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Proverbs

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# PROVERBS: A LIFE WELL-MANAGED<sup>1</sup>

This morning and over the next two Sundays we will explore together “The way of wisdom,” from the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. I have two reasons for selecting these texts. First, I sense that as Christians living in the modern world, our intellectual understanding of the scriptures far exceeds our ability to apply them to everyday life. The furious pace and fierce competition of our high-tech world has drowned out our ability to cultivate healthy relationships. Marriages suffer for lack of intimacy; children receive precious little uninterrupted time from parents, and companies crash, not for lack of technological expertise, but because of destructive relationships and ethical compromise. Our culture has tabled life’s most valuable commodity, wisdom, for the heartless idols of status and greed. The demonic drive is felt deep within our homes as the pressure to succeed is passed along to our children. Mark Bucko, our junior high pastor, observes that “many parents measure the health of their children solely by their grades and extracurricular achievements, when in reality, many of these kids are dying on the inside.” The need for wisdom could not be greater in today’s world.

Secondly, because of the slow pace of our regular Sunday exposition, I suspect that we are not equipping you as well as we should with the broad, sweeping framework of scripture, so that you can see the forest in the midst of the trees. By taking whole books of scripture each week, I hope to arouse your interest in the wisdom literature of the Bible, and then with these frameworks in hand, to spur you on to further personal and family study. These books would make great summer reading and reflection.

Today’s text is Proverbs. We will take a brief look at the structure of the book and identify some of the key themes that shaped Israel’s wisdom literature. Then, because it’s Mother’s Day, we will listen to some wise words of a mother given to her son, King Lemuel, on the most vital issues he will face as king. This female voice of wisdom training her son to be a “wise” king is a fitting conclusion to the book. Finally, we will be privileged to hear a daughter’s tribute to her mother, who exemplified such wisdom.

On a personal note, thirty years ago I was introduced to the remarkable insights of Proverbs, under the teaching of Dr. Bruce Waltke, who was our professor and guide on a tour to Israel and Greece. I’ll never forget how, in a crowded hotel lobby in Athens, my heart burned as he opened up the Hebrew text to us from the beginning chapters of Proverbs. The hotel was noisy, teeming with a steady stream of international tourists moving to and fro, but my focus was fixed on our teacher, whose every word dripped like sweet honey from his lips. That encounter with Bruce gave me my love for Hebrew and deepened my passions for the Old Testament. Returning home, I methodically worked my way through Proverbs 1–9, Solomon’s “*Ten Lessons in the Home*,” and made it a primary text for our curriculum for junior high students and their parents.

Since that time, Bruce has been my most significant mentor in Old Testament studies, and a gracious friend who has generously shared his vast knowledge and research with me. The fruit of three decades of his meticulous and insightful scholarship is finally in print, with the publication of his much-anticipated, two-volume commentary on Proverbs.<sup>2</sup> This is the most comprehensive commentary on Proverbs. Walter Kaiser

believes it “is destined to become *the* outstanding commentary on this book of the Bible.” I must confess at the outset that almost every insight I share with you this morning, I owe to my teacher.

## I. The Voice of Wisdom in Proverbs

The first thing we note about Wisdom literature is that it has a different voice and way of teaching than other parts of the Old Testament. This is not the thundering voice of the God of the Exodus reeling forth those staccato “Ten Words” of “You shall not”; nor is it the uncompromising voice of the prophets with their heavy oracles and pronouncements of “Thus saith the LORD.” This is the voice of the sage, the voice of reasoned reflection on the intricate details of life as one observes creation and humanity. Both the tone of voice and the way of instruction are different as well. As Kidner points out, “Where the bulk of the Old Testament calls us simply to obey and to believe, this part of it...summons us to think hard as well as humbly; to keep our eyes open, to use our conscience and our common sense, and not to shirk the most disturbing questions.”<sup>3</sup>

Proverbs are not formulaic knowledge or simplistic promises, but pithy, terse statements that invite the learner to engage, probe and ponder to get at the deeper meaning that lies below the surface. The verbal root of the word “proverb” (*mashal*, “to be like”) suggests that proverbs are designed to quicken and raise the apprehension of the hearer through the powerful art of comparison and analogy. Consider the sage’s engaging, if not shocking, analogy of a gold ring in a pig’s snout, with what normally catches the eye of a young man.

*[Like] a gold ring in the snout of a pig [is]  
a beautiful woman who turns aside from discretion. (11:22 Waltke<sup>4</sup>)*

As Alter remarks, “It is a little shocking to contemplate the image of a gold ring in a pig’s snout, and that sense of shocking incongruity then carries over strongly from the metaphor to its referent, making us see with a new sharpness the contradiction of beauty in a senseless woman.”<sup>5</sup> We are horrified to think of a gold ring, which symbolizes wealth and beauty, in the snout of a filthy, unclean pig, wallowing about in the mud, the mire and the dung! This image of wanton wastefulness provokes our outrage. But then we read the surprising punch line, where the sage applies the metaphor to “a beautiful woman who turns aside from discretion.” This is a comparison that no teenage boy, with hormones aflame, would consider making. But the sage forces him to wrestle with the shocking comparison. On closer examination, he discovers such a woman is worse than a pig. A pig has no natural gift of beauty or moral “discretion” (lit. “taste, discrimination”). But she, by contrast, has forsaken hers. Therefore, the beauty that was once a gift to adorn her, now looks like a tragic waste, provoking his disgust. In this manner, the sage has trained the youth not be blinded and swept away by feminine beauty, but rather to make lasting commitments based on the inner qualities of the heart. This is the powerful, engaging voice of wisdom.

## II. The Structure of Proverbs

Waltke suggests that “The headings (superscripts) in Proverbs readily divide the book into seven collections:”

1. Title, Preamble and Prologue (1:1–9:18)
2. Proverbs of Solomon (10:1–22:16)
3. Thirty Sayings of the Wise (22:17–24:22)
4. Further Sayings of the Wise (24:23–35)
5. Hezekiah’s Collection of Solomon (25:1–29:27)
6. The Sayings of Agur son of Jakeh (30:1–33)
7. The Sayings of Lemuel’s Mother (31:1–31)

The first nine chapters, the prologue, give us “*Ten Lessons in the Home*,” whereby a mother and father instruct their son (and by application, their daughter) with extended lessons on wisdom. The themes of instruction are noteworthy for their relevance to the world the youth must face, and the “way” of instruction is an exemplary model for teaching adolescents. These parents are fulfilling the command to teach their children “diligently... when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up” (Deut 6:7), but they do so by beginning with the contemporary world, with all its dangers, then applying wisdom to key situations which the child must encounter. A sampling of skills in which the parents are training their child include:

- Resisting peer pressure that will destroy one’s life
- Discerning the descending scale of folly in fools
- Cultivating an authentic relationship with God that internalizes his word
- Escaping seduction from prostitutes (today, this would include pornography)
- Developing a healthy and joyous sexuality in a world that offers “cheap” sex
- Knowing the dangers of certain financial commitments

The prologue sets the stage for the remainder of the book, consisting of 900+ individual proverbs, many of which are linked by catchwords and themes, deriving their force by applying them in their broader context.

## III. The Purpose of Proverbs: The Acquisition of Wisdom (1:1–7)

The purpose of the book is set forth clearly in the title and preamble (1:1–7) as the acquisition of wisdom.

*The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:*

*to know wisdom and instruction,*

*to understand words of insight;*

*to accept instruction in prudent behavior,*

*[to do] what is right, and just, and fair;*

*to give to the gullible shrewdness,*

*to the young, knowledge and discretion —*

*let the wise hear and add to their learning,*

*and let the insightful acquire guidance —*

*to understand a proverb, namely, a parable,*

*the sayings of the wise, namely, their riddles.*

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,*

*but fools despise wisdom and instruction. (1:1–7 Waltke)*

### A. The Definition of Wisdom

As Waltke suggests, the basic meaning underlying “*wisdom*” (*hokmā*) is “masterful understanding,” “skill,” “expertise,” much as we might describe Michelangelo’s mastery over granite. “In biblical texts outside Proverbs, *hokmā* is used of the technical and artistic skills (Exod. 28:3; 31:6)...of government (Eccl. 4:13; Jer. 50:35), of diplomacy (1 K. 5:7[21]), and of war (Isa. 10:3).”<sup>6</sup> In Proverbs, the term has a strong relational and moral dimension that equips its possessor to negotiate his way through

the dark chaos of life with elegant grace and ethical beauty. Rather than being overrun and victimized by life, wisdom allows us not merely to cope and survive, but to “achieve what would otherwise be impossible. Through it weak and vulnerable creatures, such as the ant and the rock badger, cope and survive against insuperable odds (Prov. 30:24–28).”<sup>7</sup>

### B. Integration with Creation

There is also the vital element of what I would call “integration,” which comes with the development of wisdom. To walk “wisely” is to live in harmony with the unique way the Creator has designed his creation and the creatures that live within it. Wisdom, as it were, was built into the very fabric of creation.

*The Lord by wisdom founded the earth,  
established the heavens by understanding;  
by his knowledge the depths were split open  
and the clouds drip dew. (3:19–20)*

As Brueggemann writes, the starting point for wisdom is the

“*sustained critical reflection on lived experience in order to discern the hidden shape of reality that lives in, with, and under the specificities of daily life.* Such a characterization proceeds on the assumption that in the very concreteness of life there is a buoyant, intractable givenness that must be honored and respected because it cannot be circumvented or outflanked.”<sup>8</sup>

This makes wisdom a prized possession, something to be sought after above everything else.

*Blessed is the person who listens to me,  
keeping vigil at my doors day by day,  
observing the doorposts of my door ways;  
for the one who find me finds life,  
and so obtains favor from the Lord,  
but the one who misses me is the one who does violence against himself;  
all who hate me love death. (8:34–36)*

There is much about life that is given to us as unyielding and non-negotiable. There are well-defined ways of righteous conduct that the Creator upholds, and which we must learn to pattern our life after. To go against the grain, so to speak, is to court disaster and certain death, but to embrace wisdom is to experience a heart-warming integration where we feel at home in the universe. Therefore a “wise” person is characterized not by the amount of information he knows, but by the significant and abiding relational connections he is able to maintain in the totality of God’s world, with all kinds of people, places, plants and animals. To live in wisdom is to receive life in all the joyous richness in which God designed it to be lived.

### C. The Necessity of Discipline

But such mastery does not come easily. It is hard-won. Wisdom must be coupled with *instruction* (*mūsār*, lit: “chastening lesson”<sup>9</sup>), a term that speaks of the corrective discipline and rigorous training that one must submit to in order to acquire such skill and shape character. No one expects to play Bach on the piano without years of submitting to rigorous repetitive scales. Yet, such discipline yields the sweet rewards of freedom and breathtaking beauty as well-trained fingers glide effortlessly across the keyboard. Children don’t drift into wisdom; they are endemically selfish. So parents are exhorted to consecrate their children to the Lord and initiate their training while they are young and teachable. Every child rebels to some degree against the teaching of his or her parents, but diligent teaching that penetrates the soul of a youth most often has the last word.

*Dedicate a youth according to what his way dictates;  
even when he becomes old, he will not depart from it. (22:6)*

Again we must remember that this is not the whole truth on the matter, but in most cases “The consequence of this strong spiritual initiative is that the dedicated youth will never depart from the original initiative.”<sup>10</sup>

#### D. Emphasis on Moral vs. Intellectual Skills

Acquiring wisdom necessitates acquiring both moral and intellectual skills (verse 2), but far greater emphasis is given to the moral aspect of learning. Notice that in the preamble, the moral aspects of learning are explicated in three verses (3-5), while the intellectual abilities are explicated in one verse. God doesn’t put the cookies on the bottom shelf, so to speak. Without intellectual effort these proverbs will not yield their mysteries. But acquiring wisdom depends much more on a teachable spirit, a humble heart and a willingness to obey than it does on those dreaded SAT scores. Learning disabilities are much less an impediment to wisdom than pride. The gateway to learning which opens the storehouse of wisdom’s treasures is not one’s IQ, but the “fear of the LORD.” This is an important word in a culture that places extreme emphasis on academic achievement. So intense is the competition and pressure to get into college these days, I wonder if any high school student ever experiences the pure joy of learning and the thrill of discovery. The sad state of affairs is that we end up with depraved intellectual geniuses running companies, men and women who, unfortunately, cannot sustain healthy relationships.

#### E. The JOY of Education (15:20-23)

Contrast the depressive, heavy spirit that academic pressure produces in most of our homes with the ever-increasing *joy* given to those who embrace the educational track of wisdom.

*A wise son makes a glad (sāmāh) father,  
but a foolish human being is one who despises his mother.  
Folly brings joy (simhâ) to one who has no sense,  
but an understanding person makes [his] going straight.  
Plans are thwarted without counsel,  
but with a multitude of counselors each plan succeeds.  
An individual has joy (simhâ) in the apt answer of his mouth,  
and how good is a word at the right time! (15:20-23)*

These four proverbs are linked by the key word “joy.” This suggests that true education, as God meant it to be, produces something so valuable that it brings forth the fruit of “joy” in ever-increasing doses through each stage of development of one’s life.

The basis for the joy seems to confirm that, once again, wisdom is evidenced in the ability to make healthy relational connections. When the child is young, his godly character brings joy to his parents, who have been faithful to instruct him in God’s ways. The child values and embraces the spiritual values of his or her parents, which brings honor to them. But as the child grows out of adolescence and becomes a young adult, peers replace parents as counselors. While fools are islands unto themselves, and most often take no thought of their self-serving actions, their “plans are thwarted” and come to nothing. By contrast, the wise young adult lives in a community of friends and submits each new undertaking to the

open confidential *counsel* of intimate friends...as they lovingly correct each other until they reach wise resolutions as a result of their coming together...‘Plans [plural] fail for want of counsel [singular] but a plan [singular] succeeds because of advisors [plural].’<sup>11</sup> It is necessary to have a number of counselors to offset the weaknesses, ignorance, and limitations of each individual. Each resolution succeeds because it emerges out of humility and trust as members submit themselves to be corrected in open, honest counsel.<sup>12</sup>

Joy has expanded from the parents who initiated the child, to a community, a band of intimate friends, who together discern the right moral path that yields sweet success.

But the crowning moment of joy arrives when the ultimate goal of education has been realized. This “graduate degree” of joy is given to the individual who is able to give an “apt answer” to someone in a challenging situation, at just “the right time.” Making a significant relational connection with someone who is deeply hurt, confused, troubled or angry is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks we face as human beings. So often I find myself speechless in such situations. Or if I am forced to give a quick reply, I rely on an arsenal of stock phrases or standard illustrations or arguments. But rather than bringing life to the hearer, the words fall like lead to the floor. I notice that Jesus in his interactions with people never used stock phrases or inundated them with information; rather he always seemed to have just the right word, coupled with a divine sensitivity to the person’s spiritual state, and his ability to receive such a word.

We learn from the prophet Isaiah that this was the goal of Jesus’ education as he was daily trained by his Father.

**The Lord God has given Me the tongue of disciples,  
That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word.  
He awakens Me morning by morning,  
He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. (Isa 50:4 NASB)**

The sage would hold this up as the goal of our education as well. Such a well-timed word brings life to all who hear it and an indescribable joy to one who gives it. This is the ever-deepening joy which wisdom imparts as we are able to create and sustain deep and abiding relational connections, first in our home, then in a community of peers, and finally, in a hurting world.

The book of Proverbs concludes with the wise voice of a mother to her son.

#### IV. The Wise Voice of a Mother to her Son (31:1-31)

##### A. The Noble King (31:1-9)

*The sayings of Lemuel, a king —  
an oracle that his mother taught him.  
Listen, my son! Listen, son of my womb!  
Listen, son of my vows!  
Do not hand over your strength to women,  
and your sovereign power to those who destroy kings.  
It is not for kings, Lemuel, not for kings to drink wine,  
nor for rulers to crave intoxicants;  
lest he drink [them] and forget what is decreed,  
and lest he change a verdict for every oppressed person.  
Let intoxicants be given to the one who is perishing,  
wine to those who are bitter;  
let him drink and forget his poverty,  
and remember no more his misery.  
Open your mouth for the mute;  
to give judgment for everyone fading away.  
Open your mouth, judge righteously,  
and issue edicts for the poor and needy. (31:1-9)*

Waltke suggests that King Lemuel (“dedicated to God”) was “probably a proselyte to Israel’s faith,”<sup>13</sup> who honors his mother by recalling and immortalizing her teaching to him since the day she dedicated him to God (verse 2). As his mother, she impressed upon him the most important qualities that make for outstanding leaders. One of the major responsibilities for those in leadership was to care for the rights of the poor. This was the backbone of justice in Israel’s soul, and a primary task of kings. Lemuel’s mother warns him that there are two temptations that will destroy leaders and pervert justice: being intoxicated with women or

with strong drink. Contrary to the modern belief that a leader's private life has nothing to do with his ability to lead, she warns her son that unrestrained sexual gratification "corrupts the king's sovereign power, including wasting his money. Gratification of lust distracts his attention from serving the people, blunts his wit, undermines his good judgment, exposes him to palace intrigues, and squanders the national wealth."<sup>14</sup>

The same is true with regard to obsession with alcohol. A king with blurred judgment easily distorts justice. Worse yet, if he is addicted to alcohol, he can fall prey to self-interest and use his office to pay for his addiction. So rather than "opening his mouth" to satisfy his addiction, a true leader should "open his mouth" to protect the poor.

### B. The Valiant Wife (31:10-31)

- 10 *aleph* A valiant wife who can find;  
Her price is far beyond corals.
- 11 *beth* The heart of her husband trusts in her  
he does not lack "spoil."
- 12 *gimel* She does him good and not evil  
all the days of her life.
- 13 *daleth* She selects diligently wool and flax,  
and works with her glad palms.
- 14 *he* She becomes like trading vessels;  
she brings her food from afar;
- 15 *waw* and she arises [like a lioness] while it is still night,  
and provides "prey" for her household,  
and the quota [of food] for her servant girls.
- 16 *zayin* She considers a field and purchases it;  
from the fruit of her palms she plants a vineyard.
- 17 *beth* She girds her loins with strength;  
she strengthens her arms for the task.
- 18 *teth* She perceives that her trading is good;  
her lamp [of prosperity] does not go out at night.
- 19 *yodb* Her hands she holds out to the doubling spindle;  
her palms grasp the spindle.
- 20 *kaph* Her palm she spreads out to the poor,  
and she holds out her hands to the needy.
- 21 *lamedh* She is not afraid for her household on account of snow,  
for all her household is clothed with scarlet.
- 22 *mem* Coverlets she makes for herself;  
her clothing is fine linen and [wool dyed with] purple.
- 23 *nun* Her husband is respected at the city gate  
when he sits with the elders of the land.
- 24 *samekh* Garments she makes and sells [them];  
sashes she supplies to the merchants.
- 25 *'ayin* Strength and majesty is her clothing,  
and so she laughs at the coming days.
- 26 *peh* Her mouth she opens with wisdom,  
and loving teaching is on her tongue;
- 27 *šadeh* one who watches over the affairs;  
the food of idleness she does not eat.
- 28 *qoph* Her sons arise and pronounce her blessed;  
her husband [rises] and praises her;
- 29 *resh* "Many daughters do valiantly,  
but you surpass all of them."
- 30 *shin* Charm is deceitful and beauty is fleeting;  
as for a woman who fears the Lord, she should be praised.
- 31 *taw* Extol her for the fruit of her hands,  
and let her works praise her in the gates. (31:10-31)

But perhaps the greatest advice Lemuel's mother gives him is identifying his most important asset as king. The final lesson in Proverbs is

an acrostic (i.e., from "a to z" to express the totality of an idea) on the infinite value of a "valiant wife." Lemuel's mother trained her son to look beyond physical beauty to something more precious, rare and valuable: a woman who "uses her strength, ability, wisdom, and valor so totally and selflessly for others."<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the idealized wife in Greek literature who was prized for being "the silent, 'homebody' spouse," somewhat like the stereotyped "Southern Belle," or the famed *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit models who never get their hands dirty, our Hebrew heroine is "diligent, 'takes charge,' is engaged in profit-making ventures, and is also a wise teacher and philanthropist."<sup>16</sup> Though she is rare, she is not a mere ideal dream, but a woman whose character all should seek to emulate. In the Hebrew Canon, the book of Ruth immediately follows the book of Proverbs, and Ruth is given this title by Boaz (Ruth 3:11). So for Lemuel to be a good king, the woman he married was far more important than the graduate school he was accepted into.

As I was pondering this truth, it struck me that the strength of our church is found not in the education of your pastors and elders, but in the character of their wives. All of them without exception are women who emulate Lemuel's mother's description of a valiant wife, and are to be praised and admired.

To conclude our study, I have invited Gina Grinis to give testimony about her mother, a true example of Lemuel's mother's description of a "valiant wife." [See insert.]

1. Title taken from that of the chapter on Proverbs in Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985), 18.

2. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs* (2 vols.; NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004-05).

3. Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 11.

4. All the scriptural quotations of Proverbs are taken from Waltke's translation of the Hebrew text in his two-volume commentary *Proverbs*.

5. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 176.

6. Waltke, *Proverbs*, 1:76.

7. Waltke, *Proverbs*, 1:77.

8. Walter Brueggemann, *Solomon: Israel's Ironic Icon of Human Achievement* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 105.

9. Waltke, *Proverbs*, 1:175.

10. Waltke, *Proverbs*, 2:205, who also carefully points out that the expression "his way" dictates not the "way" that is according to the child's physical or mental abilities, but the right "moral" way determined by God. "In sum, the proverb implies that the religious and moral initiation of the youth should be oriented from the first to counteract his foolish way."

11. Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1999), 154.

12. Waltke, *Proverbs*, 1:632-633.

13. Waltke, *Proverbs*, 2:503.

14. Waltke, *Proverbs*, 2:507.

15. Waltke, *Proverbs*, 2:521.

16. Waltke, *Proverbs*, 2:517.

## Mother's Day Testimony

Gina Grinis – Mother's Day, May 14, 2006

My mom, Anita Juarez Favela, was truly a remarkable woman. She bore eleven children between the years of 1946 and 1969. (That means she was pregnant for eight-and-a-half years!) If you think raising kids is difficult these days, she raised kids during the post-war years, the booming fifties, the turbulent sixties, the seventies and on through the narcissistic eighties. She weathered adolescence and the teen years, not just once, but eleven times, and through all those changing cultural milieus! On a shoestring budget (Dad never made more than \$7,000/yr) she didn't just "bear" eleven children, she nurtured us, trained us, taught us.

There wasn't a fussing, crying baby that she couldn't calm. She would take that baby and cradle it just so on her ample bosom and the crying would stop. Nor was there a toddler that didn't respond to her quiet, firm hand. There doesn't exist a little boy who didn't love her oatmeal, butter-scotch cookies, cookies that she would quietly, secretly slip into his hand when no one was looking. And there isn't a man who didn't melt at her red chile, especially the burritos. I've got four brother-in-laws and one husband who will testify to those. Some of them say that Mom's cooking was the best part of the dowry!

But she didn't start out wanting to be "Mother of the Year." As a young Mexican immigrant, that wasn't her dream. You see, I used to go through her hope chest when I was in my early teens. I would find all her old photos and pepper her with questions. In those photos, she was a different person. She was young and beautiful, so stylish and with such a hopeful look about her. She would tell me about her fancy hats, her boyfriends, and her aspirations to do more than just work in the laundry and get married. But her dad didn't let her go on to high school. Instead, she was forced to work at the local laundry plant alongside her older sisters. But mom was determined and always tried for more: she worked as a nanny; secured a salesclerk job at the uptown drugstore; proved her entrepreneurial spirit by gift-wrapping for customers on the side. She found jobs that gradually moved her "uptown." Toward the end of the war she left her small town and enrolled in a business college in the big city of Phoenix. It was there that she met my dad, a charming, good-looking man, ten years her senior, who swept her off her feet. In too short of a time, against her parents' wishes, she found herself married and relocated far away from her family and community. Dad's world was different than hers and so began her real life's journey.

She told me once that when she had three children and found out she was pregnant with the fourth, she fell on her knees, crying. She had dreamed of so much more for her life. She had wanted an education and a career and had hopes for "something more." Instead, she found herself locked in a difficult marriage, bearing child after child. She said she clearly remembers falling on her knees in the sun room that day and praying, "Lord, if this is the lot you have for me in life, then let me be the best mother I can possibly be." She gave up her dreams and yielded to God's will. And I am so glad she did.

Her commitment was tested many times over the years. One time was particularly poignant. Baby #6 was born prematurely, only 11 months after Baby #5. The baby (Nita) was in the hospital for five weeks. At that point Dad went to Mom and said he wanted a vasectomy. Mom refused. She truly believed that all children were a gift from God, precious in His sight. They weren't just work, they brought joy and laughter. When Mom told me that, it spoke powerfully to me. It's only fair to say it's probably because I'm Child #7!

So what made her such a great mom?

If I try and encapsulate her life there are three things that come to mind—sacrificial giving, faith, and unconditional love. These she taught by example.

We learned what "sacrificial giving" meant by watching her. Her life was not about her, it was about providing for her family. She wanted a good education for us and knew that spiritual grounding was paramount (Proverbs 1:7). That meant Catholic schools—and the accompanying tuition. So she worked to bring in extra income. This woman who never learned to drive worked by baking cakes, ironing the nuns' habits, cleaning the church sacristy and convent, and later working in the school cafeteria, all while still running her growing household of kids. Somehow the tuition always got paid.

There were countless nights that she worked late into the night cleaning, sewing, ironing shirts, or hemming a little dress. That last example is mine. I remember wanting so badly to wear that "new" hand-me-down dress to school, but Mom just didn't seem to have time to fix it. There were babies to be fed, dinner to be cooked, dishes to wash. I went to bed disappointed, only to wake up and see that clean, hemmed, freshly-ironed dress hanging on my door. She knew a little girl's heart and cared for it.

Her giving didn't stop with us. When her sister was struggling with sending her boys to public high school in a small town, mom offered to take them in. The Catholic high school in Phoenix was so much better. If we could fit nine kids in three bedrooms what was two more! She took my cousins in and treated them as her own. And we all learned to wait for that one bathroom.

In her later years, I'd call and find her filling her time not with shopping and lunches and naps, but with countless church ministries, her favorite being visiting the "old people" at the nursing home—this when she was in her seventies!

We learned what faith meant by watching her. Underlying, surrounding, and enveloping all of her service was her faith. It's impossible to think of my Mom without remembering that. Growing up in the Catholic Church, in the era that she did, meant that Mom's was not a "well-informed" faith. She didn't know chapter and verse for every spiritual principle that she tried to teach us. But what she had was faith. Mom knew God. She gave her life and those of her children into God's hands and then trusted Him. She knew Him as her Provider. How else could she have clothed and fed so many on so little? When her and Dad's efforts came up short it was God, through the Catholic community, who provided. And she made sure we realized it. She knew God as her Protector. This woman who never learned to drive would place her boys on the bus and ask the bus driver to let them off at the right spot. Then, she'd watch the bus pull away and she'd pray, "Lord, protect them." When her husband lay unconscious in the hospital for a week, victim of a robbery, she waited at home with her eight children and she prayed, "Lord, deliver him." When her daughters went off to college in liberal California, she prayed, "Lord, give them wisdom." Her last act, before she went into surgery (she died last June), was to gather her children around the hospital bed and have them pray with her, "Lord, into Thy hands I commit my spirit."

Even more important than serving and faith, we learned to love by watching Mom. First Corinthians 13:13 says, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." As I've reflected, it's really pretty simple. Mom loved us. She loved me. I may have been number 7 out of 11, but I was unique in her eyes. She was my

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biggest cheerleader, my biggest fan, the one who thought I was so, so special. She believed in me, was proud of me, expected great things of me. And I delivered, not out of pressure, but because I wanted to make her proud.

Hers was a love freely given, without expectations. When I moved away from home she never made me feel guilty for not calling or writing regularly. She was just tickled when I did and would fully enter into my world, delighting in hearing my stories and sharing my dreams. She often said she lived vicariously through us kids and thoroughly delighted in all the opportunities God brought our way.

Mom was for us. She singlehandedly created a home filled with love and laughter, rearing eleven children who ALL felt as if they were the apple of her eye. Each of us would swear that we were her favorite!

When I came into my faith in my adult years, I knew the love of God because I had known the love of Mom. Psalm 56 says,

**You have taken account of my wanderings;**

**Put my tears in Your bottle;**

**Are they not in Your book? ...**

**This I know, that God is for me! (Ps 56:8-9 NASB)**

When I read that, I realized that in the same way that Mom loved us unconditionally, in the same way that she believed in us—even as we made mistakes and were immature—it was only a pale picture of how God loves us. He delights in me. He loves me just the way I am and He is tickled when I call.

Thanks, Mom, for giving up your life for us. Thank you for filling my love tank to overflowing and for showing me the true source of your love and all love—God.