

PRAISE HER IN THE GATES

The Calling of Christian Motherhood

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To my parents for their wisdom,
my children for their joy,
my grandchildren for their promise.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Big Picture

And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:3)

Today the Church is characterized by much confusion about the role of the mother. What the Scriptures teach so plainly and simply is twisted beyond recognition by those who refuse to submit to God's Word. The world has infiltrated the Church and is leading women astray, teaching them to dismiss the biblical pattern for motherhood. But as God mercifully grants reformation and revival to His Church, many families are discovering that they have been either duped or disobedient, and many are returning to the old paths laid out in Scripture. It is essential that Christian mothers understand their calling so that they can whole-heartedly embrace it. When mothers faithfully obey God in this very precious and demanding role, they can expect God to fulfill His promise of blessing in their families.

As I discuss the mother's calling in this book, I will examine different challenging aspects of the mother's duties in the home, from childbirth to the time when the children leave home. But before discussing these specific areas, it is important to look at the big picture. Anytime we take on an important job, it is very helpful if we have a vision for the end result. If you are building a home, you may not be able to see with your eyes what the final product will be, but you can, by faith so to speak, know what you are shooting for. The house plans lay out the complete design, and as each wall

goes up, it should follow this master plan. Because mothering is very similar, a mother needs to see her daily tasks in light of the whole design. Each day's work is significant, for it is contributing toward the long-term plan. Though we may be tempted to think that this particular nail in this particular stud wall will not make much difference in the way the home looks in the end, a wise builder knows better. Each nail is important and ensures that the house will stand and not topple over in the first storm. Mothers must see each day's duties as part of this building process. Though it may not seem like much got accomplished in a single day, all those nails in the walls do add up. "The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish pulls it down with her hands" (Prov. 14:1).

Let's turn now to see what the Scriptures say about this master plan and why the mother's calling is so significant. First we will consider the positive biblical images of motherhood from Psalms and Proverbs, and then we will look at specific instructions to mothers in the New Testament.

Psalms 127 and 128 are often cited for their beautiful imagery describing mothers and children in the home. In Psalm 127 children are called a "heritage from the Lord," a "reward," and compared to "arrows in the hand of a warrior." The man with a full quiver is happy because his children give him stature in the community as a sign of the Lord's blessing. The virtuous wife in Proverbs 31 has succeeded in her duties because "her children rise up and call her blessed." The fruit of her hands praise her in the gates, her husband and her children testify to her obedience in her calling, and she is commended for this fruitful obedience.

Consider the lovely images of Psalm 128. Blessings for the one who fears God include happiness around the dinner table where the fruit of hard labor is enjoyed. The wife is described as a fruitful vine. And where is she? "In the very heart of your house." The mother is central to the picture of blessing and prosperity. Around the table are the olive shoots, an image of promise and growth and future prosperity. This

The Church Our Mother

But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. (Gal. 4:26-27)

When men assume the role of husband and father, the scriptural paradigm they follow is that of God the Father (Eph. 3:14-15) and Christ the Bridegroom (Eph. 5:25). They have a masculine paradigm to follow and must imitate Christ as they love their brides as Christ loves the Church. Wives also have a scriptural paradigm to follow, for they are commanded to imitate the Church. “Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let wives be to their own husbands in everything” (Eph. 5:24).

The Christian Church is called the new Jerusalem and a bride: “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). In verse nine, the Church is similarly called, “the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” Clearly, the Church is the model for earthly brides.

This bridal model is also maternal. Galatians 4:21-27 explains the allegory of the two covenants, and it identifies the new Jerusalem as “the mother of us all.” In this modern day when the Church has abandoned its duties and roles, it may be difficult for us to see our duties as mothers as they are pictured for us in the Church. Sadly, vast numbers of

mothers today (in the Church, as well as in the world) have abandoned or murdered their own children. But they learned this first from the Church, when the Church ceased to teach the truth, failed to correct and discipline its members, and rejected its commission of fruit bearing and nurturing to pursue its own entertainment and pleasure. Nevertheless, let's examine the Church's God-ordained duties that mothers can follow as their scriptural and maternal paradigm.

All the Church's responsibilities are commanded by God, and the Church is to submit joyfully to Christ; in the same way, a mother's duties are laid out in Scripture and are delegated to her by her husband. When God gives a commandment, He also provides the grace to do it. In all their responsibilities in childrearing, wives must look to their husbands and "submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord" (Col. 3:18). This means that wives are not any more autonomous than the Church is; a wife must look to her head as the Church looks to Christ. "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything" (Eph. 5:23-24).

When a wife lurches off to do what she thinks is her responsibility without her husband's blessing and delegation, she is out of bounds and unprotected. In the case of a single mom or a wife of an abdicating husband, she must look for the Lord's blessing and protection by being careful and wise about her duties and her manner of fulfilling them, and she must look for pastoral help in these things. Just as the Church today is doing many things that seem like a "good idea," if they are not mandated by Scripture, the Church is out of bounds, disobedient, and unprotected. Wise women will not imitate a disobedient Church. So as we go over these duties that are modeled for us by the obedient Church, we must remember that our submission to our husbands is a necessary foundation for our obedience and success in our duties. And in examining what

Conception, Pregnancy, Childbirth

For thou hast possessed my reins; thou hast covered me in my mother's womb. (Ps. 39:13)

When women talk about babies, they are talking shop. It is only natural that they develop strong opinions about nearly everything having to do with conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and child care. At the same time, it is only natural that many old wives' tales surround these womanly subjects. Old wives' tales may be around for generations, but they are foolish by nature. Even in Paul's day he had to caution Timothy to "reject profane and old wives' fables, and exercise yourself toward godliness" (1 Tim. 4:7). In the first chapter, Paul says not to "give heed to fables" because they "cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith" (v. 4). In 2 Timothy 4:4, Paul describes those who "turn their ears away from the truth" and are "turned aside to fables." Now certainly Paul may not have had in mind fables about childbirth, but nevertheless, the principle applies to all kinds of falsehoods. When women have strong opinions about the many issues surrounding the bearing and rearing of children, they can cause division and disputation in the church. This should not be.

We think of an old wives' tale as a silly story or superstitious belief passed around by gossipy old women. Certainly Christian women do not want to be characterized as listening to, believing in, or passing on silly stories as though they were true. The fact they are named after old wives is

a sad statement on the general behavior of some women. Women can be easily deceived (1 Tim. 2:14) and can learn to be “not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not” (1 Tim. 5:13) and probably believing things they ought not. None of this is very flattering to women, but if we want to identify our temptations, we must listen to God’s warnings to us through Paul. We must learn to separate truth from fiction when it comes to all we hear, read, or say about any subject, but especially (since this is our topic here) regarding our calling as wives and mothers. As we approach this subject, let us lay all our prejudices and favorite little pet notions aside and examine God’s Word with a submissive spirit. Anyone can promote a pet theory by telling testimonies of amazing cures. This is an old device of propaganda. Even “facts” can be misleading. One “study” comes up with one conclusion to support its thesis while another “study” produces far different results. This calls for wisdom.

God commanded fruitfulness in Genesis before the fall. “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). Man and woman were given the joyful task of taking dominion over all the earth. But after the fall, God cursed the man in his calling and cursed the woman in *her* calling as a mother and as a wife: “I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). Paul points out in 1 Timothy 2:15 that women can be saved in their calling: “Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control.” God will call women to Himself as they are fulfilling their calling as wives and mothers.

Let’s now turn and consider what the Bible says about conception, pregnancy, and childbirth. Then we will examine some of the old wives’ tales surrounding these aspects of a woman’s calling and discuss how we can discern between truth and falsehood and be self-controlled.

We know that children are from the Lord. They are His reward, His heritage, and He is the One who opens and closes the womb. When Eve gave birth to the first child, Cain, she said, “I have acquired a man from the Lord.” When Cain killed his brother, Eve conceived again and bore Seth, saying, “For God has appointed another seed for me instead of Abel, whom Cain killed” (Gen. 4:25). This is evident also in Genesis 29:31: “When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, He opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.” And again in Genesis 30:22: “Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb.” We learn in 1 Samuel 1:6 that Hannah was barren “because the Lord had closed her womb.” There is no question that the Bible teaches that conception is controlled by the Almighty. Children are fruit and seed from God.

One form of “old wives’ tale” that can accompany conception is attributing motives to God. If a woman cannot conceive or has a miscarriage, we ought not try to figure out *why* God is doing what He is doing. In the case of Leah, Scripture tells us why God gave her a child. But in our own cases, we do not have a word from Him telling us why things happen the way they do. We must trust in His kindness and sovereignty and know that He works everything for good for His children. After a miscarriage, a woman can worry that God may be punishing her for her sins. Of course we are all sinners, so we can always say that. But remember the blind man in the gospels. The Pharisees asked Jesus if his blindness was the result of his sin or his parents’ sin. Jesus pointed out that it was neither. We must receive all from the hand of the Lord, and we can know it is for our ultimate good, without attaching specific motives to God.

We also know that God forms the child in the womb. “Did not the same One fashion us in the womb?” (Job 31:15). “For you formed my inward parts; you covered me in my mother’s womb” (Ps. 139:13). And again in Isaiah 44:2, “Thus says the Lord who made you and formed you from the

womb.” A child is a marvelous work of God, as the psalmist says, “I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (139:14).

It is the Lord who not only opens the womb, but He brings forth children from the womb. Job said, “Why then have You brought me out of the womb?” (Job 10:18). “You are He who took me out of the womb” (Ps. 71:6). Conception, pregnancy, and delivery are all of the Lord. Christian women must have this biblical truth thoroughly understood as foundational to all their thinking about their calling as mothers. We cannot play God when it comes to planning conception, pregnancy, or delivery. It is all of God’s doing. We must be humble when we consider what He ordains to do in and through our bodies, and we must look to God for His sustaining grace through all aspects of this wonderful and awesome experience.

God has ordained pain in childbirth. “Rachel labored in childbirth, and she had a hard labor” (Gen. 35:16). Rachel not only had a hard labor, she died in childbirth. Childbirth has always been a dangerous work. It is no accident that the words *labor* and *delivery* are used. Just as men labor in the field, women labor in childbirth. It is *hard* work. *Pain* is not a bad word; at least the Scripture doesn’t shy away from using it. The pain of childbirth is used as a comparison when describing God’s judgment coming on a people. “They will be in pain as a woman in childbirth” (Is. 13:8). “Anguish has taken hold of him, pangs as of a woman in childbirth” (Jer. 50:43). “The sorrows of a woman in childbirth shall come upon him” (Hos. 13:13). When my husband was reading Anne Bradstreet’s poem (cited below) at our annual American history conference, he introduced it by saying, “This is a woman preparing for battle.” A woman certainly does have to prepare herself for labor and delivery much as a warrior prepares himself for war. This is a good work that women do, and it is a difficult and sometimes perilous engagement.

Christian women must realize that though child-bearing has a blessed result, it is still a fallen and cursed

process. It is not man who has made it a cursed process but God Himself. We cannot fool ourselves into thinking that we can make it easy or painless. Of course pregnancy is not a disease, but it is difficult. Yes, it is a natural or normal process, but it is still a cursed process, fraught with difficulty and even danger. To pretend that childbirth can be simple or to assume it will be a picnic is to believe an old wives' tale. Of course we should prepare for childbirth and do all we can to make it as successful and comfortable as possible, but we cannot deny that God has ordained pain in childbirth as a result of the fall. This runs counter to much non-Christian thinking. My point here is that all our preparations should be done before the Lord, acknowledging His sovereign hand over all these things and submitting to Him in childbirth as well as every other aspect of our lives. He gives us grace in our time of need, and delivering a child is a time of great need. Our preparations should be thorough; we should prepare both mentally and physically. We ought not think, "Since God is in control, there is nothing I can do." That is nonsense. God ordains both the end and the means. We should learn all we can to make the birthing process a triumph, knowing that we work out what God works in.

In centuries past, women commonly died in childbirth and babies also suffered a high mortality rate. Modern American women have much to be grateful for in this area. Few of us today are concerned that we may die in childbirth. It is truly rare. Consider this excerpt from a poem by Anne Bradstreet, the Puritan poet. She wrote this to her husband and called it "Before the birth of one of her children."

How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend,
How soon't may be thy lot to lose thy friend.

The low mortality in childbirth in this country is God's goodness to us. He has provided much to us in the way of knowledge about pregnancy and childbirth, and women and babies can receive exceptional care when their lives are in

danger. As Christians, there is no need for us to reject His gifts. Rather, we should cultivate gratitude.

At the same time, doctors in our country bear the guilt for the slaughter of thirty-seven million children over the past twenty-five years. We cannot entrust the care of our children to men and women who do not fear God and who murder babies in the womb. Although God is the One who has allowed us to find treatments for diseases, unregenerate man twists God's gifts and uses them for his own selfish ends. Certainly if all doctors did abortions, we would have to reject the profession all together. But there are many Christian nurses and doctors who can be trusted to help us take care of our children. To reject all of modern medicine because of the widespread wickedness would be foolish and believing an old wives' tale. In our community we are blessed with several Christian physicians and many Christian nurses who not only reject abortion but combine their training with a sincere desire to please and serve God while caring for people. These are the kind of physicians we should seek out, pray for, and thank God for. To lump all doctors together would not only be unkind to those with true integrity and faith, it would be a false representation and qualify as a fable.

Today with the rise of midwifery among Christians, many women are choosing to have their babies at home, and many with great success. Christian women must be very careful not to allow disputes over the choice of doctor versus midwife. Because women tend to feel strongly about these subjects, it is tempting to become imperialistic about their preferences, finding a Bible verse to supposedly support their view. We ought not try to proselytize women to our preference. This can nurture a "true believer" mentality that clutches at its own cause. Remember that word of mouth is not a reliable source of information. Do your own research. And women must be very careful to wait to be invited before giving their opinion. When we differ with one another over whether it is best to have babies in the hospital or at home,

it is a thing “indifferent,” at least as far as fellowship is concerned. We must not listen to those who use scare tactics to convince us of their view.

When a midwife says (as one said to my daughter), “If you go to the hospital they will shoot you full of drugs and stick you in a corner,” you ought to be alert to the fact that she is either making a wild statement or you need to find out what hospital she is referring to and stay far away from it. This may be passing on old wives’ tales. We live in a small town and our hospital has a good reputation. I had three children there, and I never had drugs, and I was never stuck in a corner. The truth is that many women *want* drugs and *ask* or even *beg* for drugs. Some of them are very grateful for drugs because in their case, drugs were a great blessing. That is an entirely different thing than “being shot full” of them. The Christian doctors I know do not *push* drugs, nor do they leave their patients in a corner.

Now of course the converse is true also. If a local midwife with a good reputation is being slandered, we ought not listen or pass it on. Midwives and doctors should be held to the same standard. There are well-trained, God-fearing midwives, as well as poorly trained, God-fearing midwives. We cannot lump them all together. (And of course, there is the other category of God-hating midwives; I am not even speaking here about them.) If fables are being passed around regarding midwifery, we ought to oppose them, whether we are personally supportive of midwifery or not. Fables are never to be used to support or refute our positions. The point is to have charity toward one another, even if we think we see a sister making what we believe to be a grievous mistake. I have seen the saints in our community rally around and help people in difficult circumstances, even if they disagreed with their medical decisions that got them into the difficulty. This is what Christian charity is.

The only way that fables can cause division is if they are pressed on women as gospel truth and a response is demanded. Some say that biblical modesty prohibits the