

THE GREATEST MOTHER OF ALL TIME

By Paul Penno Jr.

May 8, 2011

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.

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: 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" (Luke 1:45).

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!

Grandchildren are a special blessing. One sees mother love exemplified. Mothers can’t keep their eyes off the baby! No matter who is holding the baby, every moment, mother’s eyes are on that baby.

There is no human love that we know as faithful and enduring as the love of a mother for her son. It is sons who get into so much trouble that they break mother’s heart—more than daughters seem to do!

The best Son in all eternity broke His mother’s heart when she was forced to watch Him writhing on a Roman cross, crucified as though He were a criminal.

Can you imagine the pain that slashed Mary’s heart! Old Simeon, when he found Joseph and Mary and the holy Child in the Temple, said to her, “A sword shall pierce through thy own soul . . .” (Luke 2:25-35).

The Greek word old Simeon used for “sword” was *ramphaia*, the word for Goliath’s sword, that huge weapon that young David pulled out of its scabbard as he jumped up onto the felled and stunned giant after he had hit him in the forehead with his pebble slung with marvelous accuracy inspired by the Holy Spirit; but what a prophecy old Simeon declared under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit!

Poor Mary, as she watched her holy Son grow up and wondered at His holy character! What joy He must have brought to her; but she could never forget that inspired prophecy of the old prophet; no mother has suffered the pain that Mary must have suffered when she watched Jesus being crucified!

Someone will object, “But many mothers in the old Roman Empire had to watch their sons crucified!”

Yes, but don’t forget the more than sublime hope and joy that Jesus’ identity had brought to her from His birth to the awful event of Calvary; she could not understand what was going on! Sometimes in my faulty human thinking I have wondered if it had not been more merciful of the Lord to let Mary join her husband Joseph in sleep before Calvary had to

happen; but I cannot second guess the Father's holy will.

The Father permitted this terribly awful Event to be witnessed by the human mother of our Lord and Savior; if any mother will read the awful Story in the Gospels, as it is, she will be inspired and strengthened to endure the trials that God in His providence permits mothers everywhere to endure.

How much does God care about you as an individual person? How important are you to Him? The biggest problem that children and youth have today is that they don't know who they are. Oh yes, they know their names that their parents gave them, but they don't know their true identity, they don't sense their own self-respect or self-worth as individuals. So they drift into all sorts of evil. "Here's nuthin' goin' nowhere" is the root cause of most crime and degradation, including teenage promiscuity and pregnancies that later produce a replay of the same tragic consequences, generation after generation.

When you were born as a baby, your mother probably counted everything she could see—you had both eyes, two ears, two hands, two feet, and yes, she probably counted the toes on each one to be sure you were "normal." She paid attention to you; you were important in her eyes. But as you grew older, you began to realize that she could not follow you around all your life, re-counting your fingers and your toes; you were on your own.

That's when you began to have problems, unless you had learned somehow to believe that you have

a heavenly Father who cares for you infinitely more than your father and your mother ever could.

One thing your mother never counted on you—how many hairs were on your head. Even though she cared for you she never cared that much. But Jesus makes a fantastic statement that must not be brushed off as mere exaggeration: He says in Mt. 10:29, 30 that your heavenly Father has counted all the hairs on your head! And you must not disbelieve it—Jesus says it; it has to be so. The important point is not the actual arithmetical total. It would do you no good to know.

This is Jesus' way of saying what David said in Ps. 139:17, 18, "How precious are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand." Now, what will you do with this? Believe it, or disbelieve it? Your happiness here and maybe forever, depends on which way you choose.

Let me tell you about the shortest sermon in the Bible—it's only one sentence, preached by someone who has a right to the pulpit at least once in her lifetime—the Virgin Mary. She preaches to the frustrated servants who don't know what to do about an emergency: "Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it!" (Jn. 2:5). Then, a period.

She's talking about her Son, Jesus. You can't get bored with such a short sermon but you can get frustrated by it. It seems He's always telling me to do something that I feel I just can't do.

Those poor servants: He told them, "Fill the water pots with water"—easy enough; then, "take them to the master of the feast"; easy enough. But they

must tell the boss, “Sir, here’s your wine you asked for,” when they know jolly well it’s only water. Now that’s hard!

Doing or saying what your heart says isn’t so—is anything harder? Let’s find the Good News here: (1) It’s your heavenly Father that is telling you to *do* this or that. (2) A true Father never drives or “provokes” you to frustration (remember Paul’s counsel to fathers, “provoke not your children . . .?”). (3) He is telling you what to do; now take the time to ask Him how to do it; He’ll respond.

(4) Note that Mary did NOT say, “whatsoever your friends tell you to do, do it,” or “what your teachers, counselors, or your parents even, tell you.” They may be right and they may be wrong, but no one understands you like your Heavenly Father (Psalm 27:10 will help you there).

(5) Jesus was a youth, knows your problem exactly, was tempted precisely like you are “in all things,” understands your selfish fear, still likes you (loves you). Believe it.

(6) Listen to Him pray at the age of 12, “Not My will but Thine be done.” Tells His doubting, frustrated parents: “Don’t you know I must be about My Father’s business?” In other words, “Whatsoever He saith unto Me, I must do it!” Anticipated His own mother’s sermon!

(7) You feel helpless? At least you can *look!* Watch Him, listen to Him in Gethsemane; on His cross. Identify with Him there. Your dead, lifeless heart will experience a resurrection “with Him,” also.

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 step-mother 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!

Now the commandment some think they can't obey is “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12). To them it seems as impossible as if God asked them to jump over the moon. Does it sound easy? It doesn't to these people.

If your Mom and Dad are kind, faithful, loving parents, you may find it easy to “honor” them. In that case, just be very thankful!

But for others, this commandment is a stone wall. Mom was mean, an alcoholic perhaps, a drug addict, someone lazy, selfish, uncaring, or cruel, just the kind of person it seems impossible to “honor.” Or, it could be Dad is the problem: he was an alcoholic, harsh, cruel, selfish, absorbed in his own pleasure, he showed you no love, and he may have even abandoned you to take off with another woman.

How can you “honor” or respect him? When it comes to praying the Lord's prayer, you find it hard to say, “Our Father which art in heaven” This problem is important.

If you believe that God is telling you to do something you can't do, that upsets your whole attitude toward Him. You can't help it; it's not your

fault if your parents deprived you of the atmosphere of loving nurture that every child born into this world deserves. What happens for multitudes is a sour alienation from God Himself. Why serve Him if He demands what you can't do?

But at the same time, your heart of hearts deep inside longs for peace with God and healing of soul. You can't expel your parents from your mind, even if they are thousands of miles away. As long as you live, there they are casting a shadow over your inmost emotional being. You are never truly free; you have a ball and chain around your ankles. If some miracle enabled you to keep that troublesome fifth commandment, you would see hope that you could keep all of the ten and be happy.

God has assured you in the fifth commandment that He will enable you to “honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long” and happy. Therefore this commandment contains the secret of joyous living. But how can He accomplish this miracle?

1. God sees people differently than we do, and He enables us to see them as He sees them. In other words, when God sees someone who is mean, selfish, irritable, unloving—just “bad,” He sees that person as he/she could become, or would have become, by His grace. This is how God looks at the sinful human race, “not imputing their trespasses to them” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Yes, God loves people, but He does not love their badness. So, because Christ gave Himself for everyone's salvation, He sees in every person what that person will become when God's grace has time

to work on his/her heart. He sees the potential; He sees what that person would choose to be if circumstances had permitted. Many a person who is irritable, unpleasant, or cantankerous has a hidden problem that makes him/her that way.

For example, there was an irritable elephant that got onto the main road and harassed motorists passing by. Finally, the Game Warden had to shoot the beast. Then they found the problem: it had a painfully abscessed tooth. Yet the elephant was probably normally docile.

2. You learn from the Bible to think of your parents as they would have been were it not for the troublesome pain that distressed them. Yes, this requires faith on your part, but you learn that faith from Jesus for He has faith in you. As Jesus forgives us when we are unlovable, so you learn to forgive your parents.

It's very true that you don't have the resources within yourself to do this. No psychology textbook can give you that ability. But this is precisely what the grace of Christ does for us. It's God's assurance in the fifth commandment. He says, You will learn to honor your father and your mother, and then you will be happy for now and forever.

The love of parents for their children can be reversed; even if a child is bad, the parent still loves him. Now by the grace of the Savior, it is possible also for a child (perhaps grown by now!) to love the parent in spite of his/her badness.

3. What is back of this miracle is the realization that all of us are like that irritable elephant. Something gives us pain and irritates us, but we

learn from the Bible that Jesus had things that gave Him pain also.

He was "despised and rejected by men" (Isaiah 53:3), abused, insulted, yes, crucified. He had enemies and tormentors, but He prayed for those who crucified Him, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). As we want God to be generous with us, to overlook our faults and to love us in spite of them, so now we are given love and grace toward other people who wrong us. This is the miracle of the assurance in the fifth commandment.

4. That assurance embedded therein rests on the firm foundation of a truth more solid than the everlasting hills: the love of God for His lost world. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Can you imagine a more wonderful "Father" to have than God Himself, the Father to Jesus?

But wait, here's a problem: there was a time when the Father was so distant from Jesus, so unresponsive to His pleas for help, that it seemed to Jesus that He did not love Him. When Jesus was on His cross, the Father seemed so far away (maybe your father or mother has seemed far away emotionally from you!) that Jesus cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46).

Then, according to the record in Psalm 22:1 and following, Jesus kept on praying to Him, but the Father did not answer: "You do not hear" (verse 2). During those awful hours, Jesus had no visible

evidence that His Father cared anything for Him! Don't discount the reality of the temptation Jesus felt. If He had opened His heart to welcome the temptations of Satan, Jesus could have become resentful and bitter. But He resisted that temptation, and chose instead to create something out of nothing, to believe that His Father loved Him and heard Him even though there was not a shred of visible evidence to support His faith. Here He was despised and rejected of men, forsaken by His own disciples, the heavens black above His soul, and yet He chose to trust in His Father. So we read that before He died on the cross, Jesus gained the victory. It seemed He was in the last throes of agony, being tossed on the horns of African wild buffalo, "Save me ... from the horns of the wild oxen!" (vs. 21). I cannot see your loving face, Jesus says; but I believe You are there, and even though it seems you don't love Me, I believe in the darkness You do love Me!

It's like a child who cannot see the loving face of his parent in the dark, but trusts that his/her love is real. On His cross Jesus cries out for us all to hear, "He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; nor has He hidden His face from Him; but when He cried to Him, He heard" (verse 24).

Jesus built a bridge over a vast chasm of darkness and sin (our sin, our guilt), and made a way for us to believe in Him when things are dark for us. We call that bridge "the atonement," or "the reconciliation." Now, can you build a bridge of reconciliation between you and your parents, even when it seems they don't care? Even if they are

long gone to their rest, you can re-create the matter and receive the "reconciliation" Christ gives.

Yes, by the grace of Christ your Savior! Your faith based on Him and His faith is powerful. It also builds something out of what appears to be nothing. Love that is more than our normal human love takes over (it is called *agape* in the New Testament), and it begins to work miracles. Such love, which has its origin in Christ, works miracles here on earth. Many are the alienated families who are healed by this grace of Christ!

5. But suppose your parents resist and reject this grace of Christ manifested in you? In some cases, that may happen, and we need to be prepared, for God cannot force people to respond properly. But be very slow about blaming others; but if it is indeed their fault, then God's back-up plan kicks in:

Jesus explains that if we love people in a "household" and the "household ... is not worthy, let your peace return to you" (Matthew 10:13). The meaning is that even if your efforts at reconciliation and "honor" meet with apparent failure, the Holy Spirit will give you peace within your own heart. You have chosen to "honor your father and your mother," to "honor" the institution of parenthood and the establishment of families, to honor the wise and loving parent he/she could have been by the grace of Christ—the original plan of God for the human race. Now "your days" will be "long" and happy, just as the assurance in the fifth commandment says!

6. There is a precious lesson we learn in our relation to our parents:

“We have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. ... No chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 9:9-11). We learn to thank God for His “chastening” us! “For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?” (verses 6, 7). Great Good News! All that you thought was “against you” turns out to be “for you,” a million times over! The painful “chastening” turns out to be proof that you are treated as a child of God!

7. Will we learn to honor grandparents also? God could have chosen to multiply people on earth through some other way than through families, like putting coins in machines. But no, He chose to bring every child into the world through the loving warmth of a family. When we begin to understand His plan of salvation, we “honor” His wisdom. In this way, we are given the gift of a respect for all our forebears. They may have been far less educated than we are, but they did the best with what they had. God says of them as Jesus said of Mary Magdalene, “[She] has done what she could” (Mark 14:8). Your grandparents “did what they could,” and you will honor them for their love and faithfulness.

You want to be among them! Jesus invites you. He is gathering a host of people who come from all kinds of sad, unhappy places; now they are coming into the bright sunshine of His love. They rejoice in

the fellowship of others who share this “faith of Jesus.” Your place is there, waiting for you.

A man took his wife and son to a lake area outside the city for a vacation. While the mother was fixing a meal in the house, the father and son went out on the lake in a boat for awhile. A sudden storm came up. Clouds covered the sun. There was darkness all over the lake as the waves were billowing. Then the son and the father saw that the mother had put a light in the window, and the father said, “Son I’m going to row. You keep your eyes on the light. Help me go in the direction of the light.” They did and made it to the house safely. When they arrived home, the mother was there to greet them. The son said, “Mom, we came home safely because we steered by your light.”

I wonder, when our children reach heaven, if they will come up to us and say, “Oh, dad, mom, I made it home safe because I steered by your light.”