

2 May 2021

Guides on the Journey: Susanna Wesley

Proverbs 31:1-5, 8-9

We think of the Book of Proverbs as being by King Solomon, but the last few chapters of the book contain wisdom sayings from unknown sages. We read selections from one of those chapters today – Proverbs 31, verses 1-5 and 8-9:

31 The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him:

² No, my son! No, son of my womb!

No, son of my vows!

*³ Do not give your strength to women,
your ways to those who destroy kings.*

*⁴ It is not for kings, O Lemuel,
it is not for kings to drink wine,
or for rulers to desire strong drink;*

*⁵ or else they will drink and forget what has been decreed,
and will pervert the rights of all the afflicted.*

* * *

*⁸ Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.*

*⁹ Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

There are several odd things about this passage. First of all, it's in the Hebrew Bible, but it's not Israelite. There was no King Lemuel of Israel, so this is a collection of wise sayings from a foreign ruler. (Actually, it's one of several such passages in Proverbs. Apparently wisdom is wisdom, and the Bible suggests we learn from it wherever we find it.) More curious is that odd line in the superscription that specifies that this isn't the wisdom of Lemuel himself but of his *mother*. What did Lemuel's mum want him to remember? To avoid the things that will distract him from his royal duties – basically wine and women – and to use his power to help the afflicted, the destitute, the poor, and the needy. Well said, Lemuel's Mum. Whoever you were – and we don't have a clue, because you are lost in the mists of history – you taught your son something important, something that he remembered and wrote down, and that we are still reading today, thousands of years later.

You ever think about that? People still read the words of Plato and Aristotle and Chuang Tzu and the Buddha, but where did those words come from? All of us, no matter how original we are, still consist largely of the teachings and experiences and models that we have known. What favorite sayings of Aristotle's grandmother ended up being written into his book on *Ethics*? What lessons about the blindness of this world did the young Prince Gautama, who would become the Buddha, learn from visiting his quiet, thoughtful, suspiciously unmarried uncle and his roommate? Who were the anonymous wise voices *behind* the voices that changed the world? Well, obviously we don't know. They're anonymous. But occasionally, one of those background influences gets named. King Lemuel gave credit to his mum. And today I want to talk about Susanna Wesley.

Susanna was raised in London, one of twenty-five children of a prominent clergyman there, and when she was old enough to marry, she accepted an offer from an admirer of her father, another clergyman named Samuel Wesley. Samuel and Susanna traveled north to the small town of Epworth, where Samuel was to be the vicar for the next thirty-nine years. Now, Samuel gets mixed reviews from history – some say that he was a very good preacher, for instance – but his reviews from his congregation were pretty unanimous. They thought he was pompous, self-important, rigid, scornful of country people, autocratic, and dictatorial. He was thoroughly disliked, and his congregation did everything they could think of – including vandalizing the parsonage fields and perhaps burning down the parsonage itself – to get rid of him, but among his other qualities Samuel was also mule-headed. Susanna, meanwhile, bore Samuel nineteen children during those years, and she had sole responsibility for raising them.

This she did brilliantly. She taught all her children herself, at home. Six hours a day in classes designed for each child's learning level. She had the same expectations for her daughters as her sons: girls were expected to learn how to read before they started learning things like sewing and cooking. In her own way, she was as strict with her students as her husband was with everyone, but she must have done it differently. The Wesley children respected and feared their father and adored their mother. So did the Epworth congregation, in fact. One quick story. Reverend Samuel began taking temporary assignments back in London, leaving the care of the Epworth Church to interim vicars. One of those interims, a certain Reverend Inman, was such a colossal waste of time as a preacher that Susanna began doing extra Bible lessons for her children on Sunday nights, so the day wouldn't be a complete waste. The congregation got wind of these and some began dropping in during these lessons. Then they invited friends. Before long, Susanna's Bible class had two or three hundred in attendance, far more than bothered to go listen to Rev. Inman. Rev. Inman handled it maturely: he wrote a nasty letter to Samuel, demanding that he tell his wife to stop teaching her classes. Samuel wrote a stern letter to that effect to Susanna. For a woman to teach men looked strange, he said. She wrote back that following Christ often looked strange and continued teaching her classes.

We have some of Susanna Wesley's letters and prayers, and later historians have published collections of her writings, but we don't know what she taught her children or what she taught those Sunday night classes, because she didn't write them down and save them for posterity. But two of those children were John and Charles, and in their teachings we can discern Susanna's influence. In particular, whenever they taught things that were unorthodox, that differed from what others were teaching, we nearly always see the distant reflection of Susanna's influence. For instance, Susanna was organized and expected others to be so as well. In a letter to her oldest son, Samuel, she recommends that he order his life after a Method (spelled with a capital M). This was apparently a favorite word of hers, which her son John would later use so often that scoffers would call him a "Method-ist." Or again, the Wesley brothers, more than most theologians of the day, stressed God's love over God's justice and righteousness. That was Susanna. They also empowered first lay people, then women, to go out and preach the gospel. Gee, what gave them that idea?

Perhaps most of all, John describes salvation not as something that some have and some do not, but rather as a gift of God to all that we have a chance to grow into. The theological arguments of the day focused on the source of salvation – human choice or divine election? – but John describes it as a relationship between humanity and God, and like all relationships, it can grow and change. God's grace is given to all, but we experience it in different ways as we

mature. Even as infants, God's grace is with us, surrounding us and guiding us from our birth to the point where we can choose of our own free will to follow Christ. That we are able to do that is another example of God's grace – God's willingness to put aside our sins. And then, having chosen, God's grace continues to lead us on the path of holiness. This is salvation seen through the eyes of a teacher, someone who is always leading the student to the next level, and the next. Huh. Where do you imagine that came from? John and Charles Wesley were brilliant men in their own right. I'm not trying to take anything away from them. But I'll tell you this: if Susanna had not been the woman that she was, there would be no Methodism.

There's a striking moment in C. S. Lewis's novel *The Great Divorce*. The novel is an imaginative visit to heaven, where Lewis is given a tour by the Scottish preacher and novelist George MacDonald. At one point, a woman in glorious robes appears, with angels singing before her as she walks. Lewis stares at her and says, "Is that . . . is that . . . ?" and MacDonald replies, "Oh, yes. She's one of the great ones." Lewis gazes with awe, assuming it's Mary the Mother of Christ, and then MacDonald identifies her. On earth, she had been simple English country wife who, throughout her life, cared for her neighbors' children and tended those in trouble. Nobody outside of her tiny community had ever heard her name, yet in heaven she was one of the great ones. Lewis's point is that in the upside-down accounting of the Kingdom of God, the greatest are probably not people we've heard of. They are the people who quietly support, quietly do what needs to be done, quietly touch individual lives, all the while remaining in the background, because they aren't doing anything for recognition. If you want to know what a dedicated follower of Christ looks like, your best bet is not to look behind the pulpit, or in the pastor's office, or on the Sunday livestream. Chances are you'll just find another Samuel Wesley. No, your best bet is to look in the kitchen, in the children's department, on the phone with the shut-in. Don't look for those who talk the most, but for those to whom people listen.

Susanna Wesley works as a representative of all these unacknowledged saints, because although she's famous today, it's an accident. It was her sons who gained fame. She never made the slightest effort to be famous, only faithful. As she herself put it: "I am content to fill a little space if God be glorified." She's a good representative for another reason, too: staying quietly out of the spotlight does not mean being a meek, mousy doormat. Susanna may not have put herself forward, but she never backed down either. And for some of you – more than we know – this is your calling, your faith, your spirituality. Embrace it. Do not ever think that success in following Christ has to do with outward results. The Kingdom of God is run by an internal engine – determined saints quietly touching lives, like Susanna Wesley.

We close today with one of most frequent Susanna Wesley quotations, which sounds as if it might have been spoken by Brother Lawrence, from last week: "Help me, Lord, to remember that religion is not to be confined to the church... nor exercised only in prayer and meditation, but that everywhere I am in Thy Presence."