A Mother in Israel

On the Power of Women in the Story of God

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What Time Softens

Today is Mother's Day, and I want it to be a day when those who have parented and those who have been parented are gentle with the memory of how the work went. Who has lived this life (tried to parent, tried to be a spouse) and not failed at moments along the way? It is easy to walk into a day like this and recite the inventory of what we did wrong.

Here is something interesting, though. The parent often remembers the failures. The child often remembers the good. At least, that has been my experience as a child looking back. I remember the moments where my parents failed, but the things I remember *most* are the high moments, the things that give me peace and comfort still. Time has a way of softening the bad and enhancing the good. So I hope today that the mothers reading this will feel that they have contributed something real by bringing another child of God, another image of God, into this world, and by nurturing them.

And I am confident mothers wring their hands more than fathers do. When my own children were in their late teens and still out late, *I* was in bed. My wife was the one tracking them on her phone, making sure nothing had gone sideways. I never had to do that. Hats off to mothers for being vigilant in the places where fathers are sometimes a little absentee.

The Power God Intended

What I want to do this morning is reflect on the power that God intended for women, and that even in a fallen world we still see in glimpses. There will be other times for emphasizing the role of men. Today I want to bring the emphasis to the power of women, and what God's intention for women in this world really is. The temptation is always to correct one set of abuses by reaching for the same tools that produced the abuses in the first place. The feminist movement, attempting to correct real abuses in patriarchy, reached toward opportunities women had been denied, and that reaching was right. But when the same domineering tools that men had wielded began to be used by women in turn, the result was something other than the healing God intends. When humanity, fallen as it is, tries to solve problems that only God can solve, we tend to make those problems worse.

So I want to walk through some passages and show the vision God had for women, how that vision was corrupted, and how throughout the history of Israel and into the church we get glimpses of what could be, and what will be again.

In the Image of God, He Created Them

> Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it . . ." (Genesis 1:26–28)

Notice the language carefully. "Let *Us* make man." *Man* there is a collective noun: humankind. The next words confirm it: "let *them* have dominion." Plural pronoun. "In the image

of God He created him; male and female He created them." In the beginning, the image of God was borne by male *and* female. The man is not the image of God. The woman is not the image of God. *Together* they bear the image. This is critical to feel.

Then Genesis 2 zooms in on the sixth day:

> And the Lord God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him." . . . So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs . . . Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. (Genesis 2:18, 20–22)

Notice: the very first thing in all of God's creation that he calls *not good* is the man being alone. He needs a helper comparable to him.

That word *helper* gets misunderstood in English. We tend to hear it diminutively, like *daddy's little helper* or *Robin to Batman* (and we never quite know what Robin contributes anyway). That is not what the Hebrew word means. The word is *ezer*. It appears twenty-one times in the Hebrew Bible, and sixteen of those times it is used of *God himself*, as in Psalm 33:20 and Psalm 121, "I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence comes my help." My *ezer*. God is the helper. So the helper here is not an insignificant sidekick. It is *the one who comes alongside and does what we cannot do*.

So picture the ideal of male and female. The man does all he can. The woman does all she can. Where he is insufficient, she is there. Where she is insufficient, he is there. And then Adam breaks out in poetry, the first poem in the Bible:

> And Adam said: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Genesis 2:23–24)

“Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” That phrase is poetic and tender. It is also, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the language of *covenant fidelity*. When the tribes of Israel are joined in common cause, they describe themselves as bone of each other’s bone and flesh of each other’s flesh. They are going to rule together. They are going to enter Canaan together. They are going to make decisions together. It is the language of collaborative rule. Before the fall, this is what man and woman are to each other under the loving gaze of God: a collaborative dominion in which each fills what the other lacks.

The Language of Conflict

Then comes the fall, and rule itself is corrupted. The serpent challenges the goodness of God. Adam is passive where he should have been strong. Eve is weak where she should have been stronger. In the collective failure, something breaks. And listen to the word God speaks to the woman:

> “To the woman He said: ‘I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you’” (Genesis 3:16).

For years and years, embarrassingly many years, I read this as romantic language. She’s really going to dig him. Her desire is going to be for her husband. He will rule over her in some kingly, protective way. That is how I had it filed.

Then I read fourteen verses further. Cain is angry with his brother and wants to kill him. God says:

"If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it" (Genesis 4:7).

Look at the language. *Sin's desire is for you, but you should rule over it.* That is the *exact same construction* as Genesis 3:16. *Desire* and *rule*, in this register, is the language of *conflict*, not romance. Sin's desire is to dominate Cain; Cain is called to master it. By the same construction, the wife's desire is *against* her husband, and in response, he uses his power to dominate her.

Before the fall, the word for *rule* was used of male and female *together* having dominion over the creation. After the fall, that same word turns into the rule of one over the other. The harmony of joint dominion becomes the friction of mutual struggle. This is part of the curse. And it is exactly what Jesus came to undo.

Deborah, a Mother in Israel

Throughout Scripture we see glimpses of what was, and what will be again, when women stand up and do the right thing at the right time. Look at Deborah in Judges 4 and 5.

Something to notice about the book of Judges: across the four hundred years it covers, the judges progressively decline. The early ones are strong; by the end of the book the judges are weaker and weaker. But Deborah, near the beginning, stands tall. There is nothing said against her. She is called a prophetess and a judge:

"Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, was judging Israel at that time" (Judges 4:4).

When King Jabin of Canaan is oppressing Israel, Deborah summons Barak, the general, and says: *Hasn't the Lord God commanded you? Deploy the troops at Mount Tabor. Let's go.* But Barak says, "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not

go" (Judges 4:8). Notice the deficiency. The general cannot see what the prophetess sees. So Deborah says:

"I will surely go with you; nevertheless there will be no glory for you in the journey you are taking, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (Judges 4:9).

She sees what needs to happen when the man with the sword does not. Where men have a deficiency, in the ideal, women come alongside and augment. The victory comes. And in the song of victory in Judges 5, sung by Deborah and Barak together, this line appears:

"Village life ceased, it ceased in Israel, until I, Deborah, arose, arose a mother in Israel" (Judges 5:7).

"A mother in Israel." You may not have children today. You may have suffered the loss of children. But you can still be that kind of voice. A mother in Israel sees what the village needs faster than the men who hold the power to defeat the enemy. The men go out and fight. The women see the broken thread in the fabric of the family, of the city, of the community. Deborah saw it. Village life had ceased. She rose.

And in the same song there is Jael, the wife of Heber. When Sisera flees the battle and seeks refuge in her tent, she gives him milk in a lordly bowl, lets him rest, and then drives a tent peg through his head. The poetry is striking:

> Most blessed among women is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; blessed is she among women in tents . . . At her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still; at her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell dead. (Judges 5:24, 27)

"Most blessed among women." The same Greek phrase is later used of Mary the mother of Jesus. And notice the *feet* and the *head*. Back in Genesis 3, the curse on the serpent was that

the seed of the woman would crush his head, even as the serpent struck the heel. Here at the feet of this woman, an enemy of Israel dies. The pattern is already at work.

Abigail's Wisdom

Move forward to 1 Samuel 25. David has already been anointed king but is fleeing from Saul in the wilderness, running with about four hundred men. He is young, and he is not yet the man after God's own heart he will become.

> There was a man in Maon . . . and the name of the man was Nabal. And the name of his wife Abigail. And she was a woman of good understanding and beautiful appearance; but the man was harsh and evil in his doings. (1 Samuel 25:2–3)

David's men have been protecting Nabal's shepherds. When David sends to ask for provisions, Nabal sneers: "Who is David?" David hears the dismissal and goes hot. He girds on his sword. Four hundred men gird on theirs. He swears that not a male will be left alive in Nabal's house by morning.

Abigail hears about it before David arrives. She moves fast:

> Then Abigail made haste and took two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five sheep already dressed, five seahs of roasted grain, one hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs, and loaded them on donkeys. (1 Samuel 25:18)

She sends the food ahead. David is still seething, unaware that the provision is on its way, and unaware of what his own heart is about to do. Nabal does not know he is a fool. Abigail recognizes something that needs to be protected in *both* of them. She meets David on the road and speaks:

> Please, let not my lord regard this scoundrel Nabal. For as his name is, so is he: Nabal is his name, and folly is with him . . . For the Lord will certainly make for my lord an

> enduring house, because my lord fights the battles of the Lord, and evil is not found in you throughout your days . . . And it shall come to pass, when the Lord has done for my lord according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you ruler over Israel, that this will be no grief to you, nor offense of heart to my lord, either that you have shed blood without cause, or that my lord has avenged himself. (1 Samuel 25:25, 28, 30–31)

Notice the words: "the Lord will certainly make for my lord an *enduring house*." That promise is not made explicit until 2 Samuel 7, when David tries to build God a house and the prophet Nathan tells him, in effect, *No; you are a man of bloodshed. But God will build you an enduring house.* Abigail sees it years before Nathan does. And she does not want David to mar his own name on the way there. *This will be no grief to you when this thing is done.* She is protecting the future king from a moment he would regret forever, and she does it through wisdom, courage, and food.

Time would fail to walk through every woman who steps in when the men do not see what needs to be done. Tamar sees what Judah does not. Rahab the harlot sees what no one else in Jericho will see, and saves the spies. Ruth the Moabite sees the gravity of what is at stake and chooses Naomi's people, becoming the great-grandmother of David. Bathsheba contends for Solomon. And then Mary.

Mary's "Let It Be"

All of these women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, Mary) appear in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. Each one has either a reputation that the surrounding culture would have used against her, or stands outside the family of Israel proper, or both. And in every case, they take faithful action when the men in their lives do not.

Mary, when the angel comes, hears the impossible news and answers:

"Then Mary said, 'Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word'" (Luke 1:38).

Joseph's first instinct is to put her away privately. He needs a direct angelic encounter before he will do right by her. But she, knowing what kind of scarlet letter would follow her for the rest of her life, embraces the word of God for her and is willing to do that, to see God's will done.

And the shadow of that decision followed her. Years later, when the religious leaders are arguing with Jesus, they say:

"We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God" (John 8:41).

The accusation had stayed with her. All those years. But Mary continued to show up. She brought Jesus to synagogue every Sabbath. She endured the whispers. And I think, though I can't prove it, that her steadfastness is part of what shaped Jesus' tenderness toward the women he later encountered in his ministry.

The Disciples Luke Names

Look at how Jesus' ministry unfolds. Luke 8:

> Now it came to pass, afterward, that He went through every city and village, preaching and bringing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with Him, and certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had come seven demons, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who provided for Him from their substance. (Luke 8:1–3)

These women were disciples of Jesus. They went from village to village with him. Jewish students of a rabbi were said to be *covered in the dust* of their rabbi as they followed him along the road. These women were covered in the dust of Jesus. They were students. They were learners.

And Luke makes the point even more explicit two chapters later. Mary, the sister of Martha, sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him teach. "Sat at his feet" is technical language. Paul uses it of his own rabbinic training in Acts 22:3, "I was brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel." To sit at the feet of a teacher means *to be a student of that teacher*. So when Martha asks Jesus to send Mary back to the kitchen for the traditional women's work, what does Jesus say?

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41–42).

Jesus placed Mary, as a *disciple*, on par with his other disciples. Not diminished.

"Great Is Your Faith"

And then there is Matthew 15. Jesus and the disciples have gone outside Israel proper, into the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman runs after them, crying out:

"Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed" (Matthew 15:22).

There is nothing more courageous, nothing more powerful, than a mother crying out for a tormented child. She has recognized something, that all the promises made to David are falling on the man walking in front of her. Like Abigail looking forward, she is looking forward through the same lens, except in her case, *the Son of David is here, in person*.

"But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, 'Send her away, for she cries out after us'" (Matthew 15:23).

That had to be awkward. He keeps walking; she keeps following. He finally turns and says:

> "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." (Matthew 15:24–27)

A mother's heart, fierce on behalf of a suffering child, *will not be put off*. And listen to what Jesus says next:

"Then Jesus answered and said to her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed from that very hour" (Matthew 15:28).

"O woman, great is your faith." That phrase, *great faith*, is set deliberately against the refrain Jesus uses for his own twelve disciples elsewhere in Matthew: "O you of little faith" (Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). The men who lived with him daily, who watched him perform miracles, who heard him teach in private: "little faith." This Canaanite woman, who only heard *about* him and ran after him crying for her child: "great faith."

And there is one more thing. This is the only person in the New Testament who wins a verbal exchange with Jesus. Every other recorded back-and-forth where there is disagreement, Jesus has the closing word. Not here. Here a mother's heart, torn open by a suffering daughter, *bests* him in the exchange, and that is the voice the God of heaven hears.

Bone of His Bone, Flesh of His Flesh

Now we get to the new creation. The new humanity. The collaboration that was lost in Genesis 3 begins to be restored in Christ. Listen to Paul:

> For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body (whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free) and have all been made to drink into one Spirit . . . But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. (1 Corinthians 12:12–13, 24–25)

Read 1 Corinthians 12 in light of Genesis 2:23. "Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" was the original language of collaboration. Now, through the Spirit, we have become bone of *Christ's* bone and flesh of his flesh. We are members of one body. Where one member lacks, another fills the gap. If the whole body were an eye, where would the walking come from? If the whole body were a foot, where would the seeing come from? God has made the body (and made marriages, and families, and villages) so that we are *complementary* to one another.

When we operate in the flesh, there is schism in the body. When we operate in the Spirit, new creation life, there is shared rule. Christ and his bride together. That is where this is going.

The Holy City as a Woman

Revelation gathers it all up:

> Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (Revelation 21:1–2)

All those families that mothers prayed for. All those villages whose collapse Deborah saw before anyone else did. All those children Mary the Canaanite woman ran after. All of them gather into this: a *city* that is a *woman*. A bride. And then verse 9 makes the identification explicit:

"Then one of the seven angels . . . came to me and talked with me, saying, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife'" (Revelation 21:9).

Joint rulers ruling together. The city is made up of *people*. People we prayed for. People we groaned for in the Spirit. People mothers lay awake at night wondering about: wondering where their sons were, wondering whether their daughters would come home. The world dismissed them. But the holy city is built of them: women who had seven demons cast out of them and were restored, women who took action when no one else would, women who endured shame for the sake of God's purposes. And men brought in alongside them as joint heirs.

> And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: they need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:3–5)

"No more curse." The curse that turned desire-and-rule into the language of conflict: gone. "The way our kingdom comes, the way God's kingdom comes, is on a cross." It is about sacrifice and love. It is about serving one another. *His servants shall serve Him,* and that service is the equivalent of reigning forever and ever.

Try It

When husbands and wives get out of old creation and stop trying to dominate one another, when instead they come together and try to *serve* one another where the other lacks,

something starts to happen. “But you don’t know my wife. You don’t know my husband. They’ll just take advantage of me.” Try it anyway. Thirty days. Full service. Watch what begins to happen.

In thirty-seven years of marriage, every conflict my wife and I have come through has come through the same way: one of us steps back out of the fear dance. And it is hard to dance alone, unless you’re just a little nuts. When one person stops fighting, something begins to give on the other side. Maybe domination is itself the engine of the conflict; remove one side of the engine and the engine stops.

Bless You, Mothers

God has called us to something amazing. Mothers, whether you have children of your own or not, you can be a mother in Israel. There are women in any congregation who have not borne children but who have *been* mother to many: parents to other people’s children, mentors, intercessors, those who have suffered and grown and cried out in the Spirit for the salvation of children not biologically their own. How many of those children have we seen delivered? And how many do we still want to see delivered?

On a day like this, don’t look at the past and the inventory of failures. That is in the past. We can do nothing about it. But from this day forward, we can walk in the Spirit. We can groan in the Spirit. We can seek the health and the safety and the security of our villages. We can see our children restored and become part of that beautiful city of God.

Bless you, mothers. You do the hardest job there is, and sometimes you do it alongside men who don’t get it. Men, we are still working through being in the flesh. But God has called us to be men in the Spirit. *Don’t dominate.* Listen to your wives. They may have a perspective you do not have. Wives, *don’t try to dominate your husbands*. Most of you are stronger than them,

and the temptation is real. When the dance changes, a beauty starts to radiate from your home, from your village, into your community, a witness to what God is doing through restored relationships.

And in that home, and in that village, the curse will be no more.