

A MOTHER WITH A DIFFERENCE

By Paul Penno Jr.

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A young father was trying to explain the concept of marriage to his four-year-old daughter. He got out their wedding album, thinking visual images would help, and explained the entire wedding service to her. When he was finished, he asked if she had any questions. She pointed to a picture of the wedding party and asked, "Daddy, is that when mommy came to work for us?"

A teacher gave her class of second graders a lesson on the magnet and what it does. The next day in a written test, she included this question: My full name has six letters. The first one is M. I pick up things. What am I? When the test papers were turned in, the teacher was astonished to find that almost 50 percent of the students answered the question with the word Mother.

When we are young, we need an example of sincere faith. Too often parents say that they want their children to make up their own minds about religion. They usually say that because they have not made up their own minds about what they believe. So, in essence, they are making disciples of their own belief system. Their children are going to believe like them unless somewhere along the line there is an intervention.

In everything that you've needed to know, somewhere along the line a mom probably taught you. Let's revisit some of those lessons:

My mother taught me logic: "If you fall off that swing and break your neck, you can't go to the store with me," as well as, "If everyone else jumped off a cliff would you do it too?"

My mother taught me medicine: "If you don't stop crossing your eyes, they're going to freeze that way."

My mother taught me to think ahead: "If you don't pass your spelling test, you'll never get a good job!"

My mother taught me to meet a challenge: "What were you thinking? Answer me when I talk to you. Don't talk back to me!"

My mother taught me humor: "When that lawn mower cuts off your toes, don't come running to me."

My mother taught me how to become an adult: "If you don't eat your vegetables, you'll never grow up."

My mother taught me about genetics: "You are just like your father!"

My mother taught me about my roots: "Do you think you were born in a barn?"

My mother taught me about the wisdom of age: "When you get to be my age, you will understand," or, "I will explain it all when you get older."

My mother taught me about anticipation: "Just wait until your father gets home."

My mother taught me about receiving: "You are going to get it when I get you home."

And my mother taught me, justice: "One day you will have kids, and I hope they turn out just like you. Then you'll see what it's like! I can't wait!"

She is the greatest mother of all time—and I don't refer to Eve. She is the mother to whom the angel Gabriel announced, "Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women" (Lk. 1:28).

Most people interpret the "highly favored" to mean that the virgin Mary was a super-Hollywood beauty star. But the Bible makes plain that "favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth [reverences] the Lord, she shall be praised" (Pr. 31:30). For an angel to tell Mary that she was "highly favored" of the Lord did not mean cosmetics, but "the hidden adorning of the heart," a beautiful spirit (see 1 Pet. 3:3, 4). Mary herself discloses that she had a problem involving humiliation for she sings in her poem that the Lord "hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden" (the Greek word is translated "humiliation" in Acts 8:33, and as "vile" in Phil 3:21). Mary evidently knew sorrow and rejection, even as her Son was "despised and rejected of men" (Isa 53:3). At last, Joseph married her to be the step-mother to at least six motherless children, four boys and no one knows how many girls (Mt 13:55, 56). The aged Simeon predicted that a sword as big as Goliath's would pierce her soul (Lk 2:35, "*romphaia*," LXX).

No mother in all history has ever been called to endure the terrible pain that Mary went through, even though it is probable that many pagan mothers in the Roman Empire were forced to watch their sons being crucified; but none was forced to watch the Son whom she knew to be the Son of God, crucified! The sight tore at her soul, for with

His death she thought she saw the death of all mankind.

In our few moments devoted to Mother's Day, can we learn a lesson from this story? Yes, those words, "The Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women" are God's Mother's Day message to every mother in the world who will simply believe the Good News. Why? Her Son is "the Saviour of the world" (Jn. 4:42), and that includes YOU. God has a special regard for EVERY struggling mother; and her prayers have a special place at His throne.

There is one memorable marriage in the Bible that no one seems to talk about: that is the marriage of Joseph and Mary. If there is a punch line of wisdom in which we can sum up the lessons of that marriage, it is this: Honor thy stepmother.

Now the Bible says, "Honor thy . . . mother," but not a word about honoring a stepmother. But that's what Mary was! Matthew 12:46 tells us that Jesus had "brethren," and ch. 13:55 actually tells us the names of four of the brothers, and adds that Jesus also had "sisters," but doesn't say how many girls there were. Now the question arises, were these brothers and sisters children of Mary herself? Or were they Joseph's children by a previous marriage? Two quite clear clues are in the Bible: (a) the fact that Jesus' "brethren" bossed Him around would indicate that they had to be older than He, for in Jewish families the younger never did that to the older siblings (John 7:3-5); and (b) when Jesus was dying on His cross, He did not leave His mother to the care of any of these "brothers" or "sisters," as He would have done if they were actually her

children (see John 19:26, 27). Therefore the conclusion seems inescapable: these four boys and these girls were children from Joseph's previous marriage; he was a widower. That opens up a wider vista of appreciation for Mary herself.

Being stepmother to such a brood was a terrific job! We know there was friction and tension in the family, for these siblings "did not believe in Him," says John; and that would mean also they did not believe in Mary.

Imagine raising at least six stepchildren who are not truly respectful of you and who believe you are an adulteress. But wait—look how the story turns out: after Jesus' crucifixion, at least some of those siblings repented, and believed in Jesus. In Acts 1:14 we find "Mary the mother of Jesus with His brethren" gathered in the upper room with the apostles, praying for the Holy Spirit. And one of the boys actually became president of the General Conference (see Acts 15:13). And so I conclude, all honor to Mary as a step-mother!

What was it that made the Virgin Mary to be the happiest mother of all time? (Well, before that huge "sword" pierced her soul, of course). The happiness that Mary experienced is indeed shared by many mothers, for pregnancy is normally a time of near-euphoria; God made woman to feel happy becoming a mother—we praise Him for that thoughtfulness and kindness! But aside from that natural happiness that every woman is intended to know in motherhood, the virgin Mary was especially happy! We read of it in Luke 1:45: Mary has just learned that she is to become pregnant with the

Messiah, and in her joyous enthusiasm she dashes off to "the hill country" to have a visit with a cousin, an old woman named Elizabeth, the priest

Zacharia's wife, who is six months pregnant with John the Baptist. Elizabeth greets her and bestows upon her this supreme benediction: "Blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord."

Every mother may share that blessing that comes from believing the Good News that the Lord is communicating to her. There will be a "performance," and her dreams will be fulfilled. Successful child-training comes from mother believing the promises of God. But to believe requires a calm, thoughtful heart, free from fretfulness and impatience. Your child may annoy you or exasperate you. Now comes the real crisis: will you believe the Good News that God loves your child more than you do and if you don't get in His way, He will give you wisdom to train the child aright? Or will you doubt and disbelieve and allow Satan to put discouraging, fretful words in your mouth that will confuse your child? Blessed is the mother who immediately reacts to every crisis, every problem, by believing the word of the Lord! A good prayer to pray every day is the one a distraught father once prayed: "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief!" (Mk 9:24). This dark world needs more mothers who will believe like Mary did, and refuse to speak unbelieving words!

The virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, preached a sermon once. It was very short. But it was to the point, and we need to listen to it often.

It was at the wedding in Cana, when the party ran out of wine and the host did not know what to do. Mary saw the difficulty, and immediately thought of Jesus. One wonders why she would think of Him—what did she think He could do? The story is in John 2:1-11. It seems evident that she had learned to rely on Him as He was growing up in the home as being someone always willing and able to do something in every emergency to help the situation. Perhaps she thought that He could send some of His young disciples off to buy some wine. She apparently felt some responsibility because the wedding concerned relatives. Her own reputation for hospitality may have been involved. So she told Jesus, “They have no wine!” Jesus must have given her to understand, “Don’t worry; I’ll take care of the problem.”

Then, turning to the perplexed servants, she preached her little sermon, “Whatever He saith unto you, DO IT!” Fortunately, they did just that, obeyed His instructions, and took to the “governor of the feast” the superb wine that Jesus had made by turning the water into wine.

Now, how does this little sermon apply to us? Does Jesus go to the trouble of telling us each one specific things to “do”? Does He bother that much? Yes. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus; He is the Vicar of Christ, His personal Representative here on earth. In John 16:7-11 Jesus describes how the Holy Spirit comes to each of us doing three things: (1) He convicts us of sin, so that He may heal us of it; (2) He convicts us of righteousness—that is, He convicts us of the “right” thing to do at all times, and

(3) He convicts us of “judgment,” that is, that Satan, the prince of this world, is cast out, defeated. Today, Jesus will “say” something to you, convict you of some duty. “DO IT!”

The Virgin Mary preached only one sermon that we know of, and it was a good one: “Whatever He [Jesus] saith unto you, DO IT!” (Jn. 2:5). But there’s another “sermon” by example she “preached” that is tremendously helpful to those of us who want to be real Christians. God “elected” her to become the mother of the Messiah. But mark this: God was powerless to FORCE her. The only hope the human race had was for someone to consent to become the mother of the Saviour of the world; and right there was the weakest link in God’s chain of salvation let down to save the world. It would have been contrary to His character for Him to force someone to cooperate!

Suppose no one on earth would have consented to become the mother of the Messiah? Face it: THE WORLD WOULD HAVE BEEN LOST. Becoming the mother of the Messiah involved the most excruciating pain that any woman on earth could ever endure; Simeon correctly told her that “a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also” (Lk. 2:35), the word being “*romphaia*,” the Septuagint word for Goliath’s giant sword. No other woman who believed that her child was the Son of God has ever been forced to watch Him be crucified! What a sword! If Mary had refused, the Messiah could never have been born.

Mary’s “sermon by example” is her choice to BELIEVE. Elizabeth said to her, “Blessed is she that

believed” (Lk. 1:45). Mary’s choice to believe supplied the missing link in God’s plan of salvation. Note: She did not DO anything. She simply BELIEVED. You can’t even say that she obeyed! There was nothing she COULD DO, nothing she could have “obeyed,” except to believe! God has elected YOU to salvation; yes, it’s true (1 Tim. 2:3, 4).

But you can choose to deny, negate, counteract, refuse, frustrate, disbelieve God's election, for He can no more force you to enter heaven and eternal life than He could have forced the virgin Mary. Now, choose to believe, consent to the Holy Spirit, cooperate with God's election, and Christ will be born in you (Gal 4:19). “From first to last this has been the work of God” (it has to be! 2 Cor. 5:18, NEB). LET Him do His blessed will!

Who is the Virgin Mary? And where is she? Many say they have seen her here and there. Rome teaches that the Bible supports their idea. Their claim is based on two texts: Lk. 1:28, the angel Gabriel says, “Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women.” And vs. 42, 43, the aged Elizabeth says, “Blessed art thou among women, . . . the mother of my Lord.” Their argument is that these texts mean that the virgin Mary was sinless by nature, and is “the Mother of God.” Catholic teaching says she is not to be worshipped, but “venerated,” based on an artificial distinction in meaning between two Greek words that in turn are based on a Hebrew word that means the same thing.

Gabriel told Mary that she had received grace. Very good; but only sinners can receive grace. Elizabeth had it right: “Blessed is she that believed” (vs. 45). Mary was a genetic descendant of the fallen Eve through Abraham and David, having inherited their “seed” or DNA or sinful nature as have we all (Rom 1:3; Heb 2:16); but what makes her “blessed” is that SHE BELIEVED the word of God. And she passed on to our Saviour her own fallen, sinful nature, for Scripture says “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). It does not say “all have sinned except Mary.” As His faithful mother, she taught Him to believe. The glory of the gospel is that Jesus took upon Himself the full genetic inheritance Mary gave Him and which we all have, and yet in that fallen, sinful nature He lived a life of perfect righteousness, having “condemned sin in the flesh” so that in us who believe there may be present “the righteousness of the law” (Rom. 8:3, 4). We thank the virgin Mary for being a good mother to the Boy who surrendered Himself to the cross; but it would be a sin for us to doubt His total love and devotion to us on the assumption that we must ask her to intercede with Him in our behalf. Could she be more righteous, more faithful, and more loving than He??

Lastly, where is the Virgin Mary? The Bible says nothing about her being “assumed” into heaven; she is not the co-savior of the human race, there is no “co-savior” in the universe, only One Saviour, the pope notwithstanding, she is not the “co-Lamb of God,” there is only One; our prayers should be directed to the Father “in the name of Jesus,” not to

her; and she will rise from her resting place in the first resurrection when Jesus returns (1 Thess. 4:16, 17). He will then give her immortality, which only God now has (1 Tim. 6:16).

A picture in the newspaper showed Sarah Jane Olson looking disconsolate in court on trial for putting bombs under police cars twenty-four years ago. She has been incognito for years as an apparently law-abiding wife and mother. She was young and hot-headed twenty-four years ago; should she be held accountable today for trying to murder policemen then?

Should God hold us accountable for sins we committed when we were young and hot-headed (or hot-blooded)?

Modern governmental jurisprudence has no mechanism of justification by faith; you're guilty or not, and if the former, you pay up. Sarah Jane paid a debt to society. We sinners before God have a debt to pay to the law and order of the universe, but we can't pay it and still live. Cosmic justice demands that it be paid. One has paid our debt, and the gospel is God's mechanism of repentance, which operates "through faith" (Eph 2:8, 9). We can identify with the One who paid our debt; we can appreciate what it cost Him to do so; and that very experience of faith changes the sinful heart and creates a true hatred for the sin we once loved. In such an experience of justification by faith we are "born again." We are new people, each of whom can say, "I am crucified with Christ" (Gal 2:20).

Sarah Jane had no one who can stand before the court and prove that her debt of twenty-four years

ago is paid. Hence her disconsolate look in court. David teaches us what to pray: "Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions: according to Thy mercy remember Thou me for Thy goodness' sake, O Lord" (Ps 25:7). Everybody has "sins of . . . youth" we wish we could forget. God has promised to "remember [them] not," but this is only for His "goodness' sake," that is, because One has paid the debt, the Son of God. The transaction is highly unfair if it is mere "vicarious substitution," allowing us to escape with the same hard, selfish hearts we had twenty-four years ago (or whenever). God cannot be "just and the justifier" of any of us unless we can convince the heavenly Court that we "believe in Jesus," and that "with the heart [that] man believeth unto righteousness" (Rom. 3:20; 10:10). All of Sarah Jane's decades of law-abiding conduct since the 1970's couldn't help her now; likewise a lifetime of good works can't help us. And how can the heavenly Court be convinced that our faith is genuine and not spurious? Only by looking to see if it is genuine—"faith which works" and demonstrates a true "atonement."

You can spot them nearly every time: a special group of people who seem happy all the time, eyes sparkling, smiles at the ready, laughter comes easily. They were deeply loved in babyhood by father or mother (or both!). They are "endowed," even probably enjoying a prenatal warmth when mother-to-be was happy and secure. It's fairly easy for them to say, "Yes, I believe God loves me!" They go through life having a continual picnic; they don't walk, they dance their way through. Solomon

speaks of them in contrast with those not so endowed: "All the days of the afflicted are evil [wretched, NEB]: but he that is of a merry heart hath a continual feast" (Pr. 15:15). The "afflicted" are those who lacked that warm, cuddly love in babyhood or childhood. They may have been orphans, or raised by an alcoholic or drug-addicted parent, or in a home poisoned by infidelity and divorce. It's no fault of their own that they are not richly endowed, and are "afflicted." Is it fair that the ticket to heaven seems to be a "faith" that comes naturally for lucky people? Or, forget heaven for a moment, that all their days here have to be "wretched"? Don't jump to a conclusion too soon:

(1) While it is true that "faith" is the ticket to heaven, faith is not easier for some than for others because "God hath dealt to every person the measure of faith" (Rom 12:3). There is no such thing as "natural" faith. It must always be learned, received, imported, and exercised in fellowship with Christ.

(2) Let us assume that the Virgin Mary gave Him natural cuddly

emotional warmth in His babyhood, still He was reared in an unbelieving family with all the liabilities anyone can have known in a hard childhood (compare Mt. 13:53-58; Jn. 7:2-8; Ps. 69:7-11). He says He was "afflicted . . . from My youth up" (Ps. 88:15). All the "natural" emotional warmth He may have had from childhood vanished as He hung on the cross; there He had to live entirely by faith based strictly on God's word.

(3) Your preparation to enjoy not only heaven but life here and now may possibly be even easier than for those richly endowed emotionally since childhood. Faith is not emotion; true happiness comes only from fellowship with Christ; and where is He to be found? "Preaching Good News to the poor; healing the broken-hearted; proclaiming deliverance to the captives; recovering sight for the blind; setting at liberty them that are bruised; proclaiming the justification by faith "acceptance" of the Lord (see Luke 4:18, 19). Join Him, and let Him make you happy.

A little boy forgot his lines in a Sabbath school presentation. His mother was in the front row to prompt him. She gestured and formed the words silently with her lips, but it did not help. Her son's memory was blank. Finally, she leaned forward and whispered the cue, "I am the light of the world." The child beamed and with great feeling and a loud clear voice said, "My mother is the light of the world."