

# “A Tale of Four Mothers”

Exodus 2:1-10; Luke 2:25-35 <sup>1</sup>

An older woman walked into the local country church. A friendly usher greeted her at the door and helped her up the flight of steps. “Where would you like to sit?” he asked.

“The front row please,” she answered.

“You really don’t want to do that,” the usher said. “The pastor is really boring.”

“Do you happen to know who I am?” asked the woman.

“No, Ma’am,” said the usher.

“I’m the pastor’s mother,” she replied indignantly.

“Do you know who I am?” the usher asked.

“No,” she said.

“Good.”<sup>2</sup>

Former First Lady Laura Bush likes to tell a story about a visit to the home of the President’s parents, the former President and Mrs. Bush:

“George woke up at 6 a.m. as usual and went downstairs to get a cup of coffee,” Mrs. Bush says. “And he sat down on the sofa with his parents and put his feet up. And all of a sudden, Barbara Bush yelled, ‘Put your feet down!’

“George’s dad replied, ‘For goodness’ sake, Barbara, he’s the President of the United States.’

“And Barbara said, ‘I don’t care. I don’t want his feet on my table.’”

The president promptly did as he was told, for as Laura observed, “Even Presidents have to listen to their mothers.”<sup>3</sup>

Tony Campolo’s wife, Peggy, was a stay-at-home-mom while their children were small. Never at a loss for words, when someone asked her, “And what it is that you do, my dear?” Peggy loved to reply, “I am socializing two Homo sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia that God willed from the beginning of creation. And what do you do?”<sup>4</sup>

A group of tourists who were visiting a picturesque village walked by an old man sitting beside the road. One tourist very patronizingly asked the old man, “Were any great men born in this village?”

The old man replied, “Nope. Only babies.” (1 Corinthians 1:26-31).<sup>5</sup>

And that, after all, is the point, isn’t it? While we may laugh at these stories, they highlight various dimensions of our relationships with our mothers: our accountability to them; their support of us; and the fact that it is our mothers’ nurture, more than nearly any other influence, that sets the course for our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland, on May 11, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Van Morris, Mt. Washington, Kentucky.

<sup>3</sup> John McCaslin, *The Washington Times*, “Inside the Beltway,” November 12, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> John Ortberg and Ruth Haley, *An Ordinary Day with Jesus* (Zondervan, 2001), p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Ravenhill, *The Last Days Newsletter*.

The Bible tells us to “*Watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them*” (Deuteronomy 4:9). That instruction is just as much for Dads as it is for Moms, but as often than not, we fathers drop the ball in this most central and eternal dimension of our children’s lives. It is because of their spiritual faithfulness as much as any other quality of character that we gather this day to thank God for our Mothers!

Even on Mothers’ Day, the Bible generally refers to God as “Father,” and there are good reasons for this. God is personal, not an “It,” and the limits of our language require us to assign some gender to God in order to talk about God as personal and to talk to God personally. But God is quite obviously greater than the hindrances of our language; and the Bible does use feminine or motherly language for God from time to time.

For example, the second verse in the Bible refers to God as “hovering” over the surface of the earth, and that is generally a feminine image. The Bible speaks of our taking refuge under God’s wings, which is also a feminine image (Ruth 2:12). Of the three parables in Luke 15—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son—the middle one uses a woman to represent God (Luke 15:8-10); and at the end of His life, Jesus said, “*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing*” (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34).

So, while we generally refer to God as “Father,” since that’s what the Bible does, I think we do well to remember that God is also our “Mother.” God is our heavenly Parent.

We also do well to remember that while there are women who have biological children but are hardly worthy to be called “Mother,” so, too, women can function as Mothers whether or not they have biological children. The deepest reality of “mothering” doesn’t have nearly as much to do with biology as it does with things emotional and spiritual.

Women can become “Mothers” by birth, by adoption, or simply by building their lives into the lives of others, whether those others be children, youth, or young adults. It moves me to remember that the wife of Simon of Cyrene, the man who was forced to carry our Savior’s cross, later became “like a mother” to the Apostle Paul, and her sons became leaders in the early church (Mark 15:21; Romans 16:13). Having said all this, let’s look briefly at “A Tale of Four Mothers.”

From time to time I watch the movie *The Prince of Egypt* one more time. I do this because that film does such a good job of telling the story of Moses. During one such viewing, I was particularly moved by the scene in which Moses’ mother, **Jochebed**, set him adrift in a little reed boat, entrusting his life to God (Exodus 2:3, 6:20). Had Jochebed kept Moses at home, it was certain that the Egyptian soldiers would have killed him; but in the little boat, he had at least a tiny chance of survival.

You know the story. Miriam, Moses’ older sister, followed the little craft until Pharaoh’s daughter found it, and bravely arranged for their mother to care for Moses until he was weaned—usually about two years. But then poor Jochebed had to give up her youngest child a second time, after which we have no record that she ever saw him again—or that she ever knew that her boy had become the Prince of Egypt.

**Hannah** is our second mother, and her story has a similar ending. Having prayed earnestly to God that she might bear a son, Hannah also promised God that she would return that son to God to live out his days in the Tabernacle (1 Samuel 1:11). Hannah kept her promise, and though she was able to visit Samuel once a year at the Tabernacle, what grief it must have been year by

year to miss him, to visit him, and then to have to leave him once again (1 Samuel 1:27-28, 2:11)! And we have no record that Hannah lived long enough to see her little boy become the last of Israel's Judges. It would be her son who would crown both Saul and David to be king of Israel, and Scripture tells us that David's kingdom will never end.

Our third mother is **Mary**, the mother of Jesus. Born under a cloud of scandal to parents who were very poor, the week-old Jesus was taken by Mary and Joseph to the Temple for his dedication. There the prophet Simeon blessed Jesus as "*the Savior [God] has given to all people,*" and "*a light to reveal God to the nations,*" but Simeon also told Mary, "*And a sword will pierce your very soul*" (Luke 2:30-31, 35, NLT).

In her fascinating book, *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt* (Knopf, 2005), Anne Rice helps us imagine what the unknown years of Jesus' childhood and youth might have been like as His family escaped to Egypt and later returned to Nazareth. Rice's story provides educated guesses; but we know how the story ended: Mary stood beneath the cross to watch her miraculous and beloved Son die . . . though unlike Jochebed and Hannah, Mary was also able to watch her Son rise from death to live eternally!

**Eunice**, our fourth mother, also got to see at least a little bit of what God would do through her son once she had released him to God's purposes. Eunice's mother, Lois, had become one of the early believers in the risen Christ, and she had taught this faith to her daughter. Eunice, in turn, taught it to her son, whose name was Timothy (2 Timothy 1:5).

Timothy later became like a son to the Apostle Paul (who thereby became a "father," though he had no biological children), and Timothy eventually became pastor of the church in Ephesus. Ephesus lay 250 mountain miles away from Timothy's home in Lystra, and we have no idea whether or how often Timothy saw his mother once he left home to accompany Paul.

**Jochebed** and *Moses*; **Hannah** and *Samuel*; **Mary** and *Jesus*; **Eunice** and *Timothy*: a story of four mothers and four sons. Enormous sacrifice was required of each mother in order for her son to become the man God intended . . . and we can hardly conceive of the world that would have resulted had any one of these mothers said, "No" to God's plan.

The point of all this is that whether or not she sees her grown sons and daughters very often, or at all, a mother's influence lasts through all of life, and that influence, if godly, helps to build God's Kingdom. Ray Charles was born in Albany, Georgia in 1930, and his mother raised him in church. But Ray began to lose his sight when he was five years old, and his mother died when he was fifteen. Here's part of what he wrote about his Mom:

"Strangely enough, losing my sight wasn't quite as bad as you'd think, because my mom conditioned me for the day that I would be totally blind. When the doctors told her that I was gradually losing my sight, and that I wasn't going to get any better, she started helping me deal with it by showing me how to get around, how to find things. That made it a little bit easier to deal with. My mother was awful smart, even though she'd only gotten to fourth grade. She had knowledge all her own; knowledge of human nature, plus plenty of common sense."<sup>6</sup>

At one of the great moments in Ray's life, when his native Georgia apologized for banning his performances for twenty years because he refused to play before a segregated audience, his wife

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.raycharles.com/the\\_man\\_autobiography.html](http://www.raycharles.com/the_man_autobiography.html)

leaned over to him and whispered, “If only your mama was here”; to which Ray replied, “She’s here. She never left.”<sup>7</sup>

While Ray’s comment moves us, we also know that no matter how diligent and faith-full we may be as parents, our children don’t always stay on “the straight and narrow.” While our children may or may not get into trouble with the Law, more than a few of them are seduced by the false gods of sensuality, materialism, and secular philosophy that assault them during every waking moment, and then they lose their way. It is in those times, too, that a mother’s love makes all the difference.

In Lorraine Hansberry’s classic Broadway play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, a mother struggles to keep her two children on track. In one memorable scene, the mother is confronted by her angry and defiant daughter: “Mama, you don’t understand. It’s all a matter of ideas, and God is one idea I just don’t accept. . . . There simply is no blasted God.”

With dignity and strength, her mother quietly responds, “I want you to repeat this after me. . . . *In my mother’s house there is still God.*” After a long pause, the daughter responds, slowly and quietly, “In my mother’s house there is still God.”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, we need to remember that not only do we shape our children’s lives; they also shape ours. In ways beyond our knowing, God uses our children (as well as our mates) to shape our hearts and make our character like God’s own.

Jeanne Olsen, a mother of five, took her nine year-old daughter, Kirsten, out for a mother-daughter breakfast. During the meal, Jeanne courageously asked Kirsten, “How do you think I could be a better Mom?”

Kirsten thought for a moment. “Well, you do yell a lot. I know you’ve been praying about that, but it isn’t really working yet.”<sup>9</sup>

I suspect that there’s nothing quite so nourishing as “humble pie,” and the experience of being a parent is one of the primary ways in which God creates godly women (and men). While motherhood brings with it joys beyond number, being a mother is also frequently both challenging and painful. But, as Jochebed, Hannah, Mary, and Eunice remind us, choosing to release our children into God’s care and providential purpose is also the Way of Blessing for our own lives.

As the Bible reminds us, “*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails* (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a).

May it be so in our lives on this Mothers’ Day!

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<sup>7</sup> *Ray* (Universal Pictures, 2004), written by James L. White, directed by Taylor Hackford.

<sup>8</sup> *A Raisin in the Sun* was the first play written by an African-American woman to be produced on Broadway. It premiered in 1959 and has won many awards.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin A. Miller, Wheaton, Illinois.