

THE MEANING OF 'BLESSING' IN THE BIBLE *Biblical Focus*

The Rev. Earl Palmer

The Rev. Earl Palmer's address to the Washington Forum was delivered in two speeches entitled "The Meaning of 'Blessing' in the Bible" and "The Blessing Fulfilled and Handed On."

Let me share one of the greatest texts in the New Testament from Matthew 19:13:

Then children were being brought to him [Jesus] that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

I want to explore what it means to be "blessed." Jesus laid his hands on the children, he prayed for them, he blessed them. In order to understand blessing we have to look at the Old Testament tradition for "blessing" and the Old Testament word for "blessing." There are two main words in Hebrew that will be useful. There is one key word that is translated as "bless" in the Old Testament. The three consonants b-r-k, pronounced "barak," make up the fundamental word for "bless." For instance, in Psalm 103:1, we find, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name." That use of "bless" here is the word "barak."

In the Hebrew language words do double duty, they all have concrete meaning. For example, take the word "discouraged," which is an abstract word in English. In Hebrew the word for discouraged is "his countenance fell." It is much more concrete. I can see it—his countenance fell.

Likewise, this word "barak or "blessed" literally in its concrete meaning is "to bow." So, in Psalm 103, I "bow before the Lord." I recognize who he is. That is the word "barak."

The other word for "bless" that is prominent in Old Testament Hebrew is in Psalm 1. I want you to see the two words alongside each other.



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Finding the Right Road

Psalm 1—the great Psalm of the Law—starts out, “Blessed is the man or woman who walks not in the way of the wicked, but walks in the way of the righteous.” That Psalm goes on to say that person will be like a tree planted by the rivers of water that will bear fruit. Yet those who sit with the scornful and the scoffers and do not walk in the way of the Lord, the “Torah” of the Lord, will be like chaff that is blown away in the wind. That word for “blessed” for the man or woman who walks in the way of the will of God, is “ashar.” It literally means “to find the right road.” And notice in Psalm 1 that is precisely the meaning of “ashar.” “Blessed is a man or women who walks not in the way of wickedness, but in the way of righteousness.”

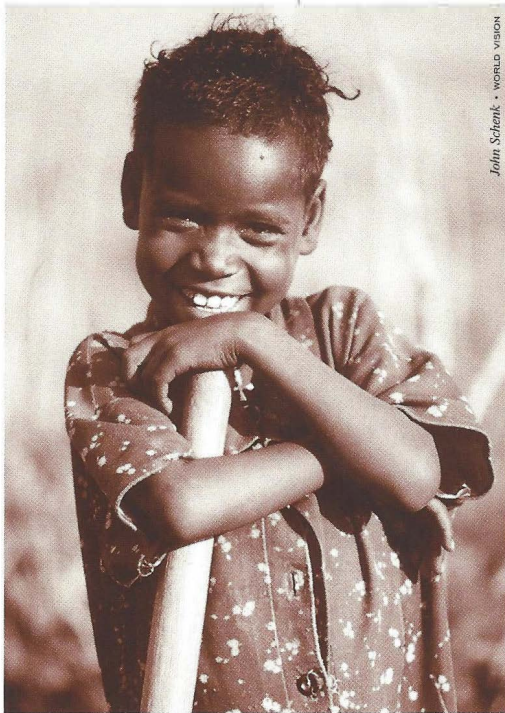
So what is success? In the Old Testament sense, success is to be where you are supposed to be—to be on the right road. To be on the right road is what it means to be blessed.

In the Sermon on the Mount—the Lord’s commentary on the Law—Jesus frames his sermon with that Psalm. Psalm 1 starts with “Blessed is the man who walks in the way of righteousness” and ends with the parable that he is like a tree planted by the water that bears fruit, whereas the wicked are not so—they are like the chaff that blows away in the wind.

Our Lord does the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount. He starts with “blessed,” only He has nine blessings—we call them the Beatitudes. The New Testament is written in Greek so the word “makarias” is used for “blessed,” which can be translated as “happy.” But Jesus is thinking in Hebrew. Even though our Lord spoke Greek and did much of His teaching in Greek, he thought in Hebrew. So what was his meaning when Jesus spoke the nine blessings: Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall be called the children of God; blessed are the peacemakers; blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness; blessed are those who are persecuted; etcetera?

I have heard pastors try to convince others that the idea is not “blessed” but “happy.” I disagree. It is pretty hard to make yourself happy when you are being persecuted or being a peacemaker. That is not what our Lord has in mind. He has the word “ashar” in mind: “You are on the right road.” You are on the right road when you are poor in spirit. You are on the right road when you mourn. You are on the right road when you are persecuted for his sake.

Notice Jesus also ends the Sermon on the Mount with the same parable that Psalm 1 ended with, only our Lord improves it. Psalm 1 says that the blessed one is like a tree that bears fruit, whereas the wicked are like chaff that is



Danse leans on a hoe handle in her father's irrigated fields in Ethiopia.

blown away in the wind. Our Lord ends the Sermon on the Mount with the identical parable, only a little more exciting. He says: "Those who hear these words of mine and do them will be like the wise man or woman who builds his house on a rock. And the foolish who hear these words and do not do them are like the foolish man or woman who builds his or her house on sand, and it washes away."

The Fulfillment of 'Ashar'

Now take a look at the most famous blessing in the Bible. In Numbers 6:23-26, Moses is given instruction from the Lord as to how he should teach Aaron to pray for the people:

Say to Aaron and his sons, "Thus you shall bless the people of Israel. You shall say to them, 'The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.'"

Notice the result of the Lord's blessing is "peace." Peace means to be on the right road. Peace is the fulfillment of "ashar." In the Old Testament, peace always has to do with wholeness. The blessing of God. To be on the right road. To have your life complete. That is the blessing. The Lord bless you, and the word used here is the Hebrew "BRK." It means "the Lord stoop down to you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you." It is a sign of his presence. And the Lord lifts up his countenance—smiles—upon you and gives you peace.

Have you ever thought about what this verse shows us about the grace of God? That God is able to stoop down and find us. He is able to get near to us. His face shines upon us, he smiles upon us. He knows us. It is a tremendous blessing of God that he knows us and comes close to us.

Let me ask you a question about blessing: What does it mean to be at peace? Because that is what blessing is all about. The biblical understanding of "blessing" is to be on the right road, to have peace, to have God smile upon you, to experience his grace. What is that right road? What is the right road for a girl child? We know from Matthew 19:13 that boys and girls were brought to Jesus by their parents, and the disciples tried to stop them from coming. The parents wanted Jesus to put his hands on their children and pray for them. That constitutes a blessing in the Jewish tradition. They wanted Jesus to stoop down to their children, look in their faces and touch them. And our Lord wanted to do it. The disciples thought this was an intrusion into Jesus' more serious teaching, but Jesus rebuked the disciples. He said, "Do not hinder the children from coming to me."

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We see through this that our Lord wants to bless children. Still today we ask: What would be the meaning of that blessing? What is “peace” for a child? What is the right road for a girl child or boy child who has been blessed by Jesus Christ? Let me share some reflections.

First, “the right road” is for all children to be on equal ground, where all children receive the grace of Christ. For the girl child, it means being on equal ground with the boy child. In the Bible, parents brought both boys and girls for Jesus’ blessing.

One of the great joys of the New Testament Church is that they preserved the Old Testament sign of the covenant when on the eighth day of a boy’s life he was circumcised and given the mark of being blessed. But the sign becomes baptism, not circumcision. It is interesting that in Galatians 3:26-28 Paul discusses baptism, which many in Christendom practice as infant baptism as a fulfillment of the Old Testament circumcision. Paul says:

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons and daughters of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ, you put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither slave nor free. There is neither male nor female. You are all one in Christ Jesus.

Blessing for the Girl Child

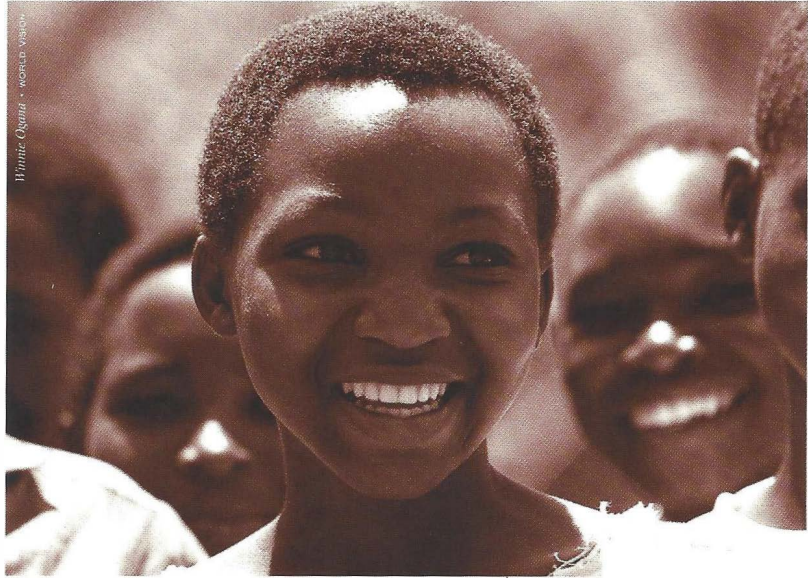
The mark of the covenant now is for both boys and girls. The mark of the covenant is neither male nor female, Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, and the mark of baptism is that mark that we have claimed, and we lay hold of the promise in baptism. There is nothing magical about baptism. A child is not loved more after baptism than before baptism. In fact, I always point out to parents with regard to infant baptism that it is like the doctrine of prayer. Their prayers do not create God’s love for a child or for anyone else. Their prayers lay hold of a love that is already there. It is God who stoops. Their prayers do not persuade him to stoop. He stoops without their prayers. Their prayers lay hold of the promise. They claim the promise.

That is why the doctrine of baptism and the doctrine of prayer are covenanted together. In baptism we are laying hold of a promise. Later that boy or girl fulfills that promise when they become confessing members of the church. Now, in the Baptist tradition, confessing by the believer and baptism are united as one. Parents who do not practice infant baptism still lay hold of the promise when they dedicate or promise or pray for their children as infants.

The blessing also then means that the girl child grows up alongside the boy child. The fulfillment of blessing is to be on the right road, in the right place

where they are nourished, where they are fed and encouraged in their life.

Our Lord had a lot to say about this. Returning to the Sermon on the Mount, which is our Lord's commentary on the Law, it is interesting that in the middle of this sermon Jesus makes it impossible for us to follow the Law. The Lord shows the grand positive that lies behind the Law, and we discover that it is impossible to fulfill that grand intention of God. We all fall short



before the Law of God. Fortunately, we get to the seventh chapter of Matthew, toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount, where our Lord invites us to bring our inadequacies to him, showing that since we cannot fulfill the Law ourselves, grace is available to those who ask for help. Notice how Jesus uses non-religious language about prayer in Matthew 7:7:

"Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find, knock and it will be open to you. For everyone who asks, receives. And he who seeks, finds. To him who knocks, it will be opened."

Then Jesus tells us a wonderful parable about child rearing. We receive a double gift from this parable: He tells us how eager God is to help us and he uses parenthood as a symbol for teaching about God's care for us. Jesus is addressing fathers and mothers when he asks, "If your son or daughter were to come to you and ask for bread, you would not give them a stone." Even an evil father or evil mother, a mother and father who are confused and have a lot of their own problems, still would not give a stone or rock to a boy or girl asking for bread or would not give a snake to a child asking for fish.

In this parable, our Lord is giving to us his standard for raising children. He is saying you must give them bread not rocks. So many children have received rocks from their parents. You do not give your son or daughter a snake when they ask for a fish. Our Lord is warning us. He expects us to give fish. He expects us to give bread.

We have to figure out how to give fish and bread. That is how a child gets on the right road. We have to make sure we are not giving rocks and snakes. That is our obligation, but it is also our opportunity to help a boy or girl get on the right road. The right road is where they receive nourishment—and that means blessing. To be blessed means to be on the right road and that is a place where every child—girl as well as boy—is nourished.

Ugandan girls are gaining confidence through World Vision's educational programs.

The Great Goal of Faith

Third, the right road is where the girl child and boy child come to faith and receive by faith the gifts of the Holy Spirit that assure us. The blessing says, "The Lord smile upon you, the Lord make his face shine upon you." Here we have a blessing, a promise that God will come near to us and actually shine upon us. There is a presence that we will experience and that is fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The great goal we have in raising the girl child and the boy child is to bring them to faith in Jesus Christ and to experience the gifts of the Holy Spirit. When Paul first introduces the gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12, he does not introduce them as gifts for men and gifts for women. Men and women receive the same gifts. Therefore, both boys and girls are to know the assurance of salvation, the assurance of their belovedness in God's sight.

Fourth, the girl child is on the right road when she reaches her full stride. How does the girl child reach full stride? How does the boy child reach full stride? To answer this, we must look at the role of women and how they reach their stride because of Jesus Christ. There may be some surprises for us when we look at the actual text. When we watch what both the Lord and Paul do in their relationships with women and the stride of the women of the New Testament, they become a model for us. This is also a model for the girl child, who must be enabled to reach her full stride. God has stooped. St. Augustine put it this way: "Proud man would have died had not a lowly God found him." That is the amazing grace of the New Testament and the Old Testament.

World Vision projects in India are impacting the lives of slum dwellers by offering loans that enable both men and women to start simple businesses and increase family income. Here children wash clothes in a public water well in the slum community of Soorean Street.



THE BLESSING FULFILLED AND HANDED ON

Blessed is the man or woman who walks not in the way of wickedness but walks in the way of the will of God (Psalm 1:1).

What does this scripture mean for a girl child as she grows up?

One way to find an answer is to notice women in the New Testament and see what we can learn. What role do women play, who are they, where are they, what are they doing in the New Testament?

First, the women are named in the disciples' circle as close friends of Jesus. There are some marvelous lists of women in the disciples' band at the conclusion of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. We hear of the women mentioned there as part of the apostolic band. Matthew 27 is one of the most interesting of these lists. Matthew begins to narrate for us the terrible, harrowing hours of Good Friday and then the amazing joy and wonder of Easter. Listen to the way he describes the women at the crucifixion in Matthew 27:55:

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Then in Mark we discover Joanna, Salome and a women simply called the "other" Mary. These are women who are named. They are friends of Jesus. They are in the circle of disciples and they are brave at the time of the trial—braver, actually, than the men because the men had scattered.

The Value of Women

Romans 16 is like the New York phone directory. Notice the women Paul acknowledges.

I commend you, our sister Phoebe, a deacon in the church of Cenchrea, so that you would be able to receive her in the Lord that befits the saints and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well.

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Then Paul adds Priscilla and Aquila. It is interesting when Luke first mentions that couple, he mentions them in the traditional Jewish way, man first and then the woman. But Paul usually addresses them as the woman first, and then the man. In Romans 16 Paul says:

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house . . . Greet Mary who has worked very hard among you . . . Tryphena and Tryphosa, the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also.

The list goes on with names of people Paul knows, many of them women who were prominent in the Church. So notice these things about women in the New Testament: They are named, they are disciples of the inner circle, they are brave, courageous and play key roles in the life of the early Church.

The New Testament records the breaking of old protocols with regard to women. In Acts 16 the apostle Paul and three friends—Timothy, Luke and Silas—heard the Macedonian call and came to Philippi. While they were there, they went to the riverside because there was not an established synagogue—it takes 10 males to form a synagogue—but it was a place of worship. When they arrived at the riverside to speak, they met a woman named Lydia. This was a Greek woman from Thyatira, a businesswoman who was in Philippi. She was a seller of purple goods and a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul, and she became the first convert in Europe. Now look at this passage.

And when she was baptized with her household, she besot us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us (Acts 16:15).

Luke uses a strong verb here to say that "she argued us into it." Paul was breaking protocol, and what he and his friends did is amazing. He and these three men stayed in the house of a woman! A gentile woman! Then, after Paul was beaten in prison and had that incredible prison experience, they went back to Lydia's house where the church was started.

Deserving of Honor

Now let us look at 1 Thessalonians 4. Of all the Pauline literature, this may be the first of Paul's letters. If, in fact, this is the first letter written in the New Testament, we are naturally interested in which ethical issues Paul decides to address first in the early Church. The first ethical issue is marriage, and he breaks ancient protocols in the Greek and Roman world with what he says about marriage:

Let each of you know how to take your marriage with your wife in holiness and honor, not in passion of lust, like the heathen who do not know God (1 Thessalonians 4:4-5).

The word for “lust” is the word for rage, runaway desire. In much of the Greek and Roman world, a man could divorce a woman anytime he wanted to. Women had few rights and they were not honored. Paul uses this wonderful word “honor”—the same word used in the Ten Commandments for “Honor thy father and mother.” In Hebrew, the word “honor” literally means “weigh heavy.” Husbands are told by Paul to “weigh heavy” their wives. Later he says the same thing about children. He even says in Romans “weigh heavy all people.” Honor your husband, honor your wife in holiness. Notice the traditional way marriage was looked at in the first century world being broken and enriched by the Gospel. Women are treated with honor, dignity and respect, having their worth imputed to them by God.

It is important to recognize that women in the New Testament hear the deepest teachings as early as men do. There is teaching in some Christian fellowships that men should not be taught by women. I do not buy that. You should be taught by the person who has the clearest understanding and the gift to teach. In the New Testament you cannot make a case that men are always the teachers because the deepest teaching is given by God to women as early as it is to men.

Let me give you some examples. In Luke 1, Mary, the handmaiden of the Lord, is hailed “O favored one.” The angel Gabriel confronts Mary:

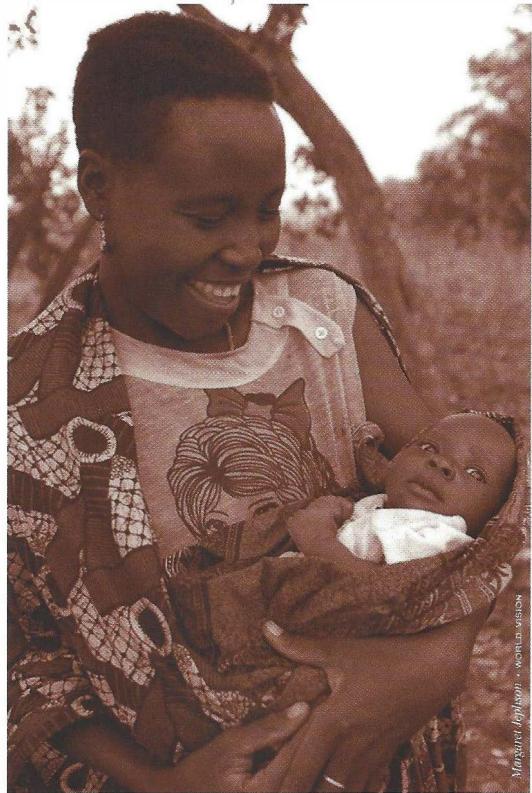
“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus.”

That is important enough. But then, she is given the theology behind this:

“He will be great. He will be called the Son of the Most High and the Lord God will give to him the crown of his father, David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. And of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:30-33).

That is the Gospel—theologically put, profoundly put to Mary. She was the first to hear it. She hears before John the Baptist hears. She is the first teacher of the Gospel.

The woman at the well also hears the most profound teaching, more so than what the disciples had heard to that point. Our Lord says to the woman:



Margaret Japhson - women vision

Pregnant and gravely anemic, 22-year-old Esmeralda Kasuli was not expected to live to give birth to her baby. Esmeralda survived with intensive care provided by World Vision and gave birth to a daughter. Esmeralda lives in a village where health conditions have been transformed as part of World Vision Angola’s primary health care strategy.

“God seeks them to worship him who will worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

This is fundamental theological teaching. Jesus explains that if this woman knew who she was talking to, she would ask Him and discover a water that would last forever. So the Samaritan woman hears this and goes into the village and preaches the Gospel, bringing a great crowd. The disciples had been there, and they did not bring a crowd. It was the woman who, as an early evangelist, brought the crowd back to meet Jesus.

The Strength of Martha

Then there is Martha. I love what John writes about Martha because Luke is not too fair with her. Luke makes Martha appear as though she is preoccupied with the kitchen while her sister Mary is worshipping. Martha comes across as cranky and distracted in Luke’s account. But John, who is attentive to key people and provides greater detail about them than other Gospel writers, helps us to appreciate the greatness of Martha.

Martha’s brother, Lazarus, was sick and the sisters sent to Jesus for help. Jesus did not come to Bethany right away but stayed at Jericho two more days. When Jesus finally gets there he is informed that Lazarus is dead. Jesus meets Martha. John gives us this most marvelous portrayal of Martha meeting Jesus. There is a little scolding that goes on in John 11:21-24:

“Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you.”

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will live again.”

Martha said to Him, “Yes I know, he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

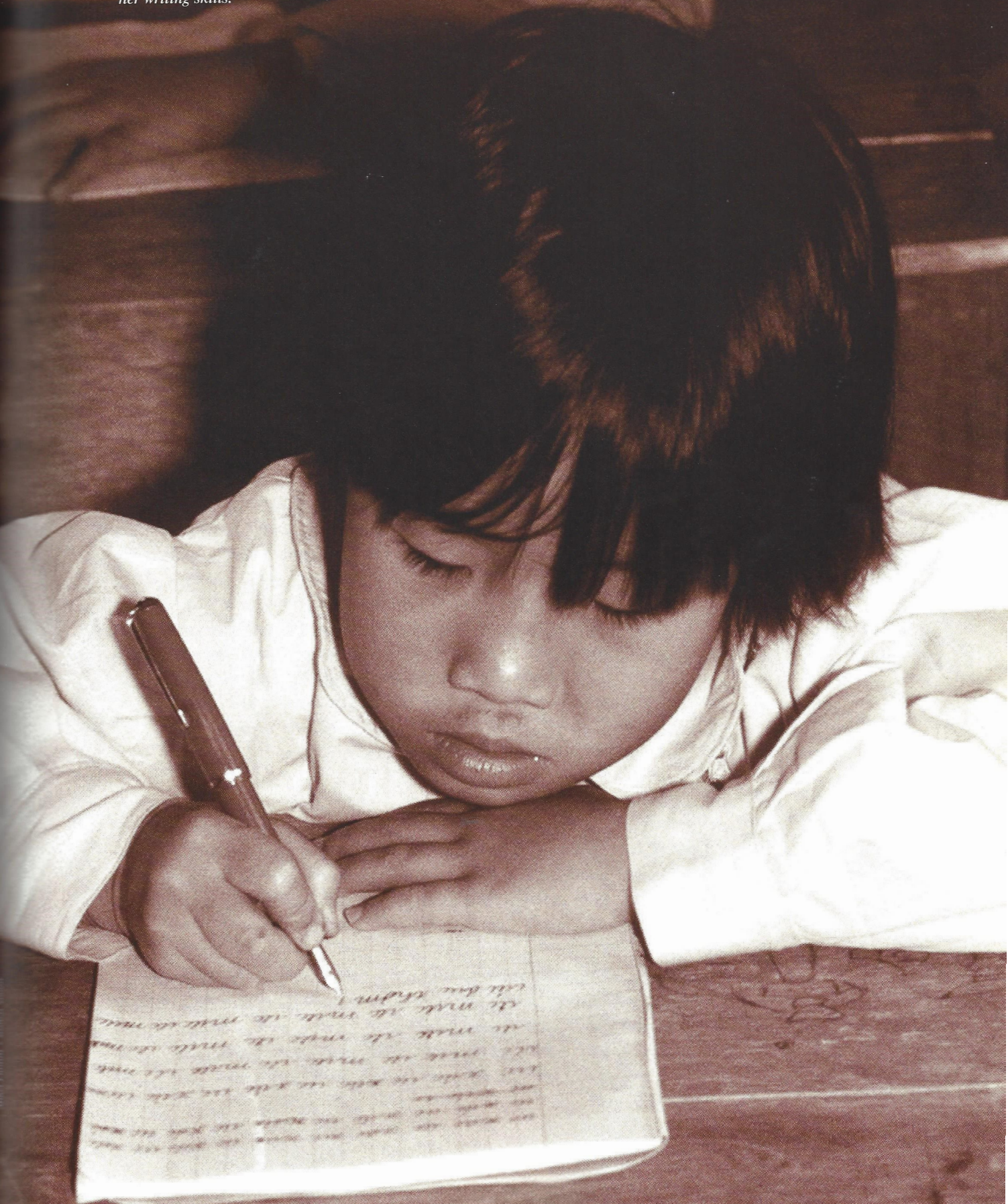
She is a very thoughtful woman. She knows the Good News’ hope of resurrection. Then it is Martha who hears one of the greatest of all the “I AMs.” Jesus said to her,

“I AM the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me though he die, yet shall he live. And, whoever lives and believes in Me, shall never die. Do you believe this?”

Martha said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is coming into the world” (John 11:25-27).

That is Martha! She is gutsy. She is strong. She is our teacher.

A young Vietnamese girl practices her writing skills.



I also love 2 Timothy 1, where Paul wrote to Timothy:

Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you (2 Timothy 1:4).

Timothy was raised by a single parent. The father, a Greek, abandoned the home and left Eunice to raise Timothy alone. All single mothers should take hope in realizing you can raise a Timothy. She did—with the help of her mother, Lois. These two great women obviously had heard and believed the Gospel and held deep faith as they raised this young man, who became Paul's great friend. Paul described Timothy "like my son." Here we see how women impacted the early Church through their godly influence on Timothy's life.

Women as Prophets and Preachers

Women in the New Testament, as in the Old Testament, were prophets and preached the Gospel. This is one reason I so strongly believe in women as preachers and pastors in the church. The prophets were both women and men throughout the Bible, all the way back to Miriam and Deborah. In Luke 2:36 we meet a woman prophet. Jesus was brought to the temple for circumcision in accordance with the Law. Listen to Luke's description of this remarkable woman, Anna:

And there was a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Nathaniel, from the tribe of Asher. She was of great age having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow until she was 84. She never left the temple but worshiped with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:36-38).

The role of the prophet is to speak to others concerning God's plan of redemption. Today, we as Christian pastors, are in the prophetic tradition, not in the priestly tradition. The priestly tradition has been fulfilled, and that is why women today should be prophets in the church. And what does a prophet do in the New Testament? He or she spells out the implications of the reign of Christ.

It is interesting that Saint Peter, in his great sermon on the day of Pentecost when the Christian Church was born, chose out of all the prophetic texts to quote this Old Testament verse from Joel:

In those last days I will pour out My spirit upon all flesh and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy (Joel 2:28).

This is what Peter uses as the text for the founding of the Christian Church. That is why I say we are in the prophetic tradition as Christians and, of course, women are prophets. Anna was a prophet, and the woman at the well became a prophet when she went back to the city of Sychar. Mary, who proclaimed the Magnificat, was a prophet. In fact, the first preachers of the Gospel of Resurrection were the women at the tomb who came to the disciples and said, "He is risen!"

So what does a woman, a girl child have to look forward to if she is on the road the Lord has prepared for her? She can look forward to being in the inner circle, a close friend of Jesus.

And what is our task toward the girl children in our lives? Our job is to join in and agree with the blessing of God. What children need now is a good touch, a non-exploitive touch. They do not need a snake, they need a fish. They do not need a rock, they need bread. And we owe it to them. It is their right, and God will bless us when we bless them. And how can that happen? It can only happen if first we are blessed.

Karl Barth's great insight into the New Testament Gospel gives us what he calls a "Gospel ethic" that works this way: Beloved, let us love one another, but you must first experience the love before you can love. We need to experience God's love ourselves in order to share it. We want to be sure that our children—the girl child and boy child in our families—experience God's love so they will be able to love.

Beloved, let us love one another. Let us bless one another with the blessing that comes from God, so they can find their "ashar." In this way we can help them find the road they should be on. And we, too, can find our road. ❖

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