

SEVEN MOTHERS

Part One

There's an old song (Public Domain) written by Theodore Morse and Howard Johnson which describes the impact mothers have on their children. It goes like this:

M is for the million things she gave me
O means only that she's growing old
T is for the tears she shed to save me
H is for her heart of purest gold
E is for her eyes with love-light shining
R means right and right she'll always be
Put them all together they spell mother
A word that means the world to me

Mothers have a profound effect on their children. They are the main nurturers of the family. With mom we could let our emotions spill out without fear of shame or reprisal. When we got hurt as children the first words out of our mouths were "I want my mommy". Mommy was our comforter. Mommy was our booboo soother. Mommy's kisses made everything better.

A mother's love never diminishes. As we grow and disappoint her by the choices we make she continues to pray and guide us to make better decisions. She embraces our future wife and makes her a part of the family. She's our go-to babysitter because she adores and dotes on our children as much as we do. She's our sounding board during the stressful times of life. She's the one who chooses never to discourage but rather to always encourage. And when we need it most, she reveals her faults so that we may be empowered to move beyond the impossible and rise above our frustration and despair.

It does not matter whether our mothers are still alive or have passed away. The impact our mothers have had on us continues to this day. But lest you think I paint too rosy a picture of mothers let me be the first to acknowledge that not all mothers are saints. Not all mothers live up to the ideals presented in this song or even in my remarks. But what remains, even in the midst of imperfect relations, is the bond that God created between the conceived and the carrier – between the one who birthed the child and the one who was born.

The Bible is full of stories of mothers who were both very young and very old when they conceived; mothers who were prostitutes, mothers who were widows, mothers who could not conceive without the direct intervention of God; mothers whose children were killed; mothers who themselves died in child birth; even mothers who gave up their child for adoption. Since we are celebrating Mother's Day today I thought it would be appropriate to give homage to these women of faith whose differing circumstances and ages all have one thing in common – they were chosen by God to bring a blessing to the world. Eve, Sarah, Rachael, Rahab, Hannah, Ruth, and Mary; these are the names of these mothers. This week we will look at the first three, Eve, Sarah, and Rachael. Over the next two weeks we will look at the other four.

EVE - The Mother Whose Child Was Killed

Eve is, of course, the mother of us all. It is from her womb that all people on earth descend. We know of three of Eve's children by name – Abel, Cain and Seth. There were other sons and daughters born to them but we are not told their names or how many there were (Genesis 5:4). Abel, the oldest, honored God but his brother Cain did not. Cain was jealous of God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice

and the rejection of his own. Cain let sin master his emotions then used his anger to kill his brother Abel who became the first person to be martyred for their faith.

As a result Cain was banished from the face of God and the one thing that Cain loved the most - the produce he was able to grow from the ground - was cursed on account of his sin. It would never again yield its produce to Cain.

Not a very good track record for the first woman to become a mother. Her first born was killed by the hand of his own brother. Her second born, along with being banished from her sight, was no longer able to make a living as a farmer. He was cursed to be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth.

One child dead and the other a wandering bum; those results would hardly make her eligible for the Mother-of-the-Year award. She must have felt like a failure. What had she done wrong to see such results? Had she pampered Able too much? Had she ignored Cain? Had she showed favoritism to one over the other? And how could one child be so gentle and the other so violent?

When a child dies, when children go astray, parent's always look to themselves to see where they went wrong, what they could have done better, how they could possibly have prevented the evil from happening. But sometimes there is no answer. Each person is accountable for their own actions, accountable for their own choices.

Though Cain brought shame to his mother, and Abel brought joy, the ability of Eve to nurture a child was not over. The success of Eve's child rearing was not dependent on the child who died. Nor was it dependent on the one who strayed. God had a future for this mother and it was not a repeat of the past. Here's what Scripture says:

GENESIS 4:25-36

“Adam had relations with his wife again; and she gave birth to a son, and named him Seth, for, she said, ‘God has appointed me another offspring in place of Abel, for Cain killed him.’ To Seth, to him also a son was born; and he called his name Enosh. Then men began to call upon the name of the Lord.”

The line of descendants from Seth reads like a who's who in Biblical history. Enoch – the one who walked with God and was no more for God took him – was Seth's three times great grandson. His four times great grandson was Methuselah, the longest living person in recorded history (969 years). His five times great grandfather was Lamech, the father of Noah. So in the eighth generation after Seth the only person on earth whom God considered righteous was Noah, Seth's six times great grandson.

No matter how much tragedy Eve encountered she had reason to be proud of how Seth turned out and how he somehow managed to keep the legacy of faith alive for nine generations. We have no record of when Eve died, but Adam was alive until just after Lamech was born. So it is possible that Eve too saw the descendants of Seth remain faithful to the Lord down to the eighth generation.

Personal tragedy can define our lives. We can choose to let our future become a bucket into which we pour the hopelessness of our past; or choose to let the future become a well from which we can draw confidence and hope for something better. Eve chose to see beyond her pain. She did not withdraw from life because of her loss. She was willing to risk motherhood again rather than close herself off to any future child. What is amazing is that her decision to conceive was the beginning of the spiritual tsunami that gathered momentum each generation until it crashed upon the ark of God nine generations after her, literally resulting in the saving of mankind upon the earth. Not a bad legacy

for a mother with such a rocky start.

SARAH – The Mother Who Couldn't Conceive

The heartbreak of being unable to conceive children is something that many women throughout the ages have experienced. But in ancient times it was particularly painful. Being able to provide a male heir was considered the highest honor a wife could give to her husband. Kings have had wives banished and even killed when they failed to produce a male heir. Fortunately Sarah had a kind and considerate husband in Abraham who loved her deeply and did not let her barrenness affect their relationship.

Still, because of her love and her desire to provide an heir for Abraham, Sarah suggested that her husband take up with her Egyptian maid Hagar. Not a good decision as it turns out. God had promised Abraham an heir but in her impatience and misguided concern for her husband Sarah actively participated in creating enmity between her husband's and her handmaid's generations for centuries to come. As we saw with Eve, sometimes our decisions create ripples that become tsunami's as the consequences of our choices gain momentum throughout history.

Even though Sarah thought of herself as barren, Sarah was always God's choice to bear Abraham a son. God could see the life that would soon grow within her as the fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham. So, despite her age, and in line with God's promise to Abraham, Sarah, at 90 years old, conceived and became the mother of Isaac.

The birth of her son was a day of joy but it soon became a day of conflict. Abraham now had two heirs, one from Sarah's handmaiden and one from his wife. As can sometimes happen, what started out as laughter over having a son in her old age soon turned to anxiety when Sarah saw Ishmael making fun of her son Isaac. For someone who had waited over 70 years to conceive that was not going to be tolerated. So Sarah told Abraham to drive out Hagar and her son because she would not allow Ishmael to be an heir along with their son Isaac.

Most times a husband should not listen to a jealous wife. Yet in the case of Sarah, God said that Abraham should pay her heed for it was through Isaac that his descendants would be named. He also told Abraham not to be distressed over Ishmael, because God would also make a nation out of him, since he too was Abraham's son. So God, the establisher of the rights of the first-born, told Abraham He was going to take care of the inheritance portion for Ishmael. Abraham could now leave his entire estate to Isaac.

Sometimes we come to the end of our lives, knowing that old age is taking its toll on our bodies, and decide that we are of no more use to ourselves, our spouses, or even the rest of the world. Our bodies are drying up and so are our spirits. Sarah is an example of someone who was wrong about her potential to be used by the Lord. Sarah thought she had no more to give, and that her life-long dream of having a child would never be realized. Yet God made alive what was physically dead so that she could conceive not only a child, not only a male heir, but also the child of promise through whom would come the future Messiah. And God did not just allow her to conceive but also kept her alive for 30 more years so that she could see her son become a man.

None of us should ever think God is done with us. God has a future and a hope for all of us, as Sarah can attest. Nothing is impossible with God unless you close yourself off to His power. If God can resurrect a dead body He can certainly reenergize people afflicted with old age. Sarah may not have been able to run a marathon when she was 90 years old, but she did conceive a child through the power of the Holy Spirit. When God makes a promise even old age cannot stand in the way of its

fulfillment.

RACHAEL – The Mother Who Died In Childbirth

Rachael was the wife of Jacob for whom he labored for 14 years. Initially deceived by his father-in-law Laban, Rachel's sister Leah was given to him first in marriage after seven years of labor. Then after making Jacob promise to work another seven years, Laban also gave his second daughter Leah to Jacob.

Jacob had been an instigator of deception when he pretended to be his brother Esau in order to receive his father's blessing; but now he was on the other end of deception. From the moment he entered into a covenant with Laban for the hand of Rachael, Laban was constantly deceiving and tricking Jacob into staying longer and working harder. Finally Jacob had had enough and with the Lord's blessing he left Laban's employ and headed back home.

But deception followed as Rachel stole her father's household idols and feigned ignorance of the theft when Laban searched her tent. Rachel had hidden the idols in the camel's saddle then sat on them. She then claimed she could not rise to honor her father because the manner of women was upon her. So Rachael was successful in deceiving her father by hiding the idols and avoiding any responsibility for the theft.

As sister wives, Rachael and Leah's lives were a constant game of one-upmanship. Knowing she was loved more than Leah, Rachel enjoyed the favor of Jacob. But Leah was consistently getting pregnant whereas Rachael could not seem to do so. So the battle ground then moved to their maids. After giving him their permission Jacob did not seem to have any problem impregnating either Leah's or Rachel's maid. Only Rachael continued to lack the ability to conceive. This only increased the strife between the two sisters and the inadequacy that Rachael felt of not being able to give Jacob a son.

God finally opened up Rachael's womb and she conceived her first child, Joseph. Several years later the Lord once again opened her womb and she bore her second son, Benjamin. Unfortunately Rachael died as a result of giving birth to Benjamin. The Scriptures say that as her soul was departing she named her son "Ben-oni", meaning the son of my sorrow. But Jacob renamed him Benjamin, which means the son of my right hand (Genesis 35:16-19).

Rachael was Jacob's right hand, his strength and the love of his life. He willingly worked for 14 years in order to ensure her father would release her to his care. When he first laid eyes on her it was love at first sight. Now his first love was gone. But she had left him something that he would treasure forever - the two sons that came from her womb. They were physical manifestations of the love Jacob and Rachel had for one another and, as the years progressed, a constant reminder of the beauty and gentleness of their mother.

There is not much to say about Rachael as a mother, since not much is recorded. Rachel had very little impact on the life of Joseph and none at all on the life of Benjamin. Like our own friends who have died suddenly and left young children behind, the influence of some mothers is limited and sometimes non-existent due to death.

I know of someone who married after being single for over 40 years. His wife became pregnant with twins within the first year of their marriage. But his new found excitement turned to grief when his wife died unexpectedly of complications while giving birth. Suddenly this newlywed became a

widower and was left to raise two newborn girls on his own. After a period of grief he hired a nanny to take care of the twins while he was at work. Fortunately this story has a happy ending. This father of twins fell in love with the nanny and married her. The twins, who had known no other mother, became the adopted daughters of their nanny.

In this story we have no idea of what impact, if any, the deceased mother might have had on the life of her daughters. But in the story of Rachael, because we can track the history of her two sons, we can see the impact that Rachael's children had on the world. Joseph, though mistreated by his brothers and sold into slavery, became the second highest ruler in Egypt and the savior of his family when a severe drought came upon the known world. Joseph was also the vehicle through which God would fulfill his prophecy to Abraham.

GENESIS 15:13-14, 16

“Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years, but I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions...Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

Sometimes, as the old spiritual says, we feel like a motherless child. Sometimes we actually are. Whether a mother dies at childbirth or late in life, the influence of a mother cannot be underestimated. But when there is no opportunity for the mother to be an influence there is still hope. For God does not abandon us to our loss. Rather He uses our loss to strengthen and mature us through the things we suffer. God is a father to the fatherless, and I would dare say that he is also a mother to the motherless.

A mother may die giving birth to her child, but the child's destiny does not end with the death of the mother. God has formed each of us in our mother's womb. We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them (Ephesian 2:10). Life does not end when our mother's die. It just changes focus. And the death of the mother is never wasted. God sees and uses that loss to prepare the motherless child for greatness.

Though Joseph did not have many years to know his mother, the very fact of his birth was a fulfillment of prophecy. Joseph is an amazing example of how God can and does use a child who has lost a parent. And Rachael is a great example that even in death a mother can have a profound impact on the world simply by giving birth.

Today we have looked at Eve – the mother whose child was killed, Sarah – the mother who couldn't conceive, and Rachel – the mother who died in childbirth. Three women used by God to bring a child into the world whose destiny was preordained. Women who did not let their limitations or their personal tragedy define who they were or what they were capable of; Women who moved beyond the immediate to experience the impossible.

Eve, a mother who lost both of her children to murder and condemnation, chose to keep her heart open and conceive another child. This decision resulted in her becoming the nine times great-grandmother of Noah. She is proof that being open to God can create spiritual tsunamis that can reverberate throughout succeeding generations.

Sarah, who was unable to conceive, became, at age 90, the mother of Isaac, the son of promise.

She is proof that nothing is impossible with God unless you close yourself off to His power; for when God makes a promise, even old age cannot stand in the way of its fulfillment.

Rachael, a woman who died in childbirth, bore Joseph who, through his own personal tragedy, became the second highest ruler of Egypt, saving Israel from famine. Rachael is an example that even in death a mother can have a profound impact on the world simply by giving birth. Rachael is proof that children can go on to do great things even if all they have is their mother's DNA.

What Eve, Sarah and Rachael all have in common is their faith. It is this faith that brought them hope. Even in death Rachael left her sons in the hands of the one through whom God said the nations of the earth would be blessed - the One who called Himself the God of Abraham (who was her husband's grandfather), Isaac (who was her husband's father) and Jacob (who was her husband). Her two sons were among the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Even her death could not negate their inheritance nor their destiny.

So if you are a mother who has suffered the loss of a child, if you have desired to be a mother but have been unable to conceive, or if you are a child of a mother who has died, learn the lessons of Eve, Sarah and Rachael. There is a future for you that goes beyond your limitations and your loss. God is never finished with His creation. He always has a hope and future awaiting them. Even though we have very little control over the events of life, God is working behind the scenes to bring good out of tragedy, life out of barrenness, and destiny out of despair. Like each of these mothers we too must learn to trust our future to the One who holds it in His hand.

I KNOW WHO HOLDS TOMORROW

*I don't know about tomorrow
I just live from day to day
I don't borrow from its sunshine
For its skies may turn to gray
I don't worry o'er the future
For I know what Jesus said
And today I'll walk bedside Him
For He knows what lies ahead*

*Many things about tomorrow
I don't seem to understand
But I know who holds tomorrow
And I know who holds my hand*

*I don't know about tomorrow
It may bring me poverty
But the one who feeds the sparrow
Is the One who stands by me
And the path that is my portion
May be through the flame or flood
But His presence goes before me
And I'm covered with His blood*

*Many things about tomorrow
I don't seem to understand
But I know who holds tomorrow
And I know who holds my hand*

*Words and Music by Ira F. Stanphill
© 1950 Singspiration Music/ASCAP, CCLI #829565*

Unless otherwise noted all scriptures have been taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scriptures taken from the Holy Bible, New living Translation (NLT), copyright ©1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Carol Stream, Illiis 60188. All rights reserved.