

as the Lord in order to please his wives. And he made God angry with him.

Look at 1 Kings 11:1-8 and see how Solomon loved many foreign women from the nations of whom God had said: "You shall not enter into marriage with them." Verses 9-12 of 1 Kings 11 tell us:

Then the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, and had commanded him concerning this matter, that he should not follow other gods; but he did not observe what the Lord commanded. (NRSV)

"Therefore, the Lord said to Solomon, 'Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant'" (v. 11).

And that's exactly what happened. Solomon's pagan wives reared their sons in pagan worship, and they abandoned God just as Solomon did.

Further, 1 Kings 12:8 tells us Solomon's ruling son disregarded the good advice the seasoned counselors gave him and he lost the kingdom. Like Solomon, Solomon's son was told just what to do; but, like Solomon, he disregarded God's wisdom, and he lost God's blessing and everything else. Remember: Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived. But, by itself, wisdom is nothing without obedience to God. *Knowing* the right thing to do is not the same as *doing* the right thing.

Good advice is meant to be followed

Now, what should Solomon have done, way back in the beginning, before he made a mucky mess of his home, his

family, his heir, his kingdom and ended up losing everything? He should have followed his mom's advice and married the one capable woman described in Proverbs 31:10-31.

Let's look at this passage, with a practical eye so that, for men, we can avoid the ruin that destroyed Solomon, or, for women, we can avoid destroying a Solomon.

*A capable wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.
The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.
She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.
She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.
She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls.
She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong.
She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.
She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.
She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.
She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.
She makes herself coverings,
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
Her husband is known in the city gates,*



Faith of Our Mothers

EVELYN BENCE

I HAVEN'T GONE HOME FOR MOTHER'S DAY IN years—a conscious decision. My mother's delight in my presence hasn't measured up to the comfort I've received by attending my own predictably liturgical church, tied to the lectionary that marks milestones of Jesus' life, without regard to the secular calendar. Except for a one-line prayer of thanksgiving for our collective mothers, my church leaves the May commemoration in the hands of the family—breakfast in bed or dinner on the town.

But back home my pastor father ran a different kind of church, with God as a frame around home or country holidays, Mother's Day being chief among them. Deep down, my patriarchal father knew he owed his very life to his mother, and his stable home—which facilitated a smooth career—to his wife. Deep down, he knew they and other women deserved recognition for their years of service at home, in the church. Consider the gold

watches they'd never get (their wedding bands and someday their golden wedding anniversary receptions having to suffice). Consider the church offices they could never expect to hold. I say this annual Mother's Day tribute was a guilt offering, and it grew grander as he approached his retirement.

When I was very young, every mother present received a long-stemmed carnation at the end of the service. I stood guard over the galvanized pails, making sure everyone knew the rules: Only one flower, only to mothers, white if her own mother was dead, red if alive. My mother brought her scarlet flower home and set its spindly stem in a clear-glass bud vase in the middle of the dining room table.

As for his personal commemoration, some years Dad gave Mom a rose bush, which he added to the thorny garden gradually taking over the parsonage yard. She enjoyed the blossoms; he enjoyed the digging and prun-

ing. One year he brought her a case of pork and beans, a purchase he justified by figuring that opening a can of precooked food, rather than cooking up dried beans from scratch, would save her time in the kitchen.

Early in June, the church Dad pastored celebrated Family Sunday, presumably a holiday of his own making. The sermon praised fidelity and solidarity. Outside the main door every family, upon leaving church, could choose a rose bush to take home and plant in its suburban yard. The more roses gracing the neighborhood, the better.

When he moved to a smaller town (we children grown, no longer lined up on the front pew, Mother anchoring the side aisle), Family Sunday got assumed into a bigger and better Mother's Day celebration. A potted plant—a rose bush if the price was right—handed to every mom.

Dad's last full-time pastorate was in a rural hamlet—a dozen houses and a church, no store, not even a quart of milk for sale. Dad knew his congregation well, and one year was confident that every woman

*taking his seat among the elders of the land.
 She makes linen garments and sells them;
 she supplies the merchant with sashes.
 Strength and dignity are her clothing,
 and she laughs at the time to come.
 She opens her mouth with wisdom,
 and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
 She looks well to the ways of her household,
 and does not eat the bread of idleness.
 Her children rise up and call her happy;
 her husband too, and he praises her:
 "Many women have done excellently,
 but you surpass them all."
 Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
 but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
 Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
 and let her works praise her in the city gates.*

—Proverbs 31:10–31 (NRSV)

These are words for everyone to take to heart. These are words to memorize; words to dwell on, and words to build one's life upon. Here we have a chance to make our lives different from theirs. We too have the advice, and we have a chance to follow it. Every woman reading this should strive to become the virtuous woman God blesses, the one described here in Proverbs 31. Every man needs to encourage the virtuous women among us. For guys who are seeking a wife, here's your check list, right from the mailroom of heaven. This is God's prescription for what will nourish your life and bring you joy.

The woman God honors

So, what does God honor in a woman of faith? The check-list starts in verse 10 with a summarizing word. Literally, it

says: *issha hayil*—that is, a woman of power, strength, valor, military force, army, wealth, virtue, and honesty. Who can find her? In other words: "What lucky guy can find a *hayil* type of woman?"

This is no simpering, little hothouse flower, some clinging vine, a fragile bit of paste jewelry, all glitter but easily chipped and demolished. This is not one of those "Oh, dear, I'm the perfect Christian woman. I can't do jack, unless my big strong husband does it for me. I'm just ornamental, well-trained in charm school." Not on your life!

Hayil, capable, is a military term. It describes a powerful force that marches on in the cause of goodness and industry. She's God's tough Amazon, so to speak, to win within a tough world.

This kind of woman, God says, is more precious than gemstones. Why is that? Because jewels are static; they just sit there. Their value may be great, but it appreciates mainly according to inflation. A regular 24-carat diamond is valuable, but it won't exceed the value of a 24-carat diamond, within the market's economic context. But the *hayil* woman is a source of wealth. Her shrewd industry earns many jewels. In other words, *she is not simply a diamond, she's a diamond mine*—spiritually and practically. And look how the spiritual and the practical balance off against each other in the rest of the passage.

Verse 11 : "The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain." She is trustworthy (spiritually) and she makes money (practically).

Verse 12 : "She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life." "She does only good and no harm to her family."

in church on Sunday would indeed be a mother—that is, until I, about thirty-five, unmarried, and childless, called on short notice and said I was coming home. "Wonderful!" my mother said. I'm not sure my father—who in church five years earlier had referred to me as a "maiden lady"—was as glad to hear of my impending arrival. Here's what he had planned: A tribute and prayer, with all mothers marching to the front, lining the altar rail. A special tribute to the oldest mother, the one who'd come the farthest, the one with the youngest baby. A mother's trio. The congregation singing "Faith of our mothers, living still / In cradle song and bedtime prayer . . .," a song used this once and only once a year, Mom pointed out to me, as if I hadn't figured it out for myself. A sermon extolling motherhood. Give-away potted petunias. From start to finish, the service breathed blessing on she who had borne and raised children. On Saturday afternoon Dad asked if I would take part in the service. "Maybe you could read from that article you wrote. . . ."

A magazine had recently published a pointed guest editorial of mine, titled "The

Family Isn't Always the Answer" (reprinted in PRISCILLA PAPERS, Summer 2000, p. 20). The tag line told the story: "Some of the most godly leaders—Joseph, Moses, and Samuel—didn't have neat and tidy family lives." Was my

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father kidding? That he wanted me to get up and read this in church, on *this* Sunday set aside to honor the hands that rocked the cradles? "There are eight million more women than men in the U.S. . . . The traditional family simply can't be God's plan for every godly woman."

"What are you thinking, Dad?" I asked, not with any incredulous accent on a specific word, but with steady phrasing, looking for clarification, hoping he'd say something that would let me justify saying, No, I can't, I won't get up there in front of everyone and humiliate myself.

"Well, you had some good points. And it's presenting another side of the issue. I'd like you to be part of the service. . . ." As I suspected, he was trying to be helpful. He was trying to broaden his narrow frame. And how could I refuse a request—as out of place and awkward as it seemed to be in the grand picture—when my writing had made it clear that being left out was not tenable? I gave myself a few hours to think about it, swallowed hard, and said, "Okay, I will read," though I wasn't sure why. To make him feel good about being magnanimous? To educate the congregation? To claim some place for myself in the only serious tribute given to women the whole year long? Probably all. So Sunday morning, pretending I was someone and somewhere else, I walked to the pulpit on cue, and spoke my piece.

Verse 13 tells us that she succeeds in business. Look at all the businesses this woman is engaged in. Verse 13 tells us she's involved in the textile business, specifically clothing manufacturing.

Verse 15 tells us she is the executive manager of her staff. Verse 16a tells us she's involved in the real estate business. Verse 16b tells us she's involved in agriculture.

What about her personal habits? Verse 17 says, "She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong." In other words, she exercises regularly and keeps herself in great shape. You know—abs of steel! This woman works out.

Verse 18 notes she produces a high quality product and that it's built to last. There is no planned obsolescence here. It doesn't punk out when the consumer gets it home after store hours. It's a dependable product.

According to verse 20, she's a philanthropist. She generously provides for the underprivileged. But, verses 21 and 22 tell us, she does not serve others at the expense of the well-being of her own family. She lives well and helps others live well too. Like the industrious little ant, praised in Proverbs 6:6, she prepares for the future. While the loafer's family is freezing in the winter, her family is comfy and in style. We're told in verse 21 her household is clothed in crimson and in 22 in fine linen and purple.

Crimson and purple clothing were affordable only to the rich in ancient times. This woman is so virtuous, industrious, and successful under God's blessing of her hard work that her whole family is decked out in good stuff. She's like Lydia, in Acts 16, who was such a successful purple merchant that she financed Paul's ministry.

Here, too, because of her success, her husband is an honored leader in government. He can afford to serve in civic government because he partnered with his wife and helped her become all that she could be. After all, behind every successful woman is a supportive man. He hasn't said to her, "Now, Honey, don't worry your pretty head about business, it's far too tough for you." or "Gee, you shouldn't really try to compete with Abdul's Fifth Century B.C. Real Estate Brokerage Firm, should you?" or "Why don't you leave textiles to Peniel's Purple Emporium for Appealing Apparel?"

No; he says, "Go, Girl! You can do it!" And she does, big time. Verse 24 tell us she's the one who supplies Peniel with his purple apparel. And Abdul's business depends on her patronage. As verse 25 puts it, using a metaphor from her business, "Strength and dignity are her clothing and she laughs at the future." In other words, she regards the days to come with pleasure, not fear, because she's built a firm foundation for herself, her family, her staff, and the downtrodden who depend on her help.

But does she stop there? Is a woman's place in the business world only? Not at all! As verse 26 tells us, she becomes a teacher. The Hebrew word *hokma* used in verse 26 means wisdom, knowledge, experience, intelligent insight, and judgment that comes from a life of doing good work as well as good works. In its verb form it means "to become wise through experience and then to teach others." Substantively, it is used to signify a philosopher; the philosophers were the professors of the ancient world. And, when she teaches, she fulfills the directives of Paul in Ephesians 4:15, "She speaks the truth in a spirit of love," or

The service continued as planned. I survived, though I never again went home for Mother's Day. The church survived, even soon enlarging their sanctuary. And my parents stayed on; within a few years buying a house for retirement on the hamlet's upper road, where Dad tore up the lawn and planted roses.

That might be the end of the story but for a serendipitous stop at the high-steeped, red-door church in Bath, New York, where Mother now lives in a nursing home. One Sunday morning in October, four months after Mom's stroke, I said good-bye to Dad, drove the eighteen miles east to see Mom. I told her I'd slept well, read her a page from a devotional book, and prayed. Getting ready to leave, I asked if she wanted me to position her geri chair so she could look out the window or toward the hallway.

"The hall."

It wasn't what I'd wanted to hear. "But Mom, don't you want to see the tree?"—the immediate view outside her second-story window.

"I saw it yesterday."

I turned her toward the hallway and kissed her. We exchanged farewells: "I love you. I'm praying for you." In tears, mourning mother's days, I returned to my car to head south, to Virginia.

Not ready to face the fast four-lane, I drove down the main street of town, past that church with the red door. I looked at the church sign and at my watch. I was only five minutes late for the 10:30. *Great! A liturgical service. No surprises. I know the predictable words bridging heaven and earth: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth." The phrases and the gifts—they'll help me put my world in order. Just what I need. Get me settled for the ride.*

I opened the church door and settled into a pew near the back. There was nothing remarkable about the service. I might not have marked it but for its one surprise, after the sermon and before the Eucharist: an "extra" congregational hymn and one I'd never discovered, buried in the "Christian Life" category of the *Episcopal Hymnal 1982*.

In the first verse, Linda Wilberger Egan's lyrics summarized Gabriel's birth announce-

ment to Mary, noting: "Blessed is she who believes in the Lord."

A second verse, about the Samaritan woman, ended: "Blessed is she . . . who perceives."

Long before we got to the third verse, pronouncing blessing on behalf of three female witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, I sank, sobbing, to the pew and let myself be overwhelmed by the blessing of belief.

For my mother, whose faith remained true to her and would, I prayed, till death.

For me, suddenly able to perceive myself fully within the Lord's welcomed company.

Trying to calm my emotions, a woman sitting behind me, in the back row, placed her hand on my heaving shoulder. Feeling her touch, I widened my claim of grace: For her and all the faithful women whose belief, like a thorny rose, blossoms fragrantly in the yard. n



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