blazed the trail of life by default as the first humans. From both their successes and their failures, we can learn timeless lessons for our lives today.

Eve is not just a case study for females. We see in Eve what we see in us all: the fallibility of our humanness and the hardships and complexities of life as a result of our sin. The criticisms we sometimes make in jest about the curses resulting from Eve’s choice are our reality. We cannot seem to talk about Eve without talking about her sin since it so starkly shaped human history. Yet Eve is not merely a villain or victim of Scripture. She represents the human experience and the epitome of free will. Every one of us will face moments of temptation like Eve did. Rather than simply critique Eve, we should learn from her how to use godly wisdom for the choices we will surely face. It would not be many generations after Eve and Adam that God would say of following His Word:

“I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live: that thou mayest love the Lord thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the
Lord sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.” (Deuteronomy 30:19–20).

Eve’s choice put all of humanity on a collision course with a multitude of daily difficult choices, but we learn from her a universal lesson for women and men alike: the importance of hearing and heeding God’s Word. In some sense it is a gift to go into life knowing in advance the reality of an active enemy seeking to bring destruction. Eve gives the youngest of children a lesson learned the hard way. If we will heed her example and study Scripture’s account of her choice, we can avoid similar downfalls. Learning from her lesson, we can cultivate in our lives a reverence for God’s Word and ways, not just submitting to rules but embracing with thanksgiving the life that God’s Word gives and the safety it brings in making us wise to the enemy’s tactics. His Word shows us how to live in relationship with Him—our ultimate source of hope.

C. Eve Gives Us Direction Today for Our Relationships

Eve and Adam experienced the first human joys of relationship. They give us a precedent in forming a family. Eve was the first mother to experience the joy of holding her child for the first time. She also was the first to experience the grief of losing a child.

While Scripture does not record Eve’s perspective or emotions, it is not hard to imagine the grief, the what-ifs, and the infinite questions that must have tormented her. Could she have blamed herself and her fall in the Garden for opening the door to this horrific loss? Might she have felt an overwhelming sense of shame all over again because her choice led to this unspeakable pain?

What we do know is that somehow life went on for Eve. She and Adam had another child, and Scripture is intentional in recording the naming of the child: “And she bare a son, and called his name Seth: For God, said she, hath appointed me another seed” (Genesis 4:25). To be human is to feel pain, so we can surmise Eve still grieved for the loss in her family. Yet in Seth’s birth it seems she acknowledged God. This passage of Scripture suggests in the midst of unimaginable family tragedy, she looked again to her Creator and Provider. Perhaps she saw in this situation that the merciful God who clothed her and Adam after the tragedy of her first sin now again visited her with provision in another season of loss.

No family is perfect because people aren’t perfect, and family life will involve hard times, disappointments, and questions. In our own time of family difficulty, we can look to Scripture and Eve’s statement of God’s provision. In every season of family life, we can find in God a faithful provider, always with us and
guiding us through whatever looms ahead of us. When those difficulties come, we can have faith in a God who is mindful of us.

III. GOD’S GIFTS ARE GREAT

God always gives the best. His gifts are from above, priceless and eternal. They are presented in love, function in love, and produce a loving atmosphere. Love is declared to be the greatest of God’s abiding attributes: faith, hope, and charity. (See I Corinthians 13:13.)

Eve was created perfectly, a gift only God could give. God knew Adam’s makeup, his future, and God’s plans for him. Great gifts are always presented with thorough knowledge of the recipient. The gifts of God are given severely to us as He wills because He knows us. (See I Corinthians 12:11.) They are always right, perfect for us in every way. Eve was a gift to Adam and to all of humanity as the mother of all living. Furthermore, Eve is a gift to us in setting precedents and teaching us lessons. From her we learn the importance of looking to God’s Word for direction in life and looking to Him for provision with our families. No matter what else we achieve in life, let us learn these two lessons from the first lady.

The ability to reproduce was inherent with Adam and Eve and with Christ and the church. It is in accord with God’s creative pattern and after His own nature. The life God first breathed into Adam was returned to God many times over in the procreation of life. It was His own creation giving back precious life. Eve produced children who eventually produced the generation out of whom Christ was born. Christ’s birth was the beginning of many generations to come from which the Lord would call out a people for His name’s sake to become the bride of Christ.

The great gifts of God revolve around life. Physical life, abundant life, and eternal life are all gifts of God. They are all great, unmatched by anything humanity can produce or give. Be they physical gifts or talents or the spiritual gifts of peace, love, and joy, they all rest within the confines of greatness. They are to be enjoyed, appreciated, received with thanksgiving, and shared with others. The reward of the gift-giver is the appreciation and gratefulness of the recipient. Acknowledge Him and He will be pleased.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

God never leaves anything He creates incomplete. He finishes what He starts. He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. When Adam was created, God knew Adam was alone. He also knew there was a woman in His plan. God created Eve as a woman of worth with a valuable role in His kingdom.

Just as Eve contributed a special gift to creation in her role as the mother of all living, all women today are endowed with gifts that can be used to bless God’s kingdom. These numerous gifts can range from natural talents to feminine qualities to spiritual gifts. Whatever the case, it is evident that women make a tremendous impact in our communities, our homes, and our churches.

For women to be esteemed as they are created to be, we must recognize them as unique and precious gifts of God. Eve was made to fulfill the purpose and plan of God in creation. She was presented to her counterpart as an equal, to be loved and cherished, to be a helpmeet in making humanity complete. Likewise, women today are to be recognized as gifts of God. God endows all people with gifts that bless God’s kingdom and fulfill His purposes. Women are a special part of His story of love, written by a God who delights in giving good gifts.

REFLECTIONS

• Discuss the character of God as a gift giver and how we can duplicate His giving example.
• Discuss the practical ramifications of the helpmeet role for women today.
• Identify and discuss how the gifts of God should be received and revered in today’s church.
• Identify some of the gifts with which God has graced your life.
FOCUS VERSE

Psalm 30:5
For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.

LESSON TEXT

Genesis 18:1–2, 9–14
1 And the LORD appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day;
2 And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground,
9 And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent.
10 And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him.
11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.
12 Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?
13 And the LORD said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old?
14 Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.

I Samuel 1:1–2, 9–11, 15–17
1 Now there was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim, of mount Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah, the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephrathite:
2 And he had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah:
9 So Hannah rose up after they had eaten in Shiloh, and after they had drunk. Now Eli the priest sat upon a seat by a post of the temple of the LORD.
10 And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore.
11 And she vowed a vow, and said, O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head.
15 And Hannah answered and said, No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before the LORD.
16 Count not thine handmaid for a daughter of Belial: for out of the abundance of my complaint and grief have I spoken hitherto.
17 Then Eli answered and said, Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him.
OUTLINE

I. SARAH WAS BARREN
   A. Sarah Was Abraham’s Wife
   B. Sarah Laughed When She Heard She Would Have a Son

II. HANNAH WAS BARREN
   A. Hannah Was Elkanah’s Wife
   B. Peninnah Ridiculed Hannah
   C. Hannah Wept Because She Was Childless

III. SARAH BROUGHT FORTH ISAAC
   A. God Promised to Establish His Covenant with Isaac
   B. Isaac Became the Father of Jacob

IV. HANNAH BROUGHT FORTH SAMUEL
   A. Samuel Was Dedicated to a Life of Service to God
   B. Samuel Was the Last Judge and the First Prophet of Israel

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Sarah and Hannah were a thousand years apart in biblical history. They lived in different periods of time and were years apart in age, but they had one thing in common: both Sarah and Hannah were barren.

Both Sarah and Hannah had devoted, loving husbands who hurt with them because of their barrenness. But more important, both women touched the heart of God in their pain and sorrow, and God gave them miracle sons who became great leaders in Israel.

To Sarah was born Isaac, who became the father of Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel. From Jacob’s sons came the twelve tribes of Israel, which eventually became the nation of Israel.

To Hannah was born Samuel, the first prophet and stabilizer of the newly formed nation of Israel. He was the spiritual counsel for the first two kings of Israel and the voice of God to the people.

The normal expressions of laughter and tears, from normal people like Sarah and Hannah, are often transposed into miracles when God is invited into the barren places of their lives. He takes the painful, barren places of their lives and turns them into fruitful fields for His glory. The sons born to Sarah and Hannah brought different kinds of tears and laughter—that of rejoicing over what the Lord did for them. For with God, the psalmist

M any diseases have no medical cure although they can be treated to lessen the symptoms. The lack of moisture and tears leave the eyes dry, irritated, and unprotected, especially in windy weather. They hurt and burn and suffer damage, causing poor vision and eventual degrees of blindness. Doctors can implant little “plugs” under the eyelids to help produce moisture and tears. Tears are essential for eyes to be healthy, for vision to be normal, and for life to be naturally pleasant.

Emotional and spiritual trauma many times also seem to have no cure. But laughter is a good medicine (Proverbs 17:22), and tears work to release the pain of sorrow. For most situations, laughter, tears, guidance from the Word, and prayer will work to restore normal life to those who have experienced trauma, difficulty, or sadness. Peter wrote: “Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

Jesus, the Great Physician, has a great cure for brokenness and troubled hearts: He said, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28–30). The beauty of this prescription that Jesus, the Great Physician, gave is that it is not artificial. It is a cure that really works.

Artificial Tears

M any diseases have no medical cure although they can be treated to lessen the symptoms. The lack of moisture and tears leave the eyes dry, irritated, and unprotected, especially in windy weather. They hurt and burn and suffer damage, causing poor vision and eventual degrees of blindness. Doctors can implant little “plugs” under the eyelids to help produce moisture and tears. Tears are essential for eyes to be healthy, for vision to be normal, and for life to be naturally pleasant.

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said, “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30:5). With God, morning follows night. With God, it is possible to laugh so hard that you cry over His goodness and blessing.

Sarah and Hannah are more alike than different. They shared a common pain, sought help from a common source and concluded their lives with a common blessing, the miracle births of sons. Their devotion of faithfulness and godliness was equally profound, exemplifying the qualities of godly character and the faithfulness of the Lord they served. And possibly the greater satisfaction to their blessing is that their sons became guiding lights of God’s ways to all generations to come, even to today’s world.

Sorrow and joy come to all. Tears and laughter are human efforts to mask pain and cope with limiting impossibilities that control life. But tears and laughter are also God’s gifts to express our extreme joy. It is the inclusion of God that makes the difference in the ordinary expressions of tears and laughter. In the presence of God, laughter and tears are equally received, rightly discerned, and extremely productive. When the Lord turns the negative circumstances of our lives around and fills our mouths with laughter, it is as if we were dreaming, wrote the psalmist in Psalm 126:1–2.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. SARAH WAS BARREN

Sarah’s desire to have children was as real as that of any woman. The culture of the times shamed women who had no children and praised those with many. So great was Sarah’s pain that she suggested a plan to her husband, Abraham, that would remove the shame in the eyes of the people. Ishmael was the result of Sarah’s arrangement for her and Abraham to have a child by Hagar, her maid.

Sarah’s suffering was physical, mental, and emotional. The birth of Ishmael was an attempt to curb the suffering, but the womb was still barren. The only cure was a child of her own. The years had passed and Ishmael was quickly becoming a young man. To survive, perhaps Sarah learned to cover her tears with laughter.

A. Sarah Was Abraham’s Wife

God had chosen Abraham to become the father of the faithful, to become the source of a great nation to represent God to all the peoples of the world. It was a high honor and filled with many promises of God to Abraham. Sarah’s expectations could be nothing but high as she thought of her future life with Abraham.

Years passed between the time God first spoke to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees and the time when he came with all his household to the plain of Mamre in Hebron. The journey had taken them over the Arabian Desert down through Canaan into Egypt and back to Canaan. Trauma, danger, and trials filled their path, but the blessing of the Lord in wealth and a house of servants remained upon them, preserving them for God’s plan for a chosen people. (See Genesis 11–17.)

After settling in Hebron, the Lord appeared to Abraham again. (See Genesis 17.) This was not the first time the Lord had appeared to him. (See Genesis 12:1; 13:14; 15:1; 17:1.) Abraham knew who the Lord was when He appeared to him, but he did not know the reason for the appearance. Years passed between the Lord’s appearances to Abraham even though he walked faithfully before the Lord with all his house.

Most of our lives are spent doing what the Lord has directed us to do, with no unusual visitations of God’s presence. But we must always be ready to entertain the Lord on those occasions when we sense His presence in unusual ways. His presence is always accompanied with a blessing of encouragement, enlightenment, or healing, often accompanied with fresh confirmation or new direction for our lives.

This appearing of the Lord to Abraham was significantly different. He appeared to reestablish His covenant with Abraham and his seed as an everlasting covenant (Genesis 17:2, 7). God changed Abram’s name to Abraham, for he was to be the father of many nations (Genesis 17:4–5). Circumcision was to be the sign of the covenant. And Abraham was not to call his wife Sarai any longer, but Sarah was to be her name for she was to have a son and become the mother of nations. Kings were to come forth from Abraham and Sarah’s son.
"And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her. Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years? And shall Sarah, that is ninety years old bear?" (Genesis 17:15–17).

Abraham fell on his face and laughed at the thought of a man who was one hundred years becoming the father a child. It was even more incredible to think Sarah could have a son at the age of ninety. God had promised Abraham a child in Genesis 12:2 and Genesis 15:4, but Sarah had not yet conceived. Ishmael was born of Hagar when Abraham was eighty-six years old (Genesis 16:16). At this time of God’s visitation, Ishmael was thirteen years old. No doubt all these events quickly passed through Abraham’s mind when the Lord spoke to him of Sarah bearing a son.

Abraham immediately pondered how this could be. It seemed physically impossible. And they had already brought Ishmael into the world as a way of accomplishing what God had long before promised to Abraham. Therefore, Abraham presented to God the idea that Ishmael should live before him as his seed. But God said that Sarah would indeed bear a son and his name was to be Isaac.

“And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly: twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year” (Genesis 17:19–21).

The promises of God are sure (I Corinthians 1:20). They will come to pass in God’s own time, according to His will, and for His glory. People sometimes try to help God accomplish His purpose, but human instrumentality is insufficient to accomplish the divine will of God. It leads to disappointment, heartache, and suffering, as it did for Sarah, who regretted her decision to offer Hagar to Abraham to bring forth a child. (See Genesis 16:5.)

B. Sarah Laughed When She Heard She Would Have a Son

In Genesis 18, the purpose of the Lord’s visit to Abraham was twofold: (1) to visit Abraham to pronounce a time for the blessing upon Abraham’s house and (2) to let Abraham know of the coming judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness.

Abraham did all within his power to entertain the Lord so He would stay as long as possible. (See Genesis 18:3–8.) As Abraham and his visitors sat under the tree and ate the meal he had provided for them, he was asked, “Where is your wife?” Sarah needed to personally hear in the presence of two witnesses what the Lord had earlier spoken to Abraham concerning the covenant and the birth of Isaac.

When Abraham responded that Sarah was in the tent, the Lord said, “I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son” (Genesis 18:10). Sarah, standing in the door of the tent, heard the Lord speak. She considered what the Lord said in light of her age and Abraham’s age and the fact that she was beyond her child-bearing years. “Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?” (Genesis 18:12).

The Lord again confirmed the promise, saying to Abraham, “Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child which am old? Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son” (Genesis 18:13–14). Sarah, being afraid, denied that she laughed, but the Lord said, “Nay; but thou didst laugh.” Again it was a confirmation to Sarah and to Abraham of the Lord’s intent to bring forth a promised child named Isaac.

With that covenant promise reaffirmed, the
three arose and looked toward Sodom (Genesis 18:16). As Abraham walked with them, the Lord told him of the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham began to bargain with God to save Sodom from destruction, ending with the request to save the city if ten righteous people lived there.

The eyes of the Lord are ever upon the righteous and the unrighteous. His rewards and judgments are within His own frame of reference in timing and execution.

II. HANNAH WAS BARREN

Hannah lived during the time of the judges. Like Sarah, she was barren. But her childless state was the Lord’s doing for He had shut up her womb (I Samuel 1:5). Many women are childless because of natural causes. Hannah was childless for a divine cause. But during those frustrating years of want, she did not realize it was the Lord’s doing. It was not until she grew older and Samuel became the prophet of the Lord that she understood the providence of God. Those who suffer under the providential hand of the Lord have special rewards of compensation in the end. Consider Job. He did not understand what was happening to him during his trial, but he retained his integrity and trusted God through it, and God honored him (Job 42:10–13).

A. Hannah Was Elkanah’s Wife

Hannah was one of two wives of Elkanah. The family lived in the heart of the Promised Land, Mount Ephraim. Elkanah was of the tribe of Ephraim, the son of Joseph. Mount Ephraim was near Shiloh, just a few miles to the south toward Jerusalem. Shiloh was the spiritual center of Israel during the time of the judges. Elkanah and his family went to worship at Shiloh for the feast days. The house of God and Eli the priest were there.

It seemed that Hannah had everything a woman could want. Her home was Mount Ephraim, and her husband was a righteous man of honor and heritage who loved the Lord and loved her. Elkanah showed partiality to her over his other wife, Peninnah, with a double portion at the time of offerings (I Samuel 1:4). Hannah was blessed with the material things of life, but she was unhappy because she had no children. Elkanah did what he could to make her happy. He loved her and tried to be better to her than ten sons, but still she longed to have a child.

B. Peninnah Ridiculed Hannah

Because Hannah is listed first as Elkanah’s wife, it is probable that she is the younger of the two. Neither was old, but Elkanah favored Hannah. The difference was that Peninnah had sons and daughters but Hannah had none. They lived together, worshiped together, shared everything in life, even the care of the children and the husband to make a home. But all was not well. Hannah had bitterness of soul, but Peninnah had bitterness of spirit.

All that Hannah had, even the love of Elkanah, was not strong enough to drown the continual provocative barbs of Peninnah and the mingled voices of all her children ringing in her ears. As Rachel wept for her children and would not be comforted (Matthew 2:18), so Hannah was not to be comforted in her childless state.

Peninnah provoked Hannah and became her adversary. Maybe it was because Elkanah obviously loved Hannah more. Maybe she was more pleasant, more attractive, more spiritual, or the children liked her better than their own mom. Whatever the reason, there was no escape for Hannah. She was barren and Peninnah took advantage of her barrenness to provoke her to tears.

To make matters worse, Peninnah provoked her more when they went to the house of God to worship than she did at home. This was no doubt the time when it was obvious that Elkanah showed his partiality to her over Peninnah. Peninnah was blessed with children, but most likely she was jealous or envious. Solomon, in his wisdom, wrote about the cruelty of jealousy.

“Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame” (Song of Solomon 8:6).

What should have been a place of peace and rejoicing became a place of difficulty for Hannah because of Peninnah’s provocations.
However, when the family went to Shiloh, Hannah took advantage of the sanctuary of the house of God and turned her heart to the Lord in prayer. Only the Lord had the answer to her sorrow. Prayer is often the key to deliverance when overwhelming circumstances become an individual’s lot. Some things only prayer and fasting can fix. When all human efforts of loved ones fail to comfort, the Lord is still there to hear and answer prayer, especially prayer accompanied with weeping.

C. Hannah Wept Because She Was Childless

Hannah suffered much before Samuel was born. She suffered from the inability as a wife to give her husband a child in light of cultural expectations and the provocation of a jealous adversary. There was no escape for Hannah. Things only got worse with time. Her suffering increased year by year.

One year when the family went on their annual visit to Shiloh to sacrifice to the Lord, Hannah left the others for a time and went to the house of the Lord alone. She prayed and wept before the Lord with bitterness of soul. (See I Samuel 1:8–10.) Weeping and praying are normal expressions. But bitterness of soul pushes beyond the normal to desperation. Eli the priest thought she was drunk. However, when Hannah explained her situation, Eli had compassion on her and said, “Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou has asked of him” (I Samuel 1:17).

Hannah prayed with tears, but when the answer came, she prayed with rejoicing and a song of praise. (See I Samuel 1:9–11; 2:1–10.) It is common for initial prayers to be mixed with tears and subsequent prayers to be mixed with laughter.

III. SARAH BROUGHT FORTH ISAAC

Sarah shared all the promises God made to Abraham. She walked every step of the way with him, leaving her home and family, looking for a city whose builder and maker was God (Hebrews 11:10). She endured every hardship with Abraham and believed every promise God made to him, including the promises of descendants innumerable. Yet, she remained barren. Faithfulness alone is not a guarantee of fruitfulness.

A. God Promised to Establish His Covenant with Isaac

Chills must have run up and down Abraham’s spine when he realized that Sarah had laughed (Genesis 18:12). He had laughed also (Genesis 17:17), for this was not the first time the Lord had spoken to Abraham concerning his children and his wife. (See Genesis 12:7; 13:16; 15:4; 17:7.) The Lord not only told Abraham that Sarah would bear him a son, but that his name should be Isaac and he would be born within the year (Genesis 18:14).

The power of the covenant was its length. It was everlasting. The everlasting covenant that God first made with Abraham, He established with Isaac and Jacob also (Genesis 17:19). Israel shall always be a chosen people of the Lord. David’s throne was established forever. God declared it so. The covenant was for a thousand generations.

“O ye seed of Israel his servant, ye children of Jacob, his chosen ones. He is the Lord our God; his judgments are in all the earth. Be ye mindful always of his covenant; the word which he commanded to a thousand generations; even of the covenant which he made with Abraham, and of his oath unto Isaac; and hath confirmed the same to Jacob for a law, and to Israel for an everlasting covenant” (I Chronicles 16:13–17).

B. Isaac Became the Father of Jacob

Biblical names often have attached meanings. The name God gave Abraham for his son that was to be born to Sarah was Isaac, which means “laughter.” Abraham and Sarah both laughed at the possibility of having a son in their old age (Genesis 17:17; 18:12). It seemed impossible. But when Isaac was born and circumcised on the eighth day, Sarah said that God hath made her to laugh and all to laugh with her. The nature and meaning of Sarah’s laughter completely changed when God made her to laugh.

And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me. And she said, Who would have said unto Abraham, that
Sarah should have given children suck? for I have born him a son in his old age” (Genesis 21:6–7).

The laughter God gives is not temporary. Sarah laughed again and again as Isaac grew. Although Sarah died and was buried in Hebron before Jacob was born, she had the promise that God would establish the everlasting covenant with Isaac’s seed as He had with Abraham and Isaac. Jacob was born when Isaac was sixty years old. When Jacob left Beersheba to go to Haran to find a bride, the Lord spoke to him in a dream and promised to be with him and to bless him. Through his children all the families of the earth were to be blessed. (See Genesis 28:10–22.)

When God called to Moses from the burning bush, He identified Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That identity carried into the ministry of Jesus Christ and into the preaching of the New Testament church. (See Exodus 3:6, 15–16; Matthew 22:32; Mark 12:21; Acts 3:13, 7:32.) The covenant was an everlasting covenant of God with the house of Abraham.

IV. HANNAH BROUGHT FORTH SAMUEL

A. Samuel Was Dedicated to a Life of Service to God

God heard Hannah’s prayer and knew the heart and character of Hannah and Elkanah. He also knew the greater purpose of His will for her son and heard the vow she made. Vows are powerful prayers. They usually are made in response to difficult circumstances.

Hannah’s prayer was not selfish. She asked not only for a child to vindicate herself, but she also asked for a male child and vowed to give him to the Lord for His service. God heard her prayer and honored it through the voice of Eli: “Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him” (I Samuel 1:17). Hannah went on her way rejoicing. There were no more tears of sorrow, only tears of joy.

Before the family left Shiloh the next morning, they worshiped (I Samuel 1:19). Consider the full cycle of Hannah’s answered prayer: First was weeping and praying for a son, followed by the word (Eli’s voice), rejoicing, and worship. It concluded with God remembering her, the birth of Samuel, and keeping her vow. (See I Samuel 1:9–21.)

After Samuel was weaned, Elkanah and Hannah took him to Shiloh and presented him to Eli in keeping with her vow. They also brought with them an offering of three bullocks, an ephah of flour, and a bottle of wine, plus garments for Samuel. They presented Samuel to the Lord’s service and worshiped. Hannah followed that worship with a prayer that parallels Mary’s song of thanksgiving before the birth of Jesus. (See I Samuel 2:1–10; Luke 1:46–55.)

Because Hannah kept her vow and provided for Samuel yearly, Eli pronounced a blessing upon Elkanah and Hannah, and five more children were added to their family. Gifts to the Lord are returned to the givers in greater abundance than that which was offered.

B. Samuel Was the Last Judge and the First Prophet of Israel

Samuel was a son of divine purpose. He was born at the close of the era of the judges in the land of Canaan to make way for the nation of Israel. The sons of Jacob that formed the twelve tribes had been ruled by strong men and women since the conquest of the land some five hundred years earlier. The people were ready for a kingdom and cried for a king. Thus, the nation of Israel was formed. Kings were chosen and anointed by prophets to serve the people. Samuel was the key person in this transition from separate tribes to a united nation of people.

Samuel was both a judge and prophet. He is a type of servant of God, the voice of God to the people. His was a voice of righteous judgment and blessing. He was born of mourning, dedicated to a life of service, reared in an atmosphere of the house of the Lord, the priesthood, the Law, and worship. He was sustained by the loving gifts of his mother. Samuel was a gift from his mother back to God for service, which is a type of church ministry today. Even as a boy, Samuel had the favor of the Lord and the people (I Samuel 2:26), and he continued to grow in stature and in favor of the Lord and the people. (See I Samuel 3:19–20.)
Samuel was the last of the judges and the first of the prophets. Samuel anointed the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David, and set the pace for the future prophets of Israel in their relationship with Israel’s kings. The will of God was best accomplished when the kings listened to the voice of the prophets. As long as Samuel was alive, Israel had peace with her neighbors (I Samuel 7:13–15).

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

God is not limited by our frailties, but He is moved by both our tears and laughter. It is important that our hearts be turned to Him in times of crisis and that we believe He is faithful to keep His promises. Sarah counted God faithful who had promised and received the reward of that confidence. Hannah believed the man of God and returned home to receive the promise of his prophetic word.

The Christian walk is a walk of faith. It is not always clear why we experience misfortunes in life, why we struggle against seemingly impossible situations, or why bad things happen to good people. It is especially difficult when God does not answer our prayers quickly with help, healing, or deliverance. But we know that God is faithful. As mature Christians we understand the writings of the apostle Paul when he referenced his bonds and the furtherance of the gospel in Philippians 1:12–14.

In difficult times of tears and laughter, biblical characters like Sarah and Hannah become our inspiration. In prayer, fasting, weeping, searching the Scriptures, and spiritual counsel we find solutions to our troubling circumstances. It is the will and way of the Lord that our lives be fruitful and that our tears and laughter are those of rejoicing beyond our greatest expectations.

REFLECTIONS

- Discuss the pain people experience who are not meeting the expectations of social and cultural norms of their day.
- Discuss how we weep or laugh and trust God at the same time.
- Share how God has brought experiences into your life, or people into your life, in preparation for a kingdom purpose.
- How can we best understand and minister to those who have no spouse or children?
- What are some survival suggestions for those who are waiting on God to perform a miracle in their lives?
- Discuss the honor of God’s confidence entrusted in someone to bring to birth and maturity an Isaac, a Moses, or a Samuel.
- Discuss how God uses human instrumentality to meet our needs and answer our prayers.
FOCUS VERSE

Proverbs 4:18
But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.

FOCUS TEXT

Genesis 24:48–52, 58–61, 67
48 And I bowed down my head, and worshipped the Lord, and blessed the Lord God of my master Abraham, which had led me in the right way to take my master's brother's daughter unto his son.
49 And now if ye will deal kindly and truly with my master, tell me: and if not, tell me; that I may turn to the right hand, or to the left.
50 Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, The thing proceedeth from the Lord: we cannot speak unto thee bad or good.
51 Behold, Rebekah is before thee, take her, and go, and let her be thy master's son's wife, as the Lord hath spoken.

58 And they called Rebekah, and said unto her, Wilt thou go with this man? And she said, I will go.
59 And they sent away Rebekah their sister, and her nurse, and Abraham's servant, and his men.

67 And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Joshua 2:1–4
1 And Joshua the son of Nun sent out of Shittim two men to spy secretly, saying, Go view the land, even Jericho. And they went, and came into an harlot's house, named Rahab, and lodged there.
2 And it was told the king of Jericho, saying, Behold, there came men in hither to night of the children of Israel to search out the country.
3 And the king of Jericho sent unto Rahab, saying, Bring forth the men that are come to thee, which are entered into thine house: for they be come to search out all the country.
4 And the woman took the two men, and hid them, and said thus, There came men unto me, but I wist not whence they were:

Joshua 6:16, 25
16 And it came to pass at the seventh time, when the priests blew with the trumpets, Joshua said unto the people, Shout; for the Lord hath given you the city.

25 And Joshua saved Rahab the harlot alive, and her father's household, and all that she had; and she dwelleth in Israel even unto this day; because she hid the messengers, which Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.
I. THE OLD WORLDS
   A. Rebekah Was a Grandniece of Abraham
   B. Rahab Was a Harlot Living in Jericho

II. THE NEW HORIZONS
   A. Rebekah
   B. Rahab

III. THE LINEAGE OF JESUS CHRIST
   A. Both Rebekah and Rahab Left Their Homes for New Lives
   B. Both Were Included in the Lineage of Jesus Christ

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Two people who contributed to God’s plan could not be more of a contrast than Rebekah and Rahab. Rebekah, a virgin, lived in Haran; Rahab, a harlot, lived in Jericho. Neither Rebekah nor Rahab could have anticipated what God had in store for them. Their backgrounds, though starkly different, were both headed for new horizons. Rebekah, the grandniece of Abraham, and Rahab, an unknown harlot without pedigree, surrendered to God’s plan that thrust them into roles of righteousness that are a challenge to believers today.

Although not everyone around Rebekah was a believer, she was born into a family that respected and worshiped the one true God. Her great uncle, Abraham, yielded to God who told him to leave his country and kindred to go to a land He would show him. Rahab, by contrast, was surrounded by idolatry. Her yielding to God’s will was more of a miracle than Rebekah’s decision to go with the servant to become Isaac’s wife.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. THE OLD WORLDS

A. Rebekah Was a Grandniece of Abraham

When Terah, Abraham’s father, left Ur of the Chaldees in Mesopotamia, he and his family migrated approximately six hundred miles west to the area of Mesopotamia known as Haran. It was here that Rebekah grew up. It is not known how much of the family still believed in the one true God. At least enough of them believed for Rebekah to be exposed to the truth.

Rebekah’s father was Bethuel, son of Nahor, Abraham’s brother. Bethuel probably...
farmed and raised livestock. Rebekah’s duties consisted of the normal domestic duties of housework and going to the well to draw water for the needs of the household. The latter responsibility brought her to the well when Abraham’s servant arrived on his mission to obtain a wife for his master’s son, Isaac.

Abraham, who had previously immigrated from this area to the land of Canaan, approximately five hundred miles south of Haran, ordered his eldest servant to go to Haran and find among his kindred a wife for his son Isaac. (It is commonly believed this servant was Eliezar mentioned in Genesis 15:2.) Abraham made Eliezar promise he would not select a Canaanite woman for his son and that he would bring a bride to Isaac. (See Genesis 24:3–7.) Abraham was concerned that his son remain in the land of promise.

Rebekah, though an insignificant maiden, had an enviable pedigree. As the grandniece of Abraham, she was kin to scriptural nobility. Although she would later become more of a role player in the drama of redemption, Rebekah was already privileged to be influenced by those who believed in the one true God.

B. Rahab Was a Harlot Living in Jericho

If Rahab was well-known in Jericho, it was for the wrong reasons. Employed in one of the oldest, yet infamous, professions known to man, she was a harlot. “The harlot who lives on the wall” may have been her distinction. This is all we know of her until two Hebrew spies knocked on her door. She was used to having male customers knock on her door at night, but she had never opened her door to men such as these.

The Israelites had left Egypt, had rejected their first opportunity to enter the Promised Land, and consequently had wandered in the wilderness for forty years. They were now at the border for the second time, ready to enter the land promised to Abraham and his seed. Joshua, their leader, sent two men to spy out the city of Jericho, the first city the Israelites would encounter after crossing the Jordan. Joshua wanted to know something of Jericho’s military strength that would enable Israel to prepare appropriately. It was these two Hebrew men who knocked on Rahab’s door.

Expecting a customer, Rahab opened the door and unknowingly welcomed two Hebrew spies into her home. When the king of Jericho heard that two men from Israel had entered the city and had gone to Rahab’s house, he sent messengers to her ordering her to bring forth the men. She informed the messengers that the men had left that evening about the time of the shutting of the city gate. In reality she had hidden the spies in the stalks of flax on the roof of her home.

When the threat had passed, Rahab spoke with the spies, letting them know that the inhabitants of the city had heard how the Lord had dried up the Red Sea when they left Egypt and how the Israelites had slain two kings of the Amorites. Perhaps because of these things she had heard, Rahab had come to believe in God. She told the spies, “The LORD your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath” (Joshua 2:11).

Knowing Jericho would be defeated, Rahab asked the spies to promise they would spare her and her family since she had shown them kindness in saving their lives. The spies promised her and her family safety if she would bind a scarlet thread, or cord, in her window as a sign to them when they invaded her city. They also made her promise that she would keep all the information secret they had shared with her. After agreeing to all of this, she let them down over the wall with the scarlet cord, for her house was on the wall. At her instruction the spies fled the city and hid in the mountain three days before returning to Joshua.

In contrasting these two women who later became better known to us in Scripture, we find there were contrasts other than just their morality. As Rebekah had a pedigree being of the extended family of Abraham, Rahab was a nobody. Until she became a follower of the Lord, she was a heathen employed in immorality in a pagan city. Rebekah represented a type of the Jews, and Rahab represented a type of the Gentiles, who enjoyed the extended arm of God in salvation. Rebekah represented Jews who had an inside track by being chosen as a people to receive God’s promises, and Rahab represented Gentiles who were not a people but became a people. (See I Peter 2:10.)
II. THE NEW HORIZONS

A. Rebekah

What a difference a day makes! Those words may have been the title of a popular song in the 1960s, but those words were more than a song to Rebekah. When what she thought would be just another uneventful day announced itself, she arose, breakfasted, and began her domestic duties. Unaware that her trip to the well would eventually hold more than water, she went about her daily duties.

When Eliezer arrived at the well outside the city of Nahor, he stopped and prayed that the Lord would let him know which maiden was the one for his master’s son. “Let it come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say, Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink; and she shall say, Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also: let the same be she that thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac; and thereby shall I know that thou hast shown kindness unto my master” (Genesis 24:14).

Before he had finished praying, Rebekah approached the well. When Eliezer asked Rebekah for a drink of water, she volunteered not only to give him a drink but to draw water and give to his ten camels, which she proceeded to do. Being so sure that this maiden was the one, Eliezer offered her a golden earring and two bracelets. With these gifts he asked whose daughter she was. Finding that she was of Abraham’s kindred, he inquired about lodging. She was quick to assure him, “We have both straw and provender enough, and room to lodge in” (Genesis 24:25).

When the family was apprised of the visiting stranger’s presence, they quickly made sufficient lodging and provisions available. Being invited to a meal, Eliezer refused to eat until he had related his story, which included his master’s order to find a bride for his son. He then told of his arrival at the well, his prayer to the Lord, and Rebekah’s response.

This is the first time the Bible links the well with marriage. Scholars refer to this as a “type scene.” It is placed in the text to help the reader (listener) understand more easily what is going on.

When the family heard his story and had received the gifts Eliezer had brought, they enjoyed a meal and retired for the night. The next morning Eliezer asked to be sent on his way along with Rebekah. He felt it needless to linger in Haran since he had found what he felt to be the Lord’s will for his master’s son.

The family responded to this request by saying in so many words, “Not so fast.” They said, “Let the damsel abide with us a few days, at the least ten; after that she shall go” (Genesis 24:55). Abraham’s servant refused to be deterred saying, “Hinder me not” (Genesis 24:56). They agreed to let Rebekah decide the time of her departure. They asked her, “Wilt thou go with this man? And she said, I will go” (Genesis 24:58).

Note Rebekah’s willingness to accept what she felt to be the right thing to do. What daughter of a happy family would be eager to leave her loved ones to go to a strange land and marry a strange man? Yet, without hesitation, she said, “I will go.”

Many who are faced with such a monumental decision would have asked for some time to think it over. It would not have been unusual for Rebekah to have said, “Give me a week or two to think about it.” It was obvious she was convinced this was the will of the Lord for her, for there was no indication of hesitancy.

New horizons are not attained without taking risks. Usually God does not show us everything we will encounter. We have to step out by faith and trust Him. It is much like Noah’s coming out of the ark after the flood. After the waters abated and the ground was dry, he and his family exited the ark, which had come to rest on a mountain. They did not know what they might find in the valley. God may not show us the valleys in advance, but those areas are where we spend most of our experience. If we knew in advance what the valleys held, we might be more reluctant to meet the challenge of new horizons. God shows us just enough for us to leave the ark and explore the new world He has planned. If we will trust Him on the mountain tops, He will see us through the valleys.

B. Rahab

After wandering forty years in the wilderness, Israel paused on the east bank of the Jordan River ready to cross into the land promised to Abraham and to his seed. This was the time for which Israel had prayed and longed. Knowing
this, Joshua wanted to be sure they were moving according to God’s divine plan.

It seems that God often puts water between the world and His people. When God called Abraham to leave his family for a new horizon, Abraham had to cross the Euphrates River, for Ur of the Chaldees was on the north side of the river. Crossing the Euphrates River, he became the first Hebrew, for the word Hebrew means “one from beyond” and comes from a root word meaning “to cross over.” It is generally understood that this means the Euphrates River that Abraham crossed over to pursue God’s divine plan.

When Joshua referred to “your fathers dwelling on the other side of the flood in old time” (Joshua 24:2), he was referring to Abraham’s existence in Ur, for flood is from a term meaning, among other things, “stream” or “river.” As God put the flood between Noah and the wicked world, as Abraham had to cross the Euphrates, as Israel had to cross the Red Sea, and as Israel had to cross the Jordan River, believers today must put the water of baptism between the world and themselves. New horizons always involve leaving the old behind and crossing over to the new.

After Israel crossed the Jordan River and entered Canaan, their first challenge was the city of Jericho. Ancient Jericho is thought to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. Eight hundred feet below sea level, it is considered to be the lowest city on earth.

Little did Jericho or Israel know the strategy God had planned. He told Joshua and Israel to march around the city once each day for six days, and on the seventh day to march around seven times. After the seventh time around on the seventh day, the priests were to blow the trumpets and everyone was to shout. When the people followed God’s instructions, “the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city” (Joshua 6:20).

As Israel entered Jericho, Joshua sent the two spies to Rahab’s house to rescue her and her family. “And Joshua saved Rahab the harlot alive, and her father’s household, and all that she had; and she dwelleth in Israel even unto this day; because she hid the messengers, which Joshua sent to spy out Jericho” (Joshua 6:25).

Because of her belief in God, Rahab not only assisted Israel in its conquest of Jericho, but she was able to save herself and her family. It is noteworthy that she believed in the one true God, but it is also noteworthy that she was able to influence the rest of her family not only to join her in her home but apparently to join her in her belief.

How much faith was required to believe the story of two strangers in the night to the extent that she would agree to cooperate in an act that was traitorous to her city? Obviously, Rahab had to do a lot of believing not only to accept such a story from two strangers but also to risk her life in hiding the spies if she were caught by the king’s men. Rahab also manifested faith in telling her family, who believed her and assembled in her house that fateful day.

III. THE LINEAGE OF JESUS CHRIST

A. Both Rebekah and Rahab Left Their Homes for New Lives

No one ever moves forward without leaving something behind. We cannot change positions forward or backward without moving. When we vacate an area, something is left behind. As Rebekah vacated Haran and Rahab vacated Jericho, they left everything behind. They not only left behind their homes and families physically, but they also left behind their pasts. Before we explore their gains, let us discuss what they left behind.

All Rebekah knew was Haran. She was probably comfortable and happy there. But being happy in Haran is not always what God has planned for us. Sometimes it takes leaving Haran and home to find His will for our lives.

Rebekah did not know Abraham or his servant. She did not know Canaan and had never met her future husband. She was on her way to a new life with no hope of ever returning to the old. It is always easier to hold on to what you know rather than letting go and reaching for something you do not know. This is the reason many people do not respond properly to new truth that is revealed to them. They may see the validity of new truth, but it is difficult to let go of what they know, especially if it includes traditions they and their families have held for years.
As Rebekah and Rahab left their homes for new lives, people seeking the Lord today must be willing to leave old habits for new lifestyles. For these two women to leave everything behind is no different from new converts leaving everything of the world behind to follow Christ. As there was no way for these women to have remained in their homes and to have enjoyed their new lives, there is no way for individuals coming to the Lord to remain in their old habits and lifestyles and enjoy their new lives in Jesus.

B. Both Were Included in the Lineage of Jesus Christ

Little did Rebekah know she was to be a vital link in the genealogical chain that connected Adam to Jesus. The royal line that began with Adam ran all the way to Jesus. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were three of the most well-known male links in that chain. Rebekah was to be the wife of Isaac and the mother of Jacob. When she left Haran and home for everything strange and unfamiliar, it probably seemed she was leaving the significant for the insignificant. But Rebekah was to be a key player in the drama of redemption, for Jesus was a descendant of Rebekah.

What if Rebekah had chosen not to go with Abraham’s servant? She would not have been the wife of Isaac or the mother of Jacob. She would not have been in the lineage of Jesus Christ. Would her refusal have aborted God’s plan? No! He would have chosen someone else and fulfilled His divine purpose. But Rebekah would have suffered for not yielding to God’s divine will. Her life would have been quite different.

If we fail to surrender to God’s divine will for our lives, God will still have a church and will accomplish His purpose. But we will be the losers. For this reason, we need to yield to God’s will to enjoy the best life that can be experienced.

Not only did both of those women leave everything to allow themselves to be inserted into God’s divine plan, but also they did so with no plans to return. Their decisions were final. Once they decided to yield to God’s plan, there was no going back. This is the kind of determination required to follow God faithfully.

“We are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul” (Hebrews 10:39).

“No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

Until that fateful night when two Hebrew spies knocked at her door, Rahab’s life was the life of a prostitute. It was as though God knocked on her door with the question, “Will you join the royal family of which physically one day you will be a part?” Although we can imagine this now, she could not then. She had no way of knowing how significant her decision was.

The Bible often appears to be a book of paradoxes. If we were God and intended to select our lineage, would we include a harlot? I think not. But God’s ways are not our ways. Contrary to our thinking, He knew that a converted harlot would not represent a weak link in the royal chain.

Of all the houses in Jericho where the spies could have stopped, God chose a house of ill repute. Of all the people He could have used, He chose a woman whose reputation was the lowest. We know habits, but God knows hearts. For this reason, we must be slow to pass judgment on situations we know nothing about. God often works plans that are quite involved and difficult to understand until their fruition.

Rahab married Salmon and had a son named Boaz. Boaz and Ruth had a son, Obed, who was David’s grandfather. And that is how a prostitute ended up in the lineage of Jesus.

It would be accurate to assume that Rahab felt her life was meaningless. Living in Jericho and making her living as a harlot was not a boon to her self-esteem. No one knows the moment of her spiritual awakening, but at some point she began to believe in the God of Israel. That alone makes life meaningful.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

When Rebekah and Rahab were challenged to leave their old lives and walk toward new horizons, they did so with faith. It had to be faith, for they had no way of knowing
how their decisions would play out. Because they believed in God, they accepted these new challenges as being best for them. Their decisions separated them from their past, their environments, their livelihoods, and their associates. True faith never lives alone; it is always accompanied by actions. James recorded, “Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?” (James 2:25).

No one needs to be an inmate in the prison of the past. Unpleasant and sinful pasts are never able to forge chains so strong they cannot be broken by a will to escape and have a better life. With God’s help, new horizons can be enjoyed if we will step out by faith and walk toward them. As the two women had to leave everything behind to enjoy the fruit of the future, so must we forsake all to follow Him.

If our faith is in Jesus and we trust Him explicitly, we do not have to know the future. Understanding God is not necessary for believing Him. We must walk toward new horizons believing that He will take care of us.

**REFLECTIONS**

- How were Rebekah and Rahab alike?
- How were Rebekah and Rahab different?
- Was it more difficult for Rebekah to leave her home than for Rahab? Why or why not?
- In what way do we as believers have to make similar decisions to those of these two women?
- Did it require more faith for Isaac to accept a bride he had never seen than for Rebekah to accept a groom she had never seen? Why or why not?
FOCUS VERSE

Deuteronomy 10:12

And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul

FOCUS TEXT

Genesis 29:15–30

15 And Laban said unto Jacob, Because thou art my brother, shouldest thou therefore serve me for nought? tell me, what shall thy wages be?
16 And Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel.
17 Leah was tender eyed; but Rachel was beautiful and well favoured.
18 And Jacob loved Rachel; and said, I will serve thee seven years for Rachel thy younger daughter.
19 And Laban said, It is better that I give her to thee, than that I should give her to another man: abide with me.
20 And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her.
21 And Jacob said unto Laban, Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her.
22 And Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast.
23 And it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her.
24 And Laban gave unto his daughter Leah Zilpah his maid for an handmaid.
25 And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah: and he said to Laban, What is this thou hast done unto me? did not I serve with thee for Rachel? wherefore then hast thou beguiled me?
26 And Laban said, It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.
27 Fulfil her week, and we will give thee this also for the service which thou shalt serve with me yet seven other years.
28 And Jacob did so, and fulfilled her week: and he gave him Rachel his daughter to wife also.
29 And Laban gave to Rachel his daughter Bilhah his handmaid to be her maid.
30 And he went in also unto Rachel, and he loved also Rachel more than Leah, and served with him yet seven other years

FOCUS THOUGHT

The blend of love and duty are inescapable for believers.
The Bible is filled with fascinating stories, with many of them told that feature women as key players. God’s portrait gallery reveals that women often had a tremendous influence upon future generations. Some women lived in the background of their fathers or husbands, but others’ lives had a powerful impact upon their world. The Bible has always been faithful to reveal both the strengths and weaknesses of individuals. Some women like Rahab rose above their past; others like Gomer, Hosea’s wife, fell into debauchery. Some women were cruel and treacherous, but others were self-sacrificing and loyal. Many women in the Bible had certain traits that seem to stand out and to define their lives. The same would be true for men as well.

Rachel and Leah were sisters married to the same husband. Rachel represents the love that believers gain through knowledge of their heavenly bridegroom. Leah represents consistent, dutiful service to the Lord. It is true that love will bind us to duty. What begins with love will hold us and keep us in the times of our deepest trial and greatest temptation. We as believers are betrothed to Christ, and like the Shulamite in Song of Solomon 3:4 we should be able to say, “I have found him whom my soul loveth . . . and would not let him go.”

I. JACOB’S SEARCH FOR PEACE
The life that is unmindful of God’s presence can be muddled, full of strife and confusion. To a large extent that is a description of how Jacob seemed at times to be living. Jacob’s life was marked by a constant search for peace, a desire for harmony and security. This was especially true when he found himself in conflict with his brother, Esau. Esau allowed hatred to control his thoughts towards his brother, Jacob. With God’s help we can enjoy a healing process, though the recovery may seem to be terribly slow. Before we judge others too harshly, we need to ask ourselves, “Whom have I injured in the past? What kindnesses have I left undone?” Perhaps there is little or nothing we can do about what has already taken place. But we can certainly do something about the future. Someone needs our encouragement and not our criticism. Someone needs our praise and not our fault-finding. Let us look for opportunities to encourage and commend others.

II. JACOB’S ATTRACTION TO RACHEL
A. Jacob Met Rachel at the Well
B. Jacob Agreed to Work for Laban

III. THE CUSTOM OF THE LAND

IV. THE MARRIAGE OF LOVE AND DUTY
A. Rachel Represents Love
B. Leah Represents Duty
C. Love and Duty Function Together

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

There is a wound that is particularly painful and hard to endure, and that is the wound we suffer from a close friend or a loved one. It is one thing to suffer as the result of a physical activity or an industrial accident. It is quite another thing to feel betrayed or deeply hurt by someone with whom we have had a close relationship. A sprained ankle or a broken arm will often mend itself without long-lasting effects. But a wound from a friend or a fellow believer? That can be another matter. David complained to the Lord, “Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me” (Psalm 41:9). Let us not become embittered, even as Esau allowed hatred to control his thoughts towards his brother, Jacob.
lived in his early years. Jacob, the second son of Isaac and Rebekah, was a selfish conniver who would take advantage of others when it suited his purpose. True, his mother had received a prophetic word from God regarding Jacob even before his birth, but somehow that did not seem to translate into reputable living. From his birth Jacob showed himself to have a grasping nature. (Because he took hold of his twin brother’s heel when he was born, he was named Jacob, which means “he that supplantheth.”) There would be little peace in the heart of Jacob as long as he continued in his despicable and deceitful ways.

A. Jacob Fled from Esau

There is forever a conflict between the flesh and the Spirit (Galatians 5:17). Esau, Jacob’s older twin brother, put no real value on spiritual things. He was a man of the world who lived for the world. It is remarkable how casually he treated the privileges he could have enjoyed as the firstborn son of Isaac. He bartered away his birthright for a single meal, a stew of lentils, and then “rose up, and went his way” (Genesis 25:34) as if nothing of any great importance had happened. No wonder his actions were such an offense to God. Romans 9:13 states, “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.” The birthright the older son disdained (Genesis 25:34) involved not only a double portion of his father’s inheritance but also spiritual blessings.

Unlike Esau, Jacob valued God’s covenant promises. His mother may have shared with him what she had received prophetically from God years before. The Lord had told her that Esau would hold an inferior position to Jacob, and Rebekah, who strongly preferred her younger son, clung to that promise. Rebekah would do everything she could to ensure that Jacob would attain prominence.

When Isaac was old with extremely poor eyesight, he began to feel that death might be imminent. He called for Esau with the intention of bestowing upon him the paternal blessing. Never mind that God had chosen Jacob to be heir to the promise. Isaac loved Esau and his savory meat, and the two men could enjoy a meal together before the blessing was given. “Now therefore,” Isaac instructed Esau, “take, I pray thee, thy weapons, thy quiver and thy bow, and go out to the field, and take some venison” (Genesis 27:3).

Should we suspect that Rebekah was listening outside Isaac’s tent? We know she overheard what her husband had said, and while Esau went to hunt for venison, she sprang into action. She commanded Jacob to bring her two kids from the flock of goats. With these she would prepare savory meat such as she knew her husband loved; then Jacob could be the one to take the meat to Isaac and receive his father’s blessing. It was a daring scheme, and it would demand immediate action. At first Jacob hesitated. “Behold,” he reasoned, “Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man: My father peradventure will feel me, and I shall seem to him to be a deceiver; and I shall bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing” (Genesis 27:11–12). But Rebekah was not to be deterred by these misgivings. She stated, “Upon me be thy curse, my son: only obey my voice, and go fetch me them” (Genesis 27:13).

How carefully Rebekah proceeded with her deceitful scheme! If it were discovered, all hope of Jacob being blessed would be lost. Everything had to be done to make the plan as foolproof as possible. Somehow Isaac would have to be convinced that he was really promoting Esau and not Jacob. Rebekah needed to prepare the meat from the young goats in just the right way. She must find those special garments that belonged to Esau and put them on her younger son. She needed to be careful to cover the hands and the smooth of Jacob’s neck with the skin of the kids of the goats. Finally, Rebekah would place the savory meat and the bread in the hand of her favored son, and then her part in the deception would be finished.

Isaac had some misgivings from the first when Jacob came into his presence. “Who art thou, my son?” (Genesis 27:18) he inquired. The voice he heard sounded like that of Jacob and not like that of Esau. It appeared strange as well to the older man that Esau could have found and prepared the venison so quickly. But Jacob was ready with an answer, and he said, “Because the Lord thy God brought it to me” (Genesis 27:20). This bold and blasphemous lie shows us Jacob at his worst. Whatever it might cost, he had determined to
Jacob followed through with the underhanded plot, and Jacob played his part like a professional.

Isaac decided to settle the matter conclusively, and feeling Jacob’s hands, he was convinced that this was indeed his older son. The hands, the old man was sure, were Esau’s, the smell of the garment, he believed, was of Esau as well. Betrayed by a kiss, a plate of meat, and some wine, Isaac proceeded to pronounce the prophetic and patriarchal blessing upon Jacob.

Jacob had just gone out when his brother came in. What a shocking meeting this would prove to be! When Esau heard from Isaac what had just taken place he cried with a bitter cry, and his heart began to throb with a seething hatred.

Rebekah had real reason to be alarmed when she heard that Esau was determined to kill Jacob after the passing of her husband. Fearing for her younger son’s life, she commanded Jacob to flee to Haran where her brother, Laban, lived. That is also where Rebekah lived when Abraham’s servant came in search of a bride for Isaac and chose her. She hoped Jacob could find a bride there as well.

Apparently Rebekah wanted Isaac to give Jacob that same directive, for she began a conversation with Isaac about her disappointment with Esau’s choosing heathen wives. She mentioned to Isaac that she did not want Jacob to do the same thing. Isaac agreed and called Jacob in to bless him and direct him to go to Laban and choose one of his daughters for a wife. Isaac blessed Jacob again and sent him on his way.

II. JACOB’S ATTRACTION TO RACHEL

A. Jacob Met Rachel at the Well

The meeting at the well was planned by neither Jacob nor Rachel, but without question it was in the will of God. At Bethel the Lord had told Jacob in his dream, “Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest” (Genesis 28:15). It was providential that Isaac’s son arrived at the well at midday, for then he met with shepherds who were from Haran and knew his Uncle Laban.

As Jacob conversed with the shepherds, he asked whether they knew Laban. They did, and they pointed out that his daughter Rachael was arriving with her father’s sheep. Not only was this the right place and the right time, but it was also the right situation. Jacob was able to impress Rachel with his strength and his kindness. “Jacob went near, and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother” (Genesis 29:10).

What thoughts must have gone through
Rachel’s mind as Jacob kissed her in a friendly, courteous greeting and then wept aloud! Perhaps she wondered when she heard he had traveled so far from home, and she may have been shocked to find that he was her cousin. It seems probable that Rachel left the sheep in Jacob’s care as she hurried off to tell her father the unusual news.

B. Jacob Agreed to Work for Laban

Laban ran to meet his sister’s son and certainly provided a warm welcome for the weary traveler. Perhaps Jacob felt that he had finally escaped from the kind of strife and turmoil he had experienced in his own home, but time would prove otherwise. Laban could be and would be as deceitful towards his nephew as Jacob had been toward his father and brother. Some principles never change. “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). And generally speaking, we reap a greater harvest than that which we have sown. That is the nature of a harvest.

Reason suggests that Jacob served his uncle for a number of days without pay. But then Laban decided this man would be well worth hiring to tend his sheep. Perhaps a bargain could be arranged. “And Laban said unto Jacob, Because thou art my brother, shouldest thou therefore serve me for nought? tell me, what shall thy wages be?” (Genesis 29:15).

By now it must have become evident to everyone in the household that Jacob had become enamoured with Rachel. What value were wages? For Jacob there was a far greater treasure to be gained than money or material possessions. Without hesitation he said to Laban, “I will serve thee seven years for Rachel thy younger daughter” (Genesis 29:18). Because Jacob had no dowry to offer, he offered the only thing he had; he offered himself as a servant to Laban for seven years.

III. THE CUSTOM OF THE LAND

When he awoke in the mornings Jacob thought of Rachel; when he trekked over distant hills with Laban’s sheep he could see her face; when he walked the lonely plains he heard her voice. The hardships seemed insignificant, the long hours unimportant. “And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her” (Genesis 29:20).

And then the time arrived. “Jacob said unto Laban, Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her” (Genesis 29:21). Having served his indenture, Jacob felt in his heart that Rachel was rightfully his.

But Laban had other thoughts. Subtly, having gathered the men of the area for a marriage feast, Laban made it appear that he was acting appropriately and in good faith. Jacob, however, was about to discover to his chagrin that this was far from the case. In the evening Laban brought Leah to Jacob instead of Rachel, and perhaps because Leah was veiled, the fraud was not discovered until the next morning. What a disappointment! What confusion! Somehow Leah had been persuaded by her father to take part in his despicable scheme, and as a result she would suffer some long-term consequences.

How could Laban justify what he had done? When Jacob demanded an answer, he was given the lame excuse that it was the custom of the land: “It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the first-born” (Genesis 29:26). Even if this had been the case, Laban should have informed Jacob long before he actually did. To make matters even worse, Laban required seven more years of labor for Rachel, although he agreed to give Rachel to Jacob after a week of being with Leah. We might think Laban would have been smitten by his conscience, but Proverbs 21:2 tells us “every way of man is right in his own eyes.”

IV. THE MARRIAGE OF LOVE AND DUTY

Certainly there were contrasts and conflicts in Jacob’s marriages. It could not be otherwise. The marriage with Leah had been arranged through deception; the one with Rachel materialized through love.

A. Rachel Represents Love

There is a desperate longing within everyone’s heart to be loved. Consciously or subconsciously, we all crave affection. We want someone to care about us deeply, to be concerned about our feelings, our hopes,
our dreams. We want someone to be there when we are hurting and someone to be there when life becomes chaotic. Those who seemingly are the most cold-hearted and insensitive may deny this longing, but their protests ring hollow. Some are willing to pay a terrible price for what they think is love; for example, the teenager who sells her virtue for a night of illicit sex; the husband who indulges in an extramarital affair. But true love is life changing and uplifting, a powerful force that “is strong as death” (Song of Solomon 8:6). True love is unselfish and self-sacrificing, patient and forgiving.

Jacob found true love in Rachel. She represented all he had ever dreamed of. The Scripture says, “Rachel was beautiful and well favoured” (Genesis 29:17). No doubt there were other features that attracted Jacob to Laban’s daughter. She had proven she was a hardworking shepherdess and had shown him kindness from the first.

Obviously God had orchestrated the romantic attraction between Jacob and Rachel. Esau had deeply grieved his parents by marrying two Hittite women. (See Genesis 26:34–35.) It was the parents’ earnest desire, and perhaps their fervent prayer, that Jacob would find a more suitable wife.

B. Leah Represents Duty

Leah was the firstborn daughter of her father, but Leah would have been keenly aware that she had not been the first loved by her husband. It must have been a painful realization, a constant reminder that her husband’s greatest affection was toward someone else. Leah was married to the man she loved, and she was faithful, but her thoughts must often have been troubled. Even knowing that Jacob labored fourteen years for Rachel, Leah strove year after year to win a greater portion of his affection.

Leah was determined to fulfill her duty as a wife. She was typical of many other people who, despite broken dreams and dreadful hardships in the home, continue to do their best. Disrespect and even hatred could not stop her. The envy of her sister Rachel could not crush Leah’s faith. She was truly a woman destined to make a difference. Often it is the person who struggles against tremendous odds, and yet remains faithful, that God uses.

“And when the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren” (Genesis 29:31). Our mighty God sees all of our efforts to be trustworthy, and He sees all of our struggles. He has promised to “be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble” (Psalm 9:9). Leah was well aware the Lord was her source of help. As He began to bless this woman with children, she was careful to praise God for His goodness. When she gave birth to her firstborn, she called his name Reuben (behold a son) and said, “Surely the Lord hath looked upon my affliction; now therefore my husband will love me” (Genesis 29:32). Dutifully and courageously Leah bore five other sons and a daughter to Jacob. It would be through the lineage of her fourth son Judah (praise) that our Savior would come.

C. Love and Duty Function Together

Love will initially draw a man and woman together, but it will take a sense of duty to keep the couple together. Circumstances change. Emotions fluctuate. Feelings oscillate. The young man who stands at a marriage altar looking at his beautiful bride may one day see his companion in a wheelchair or a hospital bed and in terrific pain. The physical beauty of his bride may have faded, only to be replaced by the telltale signs of age.

On the other hand, the wife may be the one holding a trembling hand and looking at the vacant stare of a frail patient in a nursing home. In the past he was her strong and handsome bridegroom, his eyes sparkling with indescribable joy. She was his cherished sweetheart. Much of that may have become only a memory, but the commitment to a spouse can remain as strong as ever.

Duty involves commitment, a moral responsibility to do what is required and what is right. The husband who labors for long hours in a coal mine to provide for his family has accepted his responsibility. We can count on the woman who has chosen nursing as a career if she has a great compassion for hurting people. We will know that a mother will be faithful to the child whom she loves, regardless of the pain that child may have caused her. And we can trust the pastor who prays earnestly for
his flock, for he will be there whenever and wherever he is needed.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

It is not always what we want to do that is important. It is what we know in our hearts we should do. Someone has to clean up the area and wash the dishes after a church dinner. Someone has to mow the lawn in the summer and shovel the snow on the walkway to the sanctuary in the winter. Typically these are the not the kinds of jobs that will receive much recognition or appreciation. But love can cause even menial tasks to become meaningful.

If we truly love the Lord, we will be there when the church doors are open. Prayer meetings will not be a drudgery but an opportunity to enter into His holy presence. We will delight in reading the Word of God, treasuring the Lord’s promises and long ing to conform to His image. We will find great pleasure in fellowshipping with other believers and in sharing the message of salvation with unbelievers. Worship will become a way of life. We will become joyful givers to God’s work, for we know that He has given so much more to us.

And what has God given to us? He has provided us with the greatest gift of all. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

REFLECTIONS

- Do you think Isaac was aware that the patriarchal blessing was intended by God for Jacob and not for Esau? Explain.
- What lessons can be learned from the deceitful behavior of Leah, Jacob, and Laban?
- Genuine love will lead to exceptional commitment. Discuss.
- Do you think the conflict between Jacob’s wives had a major bearing on how Joseph would be treated in the future by his brothers? Discuss.
FOCUS VERSE

Romans 5:10
For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.

LESSON TEXT

I Corinthians 15:1-9, 17
1 Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand;
2 By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.
3 For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;
4 And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures:
5 And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve:
6 After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep.
7 After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles.
8 And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.
9 For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

. . . .

17 And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.

FOCUS THOUGHT

The Resurrection—the heart of the Christian faith—changed our eternal destiny.
I.  THE PROOF OF THE RESURRECTION
   A.  Christ Rose According to Scripture
   B.  Christ Rose on the Third Day
   C.  Seen by Credible Witnesses
   D.  Seen by the Writer Paul
   E.  Historical Proof

II.  THE POWER OF THE RESURRECTION
   A.  Christ Is Risen from the Dead
   B.  Overcame Death and the Effects of Sin
   C.  Believers Risen with Christ through the Spirit
   D.  Dead in Christ and Believers Will Rise in the Rapture

III. PARTAKERS OF THE FIRST RESURRECTION—THE BLESSED HOPE
   A.  The New-Birth Experience
   B.  Changed from Mortality to Immortality

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC
The fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians is exceptional among the chapters of the Bible. Within this chapter the apostle Paul expounded the doctrine of the Resurrection, which is the heart of the Christian faith. Resurrection means “1. a raising up, rising (e.g. from a seat): Luke 2:34; 2. a rising from the dead” (Thayer’s Greek Lexicon). When Christians mourn the passing of born-again loved ones, they receive comfort through the expectation of the resurrection of the dead.

To better comprehend Paul’s purpose in broaching the subject of resurrection, it is helpful to understand the mind-set of the culture with which he was dealing. Corinth was a Grecian city, located approximately forty-eight miles west of Athens. Consequently, the Greek belief in the immortality of the soul but rejection of the resurrection of the body permeated the Christian community. (See Acts 17:31-32.) Wycliffe Commentary explains that Greek ideology held that the body was the source of all mankind’s weakness and sin, but death liberated the soul from the weak and sinful body. In their mind, the resurrection of the body would cause the liberated soul to descend back into the captivity of the body.

The Pulpit Commentary ascribes the following six sections to I Corinthians 15:
1.  The evidence of Christ’s resurrection (verses 1-11);
2.  The resurrection of Christ is the...
foundation of our faith in the general resurrection (verses 12-19);
3. Results to be deduced from Christ’s resurrection (verses 20-28);
4. The life of believers an argument for the Resurrection (verses 29-34);
5. Analogies helpful for understanding the subject (verses 35-49);
6. Conclusion and exhortation (verses 50-58).

Obviously, Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 made a grand effort to rebut the philosophy of the Greeks and to establish the validity of the Resurrection and its necessity to salvation.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. THE PROOF OF THE RESURRECTION

A. Christ Rose According to Scripture

Old Testament prophecies concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ are few. There was speculation about life after death, but there seemed to be little or no direct connection between that conjecture and Israel’s religion. Interestingly, while Israel’s neighboring nations believed in a resurrection, the chief concern of the Israelite priesthood and rabbinical leaders was for a holy nation. Consequently, there was little said in Old Testament times about an individual’s eternal state.

David, the great psalmist, spoke of the resurrection of Christ in his song of preservation and eternal trust:

“For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption” (Psalm 16:10).

It is readily apparent that David did not refer to himself as God’s Holy One; the reference was prophetic of Jesus Christ. The words of this prophecy, while not directly stating that a resurrection would occur, indicated that through some means death and decay would not affect the body of the Messiah.

The prophet Isaiah also alluded to the Resurrection. (See Isaiah 53:10.) Most theologians agree that Isaiah was speaking prophetically about Jesus, and the reference to “prolonging his days” refers to His resurrection.

Although Old Testament prophecies of the Resurrection are sparse, Jesus Christ “anticipated His own resurrection. At first He used only vague terms, such as, ‘Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ But later He spoke plainly, and whenever He mentioned His death, He added, ‘The Son of man . . . must be raised the third day’” (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia). He fulfilled the prophecies of His resurrection just as predicted.

B. Christ Rose on the Third Day

By the beginning of the New Testament era, Pharisaic doctrine included the belief of a resurrection, although the religious sect known as the Sadducees still rejected the notion. Jesus’ teachings did not introduce the doctrine of resurrection into Jewish religion, but He did state most of the prophecies concerning His own resurrection. (See Matthew 12:40; 16:21; 20:19; 27:63-64; Mark 9:31; 10:33-34; Luke 18:32-33; 24:46; John 2:19-21.)

Repeatedly, Jesus taught His disciples that He would rise on the third day after His death. Those who heard these initial prophecies attested to their validity and fulfillment later as they penned what would become Scripture. (See Matthew 28:1-7; Mark 16:1-7; John 20:1-19.)

When the apostle Peter preached the first sermon of the newly established church, he focused on the resurrection of Jesus as a key element of his message.

“Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it. For David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved: Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope: Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; thou shalt make me full of joy with thy countenance” (Acts 2:24-28).

In preaching to the household of Cornelius and opening the door of salvation to the Gentiles, Peter again brought attention to the Resurrection (Acts 10:40). In his letter to the
Corinthians, the apostle Paul also joined in proclaiming the risen Christ (I Corinthians 15).

The reality of the Resurrection is vital to the eternal redemption of believers. Had Jesus not risen from the dead, death would be the final destination of the body. However, Jesus taught that the body—regardless of the spiritual status of the individual—has an eternal destination (Matthew 10:28).

In addressing the issue of the Resurrection to the Corinthian church, the apostle Paul spoke of the body becoming incorruptible and mortality putting on immortality (I Corinthians 15:53-54). If the body of a believer must become incorruptible to experience eternal salvation, then the body of the wicked must also become immortal to endure eternal damnation (John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15).

C. Seen by Credible Witnesses

In virtually any judicial system, a credible witness’s account of an event is of far greater value than what someone might later write concerning the event. While the written accounts of Jesus’ resurrection are invaluable to believers today, the most precious records are from those who were eyewitnesses to His resurrection. The first ones who could have given an eyewitness account of Jesus’ resurrection were the soldiers who stood guard over the tomb. However, greed, fear, and intimidation by their superiors immediately sealed their lips. But in spite of the concerted efforts of the Jewish establishment to conceal His resurrection, many eyewitnesses have revealed its truth.

In that early Sunday morning hour, the first one to whom Jesus appeared after His resurrection was Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9; John 20:14-16). Middle Eastern culture did not generally give women a place of great prominence or recognition in the time of Christ. Still, He chose to make His first post-resurrection appearance to a woman.

At some juncture, perhaps later the same day, Jesus appeared to two disciples and walked with them as they made their way to the village of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-31). At the outset of Jesus’ manifestation to them, neither Mary nor these disciples recognized Him because His appearance was different (Mark 16:12). However, when He called Mary by name and when He broke bread with the two from Emmaus, they suddenly realized in whose presence they were.

Later that Sunday evening, Jesus manifested Himself to a gathering of the disciples, probably the ten since Thomas was not present (John 20:19-24). Fearing for their lives, the disciples were meeting behind closed and locked doors. Suddenly, Jesus was standing in their midst. On another day and in a different assembly, when Thomas was present, Jesus appeared again, proving to Thomas that He had indeed risen. Over the course of the next forty days, Jesus manifested Himself to various disciples at different times and places, with His final appearance being on the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem before approximately five hundred witnesses.

D. Seen by the Writer Paul

Some time after Jesus’ ascension, He appeared to Saul of Tarsus, later known as the apostle Paul. Most biblical commentators decline to speculate as to the timing of this event, but those who do usually associate the occurrence with Saul’s conversion experience on the road to Damascus. (See Acts 9:3-7.) Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, did not refer to Saul’s vision on the road to Damascus, only to his hearing the voice of one who identified Himself as Jesus.

Some Bible scholars hold the view that this physical appearance of Jesus to Saul took place during Saul’s three-year stint of seeming solitude in Arabia (Galatians 1:15-18). Regardless of the time of Jesus’ manifestation to him, the fact remains that Paul identified himself as being a witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 15:8). Given Paul’s trustworthiness in all other areas of apostolic authority, it is reasonable to accept his credibility in this also.

E. Historical Proof

Aside from the Bible, the availability of history from the New Testament era is scarce. Josephus, the renowned and revered Jewish historian of the first century, lent his voice to the validity of the resurrection of Jesus. He wrote: “He was [the] Christ. And . . . those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day . . .” (Antiquities of the Jews, Book 18,
History further reveals that there is a tomb in Jerusalem—the grave in which Jesus’ body lay—that is devoid of human remains. While the skeptic would dispute the idea that the empty tomb is the actual burial place of Jesus, it is illogical to think that an inaccurate identification of a site of such historical significance would pass down through the ages.

II. THE POWER OF THE RESURRECTION

A. Christ Is Risen from the Dead

The power of the resurrection from the dead is far more than just the mere raising of the carnal, mortal body from death to life. In exposing the error of the Sadducean doctrine, Jesus taught that once resurrection occurs, the individual acquires some of the characteristics of the angels of heaven (Matthew 22:29-30). The resurrected individual does not become an angel as some doctrines purport, but there is an acquisition of some angelic attributes.

These traits are discernible by a comparison of Jesus’ life on earth before His death and the occurrences after His resurrection. During the earthly ministry of Jesus He raised individuals from the dead (Matthew 9:18; Luke 7:11-15; John 11:43-44), but these people evidently returned to their mortal body rather than taking on the distinctions of angelic beings.

When Jesus arose from the dead, however, He did not retain the mortal body that He possessed before the Crucifixion. Rather, His was a new, spiritual body that possessed the ability to enter sealed rooms without using an entryway (John 20:19-24), to appear and disappear at will (Luke 24:13-31), and to adopt a different appearance at will (Mark 16:12). While these characteristics make up a portion of an angel’s attributes, they also reflect the true physical power of the Resurrection. Greater than the physical accomplishments of the Resurrection, however, are its spiritual achievements for all mankind.

B. Overcame Death and the Effects of Sin

“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

The most astounding power of Christ’s resurrection is twofold in nature:

1. It gives power over the sting of natural death (Revelation 20:6; 21:8). While all humanity not living at the time of and included in the rapture of the church will suffer natural death, one must understand that all affected by natural death will take part in a resurrection. Some will participate in the first resurrection, of which Jesus is the first fruits, and the remainder in the second resurrection just before the Great White Throne judgment (Revelation 20:5-6). The born-again believer who dies before the rapture of the church will experience a genuine peace that will accompany his departure from this life—a peace that comes through the knowledge that death is not the end but only a doorway into everlasting life. Knowing that great joy awaits the child of God at the resurrection should remove the distress of death.

2. It gives power over the eternal effects of sin. Mankind, due to Adam’s sin, is consequently born with a sinful nature. Being born into sin relegated humanity to eternal punishment and separation from God. However, Christ’s resurrection proved His power over those eternal ramifications. Through Jesus Christ we are delivered from the eternal damnation caused by sin!

C. Believers Risen with Christ through the Spirit

From the genesis of the Bible through the last page there is a consistent flow of typology. Christ’s resurrection, though an actual physical event, had immense spiritual typological relevance as well. Paul, writing to the Roman Christians, clarified this typological application where the new believer rising from the water of baptism reflects a type of the Resurrection.

Just as Jesus rose from the grave to a new life containing new characteristics, so believers rise from the watery grave to a completely new lifestyle.

“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” (I Corinthians 15:55).

“Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was
raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

After His resurrection, Jesus did not live with the restrictions of a fleshly body. Following the watery burial of baptism, one obtains release from the restraints of the sinful flesh, releasing him to worship God in a newfound liberty and infusing him with the power to live a holy, separated life.

D. Dead in Christ and Believers Will Rise in the Rapture

It would seem that one of the favorite subjects of the apostle Paul was the Resurrection, for through his writings to the Romans, the Corinthians, the Philippians, the Thessalonians, and to Timothy, we are able to glean insights into its mysteries. It is impossible to study the Resurrection apart from the rapture of the church. Although the term “rapture” does not appear in Scripture, the apostle Paul explained the “catching away” in conjunction with the resurrection of the dead in Christ.

In the Book of I Corinthians, Paul stated that he was explaining a “mystery” to the Corinthians. This mystery involves the transition that must occur from the present corruptible, fleshly state of the believer to the incorruptible condition necessary to enter heaven. Paul further declared that not everyone would enter into the sleep of death, but that at the return of Christ for His church many would be alive and well.

Both the living and the resurrected believers’ bodies will be changed instantaneously (I Corinthians 15:52; I John 3:2). The Greek word atomos, translated as “a moment” in I Corinthians 15:52, literally means “indivisible or an atom of time” (Strong’s Concordance). With the advent of computer nomenclature, one could say that the change from corruptible to incorruptible will occur in a nanosecond. Following this sudden change is another extraordinary event—being caught up along with the believers resurrected from the dead to meet the Lord in the air (I Thessalonians 4:17). This event is known as the rapture of the church.

III. PARTAKERS OF THE FIRST RESURRECTION—THE BLESSED HOPE

A. The New-Birth Experience

The prerequisite to participation in the resurrection of the dead in Christ or the rapture of the church is the new-birth experience.

“Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:3-5).

Some individuals tend to downplay this experience or try to explain away its relevance, and others embrace the idea but fail to understand the experience.

Actually, Jesus established the pattern for salvation during His dialogue with Nicodemus in John 3, which also inspired the use of the term “new birth.” Jesus explained to Nicodemus that a person must be born again to see the kingdom of heaven. When Nicodemus failed to understand Jesus’ analogy of a new birth, Jesus explained that a person is born of the flesh once, but he also must be born of the Spirit in order to experience salvation. “Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again” (John 3:7).

What is the new birth? The new birth consists of repentance of sins, baptism by immersion in water in Jesus’ name for the remission of sins, and receiving the Holy Ghost as evidenced by speaking in other tongues. Upon experiencing the new birth, one should then walk in newness of life—a lifestyle that reflects the living presence of Jesus Christ within. With the new lifestyle comes the blessed hope of participation in the resurrection or the rapture of the church.

B. Changed from Mortality to Immortality

“For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall
be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory” (I Corinthians 15:53-54).

Obviously, when Paul wrote these words to the Corinthians he was referring to the change that occurs at the first resurrection. However, it is also applicable to the second resurrection. Paul’s description of the change that must occur at the resurrection often is perceived primarily in the way that it will affect the human body, since the soul of mankind already is eternal. The soul is not eternal in the sense that God is eternal, that is, without beginning. The soul comes into existence when life enters the body.

Genesis 2:7 states that mankind “became a living soul” when God breathed life into Adam, indicating no previous existence of the soul but a distinct point of beginning. Both the Hebrew and Greek words translated as “soul” in the Scriptures carry the general meaning of “that which breathes.” After coming into existence, however, the soul apparently is not predisposed to death as is the body, for Jesus indicated that mankind could not kill the soul (Matthew 10:28). So it is eternal in the sense of undying and unending.

The human body, because of the fall of Adam, is subject to death and decay. Scripture implies that before sin’s seduction of Adam, the human body was not susceptible to death or to the decay that now naturally occurs following death. Hence, the present body of mankind cannot participate in the eternal, but it must experience a dramatic change into an eternal state. Paul described this as the changing of the mortal into the immortal, and from the corruptible (perishable) to the incorruptible (unending existence). It is only through this change that the believer can coexist in eternity with God.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

On January 27, 2006, in an Italian court, a former seminary student turned atheist brought a lawsuit against a priest for allegedly disseminating false ideology through the propagation of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. The lawsuit alleged that Jesus never really existed but was a fabrication of the Roman Catholic Church and asked the court to determine the validity of His existence. Enrico Righi, the priest named in the lawsuit, stated that he was not concerned with the outcome of the trial because of the incredible amount of evidence validating Jesus’ existence.

Certainly, the evidence that supports Jesus’ existence—Scripture, eyewitnesses, and history—also corroborates His resurrection. The fact that Jesus rose from the dead as the first fruits of the Resurrection and ascended into heaven gives us a blessed hope that we also can participate in the resurrection of the dead in Christ and the rapture of the church.

REFLECTIONS

• Discuss what Old Testament prophecies might apply to the resurrection of Christ.
• Discuss Jesus’ prophetic statements about His resurrection.
• Discuss the various eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ resurrection.
• Reflect on the power of the Resurrection as it relates to our new-birth experience and the Rapture.
FOCUS VERSE

Proverbs 18:22
Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the Lord.

LESSON TEXT

Esther 3:8; 8:4–5, 11
8 And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king’s laws: therefore it is not for the king’s profit to suffer them.

4 Then the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So Esther arose, and stood before the king,

5 And said, If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews which are in all the king’s provinces.

11 Wherein the king granted the Jews which were in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all the power of the people and province that would assault them, both little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey.

I Kings 16:30–31
30 And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him.
31 And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him.

I Kings 19:1–2
1 And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword.
2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time.

I Kings 21:2–3, 7
2 And Ahab spake unto Naboth, saying, Give me thy vineyard, that I may have it for a garden of herbs, because it is near unto my house: and I will give thee for it a better vineyard than it; or, if it seem good to thee, I will give thee the worth of it in money.
3 And Naboth said to Ahab, The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee.

7 And Jezebel his wife said unto him, Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel? arise, and eat bread, and let thine heart be merry: I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Zidonians.
I. THE TWO QUEENS
   A. Esther
   B. Jezebel
   C. Queens in Likeness and Contrast

II. THE POWER OF INFLUENCE
   A. Esther’s Pleading for Her People Saved Them
   B. Jezebel Was Responsible for the Death of Many People

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

In his book The Home Beautiful, James Russell Miller said, “Again let me say that no wife can over-estimate the influence she wields over her husband, or the measure in which his character, his career and his every destiny are laid in her hands for shaping. The sway which she holds over him is the sway of love, but it is mighty and resistless. If she retains her power, if she holds her place as queen of his life, she can do with him as she will. Even unconsciously to her herself, without any thought of her responsibility, she will exert over him an influence that will go far toward making or marring all his future.”

Most of us have heard the saying “If Momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.” At some point in life, most people have experienced that statement to some degree. On a practical level, this means that oftentimes families are as happy as the mothers who hold them together. Proverbs 21:9 (ESV) attests to this truth: “It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife.”

Even a cursory study of women in the Bible will yield a prevalent common theme: women have great influence over their families and their communities. That same study would reveal that women can use their influence to glorify God or to rebel against Him: from Deborah, the righteous judge and prophetess, to Miriam, the leader of an insurrection against God’s leader; from Abigail, who diffused the wrath of a future king, to Sarah, who encouraged her husband to take matters into his own hands; from Eve, whose fateful deception cursed us all, to Mary, whose faithful obedience made redemption possible for us all. Then there are two queens who both influenced their husband-kings, their nations, and beyond: Esther and Jezebel.
SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. THE TWO QUEENS

A. Esther

The story of Queen Esther is a delightful, suspense-filled, irony-laden journey of the unlikeliest of heroines. Never underestimate what God can do through someone who is willing to champion the cause of His people. Esther is a shining example of how God delights in doing the impossible through those who fully surrender to Him. The ultimate theme of the Book of Esther is that God keeps His promises and protects His people. God's commitment to His covenant people is demonstrated through the theme of providence. Divine providence is greater than any force that sought to destroy the Jews.

Esther, whose Jewish name was Hadassah, was orphaned as a young girl. Her older cousin Mordecai adopted her and raised her as his own daughter. Mordecai was from the tribe of Benjamin, and as such, was among those taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. Mordecai and Esther were living in exile in Susa, a city in Persia, under the rule of King Ahaseurus.

The Old Testament is filled with colorful narratives of kings and their exploits, both militaristic and relational. Esther's story intersects the life of King Ahaseurus in dramatic fashion. Conflict in the royal palace provided the backstory to Esther's ascension. The king held a series of banquets, and he demanded the queen, Vashti, to appear. Vashti refused to come and was banished from the kingdom, so a search for the new queen ensued.

After searching throughout the land, Esther was selected as a potential candidate to be queen. She was a strikingly beautiful woman, and she found favor with the eunuch in charge of the king's harem. He provided her with special treatment, including seven of the best handmaidens. For a full year, she experienced a year of purification, which included "six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with sweet odours, and with other things for the purifying of the women" (Esther 2:12). Esther 2:17 describes that when she was presented to King Ahasuerus, he selected her to be queen, chosen above all the other virgins of the land. Who would have dreamed that a young Jewish orphan would become queen of the land? At the advice of Mordecai, Esther kept secret the fact that she was Jewish, and this act of submission would prove to be critical to saving her people.

B. Jezebel

The name Jezebel still stands in infamy because of the many abominable acts committed by this Old Testament queen. Jezebel was the princess of Sidon and the queen of Israel. The daughter of King Ethbaal ("Baal's man") of Sidon, she married newly crowned King Ahab in a contractual agreement that forged an alliance between the two kingdoms. Not only was Ethbaal a king, he was also a priest of the Canaanite fertility goddess, As-tarte. King Ahab, her new husband, was weak in the faith of his fathers, which further allowed Jezebel the opportunity to import her pagan worship to Israel. Through Jezebel's influence, Ahab built "an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him" (I Kings 16:32–33). Jezebel instituted a pagan priesthood with 450 prophets of Baal and an additional 400 prophets of Astarte.

Nowhere was Jezebel's influence stronger than in her own family. She was the spiritual leader of the family, molding the children in the paths of wickedness. Her first child, Athaliah, rivaled her mother in atrocious acts. She married Jehoram, king of Judah, and brought Baal worship to that kingdom. After her son Ahaziah's death, she murdered all of her grandchildren in order to ascend to full power. Only Joash survived because he was hidden from her. She ruled over Judah for six years. In her seventh year, Jehoiada the priest brought Joash out of hiding and crowned him king in the Temple. When Athaliah heard the noise of celebration, she entered the Temple to investigate. Jehoiada commanded that she be removed from the Temple and slain. Manipulation and bloodshed flowed from Jezebel and her descendants. Her legacy of deception and destruction paralyzed both Israel and Judah.
C. Queens in Likeness and Contrast

Most stories have a lesson to teach that transcends time and details and speaks to current situations. Some lives inspire, while others provide a chilling warning against journeying on a path away from God. In that regard, both Esther and Jezebel speak volumes to readers today. Both women were selected by their husbands, who were kings, to be their queens. Both were intelligent, bold women who were committed to a cause and leveraged their leadership capabilities to achieve their goals.

The chief difference between these women was how they used their talents and power. Esther was willing to give her life for her people. Jezebel delighted in spilling the blood of the prophets. Esther sacrificed her own best interests to protect those who were defenseless against her husband’s decree. Jezebel arranged to have an innocent man falsely tried and killed so her husband could take the man’s vineyard. Esther protected the Israelites and obeyed her God. Jezebel sought to destroy the Jews and abolish the worship of the one true God. In short, Esther used her influence for good, while Jezebel used her influence for evil.

II. THE POWER OF INFLUENCE

A. Esther’s Pleading for Her People Saved Them

Throughout Esther’s narrative, every detail of the situation revealed God’s providence at work, making a way for Esther to bring deliverance to her people. When Esther moved to the palace, Mordecai was able to secure a position at the king’s gate, which helped him maintain connection with Esther and keep watch for her best interests.

With Esther’s ascension to the throne, their lives might have been peaceful were it not for the prideful wrath of one of the king’s trusted officials: Haman. In fact, King Ahasuerus bestowed upon Haman honor above all other in his court, decreeing that his subjects should bow down in respect to Haman. If Mordecai proved to be anything, he was a devout Jew, and as such, he refused to kneel before Haman. His defiance infuriated Haman, who schemed revenge that would be exacted against all Jews.

Ever the manipulator, Haman portrayed the Jews as a defiant group of people who were a threat to the king. Haman implored the king to grant permission to destroy the Jewish people, and Ahasuerus unwisely agreed to his request. (See Esther 3:8, 11.) Though Esther lived in the palace, Mordecai was more politically connected than Esther; he was the first to share Haman’s plot with her.

Could there have been a more bizarre plot line? The king, who had banished his first queen for insubordination, unknowingly decreed for the execution of his beloved current queen. What was Esther to make of this unthinkable turn of events? Before she had time to adequately process the events, Mordecai called her to action. He reminded Esther of her identity as a Jew and charged her with the responsibility of pleading for mercy for her fellow Jews. Perhaps he could sense her fear or even her desire for self-preservation. In what has become the most quoted passage of the Book of Esther, Mordecai exhorted Esther to stand strong:

“For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14, NKJV).

With unflinching resolve and commitment, Esther asked Mordecai to call all Jews in Shushan to three days of fasting, and she even asked her servants to join with her. She promised Mordecai that after the three days of fasting, she would go before the king, which could result in either her gaining an audience with him or in being killed as a result of coming before him without being called. There is an invaluable lesson to be learned here: trust in God is being at peace with giving Him permission to decide the outcome of our dilemmas.

At the conclusion of the fast, Esther approached the king without invitation. The Lord gave her favor with Ahasuerus, who held out his golden scepter to her, welcoming her in. Given the erratic nature of his decision making, Esther did not feel comfortable directly sharing her petition with him. She understood
that she would have to approach him in a delicate manner, with the right approach. For the first part of her plan, she invited Ahasuerus and Haman to a special meal prepared for them. At the conclusion of that meal, the king asked about her request. Rather than sharing her petition at that time, Esther invited the two men to come again the next day.

In the meantime, Haman planned destruction for Mordecai, erecting gallows on which to hang him. In the palace that night Ahasuerus could not sleep, and God brought Mordecai to his remembrance, specifically how Mordecai had not been properly rewarded for foiling an assassination plot against Ahasuerus. In an ironic turn of events, Haman came to the king the next morning with the intent of asking permission to kill Mordecai. Before he could make his request, Ahasuerus ordered him to publicly honor Mordecai in the way that Haman thought he [Haman] was going to be honored.

Later that day, Esther prepared another banquet for Ahasuerus and Haman, and it was in that setting that she carefully laid out her case in a manner that appealed to the king’s ego. She gently built up the accusation, with suspense mounting, and presented her story in a method that allowed his anger to rise without making him defensive in regard to his own culpability in the situation. With his emotions high, Esther revealed the true adversary: Haman!

Haman was sentenced to death and was hung on the gallows he had prepared on which to hang Mordecai. In an unprecedented reversal of roles, Mordecai was handed Haman’s position in the king’s court. This was a victory yet not the entirety of what Esther sought. In Esther 8:5, she proceeded to plead for the lives of her people:

“If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews which are in all the king’s provinces.”

While the decree of Ahasuerus could not be repealed, he did grant a new decree that afforded the Jews the right to defend themselves and their possessions (Esther 8:11), and that edict was shared throughout all of Persia.

Following the Jews’ great victory, Mordecai sent letters to all the provinces calling for a permanent remembrance for them and the generations to come. “To establish this among them, that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly, as the days wherein the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day: that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor. . . . Wherefore they called these days Purim.” (Esther 9:21–22, 26). This holiday is still celebrated by Jews today.

Although God is not overtly mentioned in the Book of Esther, it is evident that He was working behind the scenes to save His people. God alone has the power to orchestrate a series of seemingly inconsequential events in a manner that turned the tables on the plan of the wicked. He reached out with another chance for Israel, working on their behalf.

These were Jews in captivity, assimilated in their land of oppression, who likely had lost the ways of their faith. God did not appoint their situation or sanction their behavior, but He did work through it on their behalf. What greater example of God’s providence at work than what He achieved through a young Jewish orphan. Esther went from having nothing, to having everything to lose. In the face of her own possible death sentence, Esther’s brave obedience to Mordecai’s call saved the Jews in exile and her own life as well.

B. Jezebel Was Responsible for the Death of Many People

Make no mistake—Jezebel militantly planned a hostile take-over for the minds and souls of the Jewish people, and she did so by attacking the prophets of God. She killed all who were not in hiding, but her thirst for blood was not quenched. She would stop at nothing until the prophet Elijah was destroyed. At the command of the Lord, Elijah proclaimed a drought, and departed from Ahab, hiding first by the brook Cherith, and then in the home.
of a widow from Zarephath. When God commanded Elijah to return in the third year of the drought, he met King Ahab to challenge all of Jezebel’s prophets at Mount Carmel—all 850 of them.

In one of the most dramatic scenes of the Old Testament, Elijah called the people of Israel to a point of decision: to serve the God who answered by fire. The prophets of Baal cried aloud all day, cutting themselves and leaping about, but there was no response. At the time of the evening sacrifice, Elijah repaired the altar of the Lord and made preparations to sacrifice. He drenched the altar and even filled the surrounding trench with water, to prove the power of God. Then Elijah prayed a bold prayer, and the fire of the Lord consumed the sacrifice, the altar, and even all the water. The children of Israel repented, the prophets of Baal were executed, and Elijah declared to Ahab that the drought had ended.

When Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, she responded with a prescient threat: “So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time” (I Kings 19:1–2). Once again, Elijah escaped her wrath through the hand of the Lord. In the desert, weary and overwhelmed, God revitalized the faithful prophet. God called him to anoint three men who eventually would eradicate the worship of Baal from Israel. God’s power was greater than the rage-filled curses of Jezebel!

Sometimes God’s justice does not come until the final judgment, but there are instances when it is meted out here on earth. For Jezebel, her reckoning came in a very public way after she orchestrated the death of an innocent man. King Ahab wanted to buy a field next to his palace from one of his subjects, Naboth. The land was part of Naboth’s family inheritance, so he refused to sell it, and this greatly upset Ahab. Jezebel pledged to get the land, and put forth a scheme that falsely accused Naboth, which resulted in his being stoned to death. She proudly presented the land to the king, a vineyard that was obtained through the death of innocent men.

Their celebration was short-lived, however, as Elijah once again appeared to confront their sins. The prophet foretold calamity for Ahab, and a gruesome end to the life of Jezebel. “And of Jezebel also spake the Lord, saying, The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel” (I Kings 21:23). The story of her violent demise is told in II Kings 9:32–37. She was thrown down from the window by her trusted eunuchs, and her dead body was devoured by animals. The life of one who had shed so much blood ended in an equally brutal manner.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Influence can be a powerful tool for good or for evil. Each person is given a measure of influence, some to a greater degree than others. Women, in particular, can have substantial sway with their families and beyond. The manner in which that power is used can either build or destroy lives—affecting both the person of influence as well as those being influenced. The way people choose to expend their influence is directly related to their view of stewardship. Individuals who understand that their lives are not their own will be more likely to use their influence in a way that brings glory to God.

Proverbs 31:10 asks, “Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.” Throughout the remainder of the chapter, many virtuous qualities a woman can possess are listed. Some of these traits are related to her actions (hard work, planning, preparedness, and so forth), while some reflect her character (hopeful, kind, trustworthy, and so forth). The most important qualities she possesses, however, are related to her love and devotion: she honors the Lord, her husband, and her family. She brings good to her world, her heart is to care for the defenseless, and she is promised that she will be rewarded. Esther’s life is a testimony to the type of positive influence that flows from a virtuous woman, but Jezebel is a cautionary tale of a woman whose lust for control destroyed everything she touched.

What can be learned from Esther. For those who feel that God can never use them, Esther sounds a clarion call that God equips those whom He calls. The very thing that would seem to disqualify someone may be the avenue through which God moves. As a Jewish orphan living in exile, Esther’s ethnicity should
have prohibited her from consideration as queen. Her Jewish identity could have secured a death sentence against her, even as queen. Yet her entire nation was rescued because she fulfilled her God-given destiny.

Mordecai’s life hung in the balance, but in a matter of hours, Haman was executed on the same gallows he had constructed for Mordecai. Difficult circumstances can be transformed for our good and for the good of others. Sometimes the gallows that seem to be prepared to destroy a child of God are, in fact, prepared to destroy the enemy. Pain and struggle will not destroy someone living in covenant with Him but ultimately will destroy the work of Satan. God will bring freedom through these struggles and bring glory to Himself through any situation. We should pray for the courage to make decisions that will honor God’s plan, no matter the circumstance.

**What can be learned from Jezebel.** One of the most basic lessons that can be learned from the life of Jezebel is the danger of marrying someone who is not a follower of Jesus Christ. When someone does not share the same spiritual values (is unequally yoked) as his or her spouse, at best, the family will be fractured; at worst, the spouse can turn the believer and their children against God.

Jezebel’s actions revealed the extent to which individuals will be driven when they are ruled by covetousness and unchecked thirst for power. Perhaps the most compelling lesson from the life of Jezebel is the fact that evil will never triumph over God’s power. Satan’s forces may be rising, seemingly standing strong and bold. It may even appear that evil has overtaken good, but make no mistake—God’s cause will always triumph.

Whether justice is administered here on earth, as was the case with Jezebel, or whether the day of reckoning comes in eternity, God will not be mocked and His people will not be destroyed. We will reap what we sow, and the only way to avoid condemnation is to repent and turn to God. The best news of all is that no one is beyond God’s grace. The blood of Jesus covers a multitude of sins, washing clean even those who have spilled the blood of others. His forgiveness flows freely, and His Spirit can completely transform their sin and shame.

Like these two women from the Old Testament, we have the power to choose how we will use our influence. It can be sinfully wielded to manipulate others with self-centered motivations, as was the choice of Jezebel. On the other hand, influence can be surrendered completely to God’s providence, for His glory, and an entire nation can be saved as a result, which was the testimony of Esther. The choice is ours to make today.

(Note: Portions of this lesson have been adapted from notes written by this lesson’s author for the *Apostolic Study Bible.*

**REFLECTIONS**

- How is the providence of God demonstrated throughout the story of Esther?
- How different could Jezebel’s story have been if she, like Esther, had used her influence in a godly manner?
- Where has God given us influence? With whom has He given us influence?
- Do we use our influence to manipulate others in order to achieve our own desires or goals? If so, how can we overcome that struggle?
- Are we willing to sacrifice for others in order for God to receive glory through us? Are we intentional about pointing others to God, sharing His love and gospel with those He has placed in our lives?
- What kind of stewards are we of the measure of influence God has imparted to us? Do we prayerfully seek opportunities and resources to influence others for good?
FOCUS VERSE

Luke 12:15
And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.

LESSON TEXT

II Kings 4:1–17

1 Now there cried a certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets unto Elisha, saying, Thy servant my husband is dead; and thou knowest that thy servant did fear the Lord: and the creditor is come to take unto him my two sons to be bondmen.

2 And Elisha said unto her, What shall I do for thee? tell me, what hast thou in the house? And she said, Thine handmaid hath not any thing in the house, save a pot of oil.

3 Then he said, Go, borrow thee vessels abroad of all thy neighbours, even empty vessels; borrow not a few.

4 And when thou art come in, thou shalt shut the door upon thee and upon thy sons, and shalt pour out into all those vessels, and thou shalt set aside that which is full.

5 So she went from him, and shut the door upon her and upon her sons, who brought the vessels to her; and she poured out.

6 And it came to pass, when the vessels were full, that she said unto her son, Bring me yet a vessel. And he said unto her, There is not a vessel more. And the oil stayed.

7 Then she came and told the man of God. And he said, Go, sell the oil, and pay thy debt, and live thou and thy children of the rest.

8 And it fell on a day, that Elisha passed to Shunem, where was a great woman; and she constrained him to eat bread. And so it was, that as oft as he passed by, he turned in thither to eat bread.

9 And she said unto her husband, Behold now, I perceive that this is an holy man of God, which passeth by us continually.

10 Let us make a little chamber, I pray thee, on the wall; and let us set for him there a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick: and it shall be, when he cometh to us, that he shall turn in thither.

11 And it fell on a day, that he came thither, and he turned into the chamber, and lay there.

12 And he said to Gehazi his servant, Call this Shunammite. And when he had called her, she stood before him.

13 And he said unto him, Say now unto her, Behold, thou hast been careful for us with all this care; what is to be done for thee? wouldest thou be spoken for to the king, or to the captain of the host? And she answered, I dwell among mine own people.

14 And he said, What then is to be done for her? And Gehazi answered, Verily she hath no child, and her husband is old.

15 And he said, Call her. And when he had called her, she stood in the door.

16 And he said, About this season, according to the time of life, thou shalt embrace a son. And she said, Nay, my lord, thou man of God, do not lie unto thine handmaid.

17 And the woman conceived, and bare a son at that season that Elisha had said unto her, according to the time of life.
OUTLINE

I. TWO NAMELESS, BUT REAL, WOMEN
   A. The Poor Woman
   B. The Rich Woman

II. THEIR CONNECTION TO ELISHA
   A. The Poor Woman’s Husband Was among the Sons of the Prophets
   B. The Rich Woman Became Acquainted with Elisha

III. THE TWO MIRACLES
   A. Miracle of the Oil
   B. Miracle of a Son

IV. THE SOURCE OF TRUE RICHES
   A. People of Spiritual Influence
   B. God’s Provision

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

It was not the best of times; it was not the worst of times. Joram, son of Ahab, was reigning over Israel. He continued in the sins of Jeroboam by worshiping golden calves and not honoring the Lord. If the people wanted a good and godly country, they would not have it by looking to their governmental leaders.

Things have not changed so much in that respect.

A “Bible school” appears to have been alive and well even in the midst of a godless administration. The school of prophets, apparently started by Elijah, seems to have continued under the leadership of Elisha. Men and women of God were learning and sharing the goodness of the Lord. In this community of those who loved the things of God contrasted against the backdrop of wickedness in high places, one could observe powerful miracles and see the hand of God in an undeniable way.

The power of the Holy One is not limited by cultural, political, or economic times. In the best of times and worst of times, God still will show Himself powerful to those who believe. An individual’s financial assets are no indication of morality or faith. Neither do personal limitations put restraints on God’s ability to work. God’s people must be careful not to become caught up in the times in which they live and get distracted from the glory of the eternal God.

Two homes in Israel, and in particular, two women, show us the radiance of the Lord no
matter how dim or bright one’s personal situation in life. Too many things in our world today are focused on money—it seems at times that everything is about money. A person could easily develop a personal view of self-worth based on net worth. Nothing could be further from the truth. These two women (unnamed in the biblical test) show us that eternal things are untouched by present financial matters. One woman had nothing; yet, through her, God revealed His abundance. Another woman seemed to have everything, yet God revealed what she lacked. As the Lord himself taught, these two women teach us that life does not consist in the ownership of things (Luke 12:15).

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Imagine two brothers in the church who are birth brothers. The older one had the management of the family business so that when their father passed away, the finances and assets were totally in the older brother’s control. The younger brother should have gotten at least half the money after all funeral expenses and court costs were paid. However, the older brother realized he had total control of their father’s assets through the business and so directed the funds toward himself alone and gave his brother none of the money.

While grieved that they had lost their father, the younger son was also perplexed now that he would not be receiving what he thought should have been rightfully his share. So he went to the pastor of the church both men attended and approached him about this frustration. Imagine his pastor turning to him and saying, “Man, who appointed me to divvy out your father’s wealth? I’m not your judge or your lawyer. Watch yourself, brother,” the pastor continued, “and hold yourself back from covetousness! A person’s life is not in the abundance of the things he owns.”

That younger brother might be quite upset at his pastor for not stepping in to help him in this situation. However, this is quite the same scenario that happened with Jesus and one of the people of God. (See Luke 12:13–15). While much is unknown about the particulars of this man’s situation, Jesus clearly stated that money and things are not a measure of personal worth. In fact, He went on to tell of a man who had high net worth—so many assets he did not know what to do with them. Sadly, this man had nothing of value after all.

The man in Jesus’ story was what we would call a success—he was living the “American Dream.” His fields produced so well, he ran out of room to store the harvest. He decided to tear down his barns and build more room for storage so he would have security to last many years. However, the Lord pointed out that what we call security is often a symptom of insecurity. Rather than taking rest, eating, drinking and being glad about our temporal advances, we need to take stock in something much greater. The man had satisfied his fears by preparing for the future—a future he soon discovered was not to be his after all. That night his life ended and all he had worked for was lost (See Luke 12:16–20). What good are earthly treasures when most of us will spend less than a century on this earth?

Rather than pursuing self-serving treasures, the child of God must see the importance of selfless treasures—those that are invested in eternal things. Modern people would look at the wealthy man and say, “He’s wise with money.” God looked at him and said, “Thou fool!” Even Robert Ingersoll, a noted atheist, said, “Few rich men own their own property. Their property owns them.” Jesus explained that individuals who live like this are fools for not being rich toward God (Luke 12:21). One must take stock of life to see that eternal investments outweigh the earthly ones.

I. TWO NAMELESS, BUT REAL, WOMEN

These two women help the reader understand what is truly valuable. While the Bible does not record their names, their stories fit in every society throughout history.

A humble country fellow watched as a neighboring piece of property became home to a wealthy man. The lavish home was built over several months until finally the day came when the wealthy family moved in. The country fellow watched as truckload after truckload arrived with the
Within the kingdom of God, there are those who have much and those who may presently have little in earthly goods.

A. The Poor Woman
This woman in II Kings 4 did not just lack earthly goods; she was in debt! Her husband has passed away, leaving her with unpaid debts and no income. While a husband and father should take more care to provide for his family even in his death, sometimes life hands down an overwhelming situation. This woman risked the loss of her two sons if she could not come up with the money. They would be taken away to work off the debt of their father.

She had something valuable, however—her faith in God. Rather than surrender to the blunt edge of the economics of her time, she turned to a power greater than wealth. She knew the true source that meets every need came from above. Although she did not know how her needs would be met, she knew she should take her troubles to the Lord.

B. The Rich Woman
Another woman in II Kings 4 came from a different stratum in life. Her husband was a good provider. She dwelt safely and had all her needs met. Instead of looking for more in life, she had learned the lesson the rich man in Jesus’ parable had not: she invested in things beyond this life. Using her financial means (and the willingness of her hardworking husband), she prioritized the things of God.

Some people can have prosperity and not let it distract them from serving the Lord. Such people have mastered the art of contentment. Individuals who seem to demand more, while complaining of flaws or deficiencies in the luxuries and privileges they already have, live sad lives indeed. Godliness with contentment is the richest life (I Timothy 6:6–8).

II. THEIR CONNECTION TO ELISHA
Elisha was a key person in many stories of II Kings. Carrying the anointing of Elijah and doing the work of ministry, Elisha helped link people to the power of the Lord. In both stories of God’s miracle provision, neither the women nor their husbands are named. The only named character in these two narratives is Elisha. Those who have faith in God and work with Him are significant and memorable. A child of God should be a catalyst to help others get what they need from the Lord.

A. The Poor Woman’s Husband Was among the Sons of the Prophets
The poor woman in Israel knew Elisha because her late husband had been a preacher, so to speak. As one of the prophets, he would have been a student of Elisha. Perhaps Elisha knew not only this prophet but his wife and children quite well. As mentor or leader to the woman’s husband, he probably felt some sense of responsibility for the family. Traveling as he did, he most likely did not have many resources of his own to pay her bills. But that would not keep him from taking care of a widow. True religion cares for the fatherless and widows.

When she approached the man of God, she referred to her husband as servant to Elisha. Just as Elisha had poured water on the hands of Elijah, this man had served God’s man too. She reminded Elisha that the deceased was loyal to the Lord and honored Him with his life. Likely this was an untimely death, for the man surely would not have wanted to leave his wife with a burden of debt. The crisis of the moment was the woman’s fear of losing her two sons to the creditors. It would destroy this woman to lose her husband and sons within a short time of each other.

Clearly the man of God did not have financial means to help her for he asked, “What shall I do for thee? tell me, what hast thou in the house?” (II Kings 4:2). Similar to Peter’s
“Silver and gold have I none,” Elijah followed his statement with hope for what God would do. Peter’s “such as I have give I thee” echoes in a small way Elisha’s “What hast thou in the house?” Such as she had, God was going to use.

Unfortunately, she did not have much available. “I do not have anything in the house,” she said, “except for a pot of oil.” God works even with little. Just a boy’s lunch fed thousands of people.

Elisha told her to go gather as many empty vessels from her neighbors as possible. “Don’t borrow just a few,” he said. Faith does not limit God’s working but gives Him ample room to work. The more emptiness, the more God can fill. Once she had filled her house with empty vessels, she was to close the door and watch God go to work.

B. The Rich Woman Became Acquainted with Elisha

A rich woman who lived in Shunem noticed that Elisha frequently passed by that way. One day as he traveled through the area, she invited him to eat with her and her husband. Apparently, after they had eaten, the couple invited Elisha to stop at their home for a meal whenever he came through town. After that first meal, Elisha stopped to eat with them frequently.

Eventually, the thought came to the woman that it would be nice to provide Elisha a place to stay as well, so he could have a rest stop. She asked her husband to make him a room on the wall with a bed, a desk, and a chair. They furnished it with a bed, a table, a stool and a candlestick.

In a time when Joram, the godless descendant of Omri, led the country in worshiping false gods, this family had staked a claim for the one true God and His servant. Elisha made good use of the room, and that home became a frequent stopping point. One day, his musings led him to ask what might be done for the woman. When asked, she said, “I dwell in safety with my own people,” as if to say, “I have need of nothing. I have everything I could want.” What a contrast to the poor woman who was in desperate need for her family. Yet, even in this home there was room for God to work a miracle.

III. THE TWO MIRACLES

Only one treasure—besides God—is necessary for a miracle: faith. God does not do impossible things only for those with money. Since God does not need our money or material goods, He is not impressed no matter how much or how little we have. God works miracles because it is His nature to do so.

A. Miracle of the Oil

The indebted widow did not have much left of value, but God was able to use the little she did have to do a lot. Following the prophet’s instructions, she collected all sorts and sizes of empty containers from her neighbors. Then she and her sons shut the door and went to work.

God multiplied the oil she had as she poured it out in faith. Once it started pouring, the flow of oil would not stop. The Hebrew grammar indicates this was like a constant fountain of oil flowing from that little container much like the water from Horeb. Her sons grabbed vessel after vessel to catch the spurting product. Soon every container was brimming with the miracle oil. The oil stopped flowing when she stopped pouring.

Running to the man of God, she told him how God had abundantly supplied. He instructed her to go sell this Grade A, cold-pressed, extra-virgin olive oil for top money. This would give her more than enough to pay off her husband’s debts and to amply provide for her and the children.

God wants to pour into believers’ lives today. His blessings will be in accordance to our faith. His provision will exceed our needs.

B. Miracle of a Son

The rich woman was not in need—at least so it seemed. She had all a woman could want: a strong man who provided for her, a nice home, a safe city, and a peaceful life among her kinfolk. However, the prophet probed until he found that even this well-to-do woman was in need. She had no son and her husband was old.

The prophet spoke hope into her life, “You will have a son about this time next year.” The Shunamite was not ready to hear that. “No, sir, man of God! Do not deceive me!” (See II Kings 4:16.)
However, God’s promise did come true. She conceived and bore a son just as promised. God provides not only necessities but also needs on a different level. Strong friendships, wisdom, and many other things are within the realm of what God likes to do for His people. He even likes giving us our wants—especially for those who serve Him with no ulterior motive.

While a child might not be considered a need in some contexts, children are truly riches from God.

Many years ago, missionaries in China faced being deported from the country during the war. Soldiers told them they could take only two hundred pounds with them on their way out of the country. Parents and children argued about what they would take. Many valuable items had to be left behind because they were too heavy. Finally, after many heated discussions, the family agreed on which of this world’s goods they would take with them.

The day came to be deported, and the soldiers examined their belongings to see if they had complied by packing only two hundred pounds. Then the military men looked at the missionaries and asked, “The children, how much do they weigh?” When choosing between stuff and family members, the balances tipped drastically. Belonging to family is a wealth far greater than any replaceable belongings.

IV. THE SOURCE OF TRUE RICHES

While it is beneficial to look at how one’s life parallels the experiences of either or both of these women in Israel, one should also seek to find oneself in the role of Elisha. Elisha both received care from the well-to-do woman when he was in need and administered care when the widow was in need. Paul said, “I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need” (Philippians 4:12). Of course none of us want to suffer, but we must be ready to live as did the great apostle, learning to be content in whatever state we find ourselves.

A. People of Spiritual Influence

Elisha was a positive—even a transformational—influence on others spiritually. All of God’s children are called to be positive influences in some way. To those who have stumbled, we should reach out in love with hearts of restoration. To those who are grieving, we should be the shoulder upon which they can weep. To those facing challenges, we should be the prayer support they need. Those who are ill should have those they can call upon who will anoint them with oil and pray the prayer of faith.

Members of the body of Christ minister to one another physically as well as spiritually. The Book of Acts church manifested the Spirit not only in speaking with tongues but also in giving to one another. Sharing and caring should characterize the family of faith. The church can provide the encouragement and strength needed for elderly folks who cannot make repairs or meet their own needs as they used to. While children are directly responsible for their aging parents, the church can take up this responsibility for those who have no one. Single mothers and widows also should find the church to be a place that offsets the imbalances caused by their precarious situation.

While looking at the people and events surrounding these two stories, it is also important to notice the larger picture. The widow’s miracle came because she was connected with someone who walked with God. The well-to-do woman’s need was met because she was connected with someone who walked with God. The prophet’s needs were met because he was connected with someone who loved the Lord and put Him first. Relationships are a greater wealth than money. Knowing the right people and having right relationships with the people you know is worth far more than any bank can hold.

As Elisha ministered to the two women, people of God can minister to those in need, both spiritually and materially. Life is made up of relationships with God and people, not things. Those with family and friends are the wealthiest of all people.
If the greatest wealth is relationships, then the greatest poverty is a lack thereof. First a person needs a relationship—a living interaction—with the Lord. Second, one must develop meaningful relationships with those people who can best influence them for righteousness. Third, saints of God must reach out toward those whom they can influence in matters of the faith.

B. God’s Provision
The people of God do not only balance their ledger sheets from a materialistic perspective, but they also learn the value of true riches. A relationship with the Lord is necessary to obtain true riches. More than getting out of debt or having family, we must put Jesus first. He is the answer to the brokenness and the emptiness that plagues a hopeless world.

There can be no relationship without revelation. To say an individual has a relationship with someone is to say the individual knows things about the other person that others may not know. Fans do not have a relationship with celebrities; what they know is public knowledge. A wife has a relationship with her husband that others do not have. When it comes to having a relationship with Lord, we must know Him deeply.

A deep relationship with the Lord comes as He reveals Himself through the study of Scripture. He opens our eyes during times of prayer in the Spirit. To be truly wealthy, we must have a wealth of intimacy with the Lord. Prayer, fasting, and giving are avenues of self-abasement. If we want treasures in Heaven, we must give ourselves wholly to the Lord and also give of ourselves to others.

Often, God gives to others through those who are rich in relationship with Him. The core of Jesus’ discipleship training was the concept of generosity—giving away what you have. One cannot claim to be in right relationship with the Lord and not willingly give to Him by way of His church and to others who are in need.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE
Poverty cannot take away true riches. Economic collapses do not affect true riches. True wealth cannot be destroyed by rust or by moths. Thieves cannot take away what really matters. Many Christians swear allegiance to those sentiments but live quite the opposite. Their hopes and emotions are tied up in their retirement accounts or the condition of their many possessions.

Jesus condemned the man who hoarded his treasures while not giving to others or helping those in need. All the sinful man did was pile up wealth for himself to create a sense of security. An accountant might approve of how well he kept his books. The ironic part of the story was that when the Lord came to call his soul, all his “wise” preparation became useless.

Leo Tolstoy told of a man who hurriedly agreed to a deal to pay one price to own as much land as he could cover in one day. The man agreed to the landowner’s deal and took off in quick strides. Soon he realized that if he ran the whole way, he could get more land than if he just walked. Then he figured if he ran a little farther, he could even get more land. By midday, he realized he had covered many miles which he would have to encircle to get back to his starting point by nightfall.

Greed drove him to square off as many acres as his aching legs would carry him. The sun approached the horizon, and he still had a long way to go. Giving all he had, he ran desperately—not having taken food or drink all day. Just as the last rays of light faded from view, he stumbled back to the starting place where the seller waited for him. He stumbled and sprawled on the ground, dead as a stone. The seller measured where he fell: six feet by two feet was all the ground he could cover. That was all the real estate needed to bury him.
Jesus warns us, His disciples, not to be worried about life—not about food, clothes, or other necessities. Life is much more than even what we call the basics. We should instead be ever seeking the kingdom of God (Luke 12:22–32). The way to lay up treasure that will be tax sheltered and safe from deflation, recession, or army invasion is to give it away (Luke 12:33). Then it will become an eternal investment. Richard Foster said, “Giving with a glad and generous heart has a way of routing out the tough old miser within us. Even the poor need to know that they can give. Just the very act of letting go of money or some other treasure does something within us. That something it destroys is the demon greed.”

The eternal God has invested Himself in a relationship with His people. When we invest in others (the church, widows, orphans, and so forth), we store up eternal treasure within the safe-keeping of our God. Many financial planners will not advise people to put Heaven in their portfolios, but it is the best—if not the only—financial advice Jesus gave. “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Luke 12:34). ■

**REFLECTIONS**

- What are some ways you have learned to invest in what lasts forever?
- If you had your younger years to live over again, how would you handle money differently?
- How have you seen a desire for things destroy a family?
- What are some strong friendships you have forged with people who love the Lord?
- How is your relationship with the Lord more valuable to you than any amount of money or anything you could own?
FOCUS VERSE

Ruth 4:14
And the women said unto Naomi, Blessed be the Lord, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel.

LESSON TEXT

Ruth 1:1–9, 14–17
1 Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Beth-lehem-judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons.
2 And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Beth-lehem-judah. And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there.
3 And Elimelech Naomi’s husband died; and she was left, and her two sons.
4 And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelled there about ten years.
5 And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband.
6 Then she arose with her daughters in law, that she might return from the country of Moab: for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread.
7 Wherefore she went forth out of the place where she was, and her two daughters in law with her; and they went on the way to return unto the land of Judah.
8 And Naomi said unto her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother’s house: the Lord deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.
9 The Lord grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept.

14 And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her.
15 And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law.
16 And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God:
17 Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.

FOCUS THOUGHT

Recovery from suffering is achieved through right choices.
A Great Misconception

One of the great misconceptions of Christian living is that the righteous are spared from suffering. Many people are like Job’s comforters who assumed his suffering was caused by sin. The Bible has too many examples to show that assumption is false. For example, consider the disciples. Twice they suffered great fear as they were caught in fierce storms on the Sea of Galilee. During the first storm, Jesus was asleep in the boat. They awoke Him and He commanded the winds to cease. The disciples marveled and asked “What manner of man is this?”

During the second storm, the disciples feared for their lives but saw Jesus walking on the water. The disciples were on the sea simply because Jesus had commanded them to go to the other side. He did not send them to the other side to destroy them but to teach them and give them new revelation of His might and power. Their suffering had a purpose.

Job never understood why he endured so much pain. God did not tell him. Warren Wiersbe said, “God does not have to explain His ways to us. It is enough for us to know that He cares and that He never make a mistake. We do not live by explanations; we live by promises.” God used Job’s suffering to shut the mouth of Satan.

Are you willing to trust God through your suffering? It will work for your good if you let it. (See Romans 8:28.)

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

We live in a hurting world. Suffering is all around us. Consider the following information.

Human trafficking, or “modern-day slavery,” affects over twenty million people worldwide each year. Human trafficking victims are often forced, through sexual, physical, and/or psychological violence, to perform work under slavery-like conditions.


Child abuse is rampant. On average, more than five children die each day as a result of child abuse or neglect in the United States. Over 6.2 million incidents of child abuse and neglect are reported each year (joyfulheartfoundation.org/learn/child-abuse-and-neglect, accessed June 10, 2016).

Hunger stalks the world. Seven hundred ninety-five million undernourished people exist on planet Earth. According to the World Food Programme website, “one in nine people do not get enough food to be healthy and lead an active life. Hunger and malnutrition are in fact the number one risk to health worldwide—greater than AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis combined” (wfp.org/hunger, accessed June 10, 2016).

Spiritual hunger and pain is ignored by most people as the world becomes more secular. Instead of turning to Jesus Christ and experiencing the joy and peace He gives, people turn to drugs, illicit sex, and all forms of worldly pleasure to fulfill their cravings. But only Jesus can satisfy their souls.

Does the Bible have any solutions to the suffering in the world? What advice could we give to the hurting, the victimized, the unwanted, the ill, or the ones dying without Christ? Does the Bible offer any practical solutions? Usually when suffering is discussed in a biblical setting, Job becomes the center of
attention. However, today let us consider two others who suffered: Naomi and Ruth. These two women did not have physical pain as that caused by Job’s boils, but they experienced great loss that brought sorrow and suffering. Their plight was the result of decisions—some good and some bad. Taking license with the text and filling in some of the holes in the biblical narrative, their story went something like this.

I. THE DECISION TO RELOCATE

The land of Judah was suffering prolonged, severe famine. Elimelech’s fields no longer produced grain. His cows had stopped giving milk. His sheep were starving because the pasture was parched and brittle. The creek that ran beside their humble home was dry. Elimelech saw the pain in Naomi’s eyes and heard the hungry cries of his two young sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Bethlehem, the “house of bread,” no longer provided for his family. Desperate to ease the suffering of his family, Elimelech sought a solution to their dilemma.

Pagan Moab had lush fields. It lay just beyond the southern section of the Jordan River and the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. The limestone hills that formed the plateau were generally steep but fertile. Grass covered the hills in the spring and the tableland produced abundant grain. Rainfall was fairly plentiful. Although the summers were hot, Moab was cooler than Judah to the west. During the Moabite winter and spring, snow often fell adding to the water supply.

Moab attracted Elimelech. It seemed logical to move there. Yes, it would mean leaving family and friends in Bethlehem-judah for a while. However, Moab was not that far. Once they got back on their feet, they would visit their aged parents and see friends again. By that time, blessings might be falling again and they would move back.

While it was true Moabites sacrificed their children to the god Chemosh, Elimelech and Naomi were strong in their worship of Jehovah. They had taught the Ten Commandments of Moses to Mahlon and Chilion. The boys were young but old enough to know “Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one!” Elimelech was certain his sons would never bow to the heathen god.

The boys were excited when Elimelech broke the news of the move to them. Naomi questioned the wisdom of moving to a pagan land, but she knew better than to oppose her husband. Instead, she rallied the boys and called her neighbors to help her pack. Soon the cart was loaded, and they said tearful good-byes to family and friends.

Time passed. The strange customs of Moab became all too familiar to Elimelech and his family. Their new home was comfortable even though it was not overly spacious. Their neighbors were pleasant in spite of pressuring Elimelech to worship Chemosh instead of a god no one could see. The new fields produced healthy harvests although not as robust as Elimelech had hoped.

As the boys grew into hardy young men, Elimelech depended more and more on them to reap the grain. Naomi noticed that her husband was frequently short of breath and sometimes seemed pale. He assured her nothing was wrong. One day as Elimelech was harvesting grain, he became overcome by the sun. By the time Mahlon found him, he was dead.

As the firstborn son, Mahlon shouldered the responsibility of the family. He did not have his father’s farming knowledge, so he turned to his neighbors for advice. As they worked together, he became more and more comfortable in their presence. The oldest neighbor had a young granddaughter who caught Mahlon’s eye. Before the year was out, he asked for Ruth’s hand in marriage. In due time, Chilion married Orpah.

The marriages brought heartache to Naomi. She wished her boys had married Israelite girls from Judah. She grieved when the women continued going to the heathen temple. She tried to teach them the ways of Jehovah, and she wondered if she was making any impact.

For ten years the hot sun beat down on the young men. They struggled to provide for their wives and mother. One day Chilion, who had never been as strong as his brother, suffered a heat stroke and died in the field. Mahlon then doubled his efforts to provide for his mother, wife, and sister-in-law. He apprenticed himself to a potter and longed to buy his own shop. Exhaustion was his constant companion. One evening after working all day in
the fields, he had a heart attack and died at his potter’s wheel while working on a project for a customer.

Naomi was now bereft of her husband and her two sons. The responsibility she felt to care for her two daughters-in-law compounded her suffering.

The decision to move to Moab had seemed logical so many years ago. Life seemed easier for them at first. How she grieved for her husband! He was a good man. But she wished they had stayed in Judah and waited out the famine. Her boys continued to worship Jehovah, but she sensed an ambivalence after they married Moabite women. Now her sons were gone, and she was left with two daughters-in-law who were more pagan than worshipers of Jehovah.

Elimelech’s decision resulted more in heartache than in joy. Unfortunately, this statement can be applied to many decisions Apostolics make in the twenty-first century. A job offer in a distant city may be attractive, but it is probably not a wise move if the city has no apostolic church.

A young man may be physically appealing, witty, charismatic, brilliant, and have a good job, but accepting his proposal is probably not wise if his consecration is less than his charm.

Such decisions have life-long consequences. It behooves us to choose wisely and to teach our children to choose wisely.

II. DECISION TO RETURN HOME

Naomi had moved to Moab as a young mother with two young boys and a faithful husband. Now she was a middle-aged widow with no one to support her and with no means of caring for herself and her daughters-in-law. She was destitute. The money from the sale of the fields was almost gone.

Desperate circumstances forced Naomi to make a decision. As she saw it, she had only two options: (1) She could remain in Moab and be at the mercy of people who had never really accepted her and who shunned the daughters-in-laws for marrying foreigners, or (2) she could return to Judah and trust Jehovah to provide a kinsman or loving neighbor who would look after her.

In writing to the church in Galatia, Paul stated, “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). Poor choices usually lead to pain and suffering. Recovery begins when we face the reality of life’s situation and admit that our misdeeds led us to this point. Taking the blame for one’s actions and repenting of one’s poor decisions is the second step to recovery.

However, what if the situation we face is not of our own making? What if a spouse has found someone else and wants a divorce? What if we, or a loved one, are facing terminal disease? What if the stock market has crashed and the value of our investments has plunged? What if a son announces that she is now transgender? What if friends, like David’s, have turned against us and seek our destruction? (See Psalm 41:9.)

Is there a solution to such dire situations? Is there an end to the emotional, physical, and financial suffering?

The third step on the road to recovery is trusting God and praising Him. Solomon said, “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Proverbs 3:5–6).

Claim the promise of Romans 8:28. The verse implicitly declares that God can use the most desperate situations for our good if we will allow Him by trusting Him. Joseph found this to be true, for he told his brothers, “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive” (Genesis 50:20). If we believe that God can take our despair, agony, and frustration and use it for our good, then we will find strength to praise Him. When we praise Him, we release the power of Heaven to work on our behalf. (See Psalm 68:1–4.)

Naomi decided to return to Judah. She put her faith in Jehovah to provide for her. Even though her future was unknown, her choice to return to Bethlehem began her upward path to recovery.

III. MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICES

A. Choosing What Is Right, Not What Is Easy

Some suffering could be avoided if an individual always made the right choices, but choosing what is right is not always easy.
Right choices often involve personal sacrifice for others’ benefit. Right choices bless and lift, inspire and direct, give hope and strength.

Naomi’s choice to return to her homeland was costly for her. She would leave behind her home, the graves of her husband and two sons, and her two daughters-in-law. She did not expect Ruth or Orpah to go with her. They still had family members in Moab; they could return to their mothers’ homes. They were still young enough to marry and have a family.

The thoughts of leaving Moab, her family, her gods, and the hope of finding a new husband were too much for Orpah to consider. She went back to her people. On the other hand, Ruth vowed to go wherever Naomi went, to dwell wherever she lived, to choose the Israelites as her own people, and conscientiously to reject the gods of Moab and worship Jehovah. Though what she was giving up may have pained her, because Ruth loved Naomi she knew she had made the right choice.

B. Resources for Recovery

Recovery is built on hope, righteousness, people, principles, hard decisions, and work. These are resources for renewal. Dependence on and attachment to other people are important to recovery. Naomi and Ruth worked together, each drawing from the other. Naomi was familiar with the customs of the land and had the wisdom of experience. Ruth was younger and had the strength to glean the fields to provide sustenance for them.

Naomi’s arrival in Bethlehem was met with unexpected acceptance. Although the house Elimelech had built needed repair, neighbors rallied around. The men rebuilt the roof while the women cleaned. Soon her house was livable again. Surely God had gone before her to prepare the way. Naomi and Ruth lived close to relatives, kept the customs of the Law, and waited patiently for God’s will to unfold. The bitterness that froze Naomi’s soul in Moab melted away as she watched God work miracle after miracle for her and Ruth.

C. Beyond Recovery

The Law required that the poor be allowed to glean the grain that the reapers left in the fields. To help support her mother-in-law and herself, Ruth went to glean. Her choice of fields was guided by God. She chose to work in the field belonging to a relative of Elimelech—Boaz, a wealthy landowner.

Boaz was smitten with Ruth and ordered his workers to leave extra grain in the field for her to glean. Boaz said to Ruth, “Hearest thou not, my daughter? Go not to glean in another field, neither go from hence, but abide here fast by my maidens” (Ruth 2:8). He explained, “It hath fully been shewed me, all that thou hast done unto thy mother in law since the death of thine husband: and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity, and art come unto a people which thou knewest not heretofore. The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust” (Ruth 2:11–12).

When Ruth made it clear that she wanted Boaz’s protection as a kinsman-redeemer (Ruth 3), he went before the city elders and conferred with the relative that was closer to Elimelech than he. That relative would not redeem Elimelech’s fields and marry Ruth, because to do so would endanger his own inheritance. Following custom, he took off his shoe and gave it to Boaz, signaling he had given up his right as the kinsman-redeemer. Therefore, Boaz was at liberty to buy the fields of Elimelech and to take Ruth as his bride (Ruth 4).

Without a doubt, Ruth’s choice of the place to glean was a key to her future happiness. Providentially, God had guided her. Boaz, a near kinsman, redeemed her. God supplied much more than Naomi or Ruth had ever dreamed of receiving. He turned their mourning into dancing.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The story of Naomi and Ruth occurred over three thousand years ago. What lessons can we learn from it?

We reap what we sow. An immutable fact of life is the law of sowing and reaping. In his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul stated this law: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). We sow seed by the decisions we make. Wise decisions yield blessings. Bad decisions produce heartache, pain, and sorrow.
The world is filled with suffering. Famine often results because of drought, but sometimes poor farming practices lead to crop failure. Political differences lead to war and indiscriminate mass killings, but sometimes domestic strife leads to murder. Epidemics, such as the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, spread wholesale death; but sometimes death is the result of a drug overdose or of someone firing a gun in a fit of anger. Some suffering is simply a part of the circle of life; other times the anguish and sorrow could have been avoided if other decisions had been made.

Because we reap what we sow, it is vitally important to walk in the Spirit and to follow the Lord’s leading. We need to guard our thought lives, for thoughts become actions. Paul said, “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” (Philippians 4:8).

Because we can plant good seeds, Peter advised: “Add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (II Peter 1:5–8).

While the law of sowing and reaping may sound threatening to some, it is a joyful promise that if we sow good seed, we will reap a harvest of manifold blessings. God can turn our suffering into blessing. God can turn our mistakes into blessings. As mentioned earlier, Paul wrote in Romans 8:28 that all things can work for the good of those who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose. Some people misquote this verse and state that all things are good. The Bible does not say that. A big difference exists between “all things are good” and “all things can work for a person’s good.” God is able to take the negative things in life—even our sinful mistakes—and turn them into something beneficial and edifying.

A wise woman has said that God never wastes experiences. Living with chronic pain for nearly forty years and being near death several times has made her compassionate and sympathetic to others suffering serious illness. Her familiarity with life’s ups and downs as a wife, parent, missionary, and certified teacher has given her wisdom and understanding to help her neighbors and members of her church. Dealing with physical challenges has given her an inner strength and resolve that many say is miraculous. While many would say life has not been fair to her, and she has suffered much more than any person should have to suffer, she has allowed God to take the bad things in her life and to use them for her good and through her, to bless others.

Years ago, missionary Martha Dobyns told a story that has changed some people’s perspective on life and suffering. As one individual remembers the story, a lady in Fiji had crossed the mountains to attend a service on the other side of this Pacific paradise. As she was worshiping, enjoying the presence of God, a policeman came to the church looking for her. He said, “Ma’am, I’m sorry, but I have bad news for you. Disaster has struck the other side of the island, and everything you own has been destroyed. Worse, your only daughter was killed, and your husband is in the hospital, not expected to live.”

She looked at him again and, with tears flowing, repeated, “I heard you, sir. But that is a good idea.”

As the years have passed, one minister and his wife who heard this story and who have had challenges to face have often looked at
situations and—sometimes through tears—said, “That’s a good idea, Lord.”

*Don’t be hasty to judge the situation.* It would be easy to judge Elimelech and criticize him for moving his family to Moab. Was he right? Should he have waited in Judah for a miracle? Right or wrong, Elimelech did what he thought was best for his family. Would he and his sons have survived had they stayed in Bethlehem? We do not know. We simply know what the Bible says: Elimelech moved his family to Moab to avoid the famine in Judah. He and his sons died in Moab, leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law destitute.

We also know how the story ended: Naomi moved back to Bethlehem with Ruth. Ruth married Boaz, a wealthy near kinsman to Elimelech, and became the great grandmother of David. Did God orchestrate Elimelech’s move to Moab so Ruth would be an ancestor of Jesus Christ?

Two things in Scripture are perhaps puzzling to some. One is Judges 14:4: “But his father and his mother knew not that it was of the Lord, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines.” How could it be God’s will for Samson to marry a Philistine? The other is God’s telling Hosea to marry a harlot to demonstrate the actions of the rebellious Israelites. In our minds, these two things do not harmonize with a holy, righteous God. Had we been asked, we probably would have advised Samson and Hosea to flee such sinful women. But God had plans only He could understand.

Often we find ourselves in uncomfortable situations and think we are out of the will of God. Sometimes these circumstances can be extremely frightening and painful. However, it could be possible that God is getting us into position for spiritual growth. Twice in obedience to the word of Jesus, the disciples found themselves on the Sea of Galilee in a fierce storm. Jesus used the storms to teach the Twelve about His deity.

For years farmers were taught that the milkweed plant was a weed that needed to be eliminated. Now St. Louis and other communities are planting milkweed to attract Monarch butterflies, whose population is declining. God knew all along the value of the plant. And God knows the value of trials and troubles that He allows to come our way to refine us, to purify us, and to make us better equipped to serve Him and to reach our world.

**REFLECTIONS**

- Did Elimelech move his family to Moab in the will of God? Explain how you came to this conclusion.
- Is all suffering the result of sin or bad decisions? Upon what do you base this answer?
- What is the importance of Ruth being in the genealogy of Jesus?
- How is Boaz a type of Christ?
- How has suffering proven beneficial to you?
- Have you found yourself in difficult circumstances while obeying the will of God? If so, what was the outcome?
The image contains a page from a religious study guide titled "Better Choices: Mary and Martha," focusing on the biblical texts of Hebrews 6:10 and Luke 10:38–42. The lesson emphasizes the importance of discerning between what is needed and what is best at a given moment. The excerpt from Luke 10:38–42 describes a scene where Jesus visits Martha and her sister Mary, highlighting the contrast between Martha's busy service and Mary's focused attentiveness to Jesus' teachings.
Choosing the Better

Working to reach souls in Brazil, Janice Alvear has put aside many important things to embrace that better thing the Lord has asked of her. In the book *Step Up!* by Julie Jasinski, Missionary Alvear explained what it has meant to choose God’s plan for her life:

“It has meant being challenged by witch doctors and priests, being threatened by bandits, standing before cannibal Indians, working in a leper colony as well as speaking in public schools and universities of Brazil.

“It meant going into places where male preachers had never been allowed but some condemned me for being willing to go. I had to wade across alligator-infested streams to

reach and baptize new converts. Being a missionary meant mixing mortar and laying bricks to build new churches. It meant performing weddings, burying the dead, and sometimes delivering babies.

“It meant teaching new converts and preparing people for the ministry. It meant seeing a work be born and grow into maturity. It meant hours of radio programs.

“It meant sitting in the conventions in the homeland and listening to men who made cutting remarks about women in the ministry.

In the decisions of life, individuals must choose that better part the Lord requires of them.

OUTLINE

I. THE NECESSARY AND THE OPTIMUM
   A. The Physical Life
   B. The Spiritual World
   C. The Continuing Process of Choices
II. THE NEED FOR BALANCE
   A. The Balance between the Physical and the Spiritual
   B. The Balance between Work and Worship
III. THE ADMONITION OF JESUS
   A. Jesus Loved Both Mary and Martha
   B. Jesus Reprimanded Martha for Her Worry and Anxiety
   C. Jesus Commended Mary’s Choice
IV. THE TOLERANCE FOR DIFFERENCES
   A. Believers Have Different Gifts and Callings
   B. Believers Should Be Unified as One Body of Christ

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Buying an expensive set of china dinnerware, having a new home built, hiring a professional band for a wedding—at times even the most frugal people may do extravagant things. We tend to justify our own extravagances while perhaps condemning those of others. One person may buy the latest fashion in clothes, another may purchase a new car, or still another may install an inground swimming pool. We humans tend to be biased about what we should splurge on and where we should scrimp. The foodie who thinks he has not eaten unless the food was a gourmet meal might scoff at the person who pays sticker price for a vehicle. The imbalance does not stop with material things.

In the kingdom of God, people can be extravagant with their time, prayers, and resources. One person may invest abundant energy and money into a children’s program but may be irritated by the teens who only want to sing in the choir and not do much else. One church member may think the pastor should spend more time visiting people in their homes and hospitals while another may think he should spend more time studying and preaching—even adding more services per week. The janitor may get frustrated when he wants to tidy up the church but people are lingering in prayer. On the other hand, a prayer warrior may frown at the janitor’s focus.
on earthly things and think the janitor does not spend enough time in prayer.

While we should appreciate each other’s strengths, a bigger battle might be within ourselves. We have to settle on what priorities will consume our time, money, and attention. We know Jesus said to seek first the Kingdom, but there are so many avenues of Kingdom involvement that we must learn the hierarchy of Kingdom values. Do we wait until some urgent need comes along? Do we wait for opportunities to present themselves? What if two opportunities are available? What if an individual has to choose between a special church service on Friday night or a birthday party for someone who could be won to the Lord? How does one decide which is the best way to put the kingdom of God first?

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

We can see a clash of values between two sisters in Luke 10:38–42. Jesus entered the town of Bethany to visit Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The three were devoted to Jesus; they were His disciples and His friends. In this particular instance, Martha was busy in the kitchen and got upset that Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to Him instead of helping her prepare the meal. Clearly, there was some rivalry between these siblings.

Is it better to bask in Jesus’ presence or to mow the church lawn? Should one spend an evening in prayer or at a soup kitchen? One person spends time cleaning her house and tending to the needs of her children; another spends time in prayer, Bible study, and going to church meetings. Which one is more spiritual?

The point is not that one option must be chosen to the exclusion of all others. The important thing is to choose the better part at the proper time. Learning the how and when of priorities is the key.

I. THE NECESSARY AND THE OPTIMUM

Unlike clear-cut moral issues, the physical-spiritual differences overlap in many ways. It is imperative that people take care of their physical needs. They have to eat and sleep. Unless they are retired or incapacitated, they need to work. They have to do mundane chores such as cleaning out the refrigerator and washing clothes. They have to take out the trash. But they also need to maintain a friendship with Jesus Christ. Taking time for prayer, Bible reading, and church attendance is important to that relationship. Finding the proper balance between physical and spiritual needs is the challenge.

A. The Physical Life

God made the physical world, calling it good. Cooking, cleaning, working, traveling, eating, sleeping, and a host of other physical things come to us by divine design. A responsible person takes care of physical needs. Individuals cannot be so spiritual they no longer have to manage their money or put their clothes in the hamper. Spirituality does not eclipse the physical realm; it enhances it.

Jesus Christ was perfection in the flesh. He was physical. He came as a baby who dominated his mother’s waking hours (and sleeping hours). In the boat on a stormy lake, His disciples found Him not praying but sleeping. (See Luke 8:22–24.)

Some people become so spiritually focused they can feel guilty about enjoying a family feast or taking a Sunday afternoon nap. Jesus feasted as well as fasted. Jesus slept soundly at times and stayed up all night praying at others. The key is not isolating one from the other but keeping both in the proper perspective. Rather than being exclusive, the physical and spiritual are both necessary and appropriate.

B. The Spiritual World

Unlike animals, humans are spiritual and we have an eternal destiny. This sets our priorities.

We must emphasize the importance of the spiritual in all we do. Paul prayed for the believers in Ephesus that the Spirit of God would make them stronger in the inner person (Ephesians 3:16). We should pray the same for those we are reaching for the Lord. We do want to see people advance financially and have better health, but our most important prayer is that they would grow spiritually.

We should pray for others with the same desires John had for his converts: “I wish
above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (III John 2). First, he made sure the inner person was prospering by teaching them the things of the Kingdom. Second, he wished for their physical abundance and blessing.

Peter also helped to put the physical and spiritual in balance. He told wives they need not put their focus and finances into drawing attention to the physical body. Instead, I Peter 3:4 says to develop the hidden person “of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.”

Jesus told us not to be stressed about physical things. He will take care of the physical when we focus on the spiritual: “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33).

C. The Continuing Process of Choices

Two challenges face humanity: balanced choices and consistency with decisions. Not only must we learn to balance the values and priorities in our lives, but we also must periodically reexamine ourselves to be sure we are staying consistent with what we found to be the right choice.

While we stay vigilant to choose good instead of evil, we must also consistently choose what is better rather than just what is good. Good is the enemy of what is best. The battle between good or better often arrives in the form of now or later. A teacher once set a marshmallow on each of the desks of her young school children. She told them that if they waited until the end of the class, they would get two marshmallows. If they ate the one in front of them, that was all they would get. Out of thirty-two marshmallows, only one remained by the end of the hour.

One area where the now-or-later decision is faced is in the timing of marriage: an individual finds the right potential spouse yet must discern whether it is better to marry soon or delay.

Both breakfast and prayer are good disciplines. When we awaken, which one should we choose first, putting off the other until later?

When weighing good versus better, we might determine that we could do more for the Kingdom by ministering to the poor of Indonesia than by leading a children’s choir in our home church. However, if the opportunity for ministry abroad has not presented itself, it would be better to invest in the opportunity at hand now. If our calling and desire to serve overseas is more important in the long run, we should prepare ourselves in the meantime.

Decisions in life are often more of an art than a science. The essential ingredients of wise provision, sensitivity, balance, timing, and appropriateness all aid astute Christian living. We must prayerfully examine our opportunities and challenges to see what is good, better, and best for the moment and the long-term. Spiritual matters always take priority over non-spiritual matters, and eternal matters take precedence over temporal matters.

II. THE NEED FOR BALANCE

Mary was criticized for her devotion to the Lord on more than one occasion. A few days before the Passover, Jesus and His disciples visited the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. While the others were eating, Mary came in and began to anoint Jesus’ feet with costly ointment. (See John 12:1–3.)

Judas Iscariot criticized her actions. He said, “That perfume was worth a year’s wages. It should have been sold and the money given to the poor” (John 12:5, NLT).

But Jesus defended Mary. “Leave her alone,” He said. “She did this in preparation for my burial” (John 12:7, NLT).

Mary’s actions exhibited extravagant worship. Some religious people feel it is more important to feed and clothe the poor than to give toward Kingdom matters. Those who think charity is more important than tithes and offerings may be of the spirit of Judas. He was a thief and did not care about the poor—he just used such opportunities to benefit himself (John 12:6). Pride causes one Christian to criticize another. We must all serve the Lord with abandon.

While Jesus taught us to care for those less fortunate, He told Judas, “The poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always” (John 12:8). Believers today might get caught up with mowing lawns and scrubbing church windows and forget to focus on the Lord.
Working for Him and serving others does not substitute for a close relationship with Him.

A. The Balance between the Physical and the Spiritual

When Mary gave to the Lord, her gift could be given only once. We can give money. We can give time. We can give years of our lives to a career or other consuming focus. Will we give our time to self-amusement or to lingering in the presence of the Lord? Will we intercede in prayer, or will we distract ourselves from our burdens by pursuing some natural diversion? Mary made the right choice. Again.

Daily, perhaps even hourly, we face decisions between the mundane and the sacred. When forced to choose between the two, will we choose that good part? When faced with the opportunity to pray or to play, which will we choose? When the needs of Jesus are before us, will we tend to them or let something else distract our focus?

When we know what values arrange our priorities, our decisions are not so hard. The highly skilled dentist who does not pay his taxes soon sees his office shut down. The doctor with a successful method of eliminating cancer who does not insure her business may have to close the doors. One must take care to establish priorities and balance the demands of the physical and the spiritual in order to have health, happiness, productivity, and profitability.

B. The Balance between Work and Worship

The key to balancing two worlds is to realize that both are not mutually exclusive. Is it necessary to have to choose between the natural and the spiritual realm? What if we could have both? Perhaps we can.

Many have thought we are natural beings who contain souls. Others say we are supernatural beings having an experience in the natural. Either way we look at it, the fact remains that the natural and the spiritual coexist. In fact, it is probably rare when one has to choose between the two. Most often we need both elements working together. Once we are filled with the Spirit, we are to “glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s” (I Corinthians 6:20).

The same Spirit of the Lord that resides in our natural bodies can also indwell our natural activities. We do not have to park the car to talk to the Lord. We can pray while driving down the road. While putting together food boxes for the poor, we can sing praises to the Lord. In fact, work should be a form of worship, not an exemption from it. Yes, a believer must make time to sit at the Master’s feet—to focus only on the Lord with no other distractions. Yes, we do give generously and show abundant love toward the Lord. Yet Jesus did not see it as compromise to eat a meal, go for a walk down the road, or ride in a boat across the lake.

There need not be a battle of values for the young mother as to whether she should entertain the presence of Jesus or do menial tasks. Every menial moment can be a ministry moment. Every secular hour should be laced with the Spirit. Because the Spirit of God dwells in us, all the things we do are worship to Him and “together time” with one’s best Friend. We should not choose between being a Mary or a Martha but have both strengths. Our Mary relationship with the Lord should fuel our Martha service to Him.

III. THE ADMONITION OF JESUS

Although in the Luke 10:38–42 narrative Martha was upset that Mary sat at Jesus’ feet instead of helping her prepare the meal, Martha did sit at Jesus’ feet on other occasions. (See Luke 10:39.) To “sit at a rabbi’s feet” meant to be a disciple of that teacher. Both Mary and Martha were disciples of Jesus Christ. They both had been taught by the Lord. They both loved Him. A love for Jesus will motivate a believer to serve Him.

Martha was the older sister and seemed to be in charge of the meal preparations. She was used to Mary being her right-hand woman, but this day, Mary had left Martha in the kitchen to go to the room where Jesus was and listen to Him. When Martha complained, Jesus made it clear that Mary had made the better choice. What she was doing was unto the Lord.

Jesus reprimanded Martha, not for what she was doing, but for her attitude. She was upset and troubled. She was too worried about someone else’s business.
A. Jesus Loved Both Mary and Martha

By God’s design, human beings have different personalities, talents, and interests. The church includes such people, who make up the body of Christ. Individuals need to realize the value of those believers who are different from themselves. Those in rural areas should not despise those who serve God in metropolitan areas. City folks should not look down on country-folk believers. Those who love doing ministry inside a church building should not despise those who do street ministry. Those in the prayer room should not criticize those doing online outreach as if what they are doing is of lesser value.

Each believer must sit at Jesus’ feet. Jesus loved Martha just as He loved Mary. Martha was a behind-the-scenes type of person. Mary was the outgoing woman who led many to Christ (John 11:45). Martha was no less of a believer, however. She was the one who understood the deep things of the Lord and realized His true identity, much as Simon Peter had (John 11:27). The insightful introverts must not condemn the expressive extroverts or vice versa.

Pride, or at least self-absorption, can cause a person to want to discredit another. Martha did not realize how unbecoming her attitude was when she tried to point out Mary’s alleged faults. When we meddle in someone else’s business, we only make ourselves look bad.

B. Jesus Reprimanded Martha for Her Worry and Anxiety

Martha got it wrong on two counts. First, she let what she was doing for the Lord overwhelm her. Even Jesus did not let the work of the Kingdom crush Him. If things got too intense, often He would leave town, go out on the lake, or climb a mountain just to get away. Pastors and church workers may burn themselves out by not taking time to relax and rest. Even God rested and has invited us to rest in Him. (See Matthew 11:28.)

Martha’s other mistake was taking Mary to account for not being where Martha thought she should be. No one will have the same perspective on life, the same motivation, or the same purpose in the Kingdom. For example, it does not make a person less of a child of God for desiring to raise foster children instead of being a missionary in the Amazon jungle. While our places in the kingdom of God will vary, our heart for Him and love for each other should not waver.

C. Jesus Commended Mary’s Choice

Jesus commended Mary for her choice to sit at His feet. “One thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:42). Believers must hear the Master’s voice. If we live only for approval from our peers, we will grow disheartened quickly. If He calls us to deeper consecration and greater sacrifice, realize some will not like it. Whatever comforts we give up for Jesus, He will reward us for. This is what He taught His disciples. (See Mark 10:29–30.)

IV. THE TOLERANCE FOR DIFFERENCES

One believer should not set a stumbling block before others. (See Romans 15.) We should notice and value the differences among those in God’s kingdom. We should not make others feel any different from the way we would want to feel about our own uniqueness.

A. Believers Have Different Gifts and Callings

Jesus created differences in His people. Division is not of Christ, but distinction is. We should learn to celebrate our distinctions in skills and giftings, but we should not let pride bring division in the body. We can be in unity if we understand that “we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” (Romans 12:5). The Lord has appointed these gifting distinctions within His body. (See Romans 12:6–8.)

Careless Christians can get into conflict over the distinctions in these functional gifts. The person with the gift of mercy may be first to give someone a second chance and to say we must love even those who are struggling. The person with the teaching gift is able to strengthen a church with a clear defense of truth and a desire to see everyone live right according to God’s Word. The teacher and the merciful person might get into conflict if each one thinks his or her gift is better than the other’s. The teacher might become
too sharp or critical of those who are struggling, while the merciful person might be too tolerant and even let transgressions slide. Likewise, the servant-type person might think the leader or organizer spends too much time planning instead of working. However, each one would be less effective without the other. Strong believers realize they need each other’s givings to balance their own strengths and weaknesses.

B. Believers Should Be Unified as One Body of Christ

A child of God cannot be in unity with other members of the church if true love is not the foundation of everything. Love must be without hypocrisy—it cannot be just an act (Romans 12:9). All the Marthas and Marys must learn to “be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another” (Romans 12:10).

Born-again believers are not only members of the church but also members of one another (Romans 12:5). To the church, Jesus gave leaders who would build up the body of Christ until we all come into unity of the faith and can grow up into Christ (Ephesians 4:10–15). To love God is to love His people.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Balancing the physical and the spiritual is not as mystical and abstract as some would think. First, one must establish priorities. For example, prayer and Bible study are good, but physical exercise and proper nutrition are good too. Which is better? A scriptural example helps to bring clarity: “For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come” (I Timothy 4:8). Exercise is great—many Christians need more! However, one’s exercise routine should not eclipse one’s prayer time.

People who love Jesus also love those individuals for whom He died. If children of God are in conflict with each other, they should remember that Jesus loves the other person too. Martha let her personal agenda cause her to devalue Mary. It is good to go to the Lord with complaints and frustrations against those in the family of God rather than voicing our complaints to others. The Lord can help us to see the situation from His perspective.

Many have traveled a long time with Jesus but have forgotten to enjoy the journey. They are worried about who will fail the Lord next, why did that one leave, or why did the Lord put them in this situation so far from family. Rather than studying the jagged edge of the cliff, we should pause often to appreciate the beauty of the horizon. Look at the miracles, the transformations, and the salvations that have occurred. Look at where He brought us from. Look up, not down.

No matter what we do for the Lord, we must sit at His feet often. We sit at His feet by worshiping Him, soaking in His Word, and learning from those who know Him well.

REFLECTIONS

• When have you struggled with the frustration of church members who did not participate in something you thought they should be involved in?
• How did you feel when someone criticized you for not being involved in something that individual thought was more important than what you were doing?
• When have you suffered criticism for doing something you felt was extravagant worship yet someone else called it a waste?
• Where does the balance between physical and spiritual often become a challenge for you?
• What are some areas where you can practice more of the spiritual life in the midst of physical things?
• How can you make sure not to get overwhelmed or worried about the things you do for the Lord?
FOCUS VERSES

II Timothy 1:5
When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also.

LESSON TEXT

5 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judæa, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth.

6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

7 And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.

13 But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

24 And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,
25 Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.

Luke 2:36–38
36 And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity;
37 And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.
38 And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

FOCUS THOUGHT

Service to God changes with age and time but does not diminish in importance.
CULTURE CONNECTION

LINGERING IN THE TEMPLE

Anyone who has helped lead a church from forty to seven hundred members and then has seen it grow into the thousands deserves to retire. A person expects even those who have not endured the challenges of such a dynamic ministry to kick back in the golden years and not be so consumed with the task. However, Vesta Mangun has not let age stop her from making a continuing impact on her world. After so many decades of dedication, she continues in fastings and prayers, watching for her Savior to appear. Countless souls have been blessed by her fervent praying. Thousands have been touched by her impassioned message to pray, pray, pray!

With her husband G. A., Vesta Mangun went to Alexandria, Louisiana, in 1950. Through their zealous ministry and later the leadership of their son, Anthony, the church experienced several moves into bigger and more improved buildings. Still, one thing could not be improved upon: the sight of a thin, white-haired woman bowed in prayer, seeking the face of the Lord and standing in the gap for lost or struggling souls. Like Anna in the New Testament, Vesta Mangun has continued a life of prayer and fasting after being widowed. May all believers in the Lord follow her example to be daily in the presence of the Lord and quick to introduce Him to all who will hear.

OUTLINE

I. ELDERS CAN STILL CONTRIBUTE
II. NEARLY ALL CAN SERVE IN SOME CAPACITY
III. ELISABETH AND ANNA PROVIDED VITAL CHRISTIAN SERVICE
   A. Elisabeth
   B. Anna
IV. BLESSING FUTURE GENERATIONS

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Time can be one’s greatest enemy or best asset. With time, houses deteriorate: shingles fall off, foundations settle, paint peels, and things just wear out. Time also allows tomatoes to ripen, apple trees to blossom, and seasons to change. Time is a neutral force that works differently on living beings and on inanimate objects. Inanimate objects grow worse with time: houses, cars, and other inanimate objects age, break down, and become unusable. Generally speaking, living things improve with time to a point.

Age in humans does not have to be a negative thing as long as the living water is flowing within. Even the young can become the living dead if they stop dreaming, hoping, praying, and growing. While focuses and purposes will change throughout a person’s life, each individual’s life has meaning. Rather than wearing oneself out by looking back to what should have or could have been, each child of God must live in the moment of what God wants life to be today.

Retirement is a time to reflect and refocus priorities. This does not mean individuals have finished pursuing their life’s purpose. However, the method of making life meaningful will be different from what it was before. Beautiful voices may crack and not carry a tune anymore. Preachers may be spent and not have the energy to expound the Word of God as they once did. Fortunately, life is not about personal fulfillment. Retirees can find meaning and purpose in the premium years by investing in others. Rather than becoming like a stagnant pond, elders in the Lord should keep a constant inflow of the springs of life and an outflow into others’ lives.
SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

One day as Zacharias was going about his priestly duties, the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared to him to announce that his prayer had been heard and the answer was on its way. Zacharias had settled into the daily routines of life, perhaps even giving up hope that at his advanced age the prayer for a child would ever be answered. But God had bigger plans for him—yes, even in his golden years.

Gabriel made an abrupt entrance to Mary’s life too. She was not expecting to be expecting. Then again, neither was Elisabeth, Zacharias’s wife. If Zacharias and Elisabeth were over the hill, Mary had just begun her climb. Zacharias and Mary were both shocked to hear the angel’s announcement of an unplanned pregnancy. The young woman’s amazement became wonder-filled belief; Zacharias gaped in startled disbelief.

I. Elders Can Still Contribute

Panic gripped the old man. He had entered the quiet, predictable confines of the Temple. While standing before the golden altar, he became visibly shaken when the angel Gabriel appeared to him. Zacharias stood there, staring in silent fear.

“Do not be afraid, Zacharias,” Gabriel instructed.

Zacharias was not instantly awash with relief, but he was paying close attention.

“You prayer has been heard,” the angel announced. “Your wife Elisabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John!” Gabriel continued to express how wonderful this event would be, what joy and meaning the child would bring to the man and his wife, and how this little life would turn the hearts of many people toward the Lord.

It appears that Zacharias had given up hope. Early in marriage, Zacharias and Elisabeth were a hopeful young couple looking forward to children blessing their home. Zacharias especially wanted a son. Years and then decades went by with no children. When God brought the answer he sought, Zacharias was no longer asking for it.

“I’m sorry,” Zacharias told the angel. “You will have to confirm this to me somehow. My wife and I are well past the age of having children.”

Gabriel then gave him a sign—he struck the dumbstruck man speechless. He would be unable to talk until the promise came to pass.

Sometimes humans are guilty of looking at the glass as half empty rather than half full. Zacharias stood before the golden altar inside the Temple. Very few men could stand there. There was no reason to be negative about his usefulness in life. Outside a large crowd of people were praying and waiting expectantly to receive a blessing from him. Too often, age-related difficulties and setbacks can cause a person to see life in a dim view rather than from the hope-filled perspective the Lord has.

No persons should use their age as an excuse for God not to use them. Just because their bodies have aged does not mean they are past the season of working in the His kingdom. God is not done with people even if society counts them as being past their prime.

II. Nearly All Can Serve in Some Capacity

John Wesley wrote thousands of personal letters, preached over forty thousand times, wrote a Bible commentary, and traveled almost a quarter of a million miles on horseback. Such accomplishments can intimidate the busiest of souls in the Kingdom. Not everyone will be a super-producer or an over-achiever; however, every child of God must be busy about His kingdom.

John Wesley was busy for the Lord from his mid-thirties until his late eighties. George Mueller, however, traveled just about as many miles—many by boat. His preaching reached millions of people. The difference between the two men? Mueller started this venture when he was seventy years old.

Fanny Crosby finally found her life’s purpose at age forty-three when she wrote her first song that brought glory to the Lord. Songs began to flow from this woman in such abundance that no one knows for sure how many she wrote—it is estimated to be between eight and nine thousand!

Age is not the determining factor in whether a person can work for God. Perhaps some individuals in their later years have more time than they had before to work for the Lord. As long as an individual is mentally capable,
there is some area where working for the Lord is possible.

Three phases of life appear in II Timothy 1:5 where Paul applauded young Timothy’s faith, which came to him by way of his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois. We could view life in thirty-year increments, if we were fortunate enough to live nine decades. Knowing which phase we are in can help us better relate to the two others.

The first thirty years of life can be considered a season of preparation. Children grow into adults while learning, studying, and getting a good grasp on the facts of living. During this time, they should develop a close walk with the Lord. Those in this age group settle on a life focus and study and apply themselves to learn that career.

After the thirty-year mark, people often are doing what will be the major focus of their lives. Children of God will often have found their niche in ministry and life purpose. This is the time to make a mark on the world—to contribute skills and innovation that make the world a better place. Individuals would hope to contribute thirty or more years to productive service.

By age sixty, a person has reached what some view as the golden years—a time to relax, retire, kick back, and enjoy. While, for the most part, the work load at sixty should not be what it was at thirty, perhaps a new perspective will help us not to see ourselves as over the hill. This last third of our lives is a time to reinvest in those who are preparing. By this time, we have a better perspective through experience and observation that can help those who are still maturing to avoid some pitfalls in life. Mature people have wisdom and insight in the Lord that will help younger people to clear many obstacles they might not otherwise see. Senior citizens should see that their time is not over even if their strength has begun to fade. Faith and faithfulness make them into priceless treasures in the kingdom of God.

III. ELISABETH AND ANNA PROVIDED VITAL CHRISTIAN SERVICE

“You are too old,” the missions board told one woman who wanted to serve overseas. God, who does not count time as we do, thought otherwise, and soon she was on her way to do a work for God.

Neither did Elisabeth consider herself too old to serve the Lord in whatever He called her to do. She simply said, “Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men” (Luke 1:25).

Following the spirit of Elisabeth, and borrowing from her name, Eliza George persisted as a missionary in Liberia even when the missions board forced her to retire at sixty-five years of age. She found her own supporters and continued to serve in her field of calling for nearly thirty years longer!

A. Elisabeth

There is no spotlight on Elisabeth until she reached her golden years. However, there is something more important about her life than just that “moment to shine” event. The Bible says she and her husband were “righteous before God” and “blameless.” While doing dramatic works for the Lord makes great stories to post on Facebook, the daily and consistent life of someone sold out to the Lord is of much greater value. Elisabeth was ready to accept what the Lord brought her way—even if her body was surprised by the sudden change.

Many have a call from God in their youth that they are unable to fulfill until their later years. Margaret Cole was one such woman who wanted to go to the mission field the day she was baptized as a teenager. She finally made the trip at age seventy-one after living a full life and burying her husband. She traveled throughout the Eastern Hemisphere and enjoyed more adventure and usefulness in a few years than most people experience in a lifetime. Maude Cary opened a work in Morocco at the age of seventy-two.

Evelyn Brand lived as a missionary in India long after her missionary-husband passed away. By age seventy-five, she was practically too old for the demands of that outreach. She fell, breaking her hip, and had to endure the trip down the mountain on a stretcher and then bouncing 150 miles to a care facility. She had to try to recover without modern conveniences. She began walking with canes and riding a pony for transportation. Despite her difficulties, she labored on for nearly two more decades, fighting through tropical
diseases and muscling her way through more injuries from falling off her mount. At the age of ninety-three, she relented from trying to ride horseback and let the loyal villagers carry her from place to place on a stretcher. She did this faithfully for her two remaining years.

Elisabeth cared about others. Rather than let her lack of a child turn into bitterness, she let life’s valleys soften her. Her gentleness appears in her response to the Lord’s gift of a late-in-life child and her thankfulness to Him for this surprise. Elisabeth did not manifest good character just toward her own child. She cared about others.

When Mary came to her, still stunned by her own good fortune, Elisabeth received her joyfully even though Elisabeth was entering her third trimester of pregnancy. Mary must have faced a social backlash for being pregnant without yet being married. Elisabeth provided a safe harbor for this teen who also lived for God with all her heart. Elisabeth was in tune with the Lord and responded in the Spirit with joy at what He was doing in her young cousin.

Mary and Elisabeth had a lot to share in their circumstances: they both had an unplanned pregnancy—Elisabeth thought she was past being able and Mary did not think she was yet able!

Elisabeth could have done like some elderly folks who get too focused on their own experiences and obsess about finding someone to listen to their stories. Instead, she had learned the principle of giving back and investing in the younger generation. By doing so, she not only encouraged Mary, but she also became one of the first to know of God’s miracle in the girl’s life. While it is comforting and encouraging to share one’s own experiences with others, investing in the next generation will open our eyes to what the Messiah is doing in them.

B. Anna

Both Anna and Simeon were awaiting the coming Messiah. Anna had given her life to serving the Lord. In her wrinkled and silver-streaked years, she still longed to see the Lord and lived for little else.

The Bible says Anna was of a “great age.” Any age when one serves the Lord is not over the hill or outdated. Each elderly person in the Lord should exult that he or she has a “great age.” While society intimidates the elders into dyeing their gray hair to hide the relentless march of time, God’s people should realize that white and gray hairdos are their crown of glory (Proverbs 16:31).

Anna sought to dwell in the presence of the Lord. For her, this meant staying in the Temple precincts. Today, we do not find Him only in a building made with men’s hands. We find Him in prayer and in keeping a worshipful spirit throughout the day.

Even though a person may not have much energy to give in their golden years, they still have a lot to contribute to the Kingdom. Anna served the Lord with fasting and prayer day and night. What a powerhouse elderly people are in the Lord when they pray deep, mountain-moving prayers.

Anna did not pray in the Temple because that was how she was raised. She was of a northern tribe and may not have seen the Temple in her childhood. At eighty-four years of age, she loved the Lord with all her heart and sought to see His kingdom come.

One eighty-four-year-old woman joined her eighty-two-year-old sister in prayer and fasting. Peggy and Christine were blind and crippled, respectively, in their old age as they prayed in the historic revival in the Scottish Hebrides.

In her later years, Maude Wilkins testified to the secret of vibrant elderly years: “Fasting and prayer. Those are the keys. Our people eat too much nowadays and they think about themselves too much. I learned early that to be successful in the ministry required hours of prayer, like four hours a day, and days of fasting—like three days of fasting, eat one meal, and three more days of fasting. The flesh must be willing to suffer in order to see sons and daughters born into the kingdom of God. One must be unafraid to suffer hunger pains for His glory. It was during these times that I was overshadowed by the mighty power of God and was protected from all evil forces. Yes, fasting and prayer are the keys, and don’t you ever forget it!” (Mary Wallace, Pioneer Pentecostal Women, Vol. 1).

Anna did not think her age entitled her to anything. Instead, she was overwhelmed with gratitude at what the Lord had allowed her to
experience and gave thanks to the Lord that she had the opportunity to see the Christ child arrive at the Temple. She then told others about Him. Oh that all of God’s children of “great age” would pray and tell everyone about Him until He shows up in their towns.

Even an elderly lady can have some spunk. Jewel Fauss was invested in the work of God in Houston until the end of her life. When the congregation outgrew the church building of Greater Bethel Tabernacle, she joined the younger people in helping to raise funds for a new building. This consisted of a sponsored march from the old church site to the new one. Jewel got her sponsors and marched with the team the entire seven miles! She found seventy-eight years to be a great age to be doing the work of the Lord (O. F. Fauss, What Hath God Wrought).

Unquestionably, believers can do great works for God even in their later years. Not until she was in her sixties did Carrie Eastridge do a great work with God in Africa by starting churches in new places. Oma Ellis was over sixty when she took the pastorate of a church in Arizona and served in the Arizona District. After taking the pastorate, she experienced divine healing of breast cancer.

Even in cultures where the voice of a woman is not usually respected, people will often listen to an older woman out of respect. The power of a prayed-up granny can bring even the toughest men to repentance.

God still wants to heal, deliver, and save the young and the old. In the book Profiles of Pentecostal Missionaries, Lucile Farmer told of a 125-year-old man in Ecuador, whom family members carried on a stretcher to hear the Acts 2:38 message. At the word of the preacher, the man received strength to stand and walk down to the baptismal waters. When he was baptized, God healed his hearing, and in a few days he received the Spirit of God, speaking in tongues. Just a few weeks later, he passed away.

IV. BLESSING FUTURE GENERATIONS

The temptation as individuals age is to look back and think of bygone days. But by the grace of God, they should focus on today. It is a matter of seeing through God’s eyes rather than their own fading vision.

At the same time, they should not obsess with the future. It is still as unknown now was it was during childhood. Rather than fear what will come after they are gone, children of God should invest in the next generation so the rich heritage continues. Young people should not have to build a walk with God from scratch when they have the legacy of the elders to build on. This requires commitment from two sides: the elders should make the effort to give back, and the youth must see the value of listening and asking questions that draw out the wealth of wisdom available.

In the kingdom of God, the godly older women are to teach the young women how to be guardians at home, good wives and mothers, and examples of individuals with strong morals.

“That the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience. The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed. Young men likewise exhort to be sober minded” (Titus 2:2–6).

Penny Nichols told of an experiment conducted with octopuses learning by observation in two different tanks out of line of sight from each other. One set of octopuses was trained to attack red balls whenever they were dropped into the tank. The balance group was trained to attack white balls when presented. Once these octopuses were trained to respond aggressively to the harmless balls, caged octopuses were introduced to each tank to observe the behavior of the trained creatures.

Once the new creatures had amply observed the “threat” of the two types of balls, the researchers then released the two sets of caged octopuses into a new tank. Both white balls and red balls were dropped into the tank. The octopuses that had observed their mentors attacking red balls attacked only the
red balls; the creatures that witnessed their role models attacking white balls immediately attacked the white balls. The students by observation reacted much faster than the trained octopuses had.

Although humans have four limbs less than this aquatic test group, we learn in much the same way. Children often grow up to mimic the behavior of their parents. Children, youth, and new believers need godly people to observe and imitate. Prayerful and committed youth will develop in an environment of prayerful, committed elders.

Elisha became a powerful man of God because a rough old man, Elijah, mentored him in faith and ministering the Word. God taught Elisha the transfer of anointing by his accompanying a man of great prayer and faith. Young people today should attach themselves to exemplary role models. Prayer and faith are not easy to learn from books alone.

When Elisha was on his own after Elijah was gone, he heard from God about the enemy’s plans and warned his nation. The enemy decided to take out this man of God. When the invading army came to town, Elisha was not worried, but his understudy was. Elisha prayed that the man’s eyes would be opened, and suddenly the man saw the armies of the Lord, who were on their side (II Kings 6). All young ministers and believers need an Elisha who can see God at work in the world around them. Those with spiritual vision give insight and direction to those blinded by fear. A child of God needs to find a faith-filled mentor—or be one to someone else.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Growing old cannot be all bad—everybody is doing it! When others say, “You’re too old,” we must have the mindset that God is older than we are and He is still at work. While age and strength may limit what a child of God can do, remember the Lord still will do great things through those of great age. There is no greater contribution to a church than to be a person of prayer and knowledgeable command in the spiritual realm. No matter how old children of God get, He still has a plan for their lives.

Every Paul needs to raise up a Timothy. Every John Mark needs a Barnabas and a Simon Peter to speak into his life. A Joshua wants to bask in the afterglow of a Moses’ prayer life. Each life must grow spiritually tall enough to overshadow that of another.

This is the day of non-traditional students and second-career professionals. In the kingdom of God, we do not retire; we simply recycle. We should put our life experiences to their best use by teaching others and setting an example for the next generation.

REFLECTIONS

• What have you given up on because it did not happen right away?
• What stage of life are you in: preparing, doing, or giving back?
• Like Zacharias before the altar, what opportunities can you reflect on and be thankful for?
• How did you learn what it was God wanted you to focus your energy and efforts on?
• How have you invested in someone else’s future?
• How has someone else invested in your life to help you develop to spiritual maturity?
FOCUS VERSE

Hebrews 11:23
By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid three months of his parents, because they saw he was a proper child; and they were not afraid of the king’s commandment.

LESSON TEXT

Exodus 2:1–3, 5–8
1 And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi.
2 And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months.
3 And when she could not longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river’s brink.

5 And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river’s side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it.
6 And when she had opened it, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews’ children.
7 Then said his sister to Pharaoh’s daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?
8 And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child’s mother.

Luke 1:30–35, 38
30 And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.
31 And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.
32 He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:
33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.
34 Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?
35 And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

38 And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.
OUTLINE

I. THE GODLY ADVANTAGE
II. TIMES AND CALLINGS OF GREATNESS
III. THE INFLUENCE AND INSPIRATION OF MOTHERS
   A. Jochebed
   B. Mary
   C. Principles of Mothering

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Children learn most of what they need to succeed in life before the age of five. Many of their habits, character traits, motor skills, and learning processes are developed in these formative years. Ideally, this is a time when children are at home with their mothers. Mothers guide little hands trying to toss a ball or maneuver a spoon. Mothers repeat words to help young children learn how to talk. It takes time and repetition to train children in the development of social skills. A mother dedicated to influencing greatness in her children will take the time needed to make it happen. There is no greater joy for a mother than to see that her adult children are successful and happy. A mother’s influence lives on as her children experience successes and failures.

Jochebed and Mary were mothers of the two great lawgivers: Moses and Jesus. They were mothers of strong faith who raised their children to assume their God-ordained roles of leadership. The highest compliment of Heaven for these mothers was that God would place into their trust the responsibility of raising these children of greatness.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. THE GODLY ADVANTAGE

“The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world” is a famous phrase from a poem penned by William Ross Wallace and first published in 1865. Many have pondered Wallace’s words and quoted parts of his poem as they contemplated the powerful impact of a mother in the life of a child. Perhaps only time will tell the full scale a mother’s influence has on her children.

There is a saying, “You never know what is in your basket.” When raising our children, we should remember they are not ordinary. They are destined for greatness. They belong to the King of kings. They are heirs to the throne of glory. We may be raising pastors, missionaries, or faithful servants of God. As we instill God’s purpose in them, along with a vision for greatness, we can have the assurance we are pointing our children in the right direction by training them in the way they should go. The Scripture assures us that when they are old, they will not depart from it. (See Proverbs 22:6.)

CULTURE CONNECTION

Raising Royalty

In 2016 Queen Elizabeth II celebrated her ninetieth birthday. All of Great Britain joined in the celebration. When she was just a child, Elizabeth’s father, Prince Albert, became King George VI after his brother abdicated the throne. In 1952, upon the death of her father, Elizabeth became the queen of Great Britain.

One picture of Elizabeth shows her sitting in a corner reading a book at age fourteen. She looks so serene, so peaceful. As her mother watched the coronation on June 2, 1953, I wonder if she hoped she had prepared her daughter for this moment. Elizabeth became Great Britain’s queen at the age of twenty-six and is the longest-reigning monarch in Great Britain's history.

There is a saying, “You never know what is in your basket.” When raising our children, we should remember they are not ordinary. They are destined for greatness. They belong to the King of kings. They are heirs to the throne of glory. We may be raising pastors, missionaries, or faithful servants of God. As we instill God’s purpose in them, along with a vision for greatness, we can have the assurance we are pointing our children in the right direction by training them in the way they should go. The Scripture assures us that when they are old, they will not depart from it. (See Proverbs 22:6.)

Children raised by godly parents have a distinct advantage in life. A mother teaches her children many wonderful attributes, manners, and traditions. While these areas are important for a child’s upbringing, a mother
who bases her philosophy of life on godly principles will not only impart truths that establish great standards for good citizens but will also breed a passion for the things of God in her children.

Many books are available that teach parents how to raise children, but those based on biblical principles give children the best tools for life. The Bible is a great source for parenting wisdom, giving guidance in the development of moral character, balanced discipline, and preparing children with the necessary tools to become successful when they step out on the pathway of life.

The hectic rush of everyday life robs many mothers of the time they need to spend with their children teaching them the principles of God’s Word. Many times a working mom finds herself with only a few precious moments each day with her children. However, a lot can be accomplished in a short time.

In the biblical story of Moses, we learn of his mother, Jochebed, who had limited time with her son in his infancy. She had to do a quick work instilling the most important things in life in her child. She was given permission to nurse Moses until he was weaned, which was generally from three to five years old for Hebrew children of that era. When Moses was weaned, Jochebed had to hand him over to Pharaoh’s daughter to be raised as her son. This was the only way Jochebed could save Moses’ life from the edict of death by a relentless Pharaoh.

Jochebed could only trust in God as the day came when she relinquished Moses into the care of Pharaoh’s daughter to be raised in a home and lifestyle that was contrary to everything she valued as a Hebrew. He would live among those who did not believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, the things he had been taught by his mother as a child stayed with him. “Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (Hebrews 11:24–25).

As we look at Moses’ life, we can see the wisdom from the writer of Proverbs: “Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). After years of living in the plush environment of Egyptian royalty, Moses’ heart and steps were turned toward the God of his mother and the instruction he received as a child. Little did Jochebed know she was grooming a life for greatness when she rocked baby Moses in her arms after feeding time. Perhaps the songs she sang as she rocked him to sleep included the lyrics of the Shema, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

II. TIMES AND CALLINGS OF GREATNESS

One of two notable times in history that God called an individual to be a deliverer was when the children of Israel cried out for deliverance from the oppression of Pharaoh in Egypt. During that time Pharaoh called for all the male infants to be killed. His intention was to cripple the power of the Hebrews to rebel and thus sentence them forever to a life of slavery in Egypt. God had another plan and inspired a Hebrew mother, Jochebed, to reject the king’s commandment and do all she could to preserve the life of her child. She saw potential in her offspring and felt greatness in her child. Through the faith of his parents, Moses was spared from destruction and raised in the very house of the one who oppressed them. The kingdom that oppressed God’s people was the dynasty that would experience God’s judgment for subjecting them to bondage. Victory was achieved through the child God ordained to be the deliverer of His people.

Another oppressive historical event calling for a deliverance was when Israel was subjected to the tyranny of the Roman Empire. The people of Israel looked for release from their oppression and sought a messiah. In the midst of political turmoil, a baby was born in miraculous circumstances. After the visitation and promise of an angel, the child was born to a chosen virgin girl named Mary.

Mary’s faith in God and His promise of the Messiah gave her the strength to withstand whatever was required for this miracle baby to be born. The child was born in a stable and placed in a manger, an unlikely place for a future king. The advent of the birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of many prophecies and the hope of Israel.
King Herod determined to destroy all the male Hebrew children in an effort to thwart the rising of the King of the Jews. Again, God had a plan. After receiving direction from an angel in a dream, Joseph whisked Mary and Jesus away to Egypt for safety. Ironically, they found protection in the same country that had once been a place of oppression. After King Herod died, an angel again appeared in a dream and directed Joseph to take the young family and return to Israel. Joseph found a safe place in Nazareth where Jesus could be nurtured and taught by a mother who had witnessed the greatest miracle of all. Mary had the prime opportunity to put truth into the heart of Jesus as a child. Mary knew He was God’s son, literally God in flesh, but He was also human. He was just as much man as He was God.

Mary used every opportunity she had with Jesus to teach Him what He needed to learn. “And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40). She fostered greatness in Him, which gave Him the confidence to amaze the teachers in the Temple at the age of twelve. Jesus would have been great anyway, because He was God manifest in the flesh. God made the Incarnation physically believable allowing an amazing mother to be His first earthly teacher.

The primary role of mothers is to prepare their children for life. The crises faced by these two mothers brought to the forefront the greatness hidden within each of them. Jochebed risked everything to save the life of her baby. Mary risked everything to accept her selection as the virgin mother of the Christ child. In many cases, danger or challenges bring out unknown greatness in individuals. When a person rises to the challenge, persevering in conflict, and allows God to be glorified in the situation, others can see that greatness on display. Even in this present generation, God is calling for greatness in His followers. Crisis cannot be avoided. But when it comes, watch how God amplifies greatness in His people.

III. THE INFLUENCE AND INSPIRATION OF MOTHERS

The influence of a mother begins in the home. Long before a child ventures out into the world, valuable lessons are learned on the knees of a mother. God chose two great women to be the mothers of two great leaders. Jochebed, the mother of Moses, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were great women of faith before their pregnancies that brought two destined deliverers into the world. Greatness in God is directly connected to the greatness of those who precede us as parents, educators, and leaders.

Mary was a young woman of great faith. To be chosen to bear the body of the coming Messiah was a great honor, but with it came great responsibility. Mary dealt with the shame and reproach of becoming pregnant during her betrothal to Joseph. The Law gave Joseph the right to break the betrothal with Mary at the least, and at the worst to have her put to death. A visitation from an angel greatly helped Joseph make the right decision, but he also knew this woman he was planning to marry. She was faithful and devoted to God. Mary could indeed be the choice of God to bring forth the Messiah. Mary had a greatness in her that set her apart from all the other young women who could have been chosen by God. Her greatness was exemplified when she responded to the Holy Spirit, “Be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38).

A. Jochebed

Times were difficult for Amram and his wife, Jochebed. The Pharaoh of Egypt ordered all male babies to be drowned in the Nile river. (See Exodus 1:22.) When Jochebed gave birth to Moses, she put a plan in action to save this precious life. For three months she and her family hid Moses. Early on, Jochebed saw that “Moses was a goodly child” (Exodus 2:2). In other words, he was healthy and beautiful. She knew in her spirit that a watery grave was not to be in his future.

When he became too big to hide any longer, Jochebed acted in faith to protect him by preparing a waterproof basket. She hid him among the reeds along the edge of the Nile River. Soon the baby was discovered by Pharaoh’s daughter as she came to the river to wash. He was obviously a Hebrew baby, but she was smitten with the infant and purposed to take him for her own. She knew she would need someone to nurse him, so when the opportunity came, Miriam, Moses’ sister,
Who had been watching close by, volunteered her mother. She was summoned to meet Pharaoh’s daughter, who asked Jochebed to care for the child. Although it was only for a few short years, Jochebed had the privilege of teaching her son the godly principles that remained with him for life.

B. Mary

When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus, the angel told her that her son would be great. Mary was chosen to bear the child that would become the long-awaited Messiah. She would give birth to this precious gift from Heaven, and she would also be the one to impart the teachings and tools that prepared Him for His mission in life. Jesus was born with greatness in His destiny and deity in His DNA. Perhaps Mary was the only one who truly knew this. She experienced the miracle of being overshadowed by the Holy Ghost. In that moment, her understanding of the greatness of this little human being must have been a beautiful revelation.

From the moment Jesus was born, Mary did everything she could to facilitate that greatness. Mary was influential in Jesus’ early life and was a witness to a miracle when He launched His ministry at the wedding in Cana. She was at the cross when He was crucified. She believed in the ministry and purpose of her son. The fact that Mary was among the 120 on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out is proof that she believed in His words and submitted herself to His purpose.

C. Principles of Mothering

Personal righteousness and integrity before God. The residue of a mother’s personal journey with God has great effect on her children. When a mother humbles herself before God and allows Him to cover her in His righteousness, it stands to reason that her children will benefit. As the Word of God speaks into her life, it is natural for her to share that life-changing Word with others. She especially imparts to her children the great truths she learns from serving God. As she follows after the principles of God’s Word and examines her walk with God, she has a clearer focus of what is most important to pass on to her family.

Vision and hope for the future. Naturally a mother wants her children to be successful in life. She may spend time dreaming about what the future holds for each of them. Her dream for one may be to become a doctor and for another to be a missionary. However, the foundation for the hopes and dreams of a godly mother is the fact that she knows God has already formed a path for her children. If she teaches them to follow God, their future is secure.

God has great thoughts for our future just as He did for the exiles in Babylon: “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11, NKJV).

A mother who aligns her vision and hope for her children with God’s thoughts toward them knows she is not guiding them alone. She has fallen in step with the One who has her children’s best interests at heart and also has the power to guide their steps.

Knowledge of the Word of God. Many great resources are available to help parents in raising their children. There are books on raising strong-willed children, books on how to connect with stepchildren and foster kids, and books on raising boys and raising girls. There are books on understanding the personality traits of children and the love languages for kids. These are all great helps in the journey of childrearing.

However, the most powerful tool in the hands of a mother is the Word of God. This Word that we have come to love and revere is more than text on pages. It is alive. It is God-breathed. It is a sharp sword and a powerful weapon: “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discriminator of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

A mother who equips her mind with the knowledge of the Word of God not only finds helpful reading material, but as she imparts that Word to her children, she is allowing them to experience the words of almighty God. God’s Word speaks through her. It helps her children decipher right from wrong and gives
them a moral standard with which to pattern their lives. Sharing her knowledge of the Word of God creates an appetite in her children to know it for themselves. As she guides them to memorize important verses of Scripture about who God is (Deuteronomy 6:4), His direction in their lives (Proverbs 3:5–6), the way of salvation (Acts 2:38), and other beautiful promises, she is showing them how to hide God’s Word in their hearts.

**Faith and fearlessness.** The Word of God puts great emphasis on faith. The writer of Hebrews defines the importance of faith in our walk with God: “But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

God would not require something so vital to be impossible to acquire. Faith is not difficult to come by. In fact, in Romans 12:3 we learn that God has given everyone a measure of faith, and in Matthew 17:20 Jesus declared that if we have as little faith as a grain of mustard seed, we could move a mountain and nothing would be impossible. A godly mother teaches her children how to use faith through her own faith lessons. A mother who equips her children with faith will indeed give them more than she could have dreamed. Faith in God brings about trust in Him that can come no other way.

In his letter to the Ephesian church, Paul outlined a whole arsenal of weapons against the enemy. (See Ephesians 6:10–18.) Using these weapons of warfare, a mother is able to pull down the very strongholds of the enemy with her faith. In this passage, part of the armor is her shield, calling it a “shield of faith.” Paul speaks of the shield of faith being the tool that can protect her from every device the enemy has to destroy her: “Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked” (Ephesians 6:16).

A mother stands in the gap for her children against the enemy and knows the feeling of fearless faith. As her faith builds, she becomes fearless in battle and teaches her children to do the same. She shows her children that no matter how intense the battle becomes and how hopeless it looks, we have a secret weapon; we have almighty God standing by our sides and fighting the battle for us. Faith allows us to know that God is going to keep His word: “Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee” (Deuteronomy 31:6).

Protectiveness and provision. God placed a natural tendency in mothers to nurture. It is as natural as cradling babies in their arms. Many women who have never had the opportunity to have biological children also have the natural ability to nurture and care for other children.

When God created Eve, He gave her the ability to create a being in her body after conception. Eve was made in the likeness of God, just as Adam was, so this gift God gave her was a part of His being. As a woman, a mother nurtures and protects her child with this God given inner gift. God also gave her the natural ability to provide sustenance for her newborn through nursing. As a child grows and no longer needs the provisions from a mother’s body, she moves into a more independent mode of providing for her child.

Titus 2:5 says that women are “keepers at home.” In contemporary culture, many mothers may have to help earn a living, but the core responsibility of providing for the family usually falls on the father. However, similar to a mother bird, the primary nurturing aspect of making a nest comfortable and safe naturally falls on the mother.

**Continued support and presence.** As a mother’s children grow up and are able to make decisions on their own, sometimes she feels she no longer has an influence in their lives. But no matter how old a child becomes, the support and affirmation of a mother is vital to the success of that child. A child may start to make decisions the mother does not approve of. However, a mother can show support and love for a child and not have to approve of every decision that child makes.

Our aim as parents is to train our children to think on their own. We try to equip them to make good decisions, but one bad decision should not result in rejection. Children should know that even in the midst of a life marred by wrong decisions, they can come to their mother and her arms are always open.
Releasing the child into God’s hands to accomplish His will. Baby dedication services are special events in the lives of Christian parents. That is the time when the parents are challenged to do all they can to raise these little ones in the fear of the Lord. It is also a time to prayerfully give the children back to God, acknowledging that His ability to oversee them is much more encompassing than the limited resources of the parents. However, giving children back to God does not end at the dedication service. Frequently, throughout the lives of her children, a mother finds herself on her knees, being reminded that she has given them to God and renewing that promise. Dedicating children to the Lord is releasing them into God’s hands. It is allowing God full authority to intercept at any time the distractions, deception, and self-determination that leads children away from His will.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

A mother has no way of knowing what path her children will take. If she prepares them for greatness, they have that advantage. If a mother believes in her children, and affirms them, the chances of success are greater. As mothers, we should underline everything we teach our children with godly, biblical principles. As we instill God’s Word in our children, we give them a firm foundation that prepares them for greatness. Preparing our children to be sensitive to God’s voice and obedient to His call is our first priority. As we teach our children using the Holy Bible as our instruction book, it not only equips them with moral standards and social skills but also teaches them to trust a true, living God for direction. Giving our children the tools found in God’s Word truly prepares them for the greatness God has planned for them.

REFLECTIONS

• What type of crisis was common to both Moses and Jesus that threatened their lives as babies? Do you see a similar trend today?
• How do mothers who base their children’s instructions on God’s Word have an advantage over those who do not?
• Why is it important for a mother to have greatness in her, and what is that greatness based upon?
• Discuss how teaching children to have faith can make them fearless.
• Is there ever a time when a mother’s influence is no longer effective in her children?
• For both Jochebed and Mary, it was hard to release their children into the hands of God. How can a mother find peace when she has to let go?
FOCUS VERSE

John 4:23

But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.

LESSON TEXT

Matthew 15:22–28

22 And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.
23 But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.
24 But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
25 Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.
26 But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.
27 And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.
28 Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.


37 And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment,
38 And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

44 And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head.
45 Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet.
46 My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment.
47 Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.
48 And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven
Idol Worship

In June 2002, one of the most influential and successful prime-time television programs ever produced—American Idol—was introduced in the United States. Over the next fifteen seasons this program took the television and music industry by storm. America clamored after its new stars and bought their music at a record pace.

Popular music has been one of the major avenues through which the generations have influenced society. However, the power and influence of music is difficult to fully comprehend.

Many have tried to explain it by searching extra-biblical sources that seem to confirm Satan’s role in the origin of music’s impact. And perhaps much of what scholars have said is true. Unfortunately, we do not have a complete understanding of it all.

God created music and therefore it is a gift He has given to us. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above” (James 1:17). Unfortunately, some people have taken this wonderful gift and have used it to edify themselves and to promote lifestyles that are against the purpose and plan of God.

Surely there has never been a more appropriately named television show than American Idol. So many have chosen to worship music and its artists, making idols of them, rather than using music to worship God who created the music. God is looking for true worshipers and desires to find pure hearts set on honoring Him above all else.

OUTLINE

I. BOTH WOMEN CAME TO JESUS WITHOUT INVITATION
   A. The Syrophenician Woman
   B. The Sinner Woman

II. BOTH WOMEN HAD NEEDS
   A. The Syrophenician Woman Needed Deliverance for Her Daughter
   B. The Sinner Woman Needed Forgiveness

III. BOTH WOMEN WERE INITIALLY IGNORED
   A. The Syrophenician Woman
   B. The Sinner Woman

IV. BOTH WOMEN GOT JESUS’ ATTENTION AS THEY WORSHIPPED
   A. The Syrophenician Woman
   B. The Sinner Woman

V. BOTH WOMEN RECEIVED WHAT THEY NEEDED
   A. Jesus Healed the Syrophenician’s Daughter
   B. Jesus Forgave the Sinner Woman of Her Sins

Humans are worshipers. All over the world, people worship various deities, leaders, heroes, and even venerated objects. In Western culture, however, perhaps the greatest subject of worship is the self.

Our culture tells us that only the human self can determine truth and morality. It has become popular for people to identify themselves as “spiritual, but not religious,” indicating that their spirituality is intended to serve themselves and not the requirements of another deity. As long as their spirituality helps them feel good, assuages their conscience, or provides a sense of identity, they will adopt practices and beliefs that work for them.

In contrast, Jesus Christ proclaimed that “true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23), indicating there is a right way to worship. True worship is not to ourselves but to the God who created us, with whom “we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). This worship is structured by the practice and pattern of the Bible, resulting in an entire life completely oriented to giving glory to God and following His commands.
While the world may accuse true worshipers of being dogmatic or religious, true worshipers have discovered that lasting joy, peace, and the provisions of God come when we submit our lives to Him and His Word. In this lesson, we will trace the stories of two women in the Gospels who demonstrated true worship of Jesus Christ as we consider our own worship and areas of our lives that may not be fully submitted to God. May we experience a renewal of worship to our great God!

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. BOTH WOMEN CAME TO JESUS WITHOUT INVITATION

A. The Syrophenician Woman

Imagine a daughter who became sick with a disease no doctor could diagnose. Her mother took her to doctor after doctor, hospital after hospital, and no one could provide a cure. Desperation and despair would no doubt set in, perhaps with the hope that a miracle might come through divine intervention.

This was the dilemma faced by a woman Jesus encountered while traveling to the region of Tyre and Sidon, located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Jesus was leaving Galilee to provide these pagan cities another invitation to God’s kingdom. He entered a house intending to remain incognito but was soon discovered by a woman desperate for her daughter to be delivered from demon possession. This woman was not a Jew but a Greek from Syrian Phoenicia (See Mark 7:26.) Matthew identified her with the archaic designation of “a woman from Canaan” (Matthew 15:22).

This unnamed woman began to cry out, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil” (Matthew 15:22; Mark 7:25). She was desperate for her daughter to be healed and she knew Jesus had the power to deliver her daughter. Most important, she identified Him as Lord, indicating she recognized His divine power and authority. Consequently, she was determined to get the Lord’s attention, crying out to Him, making a scene to the point that the disciples became annoyed and desired Jesus to send her away.

True worship begins with an understanding that we need Jesus more than anything else. We need Him more than medical treatment, a good job, strong family relationships, and even more than life itself. True worship begins with desperation for Jesus to complete in our lives what we could never complete on our own.

B. The Sinner Woman

A woman with a sinful history who was publicly known in her town learned that Jesus had been invited to dinner at the home of Simon, a Pharisee. While Jesus was reclining at the table, she entered Simon’s home with an alabaster jar of perfume. Alabaster was a soft stone often used to make perfume containers, and Mark’s Gospel tells us this jar of perfume was worth three hundred days’ wages. The woman came to Jesus and stood behind Him at His feet, weeping, wetting His feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, and pouring perfume on them.

Once again, a woman found Jesus in a private home with others and intentionally sought His attention. Both women exhibited desperation to see Jesus no matter the public humiliation they might endure. While the Syrophenician woman entered a home making a dramatic scene, crying out to Jesus and later falling at His feet, this sinner woman entered the Pharisee’s house quietly, and the gospels do not record her ever saying a word. She simply desired to find Jesus and to worship Him.

If we are to come to Jesus in worship, we must be willing to seek Him earnestly and humble ourselves before Him. Our worship comes from recognition that He is truly Lord, and our existence and identity is dependent on His mercy, His forgiveness, and His love.

Jesus told a parable of a widow who pestered an unjust judge until he finally gave her the justice she desired (Luke 18:1–8). Jesus told this parable to instruct believers always to pray and never give up on their prayers (Luke 18:1). In the same manner, our prayers to God should reflect our complete reliance on Him for all our needs.

II. BOTH WOMEN HAD NEEDS

A. The Syrophenician Woman Needed Deliverance for Her Daughter

It has been said that "words are not enough
to express the unconditional love that exists between a mother and a daughter." While this expression is not universal in reality, it conveys the unique bond of love and care that often characterizes a mother’s love for her girl. In the Old Testament Book of Ruth, this unique bond was exemplified by two women, Naomi and Ruth, who did not share a biological relationship as mother and daughter but developed one as mother and daughter-in-law. During difficult life circumstances, Ruth told her mother-in-law, “For whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16). This beautiful illustration demonstrates how the mother-daughter bond is not limited to biology, but relationships through love and friendship can also grow and be strengthened.

In the same manner, the Syrophenician woman demonstrated the strength of her unconditional love for her daughter. Mark’s gospel indicates her daughter was young and struggled with demon possession. While many modern scholars believe the descriptions of demon possession in the New Testament typically indicate neurological disorders or mental illness, it is helpful to remember that the Bible was written in a specific culture and setting two thousand years ago. Unexplained negative behavior or symptoms were often understood as demonic in nature.

All this Syrophenician woman knew was that her daughter’s symptoms were outside of her control, causing her daughter torment and pain, and there seemed to be no known cure. Perhaps the woman had previously tried Canaanite rituals, even sacrificing to idols in hope of a cure for her daughter.

When Jesus came to town, His fame as a healer and one who casts out demons no doubt preceded Him. The woman’s daughter needed a healer, and the mother personally interceded with Jesus to petition for her daughter’s healing.

True worshipers intercede for the needs of others. Paul told Timothy: “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men” (I Timothy 2:1). Whether biological family, friends that are like family, or the family of God, a life of worship is characterized by lifting others up before Him. Pentecostals often describe this call to intercession as a “burden,” indicating that their sensitivity to the Holy Ghost and the needs of others draws them to their knees in intercessory prayer.

B. The Sinner Woman Needed Forgiveness

Guilt and shame felt by an individual whose indiscretions are publicly known is a challenging weight to bear. Guilt is often associated with remorse for sin, thinking, I did something bad, and shame as internalized feelings that I am bad.

No doubt we have all felt guilty for sins we have committed throughout our lives. However, for some individuals, the weight of sin and guilt results in shame carried daily. That shame may even be public, especially if it resulted in legal proceedings or in family or relational problems. In churches, it is not uncommon for out-of-wedlock pregnancies and adultery in a marriage to bring shame upon men and women as the consequences of sexual relations before marriage (fornication) or outside of marriage (adultery) become publicly known to the membership. For others, sins that result in crimes broadcast in the media can bring shame upon individuals, families, and even churches.

Regarding the sinner woman in the lesson text, we are not specifically told what her sins were but only that they were many. Church tradition has often assumed the sinner woman’s transgressions were prostitution. Regardless of the nature of her many sins, the most important point is that everyone at the dinner in Simon’s home knew the nature of her sins, and they ascribed shame to her because of them.

When Simon saw the woman wash Jesus’ feet with her tears, he immediately thought ill of both Jesus and the woman: “This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner” (Luke 7:39). Since everyone else in the room knew the sins of the woman, Simon thought to himself that Jesus should know the shame of this woman, especially because He was considered a prophet. As the story continued, Jesus revealed that He did know her many sins. Most important, the woman herself was aware of her guilt and shame, and she reflected her repentance in her worship of Jesus.
Jesus declared, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:34–36, NKJV). The sinner woman knew that only Jesus could bring her deliverance from the stain of sin and all the guilt and shame that had resulted from her actions. True worshipers accept Jesus’ invitation to experience true freedom from the slavery of sin, recognizing that all “have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

IIIIIII. BOTH WOMEN WERE INITIALLY IGNORED

A. The Syrophenician Woman

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges in the Christian life is how to respond to the God’s silence. Our prayers go up without an indication of an answer, a confirmation from another believer, or a change in circumstances. Our petition before God has not been approved, judging by a lack of resolution to the request, but it has not necessarily been turned down. Instead we perceive that the Lord is silent. This perception often leads to questions: Is God ignoring me? Is there sin in my life preventing a miracle? Do I lack sufficient faith for God to respond? Is God even real?

Jesus’ response to the Syrophenician woman provides some clarity for believers. Jesus did not acknowledge the Syrophenican woman until she began to worship Him. The woman fell at Jesus’ feet, crying out to Him, and the Scripture says that “he answered her not a word” (Matthew 15:23). This prompted His disciples to compel Jesus to send her away. Instead, He told the woman, “I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). This prompted His disciples to compel Jesus to send her away. Instead, He told the woman, “I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). Jesus seemed to be testing the woman’s faith by saying it was not in the will of God at that time. Jesus’ explanation to the woman was that His present mission was to save Israelites, testing her with use of derogatory language common for Jews speaking of Canaanites (referring to them as dogs).

True worshipers learn the value of praying “thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” as contained within the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:10). Remembering to pray for God’s will and the advancement of His kingdom recognizes His sovereignty in our lives and our world. God is not a genie in a bottle who carries out our wishes at our beck and call.

While not receiving an answer to prayer may be discouraging, it can be helpful to recognize that perhaps the answer to prayer being sought is not in the will of God at this time. In practical terms, many perceive that God may answer prayer with yes, no, or wait. While we wait, we keep worshiping, keep praying, keep interceding, keep watching for God to demonstrate His glory to us as we continue to trust Him.

B. The Sinner Woman

Incredibly, while the sinner woman stood behind Jesus at His feet weeping, wetting his feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, kissing them, and pouring perfume on them, Jesus neither spoke nor reacted to the woman. Jesus was aware of the sinner woman’s actions but did not acknowledge her until He read Simon’s thoughts regarding her. While the sinner woman worshiped Jesus, He used her example of worship to minister to Simon.

Jesus told Simon a parable about two men in debt to a lender, with one owing five hundred day’s wages and another owing fifty. Since both men were unable to pay, the lender forgave their debts. Jesus then asked Simon which of the men would love the lender more. Simon responded, “I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most” (Luke 7:43). Jesus then explained to Simon how the woman’s worship exceeded the hospitality Simon had offered Him as a guest in his house and how her love for Jesus resulted in her forgiveness.

True worshipers create opportunities to reach others through the example of their lives. Here the sinner woman’s worship created an opportunity for Jesus to minister to Simon about the relationship of love and forgiveness as well as Jesus’ authority to forgive sins. In a world looking for reality or truth, nothing reaches people better than our examples. Do our lives demonstrate authentic worship to God? Can we forgive as Jesus forgives? Love as he loves? May our worship to God inspire others to worship.
IV. BOTH WOMEN GOT JESUS’ ATTENTION AS THEY WORSHIPPED

A. The Syrophenician Woman
The persistent worship of the Syrophenician woman resulted in attracting Jesus’ attention. The Scriptures indicate Jesus had ignored her cries for some time, as the disciples complained that “she cries out after us” (Matthew 15:23). Once Jesus acknowledged her worship and cries for help by rebuffing her, she amplified her efforts by kneeling in front of Jesus and crying, “Lord, help me” (Matthew 15:25). The woman refused to leave without receiving a miracle for her daughter. This persistence is reminiscent of Jacob’s wrestling with God for an entire night, refusing to give up until he received a blessing. (See Genesis 32:22–32.) While it appeared that Jesus did not want to give the Syrophenician woman His attention, she earned it through her relentless worship.

The Bible contains many examples of worship attracting God’s attention to intervene in challenging situations and to perform miracles. From the battle of Jericho to Paul and Silas in prison, divine worship often resulted in divine intervention. Today, with people exhibiting shorter attention spans influenced by our media-driven culture, remaining in a state of worship for any length of time seems impossible. How many more of our needs could be met if we would linger in worship?

B. The Sinner Woman
While Jesus seemed to ignore the sinner woman by not speaking to her or reacting to her acts of worship, He revealed that she had His attention the entire time. He told Simon the Pharisee: “Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment” (Luke 7:44–46).

The contrast Jesus provided Simon was unmistakable: this sinner woman worshiped Jesus from the depths of her soul, caring for His feet using tears and perfume worth almost a year’s wages, and Simon withheld his worship. Simon missed an opportunity to worship the Lord while a sinner woman, whose sin was likely known to everyone in attendance, gave Jesus her all. Worshiping God is a choice we have on a daily basis. It may seem at times that God does not notice our acts of worship, but we can be assured our prayers, songs, reflections of His holiness, and acts of service do not go unnoticed. Let us make the most of every opportunity to give God our all.

V. BOTH WOMEN RECEIVED WHAT THEY NEEDED

A. Jesus Healed the Syrophenician’s Daughter
When Jesus challenged the Syrophenician woman by saying, “It is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to dogs,” she boldly replied, “Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table” (Matthew 15:27). Jesus essentially told the woman she was unworthy of a miracle based on her Gentile status, and she used His metaphor to challenge Him for her miracle. Jesus was clearly astonished by the boldness of her faith, and He told her, “O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt” (Matthew 15:28). And the Scripture states that her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Thanks to the work of Jesus Christ at Calvary, every man, woman, and child may receive His miraculous intervention in their lives, including the gift of His Spirit. There are no distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, as those barriers were broken through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Paul stated, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28–29). Today we have the ability to approach Jesus Christ boldly in faith, trusting Him for our needs.

B. Jesus Forgave the Sinner Woman of Her Sins
There is no record of the sinner woman ever speaking a word, yet her acts of worship and care for Jesus resulted in her walking out of Simon the Pharisee’s house cleansed from
her sins. Jesus provided the reason for her forgiveness: “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little” (Luke 7:47). This woman demonstrated her repentance in her actions, humbly washing Jesus’ feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, and pouring perfume on them. She loved the God she knew who could remove her guilt and shame, allowing her to be free of her past. It is not uncommon for us as believers to feel we have messed up too much or that God could never forgive the things we have done. Perhaps instead of questioning the sincerity of our repentance or the measure of our faith, we should check the nature of our love for God. When we say we are unworthy of forgiveness, are we really loving God, or are we, in a misguided way, placing our love of self above our love for Him? Could it be that loving much is the basis of accepting and receiving God’s forgiveness? The sinner woman, whose sins were extensive and known by many, received what she needed by demonstrating her love for Jesus in true worship.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

How do we define true worship? How can we know God has accepted our worship? The first tragedy after the fall of Adam and Eve was Cain’s murdering his brother Abel. Cain was angry because God did not accept his sacrifice, or worship, while Abel’s worship was “a more excellent sacrifice” (Hebrews 11:4). Both men made an effort, taking action to worship God, but only one man’s worship was accepted.

From the beginning, there has always been a standard for true worship. Earlier in Matthew 15, Jesus alluded to this when challenging the Pharisees by quoting the prophet Isaiah: “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me” (Matthew 15:8).

Central to true worship is a heart that loves God and desires to please Him more than neighbors, family members, and self. The Syrophenician woman and the sinner woman both demonstrated that Jesus Christ was more important to them than what other people were thinking, what the disciples were saying, and even more important than what Jesus himself was thinking or saying. They truly loved the Lord their God with all their hearts, souls, and minds (Matthew 22:37), and God met their needs.

As we consider the nature of our worship, let us consider our heart for God. Do we love Him above all else? As we recall our personal testimonies, have we shed tears in worship at Jesus’ feet, experiencing His forgiveness for our lifetime of sins? It is easy to allow our hearts to grow so cold and distant from God that our worship becomes merely honoring Him with our lips. Our worship at church becomes mundane, our devotions become scarce, and the centrality of the Lord in our lives drops in priority. May the Lord remind us of all He has done for us because He loves us: “We love him, because he first loved us” (I John 4:19).

REFLECTIONS

• What are some areas of your life that have not been submitted to God? Are there sins you are not turning away from? Are there finances you are withholding in tithes and offerings? How might you make changes in your worship to allow Jesus Christ to be the priority in your life?
• Have you ever come to God boldly with a desperate prayer request? What was bold about your faith? What actions did you take, and what was the outcome?
• Can you think of a time when you interceded for the need of someone in your social network or church? How did your intercession impact your worship to God?
• How might reflecting on your testimony, or on what God has accomplished for you in the past, help you rekindle worship that has grown stagnant?
• How might you re-engage your heart in your worship, starting at church today or this Sunday? How might you be more “present” with God and the church in singing, praying, receiving the preached word, and responding to the altar call?
FOCUS VERSE

Proverbs 31:10
Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.

LESSON TEXT

Proverbs 31:10–30
10 Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.
11 The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil.
12 She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.
13 She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands.
14 She is like the merchants’ ships; she bringeth her food from afar.
15 She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens.
16 She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard.
17 She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengthening her arms.
18 She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night.
19 She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff.
20 She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.
21 She is not afraid of the snow for her household: for all her household are clothed with scarlet.
22 She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple.
23 Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land.
24 She maketh fine linen, and selleth it; and delivereth girdles unto the merchant.
25 Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come.
26 She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.
27 She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness.
28 Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her.
29 Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.
30 Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised.
I. THE VALUE OF A VIRTUOUS WOMAN

II. THE QUALITIES OF A VIRTUOUS WOMAN
   A. Kind, Loving, and Generous
   B. Honorable and Trustworthy
   C. Wise
   D. Industrious
   E. Strong and Fearless

III. THE REWARDS OF A VIRTUOUS WOMAN
   A. Her Husband and Children Praised Her
   B. She Received Praise Because She Feared the Lord
   C. Her Own Works Praised Her
   D. She Received the Benefits of Her Own Works

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

The virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 is a much-contemplated figure. Could such a woman have existed? If she did, who was she? At the outset of today’s lesson, the point should be made that this passage of Scripture was not written to women but to a young ruler. This single young man, King Lemuel, would not be looking for a wife with all the attributes and achievements listed in Proverbs 31. His search would be for a single maiden, a girl who would eventually become his wife. The word translated woman in the passage is used to describe females of every age and condition, married or not (Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon).

As we study the Proverbs 31 woman, we find an abstract of a “woman in the making.” The young man would not find such a person ready-made. She would have no children, no husband sitting at the gate, and likely no thriving entrepreneurial enterprises. What she would have is character, and that is the subject today’s lesson: The admirable attributes of a virtuous woman.

A person’s character is the key to a successful, happy life. Each person can learn from the conduct and character of the ideal woman of virtue.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. THE VALUE OF A VIRTUOUS WOMAN

A reading of the entire Book of Proverbs provides a picture of contrasts. The women

CULTURE CONNECTION

Just across the border of Louisiana, entering the state of Texas, is a mileage sign showing the distance to El Paso, Texas, to be a little over eight hundred miles. And those who have driven those long miles, making their way from east to west, have no doubt noticed the wide-open desert plains.

People unfamiliar with West Texas would probably not see much value in the land. The dull, brown, sandy surface with minimal greenery would cause most individuals to conclude that the land is desolate, barren, and unimportant. They would not see its value because they would see only what is on the surface.

However, what is beneath the surface makes much of that area worth a fortune. Though the naked eye sees no value, what is pumped to the surface by powerful machines proves that the West Texas land, like that near the Davis Mountains, is highly valuable (www.the-american-interest.com/2016/09/07/billions-of-barrels-of-oil-discovered-in-texas/, accessed November 2016).

In the same way, people have the tendency to look at those of another race, nationality, or gender, and fail to see them as valuable because of judging them from the surface only. However, the fact that we all bear the image of God gives us great value. It is important for us as believers to look for God’s image and see our neighbors as valuable and precious in the eyes of the Lord.
recorded in its pages can be easily classified into one of two categories: a woman of folly, or a woman of wisdom. Throughout the book, wisdom is personified as a “she,” and as we look at its final chapter, we find Scripture painting a picture—drawing a sketch—of a wise, virtuous lady in action. This, the Word lets us know, is the sort of woman a godly man should choose for a wife.

It could be stated that Scripture’s virtuous woman illustrates a materialization of all the wisdom contained within the writings of Proverbs. The twenty-two-line poem gives an illustration of applied wisdom—how it is lived out and its effects on others. The passage may actually provide many portraits of what a godly woman might look like.

As we examine this ideal woman given in a distant culture and time, we can superimpose a picture of today’s virtuous woman over the sketch King Lemuel’s mother provided for her son. The picture, although drawn according to ancient Eastern customs, details attributes and characteristics we should find in today’s Christian. As we proceed, consider that some regard the virtuous woman as a prophetic representation of the bride of Christ, which includes both male and female, as she exemplifies loving servanthood, fidelity, and influence in her world. If that is the case, this portrait of the virtuous woman is just as relevant today as when it was written, and not just to women, but to all believers.

Applying this concept to our focus thought would mean the church is to be kind, loving, generous, honorable, trustworthy, wise, industrious, strong, and fearless as she brings honor, renown and pleasure to her Lord.

Because the word picture of the virtuous woman was painted in Hebrew language in the form of an acrostic, each verse beginning with a letter of the alphabet in sequence, the traits are not necessarily listed in order of importance or in a continuous thought. Some have suggested that this form of writing might indicate that the date of the chapter’s authorship is more recent than that of other chapters in Proverbs, but several psalms and the beginning chapters of the Book of Lamentations use the same poetic form. Most likely this portion of Scripture was written using this poetic device as a tool to assist in committing its content to memory. The poem’s importance is highlighted by the fact that even today in many traditional Jewish homes it is memorized and sung by the men at weekly Sabbath meals as a song of praise to the women in their lives.

The term virtuous woman can take our thoughts down many paths. In Strong’s Concordance, we find the word translated virtuous has to do with valor, strength, riches, wealth and power. The New International Version translates the same word as noble.

Nobility, in a traditional sense, is something one is born into or marries into; but nobility is more than just being a part of an exclusive physical bloodline. To be sure, the Bible gives illustrations of both wise and foolish kings as well as honorable and ungodly royalty. Being a noble person is about living a righteous life, and that opportunity is available to every believer regardless of social status or gender. It is about being people of courage who are willing to serve others in such a way that their lives bring honor to their families, their God, and even returns honor back into their own lives.

What are the qualifications that result in a person’s being found virtuous? As we look at them in our lesson today, we would do well to remember that virtue cannot be compartmentalized in one area and closed off from another. It has a broad application that speaks of the entirety of a person’s virtuous life.

II. THE QUALITIES OF A VIRTUOUS WOMAN

The Proverbs 31 woman is clearly well-off and upper class, as would most often be the case for a woman being considered for marriage by a king. This observation alone gives the indication that the attributes in the poem do not comprise a universal checklist that can be applied to every individual in every situation. What can be practiced by everyone, regardless of their social standings and resources, are devotion and diligence.

A. Kind, Loving, and Generous

The Proverbs 31 woman was hardworking and enterprising as she managed her large household. As she went about her day-to-day activities, she was productive and also kind.
and loving. She showed her love for her family by acts of service; for example, she rose to feed them while it was still dark. With capable hands she spun wool and made clothing. She provided for their needs.

This woman was generous. Although Scripture portrays her as a person interested in making an income from her work, her desire to be profitable did not prevent her from giving to those less fortunate than she. The virtuous woman did not allow her business or busyness to close off her heart to those in need around her. She stretched out her hand to the poor. With open palms, she distributed resources to the needy and afflicted. She reached out her hands to those who were destitute, oppressed, or abused. The Hebrew language used in the last part of verse 20 indicates a sending out of blessings. The word translated hand is often related to the “hand of God” as it is upon someone to bring aid or blessing (Strong’s Concordance).

**B. Honorable and Trustworthy**

The virtuous woman was both honest and trustworthy. Her husband had the utmost confidence in her. He trusted her and he kept on trusting her. She did not give him cause to stop trusting; instead, he was satisfied. Her conduct not only blessed him personally, but it also brought the fruits of peace and tranquility into his home. She was a fountain of good to all and certainly a tremendous asset to her husband.

The virtuous woman’s husband respected his wife’s judgment and gave her the independence to make decisions in her own business ventures that took place both inside her home and out. She proved herself to be competent and trustworthy, running successful business enterprises, seemingly always looking for new opportunities to expand them and to try new things. Surely her entire household was blessed by her industry. They were clothed with scarlet and enjoyed a home well furnished with carpets and cushions. Her husband was esteemed among the elders in the city gates.

**C. Wise**

Although the virtuous woman’s business dealings occasionally took her away from home, she was wise, planning ahead to provide for her family’s needs even as she considered the business enterprises she would develop and engage in. She was wise in that she thoroughly evaluated the possibilities before making the major purchase of a field. That is wisdom in action.

In addition to her shrewd business skills, verse 26 tells us that when she gave advice, she did it with gentleness. We see here a blending of insight and poise delivered with discretion. She conducted herself with grace as she administered counsel. She was wise enough to know that regardless of how truthful her words might be, if she expressed herself rudely, coarsely, or boisterously, they would not be well received. The virtuous woman knew that her voice affected the environment around her. She was tactful and exercised self-control as she gave advice to others. The laws of love and kindness were evident in her words.

The New International Version translates verse 26 this way: “She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.” It seems this businesswoman and housewife was also a competent teacher issuing “faithful instruction.”

**D. Industrious**

It is clear the virtuous woman was not lazy. She was constantly busy with various projects and was an industrious woman who successfully combined her business enterprises with keeping her house. She was a salesperson, handling her own dealings with merchants in her home-based business. Although she prospered, she seemed to be ever on the lookout for her household and new business ventures. After she made money in one enterprise, she would invest it in another, developing and continually expanding new sources of revenue.

Not only did she work diligently, but she also took pleasure in her work. The word translated willingly in reference to her work in verse 13 speaks of “that in which one takes delight” (Strong’s Concordance). She either loved her work, or loved what her work produced to bless others—or both. When individuals love what they do, or understand the deeper reasons why they do what they do, that love makes work a pleasure. Regardless of a person’s position or profession, when
they see their work as profitable, it encourages them to do more.

E. Strong and Fearless

The virtuous woman was a woman of strength. This refers to both strength of body and strength of mind. Verse 25 records her as wearing strength and honor as clothing, a metaphor for her character. She was covered in both. The garments of strength and honor are always lovely and need not unravel or wear out over time.

Scripture says the virtuous woman rejoiced in time to come. She was confident and had an expectation of good for her future because she carefully prepared for her family’s needs. She did not fear what the future might bring. She was not afraid her family would be impoverished or hungry, because she had worked so diligently to provide for their needs.

In addition to being fearless of the future, she had a courageous soul. In Scripture the word virtuous was applied more often to a warrior than to a woman. In the Hebrew language, it is the same word translated in describing Israel’s “mighty men of valour” (1 Chronicles 12:21) and Egypt’s trained army (Exodus 14:28).

III. THE REWARDS OF A VIRTUOUS WOMAN

A. Her Husband and Children Praised Her

Those who knew her, especially those closest to her, praised the Proverbs 31 woman and stood to honor her. Her husband declared her to be the “best of the best” of all women.

While some have exalted the twenty-two-verse poem in Proverbs as a “wife wish list,” the only true instruction in all its passages is given to its readers, which includes the young man searching for this elusive lady. “Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates” (verse 31). In other words, the woman should be honored for what she has accomplished. It is because of her own works that she should receive praise in the same city gate where her husband was renowned.

B. She Received Praise Because She Feared the Lord

It is interesting to note the contrast in verse 30, especially as it relates to the comparison of the woman of folly and the woman of wisdom in the Book of Proverbs. The charm of superficial beauty is both deceptive and empty, but a woman who fears the Lord is a woman of substance. She shall be praised. More than what she did, what she earned, or what she said, her reverence for God and respectful obedience to Him were her most praiseworthy attributes. Physical beauty has deceived many into making a wrong choice for a wife. Standing in awe of God and giving Him the reverence, honor, and respect due Him brings true beauty to the soul—beauty that never fades.

Time will have its way on every face and figure. One accident, and the physically beautiful could become instantly disfigured. In one quick moment, a person’s ability to perform could be snatched away. The most important thing in the lives of individuals is their fear of the Lord. When that is present, it will be followed by progressive character development. This explains why the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Without it, there is nothing to build on.

Noble character is not something that sprouts up on its own. It is the result of a person’s continued commitment to doing what is right—even when it is hard, when no one is watching, and when it is not what everyone else is doing. Scripture simply does not support the idea that being a person of virtue could possibly be intrinsically intertwined with a person’s marital condition, parental status, career, or gender. In Christ’s kingdom there is “neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Jesus is our groom, and He is coming back for a bride. He is worthy and deserving of a lady of noble character who is clothed with dignity and faithfully working for the good of others because of the love she has for Him and His people.

C. Her Own Works Praised Her

The virtuous woman earned a good reputation for her quality workmanship and business
acumen. It was only fitting that she should have enjoyed the benefits of her labor as well as receiving credit for the things she accomplished. Not only was her husband known and respected in the city gates, but because of her achievements, she was honored in the same way.

D. She Received the Benefits of Her Own Works

It appears the concluding two verses of Proverbs 31 are not a continuation of the husband’s words of praise begun in verse 29. Instead, these verses are a summary of sorts that recognize beauty is beautiful, but it is shallow and fleeting. A wise man looks more deeply into the heart of a woman to discover her true beauty that grows more lovely with age.

The most critical factor a wise, godly man should use when choosing a wife is her authentic fear of the Lord. Regardless of her housekeeping skills or business savvy, a home will be truly blessed when a woman of virtue creates an environment of faith for her family. As she blesses others, the virtuous woman should receive both the tangible and intangible rewards for her labors, including things like honor, respect, and a peaceful home.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The virtuous woman is the crowning conclusion of the entire book of wisdom. Throughout its pages, the Book of Proverbs gives God’s people the tools needed to make sound decisions, apply good judgment, and live fruitful lives. A survey of the book reveals that men and women have basically two contrasting choices: living a life of wisdom or living a life of foolish rejection of God.

When we read the accounts of wisdom and folly in the Book of Proverbs, we should be inspired to live as the virtuous woman did. She blessed her world. She sheltered her family and others. She was generous and kind. She was faithful and supportive. She was sensitive and observant. She was diligent and productive. She was peaceful, and she was confident that she and her loved ones were prepared to face their future. This is a beautiful picture of a blessed life, the result of living wisely and building a life on the strong foundation of reverencing God while serving others.

While Proverbs 31 gives a picture of the many attributes of a virtuous woman, it concludes by giving the most important, foundational aspect of her character: her fear of the Lord. A person’s highest calling will never be based on marital status, the ability to procreate, a profession, or keeping the best home in the county. A believer’s highest calling is knowing, loving, and reverencing God.

God called King David a “man after mine own heart” (Acts 13:22). John was called the “disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23). The Lord does not define people by their accomplishments, but by their relationship with Him. At the same time, He calls His people to noble character and good works. His desire for His church is that she would be like the Proverbs 31 woman, growing in her abilities and influence while blessing others in an expanding sphere of influence.

The Proverbs 31 woman was most likely not one woman, but she gives us something to aspire to—and inspires us to rise above the bar of mediocrity and live a life that brings glory to God and blesses others. Whatever part played, whatever hat worn or function performed, all believers can be assured they are well equipped to accomplish their calling with dignity, virtue, and valor.

While we will likely never see Proverbs 31 as the theme for a Christian men’s conference, both men and women would do well to read and apply the lessons in this passage of Scripture. What the virtuous woman represents to all is a life lived in wisdom along with its blessings and rewards.

Some women may look at Proverbs 31 and think they could never measure up. A person could get exhausted just reading about this woman and all her achievements. Keeping and running a lovely home is admirable, but making sure the toothpaste is stocked or the kids have clean socks bears little weight in the light of eternity. Although a person may never have the stamina and drive of the Proverbs 31 woman, it is possible to have the same type of noble character.

Male or female, those who make their goal loving the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind and strength can surely be as praiseworthy as the Proverbs 31 woman.
REFLECTIONS

• How does viewing Proverbs 31 as a celebration of wisdom in action instead of a checklist for a good wife influence your thoughts about the passage?
• Considering that living a virtuous life is not as much about what you do, but why and how you do it, how does that affect your paradigm about your life situation right now?
• Being perfect is an unattainable goal, but being virtuous is not. Explain the difference and how that plays out in a life.
• The husband of the virtuous woman empowered her to grow and develop her gifts. Knowing that God wants the same for you, in what areas does this inspire you to stretch yourself?
• How can a gentle influence have a greater impact than a forceful, domineering approach?
• When the prince’s mother was writing her acronym in Proverbs 31, she was writing about what a virtuous maiden could become. How can realizing we are all works in process help you better respond to your own shortcomings, people who have setbacks, or those who are young in their faith?
• How could the husband’s lack of support have affected the Proverbs 31 woman’s ability to grow, develop, and be a blessing to others?