Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.
- Proverbs 31:10

THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN

Adult

The Missionary Baptist
Vacation Bible School Literature Committee presents

THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN

Vacation Bible School Lessons for ADULT
Written by Brother Clifford Hayes

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In Memory of Clifford Hayes

When I was young, I remember my Dad serving as clerk for ordinations and church organizations and later for the Siloam Association. Even at that time, as young as I was, I remember being amazed at how he could manage to take so many notes and then give back an account of the proceedings with such clarity and detail. But the fact is that Dad loved the written word and loved putting words down on paper. I believe that the abilities that I and many others observed flowed from those loves. As Mom has gone through his things since his passing, she has found numerous papers where he had written. The subjects are many as were his interests, but the clear pattern shown is that he loved to write.

As he lay in the hospital, he told us of the reasons that he had for wanting to live. Of course, he wanted to be with us. He wanted to enjoy the life and family with which God had blessed him, but he also still had things that he wanted to do, to finish. Now Dad wasn't strong anymore and his hands had developed a tremor from his medicine, so he wasn't able to do much physical work, but he could still write. Among the things that he wanted to live for was to finish his memoirs and to put his old Sunday School lessons – handwritten – onto his computer.

Above writing, Dad loved the Lord and His Church and was well studied in The Word, from the Law to Grace and Church Doctrine and this expressed itself in the bulk of his writing. He wrote Sunday School lessons for several years and during that time he became involved with writing Bible School lessons, writing one of five lessons. As time went on, he wrote the entire set of Adult lessons and has been doing so for several years now. This year's lessons are the last set that he wrote. He did them all, finishing them before he became ill.

We who participate in the Literature Committee will be hamstrung by losing him, his wisdom, knowledge, and love for God's cause. His ability to work with other people to produce something of value was a treasure that will now leave a void. Among the multitude of things that I will miss are trading rides to committee meetings, getting his insight on our committee proceedings, and the competition between us to see who could produce the most verbiage in a set of lessons (he holds the record, though I believe that I beat him this year).

I can't overestimate Dad's influence on me. I owe a great deal of who I am to him. He helped teach me how to love the Lord and is my first inspiration to write. Every boy with a good father wants to emulate him and to have his approval. Even now, I can still feel the pleasure that I would get when Dad admired something that I had done or when he simply stated that he was proud of me. It encouraged me to continue, to improve and truly that drive continues even now.

I hope that these lessons are profitable to you and that you enjoy them. I hope you agree that they are among the best that my Dad has produced.

Danny Hayes

THE VIRTUOUS MOMAN

LESSON ONE

FAITH

LESSON TEXT
Proverbs 31:11-12; 21

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER CLIFFORD HAYES

INTRODUCTION TO THIS YEAR'S STUDY

This year's study is one that has been long in coming. "Women of the Bible" is a subject that was suggested by some several years ago. This year the timing is right. The planning and writers committee wish to emphasize to the women in our churches that this virtuous woman in Proverbs 31 should be their role model. Those virtues this woman possesses are those qualities that every woman should attempt to attain. At the same time that we are stressing these points to the ladies, we also wish to stress to you young men that when you start to look for your life's mate, you should look for someone who exhibits these same virtuous characteristics.

In considering the various women in the bible who show signs of these virtuous characteristics, we have chosen several to write of as character studies. In doing this we realize there are a great host of virtuous women that have lived and served God through the ages of whom the world, in general, knows nothing. Each person reading these words can remember a Christian lady in their church or community that was dedicated to God and went about quietly doing His work. Even though their works may be great, when they die they are soon forgotten except in the memories of those who knew them and remember their labors.

Such is the example of Sister Mabel Roberts. This saintly woman was born in 1905 and lived to be 102 years old. What I am about to relate is part of a Facebook posting by Brother Doug Skinner. Brother Skinner conducted a part his paternal grand mother's funeral and saw Sister Roberts' head stone in Payne Cemetery.

"My paternal grandfather, James Skinner, was born into a profoundly poor family in the Sentinel community and

his family never attended church of any denomination. Sister Mabel Roberts and her husband, Fred, were members of Sentinel Missionary Baptist church and the church was having revival services one summer in my grandfather's twelveth year. Sister Mabel stopped by and asked if she could take James to revival with her and Brother Roberts. My great grandmother politely refused, as James had no suitable clothing to wear to church. Mabel, undeterred, sewed a shirt from bread sacks and later in the week approached the Skinner home again in hopes of getting James to church. This time she met with success and she and Brother Roberts took James to the revival at Sentinel. James heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and about the know-so, heart-felt salvation necessary for the forgiveness of sins. He fell under conviction and was allowed to pray undeterred, uncoached, uncouncelled, and undisturbed until he came forth testifying of God's amazing grace and the peace he had found at that altar. He followed the lord in baptism and began a new life in Christ which led to the man I knew and loved as "Grandpa", church deacon and charter member of True Hope Missionary Baptist church in Springfield, MO. … Now, with a family of my own including a saved spouse and our oldest child saved (two to go), I look back to consider how God's grace entered into my natural family's heritage and I found myself staring at Mabel Robert's headstone at Payne cememtary. … My heart has been broken and humbled in considering how the Lord used one of His children to carry a burden for a little boy and made a way for him to sit under the sound of the gospel. My praise and gratitude belongs to the Lord for His wonderful mercy and compassion!! I am also humbled and thankful beyond words for Sister Mabel and those like her who yearn to see people saved beyond the scope of 'mine and ours'. How blessed I have been and it may be traced back to a humble church member, a poor neighborhood boy and a breadsack shirt.

Following the funeral service Saturday, my wife said to me, 'Well I got one thing from the sermon today. … I want to be a Mabel Roberts.' I silently drove the car back to Bolivar and thought to myself, 'Me too…… that's exactly what I want'.

Lord, help us to get over ourselves and our self-absorbed lives that we may see the little James Skinners of the world. You have already shown me what you can do to bless the lives of many others through the obedience of one of your children."

God's work would prosper if everyone could emulate Mabel Roberts. However, the woman we read of in Proverbs 31 is so attentive to her duties toward God and her family that one might think, "There is no way I can measure up to her example." In and of ourselves we will surely fail. We will come to the end of ourselves and recognize our own inadequacies. In the scriptures believers are told to follow Christ's example and follow His steps, and yet who could ever measure up to the life displayed by the sinless Son of God? We all fall far short. We have not attained to His level of perfection, and yet we "*follow after*" and "*press toward the mark*" (Phil. 3:12-14). God knows us, with all our imperfections. It is this writer's opinion that God does not expect us to be perfect. He only expects us to do the best we can. If we do this then God's work will prosper. God has given us a pattern, a mark to shoot for, and though we come short and often fail, yet God's standard is before our eyes. Though we may fall short, we never want to lower God's standard.

The virtuous woman portrayed in Proverbs 31 shines as a bright light in this Old Testament book of rules and admonitions. Today as we see women of all ages following dubious role models, we are refreshed to find a timeless example of virtue, responsibility and good common sense. Here, in this picture of mature womanhood, is a woman who embodies the qualities which every woman who is a child of God should aspire to in her personal life and appearance, in her family life, and in her daily duties.

Even though other scriptures may be referred to, most of the scriptures for the lesson titles are all taken from Proverbs 31: 10 through 31. Subjects for lessons have been selected that exemplify some of those ten virtues found in this chapter. Those subjects are faith, wisdom, compassion, courage and purity.

INTRODUCTION TO FAITH

The writer of Hebrews said "*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"* (Hebrews 11:1). Breaking this down what does Paul mean when he says, "*the substance"?* A substance is what something is made of, something we can conceive. First off, true faith takes God at His word. Nothing added, nothing subtracted. Nowhere in the entire bible is the attempt made to prove the existence of God. Verse 6 of the lesson says, *"But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."*

So the existence of God is taken for granted by the writers of the Old and New Testaments. The bible begins with "*In the beginning God…"* So the redeemed have faith that God is. Can the unsaved have faith in God's existence? When I was a child I had a belief that God was present everywhere. I had been taught this. Who taught me? People of faith. After I was saved this was a fact I knew firsthand.

My wife and I enjoy going to Berea, Kentucky and look at the furniture the students at the college make. A rocking chair caught my eye and I examined it closely. I was finely designed and made except for one obvious flaw. At least to me it was a flaw. Instead of having rockers that were about 1 and one half inches wide and ¾ inches tall, it's rockers were 3/8 inches wide and 1 and ½ inches tall. It didn't look substantial to me. I asked a young man about the design and he assured me that the chair was strong. This young student, weighed well over 200 pounds and when I invited him to sit in the chair, he declined. Despite his assurances he didn't have enough faith in the design of the chair to sit in it. It is interesting to note that Noah had faith in God's design of the ark.

A tight wirewalker over high places has faith in his own ability and in the two inch wire. If he has faith that God will protect him in his foolishness, his faith may be misplaced. When Jesus was tempted by Satan following His fasting for 40 days, the devil said, *"If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, 'He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone'. And Jesus said unto him,* "*It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."* We should never have faith that God will protect us from doing things that He had given us intelligence to avoid.

Now, we can have faith in God because whatever He has said He will do, He will perform. If God has given us a promise, we can rest assured that it will come to pass. Very often much time will pass without a sign of it happening, but it will happen. Paul wrote of Abraham's faith in Romans 4:18-21. Speaking of Abraham, "*Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform."*

So, *"Faith is the substance of things hoped for"* or the assurance of those things promised by God, and *"the evidence of things not seen".* This evidence is a demonstration. This evidence is convincing proof to the believer, the soul seeing that which the eye cannot.

By faith we believe that God did certain things, even though we were not there to see them. *"Through faith we*

understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things that are seen were not made of things which do appear." Hebrews 11:3 Science also tells us that the foundation of the world is carbon and our bodies are made up of amino acids. Where did these building blocks come from? God made them.

In this 11th chapter of Hebrews the list of the "heroes of faith" is long and distinguished. There are others who are also heroes of faith. As mentioned previously there are many who are of faith that are not known by name, those who carried the banner of Christ and by their presence perpetuated God's work and His Church. Here at Old Union, going back over 200 years, there are many who are in our spiritual heritage whose names are lost to us. Probably in another generation the names of Dumont Stringer, Roy Thornton, Jay Copas, Mama Grace, George and Georgie Meador and Miss Margaret will not be remembered as they are though of by us. Then in a short while our names will be lost also except in the Church records and in the record that God keeps. Such is the case in all our churches.

Those future generations will enjoy the spiritual heritage that we leave. So we need to be careful of the spiritual environment that we provide. We must always remember that we pay our debt to the past by providing for the future.

EXAMPLES OF FAITHFUL WOMEN

HANNAH

Most everyone knows the story of Hannah. She was one of two wives of Elkanah, and she was barren. Elkanah's other wife had sons and daughters and year after year his other wife would provoke Hannah because the Lord did not give her any children. Hannah's husband did not understand why she was sad and continuously wept and would not eat..

One day when Hannah could no longer bear the pain of her empty womb, she went to the temple to present her supplication to the Lord. She cried out to the Lord and wept bitterly. She was so upset that she made a promise to the Lord in her request for a son, she said, *"O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head "* (1 Samuel 1:11).

Not long after her visit to the temple to present her request to the Lord, she found she was pregnant. When her son was born she named him Samuel which means "asked of God" or "God heard". Hannah did not forget her promise to the Lord either and as soon as Samuel was weaned she presented him to the Lord by leaving him in the care of Eli, the High Priest. Samuel grew up in the temple and worshiped the Lord there. This is just the beginning of the story of Samuel. Samuel was born as a gift and the result of the faithful prayer of his mother. In his life of service to God he constantly prayed for his people and this he learned from his mother, Hannah, a faithful woman of God.

Even though Hannah was a Godly woman, she had her weaknesses along with her strengths. The most obvious weakness, as with most of us, was that she was strongly influenced by the society and traditions in which she lived. In the time Hannah lived, and indeed during all Old Testament times, the worth of a wife, in the mind of all Godly wives, was dependant upon her ability to bear children. This did not seem to matter to some of the husbands. Hannah's husband, Elkanah, in 1 Samuel 1: 8 chided her thusly, *"Hannah, why weepest thou? And why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am not I better to thee than ten sons?"*

But it bothered Hannah and this lead to her second most observable strength. After the great faith she had in God and His ruling her life, her greatest strength was her perseverance. We have recorded in 1 Samuel 1:11 her great prayer to God for a son. But from the wording of the scriptures, I am convinced that this is not the

first time Hannah had prayed. I am convinced that Hannah prayed this prayer from the moment it became apparent that she could not conceive. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul writes, " *Pray without ceasing".*

Jesus also gives us the example of the persistent widow in Luke 18. He says that she kept coming to the town judge pleading for justice and he kept refusing, but finally gave in for peace of mind. Are we supposed to bother God until he answers? No, God is not bothered. Paraphrasing Jesus, "Will not God bring about justice for his children, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly" (Luke 18:7,8). Jesus is saying that we may have to cry out day and night, but that from the Father's perspective He is not an unwilling judge. Rather, our Father will answer us quickly.

There are lessons we can learn from Hannah's life and faith. Women of faith are not without problems in this life. The righteous also suffer. Remember Job. Sarah often suffered because of her handmaiden Hagar. We should not let others deter our trust in the Lord. Hannah could have used her misfortune and mistreatment as a reason for falling away from God. Yet year after year Hannah continued to worship God. Women of faith have problems like other women. What distinguishes them as women of faith is what they do when faced with adversity, as we learn from reading 1 Samuel 1: 9-18. Hannah was persistent in her prayers and she prayed fervently for that which she desired. She believed God would answer her prayers. Women of faith believe in the effectiveness of prayer and God takes notice of such faith.

Another lesson we learn from the study of Hannah is that she planned all along to keep her promise to God. When the child Samuel was weaned she took him to the temple and entrusted Eli and the Lord for his well being. Fulfillment of vows or promises should not be done begrudgingly. We should with gratitude of heart do the will of the Lord.

After years of praying for the same thing, most of us would give up. Hannah did not. She was a devout, humble woman, and God finally answered her prayers. Again, Paul tells us to "*Pray without ceasing"*. That's exactly what Hannah did. Hannah teaches us to never give up, to honor our promises to God, and to praise God for his wisdom and kindness.

Hannah also teaches us to be thankful for what God grants to us. When God finally did answer Hannah's prayer by giving her the son she had asked for, her thankful soul responded with a prayer of praise. Her words recorded in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, are a close parallel to the words of praise uttered by Mary following the announcement by Gabriel concerning her being impregnated by the Holy Spirit.

Hannah showed us what the Lord can do through one woman totally and unreservedly faithful to Him.

LESSON TWO

WISDOM

LESSON TEXT
Proverbs 31:26

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER CLIFFORD HAYES

INTRODUCTION

What is wisdom? What part does education play in a person's wisdom? What part does our experiences play in our wisdom? There are several parts to the dictionary meaning of wisdom. One online source defines wisdom as:

1. The ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting; insight.
2. Common sense; good judgment: "It is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things" (Henry David Thoreau).
3. The sum of learning through the ages; knowledge:
4. A wise outlook, plan, or course of action.
5. Wisdom *Bible* Wisdom of Solomon.

As noted above the definition of wisdom is "the ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting; insight. " This is the virtue that Solomon asked of God. *"Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people."* This God given asset is illustrated particularly well when we read or teach the story about the two women who claim to be the mother of one baby (1 Kings 3:16-28). We, like all Israel, stand in awe of the king, that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice

Solomon could not read minds. He had no crystal ball. He couldn't discern a person's guilt or innocence by any sort of divination or wizardry. What he could do, however, was act on what he knew and what he had observed concerning human nature.

He already knew a few basic principles of human existence from God's Word. When forced to choose, everyone will give up what they desire less to gain what they desire most. That's why Eve ate the fruit and Abraham gave up a good land for peace with Lot in Gen 13:8-9. That is why Joseph gave up vengeance for world rescue in Gen 45:4-8.

Solomon just has to expose these issues. He devised a plan to expose their deepest desires (Verses 24-25). Dividing the baby in half wasn't guaranteed to reveal the idenity of the true mother. It was possible that neither woman was the baby's mother. But it was guaranteed to reveal which, if either cared more about the child than herself. He acts accordingly**.** Rather than allowing fear, indecision, or even righteous anger to paralyze him, he does something. He gives the baby to the woman who showed a mother's concern (Verse 27). Many attribute Solomon's wisdom in this matter to good judgment or common sense. When I was a boy people would say that Solomon had "horse sense."

This is a theme that is recurring throughout the Bible. We know that knowledge, on the other hand, is defined as having information through experience, reasoning or instruction. God wants us to have knowledge of Him and also He wants us to know what he expects of us. We have knowledge of God through our salvation and our experiences with God following that momentous event. But equally important is having wisdom. But knowing facts about God and the Bible is not all there is to having wisdom. Wisdom is a gift from God. James 1:5 states, "*If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."* Wisdom is what God will bless us with in order for us to glorify Him with the knowledge we have of Him.

The book of Proverbs is perhaps the best book in the Bible to study when seeking to learn biblical wisdom. Proverbs 1:7 also clearly explains what it means to have biblical knowledge: "*The fear of the lord is the beginning of knowledge; but fools despise wisdom and instruction*." When we fear the Lord, which is the most basic form of knowledge, God can then begin to provide us with wisdom through Jesus, whom the Bible says is wisdom itself. *"But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us*

wisdom, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption" (I Corinthians 1:30).

Knowledge of God is what is gathered over time through study of the Scriptures. It can be said that wisdom, in turn, reveals itself by acting upon that knowledge. In other words, knowledge manifesting itself in any given situation through wisdom. If one lacks Godly knowledge, he will also lack wisdom. The two go hand-in-hand.

A PEOPLE PRONE TO APOSTACY

The Israelites were once slaves in a foreign land and God raised up a deliverer, Moses, whom He used to free the Israelites from bondage and lead them out of Egypt. Despite many trials and setbacks, God delivered Israel into the Promised Land. When Moses died, God worked through another faithful leader, Joshua, whom He used to lead Israel into victory over fierce, battle-tested warrior nations. Israel was well on its way to conquering the Promised Land.

But something happened after Joshua died. While some of the tribes drove the Canaanites from their borders, others did not. Judges 1: 32 tells of the common situation in the Promised Land, *"But the Asherites dwelt among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land: for they did not drive them out."* The people lost their zeal. The Israelites grew weary of driving out the Canaanites. They were tired of besieging city after city. They wanted to slow down—"lay back"—and not work so hard at driving away the pagan influences from their lives.

And so the people of Israel tolerated their idol-worshipping neighbors. They grew accustomed to their ungodly beliefs. As time passed, a new generation of Israelites came into adulthood, one that was easily enticed by the morally corrupt ways of the Canaanites. God had intended that Israel become a shining example of His Way. His laws were to be their wisdom, leading the Israelites to be blessed for their obedience. The surrounding nations were to take note and thus yearn to know about God's laws. But Israel failed to become a model nation.

Instead, the Israelites entered a cycle of rejecting God in favor of idols; suffering the domination of the enemies armies and finally, crying out to God for deliverance. God sent deliverers to save His people from their trials. The people would rejoice and follow the righteous example of that deliverer until his death. The Israelites would then reject God yet again and the process would begin again (Judges 2:11-23).

This repetitive cycle is recorded in the book of Judges, which refers to a time when "*every man did that which was right in his own eyes"* (Judges 21:25).

During this period, God used judges to deliver His people from their afflictions. Sometimes judges led armies, as Gideon did against the Midianites. Other times, judges worked as an army of one, Samson, for example. The servants God used to judge His people were men—except for one woman. Her name was Deborah.

DEBORAH

Deborah was both a prophetess and a judge (Judges 4:4). As a prophetess, God used her to deliver His messages to His people. As a judge, God gave her the authority to render civil court decisions. Why did God choose Deborah to be a judge over his people? God could see into the depth of her soul. He knew her character, her morality and her love for all things of God. And all these characteristics she possessed contributed to her greatest asset. Deborah possessed Godly wisdom. This was evidenced in her relationship with Barak.

Deborah called for this man named Barak and told him the message from God was for him to gather an army of ten thousand men from the people of Naphtali and Zebulun. The message further said that God would cause the army of Sisera "*with his chariots and his multitude; and I will deliver him into thine hand"* (Judges 4: 7). Now this Sisera was

the Captain of the army of King Jabin of Canaan. He had *"nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel"* (Judges 4: 3).

When Deborah finished delivering God's message, she expected Barak to rush out to do God's will. This is what she would have done. But Barak was enslaved by fear—and this kept him from fully trusting God to deliver him from Sisera's ruthless warriors.

And so he gave Deborah an option, *"If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go"* . Barak says he'll obey this command only if Deborah accompanies him. She agrees. This is a remarkable occurrence. This general is given a prophecy that his army will win but won't go to battle without Deborah. We can discern two things from this: that Barak had incredible faith in Deborah, if not in God, and that Deborah was a wise, courageous and faithful woman.

Barak was suffering from spiritual short-sightedness. He could not see the "big picture" of God's Master Plan and how he fit into it. This made Barak more afraid of the physical enemy, which he could see, than the God of the universe, whom he could not see.

Though taken back by his demand, Deborah said, *"I will surely go with thee"* , adding that going into battle would not lead for any honor for him, because God would "*sell Sisera into the hand of a woman".* In effect, she said, "You should have put your faith in God, not in me, nor in any other human being. You should be grateful that God has decided to still use you. Yet, because you have let your fear get the best of you, Sisera's life will be taken by the hand of a woman. She will get the glory—not you!"

This shows Deborah's office as a prophetess. How else, except by Godly revelation, could she know how Sisera would meet his death. A woman named Jael nailed him to the ground with a tent stake driven through his temple.

She and Barak were supposed to work together as a team. Barak was to lead the military into battle; Deborah was to provide wise counsel and support, and express God's will to the leader of the army. Because Barak initially failed to provide strong leadership, Deborah had to stand in the gap

Deborah stood for courage in a time of fear. She stood for godly wisdom in a time of human reasoning, when *"every man did that which was right in his own eyes."* She stood for decency and order in a chaotic time of perversity and idolatry. Deborah was a leader who was an exception to the rule in her time.

Deborah was unique for her time. There were other godly women who stood when circumstances called for them to do those things that were right in the sight of God. One such woman was Abigail.

ABIGAIL

Little is known of the background of Abigail, wife of Nabal. What we can derive from her story however reveals a woman of beauty and wisdom. Her story takes up few pages in the Bible, but what it reveals is a woman who understands her place in God's service and acts with decisiveness and integrity. Abigail's story is found in 1 Samuel 25 and takes place during the years David was running from the mad and murderous King Saul. The great prophet Samuel has just died and the country mourns the loss of such a great and influential leader. David and his band of six hundred men take refuge in the wilderness of Paran near Carmel. This is also the place where the wealthy man Nabal is pasturing his flocks of sheep and goats. Thanks to David and his men, Nabal's flocks and herds were well protected from the bands of Ishmaelites who roamed the wilderness to steal and cause harm. David and his men were on the run, and in survival mode. They could have simply taken from the herds for their needs or demanded payment for their services

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But under the leadership of David, they were valiant and noble in caring for and protecting whatever flocks

and herds camped nearby. Nabal's men later described that protection to Abigail as a "*wall*" around them.

It was shearing time in Carmel and David sent an entourage of ten men to request that he and his band of six hundred men be included in celebrating the prosperity that was due in large part to the protection that David and his men had offered Nabal's men and possessions. This was not an unreasonable request and was even considered customary. But Nabal was a man who "*was churlish and evil in his doings;"*.. He not only refused David's request, but he also mocked, ridiculed and insulted David, questioning his character and being anointed as future King.

In a fit of rage, David instructed his men to strap on their swords and they set out to teach Nabal a lesson. This is not one of David's finer leadership moments. He was angry and he let his bruised ego overcome his good judgment. David let the insult fester until he vowed to slaughter every male in Nabal's household by morning.

Meanwhile, one of Nabal's servants approached Abigail for help. And here we begin to see Abigail's strength and character shine through. The fact that the servants immediately ran to Abigail for help tells us much about her role in the family. Abigail had obviously become the source of wisdom and reason in the household. The words that the servant used when reporting this incident to Abigail indicate that it was no secret that Nabal was a mean spirited fool. The servant accurately reported that Nabal was "*such a son of Belial. That a man cannot speak to him"* (1 Sam. 25:17).

Abigail didn't waste time fretting over what to do, or bad mouthing her husband. She simply went to work to try to rectify the situation. This tells us several things about Abigail. She was smart. She didn't have to mull over possible scenarios or options. She instantly understood the gravity of the situation and the cultural expectations and potential impact. Time was of the essence. She immediately went to work putting a plan into action to save her family She knew it would do no good to go to Nabal and scold him for being such a fool. No, she understood that she must act decisively if there was any hope of saving her husband's life. The cliché, "It's easier to ask forgiveness than permission" comes to mind.

.

The feast of the celebration of sheep shearing was under way and Abigail was able to put together a great deal of food in a short amount of time without raising her husband's suspicion. She loaded donkeys with the best that her husband had to offer in the hope of pacifying David's anger.

Abigail's plan worked. That and Abigail's humble attitude and plea. She was submissive. When she approached David, she honored him. The scripture says that she bowed down before him. She acknowledges David's reputation as a great leader, a future king and one who honors God in everything he does. Her words are not flattery, but sincere praise for a man whose deeds were well known throughout Israel. Through her words and actions, she reminds him of his position, his character and his obligation to lead with integrity. Her humility, courage and wisdom caused David to reassess his thinking and caused his action to be more consistent with his own values. He tells her, *"And blessed be thy advice, and blessed be thou, which hath kept me this day from coming to shed blood, and from avenging myself with mine own hand"* (1 Samuel 25:33). After the death of Nabal, David took this godly woman as one of his wives.

There are several lessons to be gained in studying the lives and actions of Deborah and Abigail. The greatest lesson is that a woman who fears the Lord and submits to his will can be assured that God will exalt her in His way and in His time.

LESSON THREE

COMPASSION

LESSON TEXT
Proverbs 31:20

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER CLIFFORD HAYES

INTRODUCTION

This lesson concerns another characteristic of the virtuous woman. It is difficult to talk about compassion without also mentioning generosity and love. All three of these virtues are found in Proverbs 31: 10-31.

Compassion is the understanding or empathy for the suffering of others. Compassion is the emotion that we feel in response to the suffering of others that motivates a desire to help. Godly love is closely akin to compassion. Jesus tells of a father who loved his son. When that son returned home after a period of riotous living, the father "*saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him"* (Luke 15: 20). That father loved his son and had compassion when he saw his destitute condition. In the lesson text, the woman described, *"stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy"* and her every action proves her love to her husband and children.

But in today's society, the meaning of the word love has become so distorted that the Godly meaning has been diminished. Some view love as a feeling, but it is more than that. One writer calls it a decision followed by action. Jesus said, "*If ye love me, keep my commandments"* (John 14:15) and "*A new command I give unto you, That you love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men will know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another"* (John 13:34, 35).

The Bible indicates that love is from God. In fact, the Bible says, *"God is love"* (1 John 4:8). The Greek language (the language of the New Testament) uses two different words to describe and define love. These are "Agape" and "Phileo". Agape is represented by God's love for us as in John 3:16. Agape love gives and makes sacrifices, expecting nothing back in return. Writing of Paul's great essay on love in 1 Corinthians 13, A.T. Robertson says in Word Pictures in the New Testament, "Whether Paul had ever seen Jesus in the flesh, he knows him in the spirit. One can substitute Jesus for love all through this panegyric." Panegyric was a new word for me and I had to look it up. It means speech or writing in praise of a person or thing. Phileo love is usually conditional and based upon how other people behave toward us. The Greek word that defines this kind of love is often translated "brotherly love."

The other aspect of compassion is generosity. It is defined as the quality of being generous. That doesn't really tell us a lot. The definition I like best is, "a quality of the heart or mind opposed to meanness or parsimony. " I also looked that one up. It means, among other things, stinginess. According to the Bible, God expects his people to be giving to others. In Malachi 3:8-12, the Bible explains that God expects people to give a tithe to God's house. The widow who gave her offering gave more than anyone. It was all she had. Also, according to the Bible, generosity is not limited to a monetary gift. Proverbs 22:9 says that *"A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor."* Generosity can involve money, food, time or anything else that we have to give.

The women in the bible who illustrates the above virtues are Lydia, Ruth and the Shunammite woman.

LYDIA

This woman of the Bible is mentioned in only two short passages, both in the book of Acts, but what is said tells us a lot about her. She is described as a dealer of purple cloth. Purple cloth was expensive and valuable as a sign of nobility or royalty so she was probably a wealthy businesswoman. She was from the city of Thyatira. This small city was known for its commerce in Asia Minor.

It was in an area noted for its abundant crops and the manufacture of purple dye. She was a worshiper of God. This term was used for Gentiles who believed in the Jewish God, Yahweh. Although they believed in God, they were not yet believers in Christ. She was in the same condition of Cornelius before Peter's visit. When Paul preached to her the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ and through God's divine work, she repented and was saved. *" She attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul"* (Acts 16:14).

Lydia became the first convert in Europe. She apparently was baptized right away along with the members of her household. Lydia's household probably included children and servants. After baptism she invited Paul and his companions to stay at her house. To paraphrase her words, " If you count me as a sister believer, if you believe I have truly been saved, then I invite you to my house and stay with me." When God opened her heart, she believed wholeheartedly. She became a servant, generously tending to the needs of the missionaries. Later in Paul's mission, he returned to Lydia's home where he met with believers. Lydia had apparently become an active member of the church.

As soon as Lydia believed, she went to work for Christ. She shared her faith with her family and servants. She opened her home to God's people and continued being of service to the church.

THE SHUNAMMITE WOMAN

The Shunammite woman in the lesson is not named. About 120 years before this lesson there was another woman named Abishag, a virgin, who was chosen to warm the old, cold body of David the King (1 Kings: 1-4).

This woman was a wealthy and well-respected person in the community in which she lived. In Deborah we saw a leader, in Hannah a prayerful woman, in Abigail an intelligent woman and in the Shunammite, a wealthy and well respected person, with a kind heart, evidenced by her treatment of the prophet Elisha. Keeping your heart right, full of compassion and love and empty of bitterness is the secret of receiving blessings from God.

The Shunammite woman used her kindness and wealth to entertain the prophet (2 Kings 4:8-10). With her husbands permission she built an addition to her house that the prophet might have a comfortable place to rest on his journey. God blessed her with a child because of her kindness (verse 17). This was inline with God's promise, *"He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward,"* (Matthew 10:41).

LESSONS TO BE GAINED

The Shunammite woman's life teaches us important lessons about these following three essential qualities that everyone should attempt to imitate.

She had a kind and compassionate heart. The love of God (Agape) is different from the love spoken about in the world (Phileo). God's love in our heart demands us to do the work of God.

Loving God means making room for His works and people. Elisha's work was aided by the Shunammite woman's kindness. Even Jesus was aided by the women who ministered to Him (His mother, the sisters Mary and Martha and Mary Magdalene). We should allow the love that God has put in our hearts to help in His work and to relieve the suffering of His people. Women have always had a special place in ministering to Christ and his Church. It was in pouring out her love to God's prophet that the Shunammite woman received a blessing she did not even ask for. She was childless and God, through Elisha, made it possible for her to have a son.

She was contented with her lot in life. The first ten verses of the 6th chapter of 1 Timothy addresses this quality, but it is summed up in verse 6, *"But godliness with contentment is great gain."* When Elisha asked the woman what he could do for her she simply stated the fact that she was happy with what she had. *"I dwell among mine own people"* (2 Kings 4:13).

She was a wealthy woman and did have a lot to be happy about, but unlike most moneyed people, she didn't want more wealth. We all have things we can thank God for. We must keep our focus on the

good things God has blessed us with. This is the secret of a happy and thankful heart. The Shunammite woman's thankful and gratitude of heart opened the door to more blessings in her life. By being thankful of what God had given her instead of worrying about what she did not have the Shunammite woman was able to enjoy her present blessings to the full and receive even more. An unthankful heart forsakes the present joys and blessings and worries on what might not occur in the future. This is a miserable way to live life, especially when you are serving such a kind and loving God.

She was persistent. The devil and his cohorts will always try to rob us of the blessings of God. That is his self appointed task. We must never settle for anything less than that which God has given us. The Shunammite woman was persistent in bringing her child back to life. After her son was stricken ill and died she went to the prophet at mount Carmel. Elisha first sent his servant to the boy with instructions to lay his staff on the boy. This did not restore life. After Elisha went into the room where the young man had been laid out he first prayed. Then he lay himself on the child and, *"put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands: and he stretched himself upon the child; and the flesh of the child waxed warm* (2 Kings: 34). He then called for the woman to come and take up her son.

A woman of God needs to be persistent. A time will come in all our lives when Satan will attempt to steal something that God has decided to bless us with. This is the time to stand on God's word against the devil (Ephesians 6: 10-18). The Holy Spirit within you will strengthen you to do this once you have set your heart to stand on God's Word.

RUTH

A part of the Mosaic Law has to do with gleaning. When it was written and later when it was practiced, it was promoted among the Jewish people as a form of welfare for the poor. As stated in the law the corners of the field were not to be harvested and the workers were not allowed to pick up any grain they dropped. Also, all the grapes should not be gathered and in another place it says the olive tree should not be shaken but once. This means that according to the law, the unharvested grain, grapes and olives are for the poor and the strangers. If the landowner especially liked someone who was gleaning, he would instruct his workers to leave more of the crop for the gleaner to gather. We see this in the story of Ruth.

Everyone is very familiar with the book of Ruth. How a man named Elimelech and his wife Naomi and their two sons left Bethlehem because of a famine and settled in Moab. While they were there the two sons married Moabite women. Elimelech and the two sons died, leaving three widows. Being destitute and hearing that conditions had improved in Bethlehem, Naomi decides to return to her native country. She encourages her two daughters-in-law to remain in their own country and make new lives for themselves among their own people. One daughter-in-law agrees to do this. Here we see the compassion and love of Ruth. Realizing that Naomi is aged and would not be able to support herself, Ruth refuses and insists on remaining with Naomi. In her refusal she declares one of the most famous commitments in scripture. *"Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and whither thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thy diest, I will die, and there I will be buried: the Lord do so to me. And more also, if aught but death part thee and me"* (Ruth 1: 15,16).

Even though these words were said to Ruth's mother-in-law, they are often used in these modern times in connection with the commitment a couple makes to each other when they are married. In time, Ruth's commitment to Naomi leads to romance and marriage to Boaz. God blessed Ruth and Boaz with a child they named Obed, who became the grandfather of David. From the line of David came Jesus of Nazareth, Savior of the world.
Ruth told Naomi that she wanted to go into the fields and gather *"ears of corn"* or heads of barley. To me, this shows her character. She was willing to go into the fields and pick missed grain off the

ground that they might have food to eat, rather than beg for relief of their hunger. She could have told Naomi that there was nothing to eat and she was going back to Moab so she could get something to eat. But she had already made her commitment to Naomi. She had already told her mother-in-law that nothing but death could part them.

Much has been written about Ruth's love, compassion and devotion toward Naomi. And rightly so. She refused to remain in her home country and chose to live and worship in Bethlehem with her mother-in-law. To support them Ruth did back breaking work by gleaning in the fields during the harvest. All this is very commendable and the world justly honors her for all this. But even though these lessons concern women of the bible, something must be said about the actions of Boaz.

Boaz exhibits all the qualities that have been our focus in this lesson. Compassion, love and generosity. We see in the book of Ruth chapter 2: 2 and 3 that Ruth did not go looking specifically for the fields of Boaz. Verse 3 says that she *"hap"* or chance to come to the fields of Boaz. Her being there was unintended. The way things turned out, it makes me believe there was something other than chance guiding her. In these verses we find that Boaz was a very wealthy man and he was related to Naomi's husband Elimelech. Yet, Naomi had not made herself known to him, nor had she applied to him for relief of their destitute condition.

But Boaz knew of them because in verse 11 he admits that he has heard of Ruth's kindness toward her mother-in-law after the husbands had died. We see Boaz to be a just and Godly man. This is evidenced in the 4th verse of the 2nd chapter when he greets his reapers with a blessing, and they, evidently having a high regard for their employer, answer him in the same manner. After he learns the idenity of the woman gleaning in his fields, he speaks to Ruth directly. He tells her to glean only in his fields with his personal guarantee that the reapers in his employ will not harm her. He also offers her drink from the vessels

his reapers have brought to the fields. Now, this was not the usual way a landowner treats a gleaner in his fields. Ruth's goodness and integrity shone through and Boaz was impressed. Also, Ruth must have been a pretty woman. Boaz was smitten.

Boaz told his reapers to allow her to glean among the sheaves and not to fuss at her for doing it. She was already picking up what was left and dropped, so I take this to mean let her get into the standing grain. He told his men to accidentally on purpose drop handfuls of the grain so she could gather even more. All of this shows Boaz to be a man of compassion, love and generous spirit.

Ruth acknowledged the goodness that Boaz has extended to her. He has commended her for her devotion to Naomi and has wished for her happiness both now and in the future. She compared his kindness to her as to one of his handmaidens, even though she is not. Boaz was impressed with her, but she was no less impressed with him. The stage is set for Boaz to take the role of the kinsman redeemer and for the marriage of Boaz and Ruth. Ruth is the heroine of this book. Boaz is the hero of this book and is a type of Christ.

I think that after a lifetime of faithful service, these three women met Jesus and was probably greeted with the words, "*Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord"* (Matthew 25:21).

LESSON FOUR

COURAGE

LESSON TEXT
Esther 4:14

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER CLIFFORD HAYES

INTRODUCTION

Courage may be defined as the quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face difficulty, danger, pain, etc. To have the courage of one's convictions, to act in accordance with one's beliefs, especially in spite of criticism.

In England by the 1600's there were some people who didn't want to worship in the Church of England. Those who wanted to separate from it were called Separatists. Most were just average, humble people. But there were some that were not average at all. Their deep enduring faith gave them courage to stand and face danger when others would scatter like the leaves in the wind. They continued on with the belief that what they were doing was right and that it was God's will.

In 1620 the Mayflower sailed from England with 102 people on board who could no longer abide the persecutions of the Church of England. They came ashore at Plymouth in the Cape Cod area. The weather was fierce, shelter was inadequate, and food was substandard and about half of the Pilgrims died the first winter. But they persevered in their belief that they would risk their lives for the opportunity to worship God freely, without restraints.

This was courage, manifested through their actions.

All of us can think and relate incidences of courage. Military conflicts are filled with such acts. The young black woman who recently talked the shooter into surrendering his gun surely displayed courage in the face of danger. She said later that she was "scared to death". It has been said that courage is not the absence of fear; it is the mastery of it. The Bible, however, adds an important element to the definition of courage: trust and faith in God. She mastered her fear even though she was in grave danger. This lesson is about a young woman who exhibited an inordinate amount of courage in the face of great authority. She was a Jewish woman who saved her people from genocide.

DESTINY

Does destiny, or fate, play a part in a person's life? Destiny is usually thought of as a predetermined course of events beyond human control. A typical response to a belief in fate is to give up. If we can't change our destiny, then why even try? Whatever will be, will be, and we can't do anything about it. This is called "fatalism," and it is not biblical.

My research tells me that fatalism is a major premise of Islam, which demands total submission to the sovereignty of Allah. It is widely held in Hinduism, too; in fact, it is a fatalistic view of life that helps keep India's caste system in place. Greek mythology told of the Fates, three goddesses pictured as weavers of men's lives. Their decisions could not be canceled or annulled, even by other gods. Again, this type of fatalism is not a biblical concept.

But destiny does not have to be fatalism. The fall of man was not a predetermined event in which Adam and Eve were hapless puppets on a string controlled by a God whose plan for them was set in stone. God foreknew what would happen, but the first man and woman had a free will. Adam and his wife had the ability to choose obedience with its blessings or disobedience with its resulting curse. They knew what the result of their decision would be. God had said, "*thou shalt surely die"* and they were held accountable. So, having a free will, we have some control over which way our lives go. All that being said, it seems that some people's lives are charted toward a culminating point, or points, to which they are ordained and from which they cannot escape.

To illustrate, was it by chance that Moses was taken into the household of Pharaoh?
Did God have a mission for Moses in mind when he learned all the knowledge of Egypt? Or that he lived 40 years in the desert after he killed the

Egyptian? I don't believe it was by chance that Moses was on the "*backside of the desert"* and saw the burning bush and heard the voice that came from it. The whole point of Moses' life was to be a deliverer of God's people. In that he was successful. He would have failed at any other endeavor.

The Apostle Paul felt that from his birth he was set apart for the great apostolic work of his later years. Galatians 1:15 reads, *"But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace".* After Paul's conversion on the road God told Ananias, "*he is a chosen vessel unto me"* (Acts 9:15). We may be unconscious of our role in God's plan. Paul never dreamed of his while he sat at the feet of Gamaliel or while he was persecuting the Christians. It was a secret in God's mind that he revealed at the appropriate time, that being on the road to Damascus.

God told Ananias that Paul's role would be, *" to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I must show him how great things he must suffer for my names sake"* (Acts 9:15). Paul was to preach Christ among the Gentiles. His message to those people was that God's grace through Christ extended to the whole world. This was the reason for Paul's existence.

There are other examples we could use. David's reason for being was to become King of Israel. Unwilling Jonah's call was to preach to the city of Nineveh. After God dealt with him he fulfilled his mission successfully only to pout under a gourd plant because of the repentance of the city. Although He taught many invaluable lessons on His way, Jesus' destiny was to go to the cross and be our savior. John the Baptist knew this. *"Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world"* (John 1: 29).

Likewise the destiny of Esther was the salvation of her people. In the lesson text her uncle, Mordecai, told her of her mission. *"For if thou altogether hold thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house will be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this"* (Esther 4:14)?

ESTHER

Esther was an orphan girl who became queen and was used by God for a great purpose. Her courage, clear judgment and spirit of self-sacrifice saved the Hebrew nation from extermination at the hands of their enemies.

In the third year of his reign, Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, King of the Medes and Persians, searched for a new queen from among the beautiful virgins in his kingdom. She was to replace Queen Vashti. Vashti had humiliated her husband in front of many people including all his officials. She had refused to allow him to display her beauty before everyone at his special feast (Esther 1:1-22). On the advice of one of his counselors the King issued an order of divorcement, ending his marriage to Vashti. After his anger had subsided, Ahasuerus thought on Vashti and evidently was depressed. He was advised by his servants to have virgins from all over the kingdom brought to the palace that he might choose one of his liking to become his Queen. This was the first beauty pageant on record. This process of elimination took four years, from the third year of his reign until the seventh (Esther 1:3 and 2:16).

Esther, a young orphan, was among the women the King ordered brought to the palace for special pampering and preparation for the King's scrutiny as possible royal replacements. Evidently, her family had been killed during the first Babylonian invasion, and she had been adopted by her cousin Mordecai, who was raising her as his own daughter. Mordecai and Esther were both captured during the second Babylonian invasion and exiled to Persia. While in Persia, Mordecai changed Esther's name from Hadassah, meaning "myrtle tree," to disguise her ancestry. She was given a new Persian name, Esther, meaning "star." Her new name, "Esther," was appropriate for her. Like a star, Esther allowed the light of God to shine through her to penetrate a very dark situation that was about to develop.

Mordecai was a Jewish servant "*in the king's gate*" which implied that he held a position in the king's court. Following her cousin's advice, Esther did not reveal her ethnic identity. In his efforts to conceal Esther's heritage, Mordecai in effect said," "We'll call you 'Esther because that is a Persian name, and no one will ever suspect that you are Jewish." Was Mordecai unconsciously following God's plan that a victory might be won for His people?

Esther was presented to the King, who *"... loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins so that he set the royal crown on her head, and made her Queen instead of Vashti"* (Esther 2:17). Esther had delighted the king and she was chosen to be his queen. Do you think that God ordained this marriage? From our natural viewpoint, the union between a Jewess and a rich, materialistic, heathen King does not appear to be a match made in heaven. But remember, God is a God of providence. What does that mean? In the Hebrew it literally means "God provides." God provided Esther with special access to an ungodly King so that she could fulfill her destiny and liberate her people from impending destruction. God's providence is evident throughout the entire book of Esther; but I want to point out a very strange fact: His name is not mentioned even once! Although no one mentions God during this entire account, He is present to move and guide the course of events that occur.

After the King chose her as Queen, she maintained her contact with her cousin. Mordecai told Esther he had overheard a plot to kill the King. She informed the King and mentioned Mordecai's name as the one who had uncovered the plot. The would be assassins were hanged but there was no recognition for Mordecai.

In Esther 3:1 we read that Ahasuerus promoted a very ungodly man, Haman, to the number-one position in the kingdom, and God's law of sowing and reaping was again set in motion. Haman, as the highest of the king's princes, was consumed with pride. He loved his position in the Persian

Empire. The King commanded everyone to bow down to him in reverence. No one dared to defy Haman! But Mordecai refused to bow. When Haman noticed that Mordecai did not pay homage to him he was ,*"full of wrath".* At first Haman thought to only kill Mordecai, but afterwards he decided to exterminate the entire Jewish people. Even though Haman was a powerful man in the kingdom, he could not, on his own authority carry out his scheme to annihilate all the Jews in the kingdom. So he went to the King.

Now is a good time to take a closer look at this King. Ahasuerus was a man who was quick to anger and slow to think. He was easily manipulated. When he had his problems with Vashti, he was easily persuaded by his princes and wise men to divorce his wife. It seems that he later regretted this action and he was again advised by those around him to have a beauty contest for a new wife. Throughout the entire book of Esther, Ahasuerus has someone else pulling his strings. The only time he acts out of character is when Esther approaches him unsummoned and he extends his scepter to accept her. Then when Esther uncovered Haman's plot, Ahasuerus finally acted as a King should and meted out justice to that wicked man.

Now, at Haman's insistence he agrees to that evil man's plan and gives him his ring as a symbol that his authority had been passed to Haman. The edict was published and posted throughout the kingdom. When Mordecai read this he was deeply grieved and *"put on sackcloth and ashes"* and cried in the streets and at the gate of the palace. When Esther learned of Mordecai's circumstance, she told her maids to take garments to clothe him and to take away his sackcloth. But Mordecai would not accept them.

Esther then sent Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs who attended her, to find out what was wrong with Mordecai. Mordecai told him all that had happened and gave him a copy of the written decree to show to Esther. He also told him to tell her to go to the king and plead for her people.

Esther had not seen the king for 30 days. The King enforced a

law that anyone who came into the inner court to approach him whom he had not specifically called was to die. However, the king could make an exception by holding out his golden scepter, thereby sparing the person. So Esther sent the eunuch back to Mordecai with the message that she could not enter the court to see the King.

Mordecai answered that, if she did nothing, she risked death along with all her countrymen in the kingdom. He also asked a question that would be difficult for anyone to answer: What if God had elevated Esther to her position as Queen for the specific purpose of helping save her people at this critical time?

What a difficult decision for such a young woman! Death seemed certain regardless of what she decided. In the midst of her turmoil, Esther realized she could not allow fear to paralyze her into inaction. That in itself would be a decision that was unacceptable.. Instead, she left the outcome with God. It was clear she had only one real choice. In giving Mordecai her answer, Esther knew she did not have the courage within herself to face Ahasuerus. But she did know where to go for the courage she lacked: to God in fasting and prayer. Placing her life in God's hands, she let Him decide the outcome for her and her people. She sent word to Mordecai requesting that he ask their fellow Jews to fast for her for three days and nights. She and her maids would do likewise. Then she promised to go before the King, knowing full well she was risking her life

You can read the remainder of the book of Esther to see what happened. The short version is that the King did extend his golden scepter, and he spared Esther's life. After several special banquets for the King and Haman, Esther finally revealed Haman's plot and made known her request for her people. The king ordered Haman hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai's execution.

LESSON FIVE

PURITY

LESSON TEXT
Isaiah 7:14

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER CLIFFORD HAYES

INTRODUCTION

When we think about purity, most of us think of abstinence before marriage and faithfulness in marriage. And these subjects are a large part of purity. But before actions are taken that lead to loss of innocence or infidelity, the thought that leads to the act must be present. A chaste and pure person should be pure in body and soul, in his thoughts, senses, feelings, and even in his dreams and imaginations. As we take care of the purity of our hearts in order that God may dwell in them, so we must take care of our minds also. Luke 10:27 reads,*"…Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind…".* A person who lets his heart be occupied with sin, gives a proof that God does not live in his heart, as thoughts arise from the inside of the heart. Scriptures tell us to guard our heart for out of it comes the evil that permeates our lives. If you wish to have a pure mind, keep far away from whatever corrupts your thoughts. An evil thought may bring about a wicked lust, and a wicked lust may give birth to a wicked thought. On many occasions your thoughts may be expressive of your desires. Try to clear out your heart from evil desires; then your thoughts will consequently be purified.

One of my sons tells of hearing a Native American interviewed on a Christian radio station. This man related his Christian daily life as having two large dogs living within him, one evil and one good. These dogs were always at odds with each other. When asked which dog got that upper hand he replied, "The one I feed the most". In the mind of this man, Christian living was a fight on the part of the devil against his inward man. Not his soul, which cannot sin, but that part of us that can sin. We should orient our thoughts and not

let thoughts take advantage of us and direct our lives. If we feed our inner man with Godly things, sin will be easier to control. Deacon Dumont Stringer was the best man I ever knew. His brother-in-law told me that when they were boys and were out at night, when their activities turned to something that was not right, Dumont went home. I am convinced that from an early age, he fed from God's table.

When I was young my mother taught me, "An idle mind is that devil's workshop".
A busy person controls his thoughts, as he directs them according to the kind of occupation in which he works. A hard working student directs his thoughts in the way of his studies; a scientist is occupied with science, an athlete with physical exercises, and so forth. A person who spends his time in idleness will have his mind exposed to evil thoughts; he does not control his thoughts but the thoughts direct him.

The bible is silent as to why God chose Mary to be the means by which His Son entered this word in human form. Many times her virginity was expressed. Our lesson text states,
"Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Then Luke writes in Luke 1:27, **"…and the virgin's name was Mary".** Anything we say concerning why God chose Mary would be supposition and conjecture. And realizing that, we ask the question, "Was God being arbitrary when He chose Mary to be that special person who would bring His Son into the world"? We are forced to conclude that the answer is "no" because God makes His choices based upon certain qualities he sees in the people He chooses**.** As in when he chose David to be King of Israel.

God uses people who are willing to do His will. Instead of saying, "Is this in my best interest"? Mary said, "*Behold, the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word"* (Luke 1:38). Mary was willing to do what God wanted her to do. There are three things about Mary that reveal she earnestly desired to know and do God's will. She was sensitive to finding out

what God wanted her to do, she was joyful and enthusiastic about doing God's will, "*And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior*." (Luke 1: 47) and she was humble and yielded. "*Behold the handmaid of the Lord!".*

WHAT SOME SAY ABOUT MARY

First of all, it is important that we lay aside some of the misconceptions about Mary. Not once does the Bible say that Mary was sinless. In fact, Mary said, *"my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior"* (Luke 1:47). In so doing, she declared her need of a Savior just as much as anyone else. Not once does the scripture say that Mary was God or that we should worship her. We read that as the church met, "*These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren"* (Acts 1:14). They did not pray to Mary, they prayed with her and she prayed with them.

Helen Splarn, a Catholic, had the following to say concerning the early life of the Virgin Mary: "As early as the 2nd century, Christians venerated Mary by calling her Mother of God. During the controversies of the 4th century concerning the divine and human natures of Jesus, the title Mother of God, came to be used for Mary in devotional and theological writing. This suggests the divine nature of Mary and her true place within the Holy Trinity.

Closely related to the title Mother of God is the title Virgin Mary, affirming the virginal conception of Jesus (Luke 1:35). God, not Joseph, was the true father of Jesus. In the Marian devotion that developed in the East in the 4th century, Mary was venerated not only in the conception but also in the birth of Jesus. The title used was Aieiparthenos (ever-virgin), and by the middle of the 7th century the understanding of the title came to include the conviction that Mary remained a virgin for the whole of her life. This notion reinforces the idea that Mary was not touched by this world, indeed her purity of spirit, body and mind signaled her attachment to the realms of the Gods. The passages in the New Testament referring to the brothers of Jesus (for instance,

Mark 6:3, which also mentions sisters; see 1 Corinthians 9:5; Galatians 1:19) have been accordingly explained as references to relatives of Jesus or to children of Joseph by a previous marriage.

In the 2nd and 3rd centuries, various Christian writers began to express the belief that, because of her intimate union with God through the Holy Spirit in the conception of Jesus, Mary was completely free from any taint of sin. In 680AD a Roman Council spoke of her as the "blessed, immaculate ever-virgin." This can be taken one step further. It can be suggested that Mary completed the "Holy Trinity" not that she was touched by the Holy Spirit, but that she was the Holy Spirit. Who else could have born the Son of God on earth? Thus completing the Holy Trinity – God the Father, God the Son and God the Mother.

During the late Middle Ages (13th century to 15th century), devotion to Mary grew dramatically. Mary came to be depicted as the one who interceded for sinners. As the fear of death and the Last Judgment intensified following the Black Plague in the 14th century, Mary was increasingly venerated in popular piety as mediator of the mercy of Christ. Her prayers and pleas were seen as the agency that tempered the stern justice of Christ. Indeed Christ had talked of the Comforter, Councillor and Redeemer who would come at the time of the Last Judgment. People turned to Mary for God's compassion, recognising these as feminine qualities, the qualities of a Mother."

This woman then proceeds to relate the most fanciful tale about the early life of Mary. About how she was the daughter of a barren woman who gave her to the priests in the temple when she was three years old. While there she distributed food and clothing to the poor and needy and was loved by all because of these acts of kindness and her knowledge of God's mercies. This is just an example of how God's plan has been perverted by the opportunistic whimsy of man. Let's leave these lies for God to deal with and learn as much as we can about Mary, the mother of Jesus.

MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS

If we are going to know how Mary fits the characteristics of a virtuous woman, we must understand how God took an ordinary woman and used her in an extraordinary way. God did not use Mary because she was highly educated. She was not. He did not choose her because she was wealthy. She was poor.

Of all the extraordinary women in scripture, one stands out above all others as the most blessed, most highly favored of God, and most admired by women. No woman is more truly remarkable than Mary. She was the one chosen by God, from all the women ever born, to be the instrument by which He would, at last, bring His Son into the world. That fact alone would make her blessed through all ages. No doubt, at that time there were other virgins in Israel just as chaste as Mary. Yet, God chose her. However, we must be cautious in elevating her too much because of the reasons given in the previous section. She is never portrayed in scriptures as a source or dispenser of grace, but is herself a recipient of God's blessings. To show how she has been elevated and worshiped, Pope John Paul, in his will, left to her the care of the Roman Catholic Church. The tendency to make Mary an object of worship is nothing new. On one occasion a woman in the crowd around Jesus said, *"Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked."* Jesus rebuked the woman and replied, *"Yea rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it"* (Luke 11: 27-28).

If you had met Mary before Jesus was conceived , you might not have noticed her at all. She could not have been more plain and humble. From every thing we know about her background and social standing, not much about her life or her experiences in life so far would deem her as extraordinary.

MARY'S HERITAGE

In researching this section, I found that Mary did have some ancestors that were well known. In Luke 3, that writer gives her genealogy in detail.

Matthew also lists Joseph genealogy. Both Mary and Joseph descend from David. Mary's branch of David's family tree can be traced through David's son, Nathan, whereas Joseph's branch is the royal line through Solomon. In light of this, Christ inherited David's throne through His stepfather. Jesus' blood relationship to David, however, came through Mary who descended through and otherwise minor branch of David's family.

Matthew included several women in the genealogy of Christ. Since all those women came between Abraham and David, all of them were ancestor of both Joseph and Mary, including Rahab, the harlot and Ruth, who was a native of Moab. They were Gentiles in the genealogy of Christ. Mary seems to have inherited all the best traits of all her ancestors. Indeed, Mary has all the best characteristics of the women in this years study. Most significant of all, her faith was an example of the type of faith that Jesus blessed. She was pure in her life, both before and after the conception, sincere, earnestly worshipful toward God and utterly dependant on Him.

Mary's young life may well have been filled with hardships. Her home was a town in a poor district of Galilee. You may recall that when Phillip told Nathaniel that he had found the Messiah and He was a Galilean from Nazareth, Nathaniel scoffed and said, "*Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth"* (John 1:46)? Mary lived there all her life, in a place where good things rarely happened.

Then she found herself in a role for which she was both prepared and unprepared at the same time. She would become the mother of the promised Redeemer.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT THAT CHANGED HER LIFE

When we first meet Mary in Luke's gospel, the archangel Gabriel appeared to her suddenly and disclosed to her God's wonderful plan. At this time, Mary was probably just a teenager. Mary was engaged to Joseph and that contract was more binding than engagements of today. It was as binding as marriage itself and only a legal divorce could dissolve the contract. Scripture

is very clear in teaching that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was miraculously conceived in Mary's womb. Luke 1:27 twice calls her a virgin, using a Greek term that allows for no misunderstanding of meaning. The clear claim of scripture and Mary's own words, is that she had never been physically intimate with a man. And now came the announcement that changed the course of her life.

The angel called her "*highly favored"* and *"blessed art thou among women"* (Luke 1: 28). This privilege of carrying the promised Redeemer came at a high cost to Mary personally, because it carried the stigma of an unwed pregnancy. Although she had remained completely chaste, the world would think otherwise. Even Joseph assumed the worse. His inclination was to divorce her quietly. He loved her and was not willing to make a public example of her. Then an angel appeared to him in a dream and reassured him. *"Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins"* (Matthew 1:20-21).

Common sense tells us that Mary must have been concerned over all the difficulties that an unwed pregnancy would bring. However, she instantly and humbly submitted to God's will that she would be the mother of the Redeemer. There's no evidence that Mary brooded over the effects the pregnancy would have on her reputation. She could have hardly had a more Godly response to the announcement of Jesus' birth. She prayed the beautiful song of praise known as The Magnificat, found in Luke 1: 46-55. It is a song of joy and without doubt the most joyous psalm in the New Testament. As mentioned before in a previous lesson, it is closely aligned with Hannah's song of praise for the birth of Samuel.

MARY'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HER SON

When Jesus was twelve years old he became separated from his parents while on a pilgrimage to the temple. After a search and they finally found Him, Mary mildly scolds Him and He

replied with what seemed to be genuine amazement, *"How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my fathers business"* (Luke 2:49)? He was denying any idea that His earthly parents interest could override those of His heavenly Father. After awhile, Mary always remained in the background. She never sought the kind of supremacy so many seen determined to thrust upon her. It is folly that causes so many to imagine she would want to usurp her Son and ascend to the position of mediator.

In this relationship we see Mary learning to submit to Jesus as her Lord, rather than try to control Him as His mother. She seems to come to grips with the knowledge that He had work to do. She followed Him all the way to the cross and when He died, she was standing nearby with a group of women.

Already in the final agonies of death, Jesus saw Mary standing with the women and with John, the beloved apostle. At this final time Jesus acknowledged His human relationship with His mother. That apostle in his gospel relates what happened, "*When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he said to his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then he said to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home"* (John 19: 26-27).

That act characterizes Mary's relationship with her firstborn Son. She was His earthly mother, but He was her eternal Lord. She bowed to His authority in heavenly matters just as in His childhood and youth He had always been subject to her parental authority in earthly matters (Luke 2:51). As a mother, she had once provided all His needs, but in the eternal sense, He was her savior and provider.

Mary never claimed to be, or pretended to be anything more than a humble handmaiden of the Lord. She was extraordinary because God used her in an extraordinary way. She is described in scripture as only an instrument God used in the fulfillment of his plan. She never made any pretense of being an administrator of God's divine plan. The lowly view as seen in Mary's song of praise is the same simple spirit of humility that highlighted all her life and character.

It is truly regrettable that false teachings of some religious orders has turned Mary into an idol. She is certainly an admirable woman to copy, but Mary would be shocked to think anyone would pray to her or burn candles in homage to her.

She is to be venerated because she was the mother of our Savior. Also because of her abstinence before marriage, her faithfulness in marriage and because she had purity of thought.