

WIVES OF THE BIBLE

A Cross-Section of Femininity

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MOTHER OF OUR LORD MARY—JOSEPH'S WIFE

And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

THE ages are not out of joint. The present is always bringing to fruition some hope of the past. The times that are have in them the prophecy of the times to come. We fail to see in today the evolution of yesterday and the embryo of tomorrow only because we are not seers and the spirit of prophecy and interpretation does not characterize our times. The holy men of old, men of God, who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, caught up the thread of past history, and with the swiftness and strength of an inspired imagination, they carried that thread far into the depths of the days to come—through years, through decades, through centuries, through millenniums, and stopped only at the points of universal interest to men to report what they had seen.

Seven hundred years and more stretched between the day when Israel's greatest prophet, Isaiah, foresaw this day of our text and said: **Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.** That prophecy is almost forgotten. Only a few of the more spiritual men and devout women have so remembered and treasured the words as not to lose them in the meshes of tradition or distort them into some unwarranted Messianic hope.

Simeon is waiting to see the words of Isaiah come to pass; Anna is not taken by surprise, but Joseph—devout man that he was, the most fortunate son in Israel—so little dreamed that Mary, his espoused, could be that virgin of Heaven's favor, that he must have privily put her away for harlotry, had not an angel come to him in a vision to say: **Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife; for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.** This is that which was spoken by Isaiah so long ago! This is the fact on ages telling—**She shall bring forth a son;** the fact that reaches back to the dark day when sinful, despairing Adam, and guilty, shrinking Eve, heard the promise of redemption and restoration; the fact that reaches down the ages yet unborn to that glorious day in which the Son of God shall **reign from sea to sea and from the river unto the ends of the earth.** I wonder not that a man whose vision God had opened to see the things to come should linger longest at the scene in the manger, the sight of God's Son in swaddling clothes.

But my joy is greatest in that Isaiah's *future* is our past; his hope is our well established fact and faith; and today with reason's aid and history's help we can say, "She did bring forth a Son. His name, with good reason, was and is JESUS, and He has saved, saves now, and shall save His people from their sins."

The pointing of my text furnishes us with that variety of thought which ought to result in some most profitable reflections today. The colon shall mark my first division, and the words lying back of it suggest this thought.

THE MOTHER OF OUR LORD

She shall bring forth a Son.

The Protestantism which strikes the name of the most favored of women from its thought and speech is at an unreasonable extreme from Rome's semi-idolatrous devotion to the Virgin. We can better afford to forget Rebecca, or Rachel, or Hannah of the Old Testament, or Dorcas, or even favored Elisabeth of the New than to be unmindful of her life, experiences, and acts upon whom the power of the Most High rested; and unto whom was born that Holy Thing to be called "the Son of God."

From her, Christ brought his perfect humanity.

So far as we know no one claims that anything of divinity belonged to Mary in her earthly life. The promise was that **the seed of woman**, not of spirit, nor angel, but **of woman** should **bruise the serpent's head**.

It was to this physical generation that the apostle referred when in his Epistle to the Hebrews, he said: **Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same** (Hebrews 2:14).

It was Mary's womanhood that gave to Christ His genuine manhood.

We guard the fact of Christ's complete humanity with jealous care. The Scriptures warrant our doing so if all that is born of woman is human. The angel who came to announce to her the honor to be so speedily conferred only said, **Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women** (Luke 1:28).

When Mary learned the real meaning of this angelic visitation she dared only to answer in meekness and joy, **Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word**.

She little dreamed of thinking herself a semi-goddess.

Mrs. Browning, that sweetest singer among women, in her short poem, "*The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus*," gives us the sweet mother's thought, as the Son of God, in infant form, slept on her lap, and in the soliloquy makes Mary to say:

I am not proud, meek angels, ye invest
New meeknesses to hear such utterance rest
On mortal lips—"I am not proud"—not proud!
Albeit in my flesh God sent His Son,
Albeit over Him my head is bowed
As others bow before Him, still mine heart
Bows lower than their knees. O centuries
That roll, in vision, your futurities
My future grave athwart—
Whose murmurs seem to reach me while I keep
Watch over this sleep.
Say of me as the heavenly said, "Thou art
The blessedest, of women!"—blessedest
Not holiest, not noblest, no high name,
Whose height, misplaced may pierce me like a shame
When I sit meek in heaven!
For me, for me
God knows that I am feeble like the rest.

No one claims for Mrs. Browning anything of infallibility, but he who reads God's Word must feel that the authoress brought her spirit from the sacred page and only puts on Mary's lips the language which that Word warrants. Jesus surely reckoned her as woman only. Witness His reply at twelve years of age in the Temple at Jerusalem; hear His loving rebuke at the marriage in Cana of Galilee, **Woman, what have I to do with thee?** etc.

But this truth is not guarded so jealously for its own sake merely, though that were a sufficient reason for defending any truth. Our hope of intercession, our confidence in prayer, our boldness of faith are all resting here. If Christ brought from the most blessed of women a nature as human as yours and mine, then He will certainly prove a merciful and faithful High Priest to make reconciliation for the sins of the people, **For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted** (Hebrews 2:18). Never ought we to forget the Virgin while we wish to keep the blessed truth that God's Son is our elder brother.

There must, have been some sufficient reason why God so honored her.

How blind we poor mortals are to life's verities, to the presence and deserts of the good, the noble, and the true! Who among the great of Israel even dreamed that a young girl in the despised village of Nazareth, without the higher education of the times, only instructed in the law and the prophets, without the culture born of contact with society's boasted best, without a knowledge of the great outside world at all, would ever become the mother of God's Son!

Worldly-wise and wickedly-ambitious women have claimed the honor of bringing forth sons to the gods, but like the mother of Alexander, have lied for purposes of unwarranted fame. Truly God is no respecter of persons, but of character, motives, worth, and life.

There could not have been found in all the palaces of royalty one virgin into whose lap God would have consented to lay His Son. But there in that vale between the hills grew the blushing, simple-hearted child, who budding with the days and nights to womanhood, approached all unknown to self or others the queenliest office that mortal ever held. Despise not those of low estate; loathe not thyself because thy lot lacks riches or the empty honor which men so often give to a favored few.

The Vashtis of the earth are often set aside; the unknown Esthers of today, orphans though they be, will sit on thrones tomorrow, for the king knows the beauty that is un-painted, and the King in the heavens looks out for character when the exigencies of the times call for a nobler queen.

That woman who loves the purity with which God is pleased, who has an open ear for heaven's whispered instruction, whose heart sends the tendrils of holy longings toward the sky, and pulsations of tender sympathy earthward, whose hand is strengthened for life's tasks and softened for the touch of tender ministries with love, will yet hear the angels chant her honors and find God committing to her the loftiest trusts.

I know that character and reputation are sometimes far apart, but they are determined to marry and the opposition of men will only hasten the match. The chaste Joseph of the Old Testament may lie in prison awhile, but for such a character there is waiting a crown, for such a son God has reserved a scepter. Oh, if in truth we nobler lived, and nobler were, then oftener God's honors would be conferred. Mary was the worthiest of women, else she never could have become of all women the blessedest indeed.

The honor did not turn her head, but swelled her heart, deepened her life, and lifted her aspirations to holier heights.

She who was devout before must have waited longer prayer, thought oftener in praise, and spoken in diviner words after the Holy One came into the home. It would appear indeed that maternity should sanctify a soul as few other events of life ever could. She who finds in her arms heaven's freshest, costliest, noblest gift ought indeed to feel nearer that heaven than ever before.

In an article from the pen of Bob Ingersoll, amidst much of sophistry and false reasoning, he makes this beautiful speech about maternity:

“Around this sacred word cluster the joys and sorrows, the agonies and ecstasies of the human race. The mother walks in the shadow of death that she may give another life. Upon the altar of love she puts her own life in pawn.”

And yet she who offers such love to life will have proved her sacrifice a blemished thing if she follow it not with daily offerings to the same altar. The travail of the natal hour is only an earnest of the trials in training, the struggle in serving, and the intense anxieties of seeing that life—a very part of her own—in all the processes of development.

Dr. Broadus, in a sermon on “Mary, the Mother of Jesus,” said,

“It seems idle sometimes for a poor, toiling mother to indulge in the romantic ideas which poets and novelists write about a mother’s high mission. And yet, after all, the noblest thing that is done in this world is when a mother does in truth and wisdom and in the fear of God, train up a child.”

Mary must have so felt when she watched Jesus grow in wisdom and stature, and kept a great secret in her heart, trying daily to do for Him what would give Him greatest aid in His coming work. God pity the mother who does not do that! God pity the child of such a mother even more!

General Wolseley said to the educated young Scotchman who engaged to guide the armies of Wolseley over the plains of the Nile, “Now I want you to guide me straight; guide me by the star.”

When in battle that young Scotchman, wounded, was ready to die, General Wolseley, going to his side, was met with the question, “Didn’t I guide you straight, General? Didn’t I guide you straight?”

Wolseley answered, “Indeed you did.”

Ah, mother, when the last breath is being drawn it will not be so difficult to go and be parted from the son if he, waiting at your side, must say, “Mother, indeed you did guide me straight.”

I am glad that so good a mother as was Mary had other sons and daughters.

James and Judas were brothers of Jesus in the flesh, and His sisters were well known in Nazareth.

One of the darkest stains on American life is expressed in the one-child or no-child notion. The company of mothers who seem to reckon the rearing of a considerable family a nuisance, if not a social disgrace, is rapidly increasing. Were it not for the awful hidden, nameless crimes that have directly resulted here, we might thank God that such mothers and fathers can execute their will, first because the child, born into a home where he is not wanted, can never be expected to be more than an object of pity; and again, judging from the outcome such people make with the breeding of the one, it appears almost a mercy that no more are ever entrusted to them.

I thank God that when it was my happy lot to spend a few hours beneath the old roof that sheltered a family in other days, I saw there the face and rushed into the arms of one whose pride in training was only equaled by the joy of bearing nine children and the blessedness of rearing eight to mature years. Let us remember that the mother of Jesus was such an one.

Dr. Pomeroy once said,

“I knew a woman who was prominently connected with a popular and important reform movement. I had supposed her childless, but met her one day leading two beautiful children. Learning that they were her own, I congratulated her. She drew a weary sigh, and replied, ‘Yes, but they are an awful sight of care.’”

I do not sympathize with prayers to the Virgin but if I should make one today it would be a cry to Mary's spirit to come back to earth and walk and talk with mothers until they learned of her the glory, responsibility, and everlasting joy of worthy maternity.

But I must not linger here, for another sentence awaits discussion—**Thou shalt call his name Jesus.**

THE NAME OF OUR LORD

What's in a name? Much is in a name, when, as in olden times, it stands for character. It may not have been given with that intention, but no matter, it has a significance. Gould and Vanderbilt suggest financial character; Judson and Martin stand for missionary spirit; Thomson and Pasteur for scientific character; Ingersoll and Paine for infidelity; Howard and Fry for benevolence; Beecher and Spurgeon for ministerial character, etc. When you call the name of President Lincoln you don't intend to bring to mind his face or form, but the man. So every one of our names is indissolubly connected with our essential nature and bespeaks the character of labor and life. I love to think of Christ and remember that God did anoint Him indeed. I love to think of **Immanuel** and believe that *God is with us, in Him.*

But no name reaches the inmost recesses of every soul with the same tenderness, and draws from every life the same springs of love as the name of this text, "JESUS," my Redeemer, the Savior of my soul. I am glad the angel said, **Thou shalt call his name JESUS.** My heart begins to hope at the mere mention of the word. My sin-cursed soul rises up, a thing redeemed, and makes ready to put on a spotless robe when that name is spoken, because Christ proved to be just what the name prophesied of Him, a Savior of men! How that name has been sung through the ages, an honor to those who bore it, and an inspiration to all who heard it called!

It stands for leadership and victory over enemies.

When Moses had served his generation and God took him, there was mourning in Israel. But already his successor was chosen. In Joshua, which is only another form of the same name, God had found the spirit of wisdom, and soon he was leading the forces with a master mind and overthrowing the enemies round about with a hand that was strengthened by heaven. It was Joshua who led the people over Jordan; it was Joshua before whom Jericho fell, and Ai finally capitulated and kings were discomfited and the giants smitten down. That name stood for leadership when God's Son took it on: **Behold I have given him for a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people.**

How the strongest walls of sin have been battled down when Jesus was in command, and we found ourselves triumphant over those that lay across our path! How the things too difficult yesterday, under the new appointments of Jesus today, have been as easily accomplished as the taking of Ai when once the spies were in! How the kings of vice and the queens of iniquity have lost their possession of our lives since this great Soul-Captain came! We are safe from enemies under such a Leader and Commander.

This name suggests an intercession with God.

It was worn by that Priest who came into office when Israel was about to be overthrown forever by their own sin. In Zechariah we find the record of his life, and to him God said, **If thou wilt walk in my ways, and if thou wilt keep my charge, then thou shalt also judge my house, and shalt. also keep my courts, and I will give thee places to walk among those that stand by.**

Silver and gold were wrought into a crown for him. That name will stand for priesthood while time lasts. **Seeing then, that we have a great high priest, that has passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.** With such a basis of hope our lives ought to be in as perfect harmony with our professions as is the hope itself with His intercession.

Oh, how potent that name will become when the men and women and children who wear it revere it too greedy to bring it into disrepute or disgrace! The heathen in the country of the Karens used to call Judson, "Jesus Christ's man," because they saw how devoted was that soldier of the cross to the name of his Lord.

I wish we had a greater number who would give the word its original significance by discovering themselves such saviors of their fellows, such agents of redemption, men who have the heart of a Howard, the soul of an Oberlin, the spirit of a Buxton, so that prisons would become sanctuaries to the Most High; the open street a school; and the home of poverty the place of angel-visitation.

I meet men every day who are stumbling because they see inconsistencies in those who are wearing Jesus' name. They say they are better off out of the church, if such is religion. Of course their blunder is that of a blind man, and their excuses those of men who seek to salve the wounds made by God's Word. They are doing as foolishly as he who walked the Louvre of France in search of flaws in art, overlooking the while the magnificent works of Raphael and Michelangelo. But their mistake aside, the fact remains that Jesus will save many more souls when we who wear His name are indisputable evidence of His power to redeem and sanctify, and the faithful criers of the salvation which we ourselves know.

The last sentence remains, **For it is he that shall save his people from their sins.** That suggests to me as a final thought a theme slightly touched upon in what we have already said:

THE MISSION OF OUR LORD

It is here perfectly and clearly defined, **to save from sin.** First, I suppose, *from the guilt of sin.*

That is what we first need salvation from. The question in the mind of a convicted man is not, "How can I escape the punishment?" but, "How can I wash out the stain from my soul, how escape the pollution already introduced into life?" In the times of the ritual and ceremonial law the sin was confessed over the head of the scapegoat and he, being loosed, was supposed to carry it away, but the pollution of sin's touch must have remained to annoy the conscience of the guilty. Thank God for the blood which, better than niter or soap, can cleanse the soul.

Peter tells us that such is **the precious blood of Christ**. Ah, then I understand why He came! He stood by the altar of sacrifice that God might **lay on Him the iniquity of us all**. He went to the cross that He might be **the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world**.

When C. Simon had been a good while in deep distress over conscious guilt, he fell one day upon that passage in Wilson's work on the Lord's Supper, "The Jews knew what they did when they transferred their sins to the head of their offering." It flashed suddenly into his mind, "and God teaches, I may lay mine on Christ Who bore the guilt of the world on the tree." It was in Passion Week, on Wednesday, when the thought broke upon him and hope was born in his heart. When Friday came that hope had burned into a blaze of faith and on awakening on Sunday morn he cried, "Jesus Christ is risen today, Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" My friends, why should not some of you hope when our text tells of a Son Who saves from the guilt of sin?

He will save you from its dominance as well if you put your faith in Him. I find not a few who seem to think Christ would take away their sin if they confessed it, but who intimate their fear that He will not be able to break its power over their lives.

What else does it mean when you say, "I fear to begin lest I can't hold out"? My friends, it is Christ Who must fail if you do, for He has promised to complete what He begins. It was resting on that promise that enabled Paul to say to the Philippians, **Being confident of this very thing that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ**, and a little later, thinking of his own hope of final victory, he affirmed, **I can do all things through Christ which strengthened me**.

No wonder the apostle talks so, for he sees in his regeneration a total liberation from the bonds of the evil one. In writing to Rome he declared that **the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death**; and the thought is that of emancipation from its fetters.

When, in 1830, the slaves in the West Indian colonies became free men, some watching through the night on the hilltop saw the first streak of dawn and, knowing that the daylight of that August morn would rid them of their shackles forever, they signaled to the valleys, "The day dawns and our freedom begins."

Ah, my friend, you who are fettered with the cruel links of sin, the Sun of Righteousness has already risen! Why not set your faces toward Him believing, and know the joy of emancipation from the hold of hell and the dominance of demons?

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