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Adult Sabbath School Lessons

Special Insights No. 10

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Women of Mission

The Levitical rules given to Israel make an undeniable distinction between males and females. Generally, sacrificial offerings were to be a first born and unblemished male, although a significant exception was the peace offering (Lev. 3:1, 6). The days a mother was required to purify following the birth of a female child were twice as long as after the birth of a male child (12:1-5). The conclusion that giving birth to a female child made the mother more impure is difficult to avoid. Jewish sources held that the birth of a female child disarranged the organs and caused more suffering than the birth of a male child. This view is without basis in fact [1]. Several commentaries simply state there is no reason for the difference [2].

God must have had a reason, even though we may not see it. When the human race was sold by its first Adam into sin, all births in that lineage were "shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:5, KJV).

Perhaps a better rationale is that the entire sacrificial system given to Israel was to constantly point forward to the coming of that male Child who would be the Savior of the world. Every Jewish woman hoped she might be honored to bring the Christ Child into the world. The veneration of the male first born child was designed to be a constant reminder of the blessed hope specially given to the nation of Israel. That it was perverted to distort the intrinsic value of the male over the female suggests that humans succumbed to Satan's appeal to self-centered pride.

Once the Cross fulfilled all the typical sacrifices, the sacrificial system was no longer necessary to direct mankind's attention to a future event. No longer did God forgive out of forbearance, but because of an accomplished historical fact. That event rewrote the history of mankind by placing the entire race into a new Adam. That Adam satisfied the demands of the law both by His sinless life and His paying the second death penalty for sin for the human race.

After the cross, Paul could declare "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:28, 29). Paul is explaining that the history of mankind has been rewritten. The favored status of Israel is not changed, nor have the promises made to her, but who is an Israelite is revised to those who belong to Christ. It is significant that Paul even redefines the lineage of those who belong to Christ with the use of the words "seed" and "heirs."

It was this background of what was misinterpreted as divinely sanctioned prejudice that Christ challenged by His interaction with women. His dealings with women were in fact most consistent with the Old Testament history of God's even-handed interaction with women and men in the Old Testament. Rahab was a prostitute as was possibly the woman at the well (John 4). Sarah received the promise of a son from an angel much like the experience of Mary, the mother of Christ. The rules Christ "breaks" challenge the Levitical rules regarding ceremonially unclean women. He actually commends the woman with the hemorrhage who had the courage to break through artificial prejudice to seek healing.

Although not mentioned in the lesson, the widow with the "mite" is commended.

She represents a class of people in great need who are ignored by society. She could have been intimidated by the comparative insignificance of her offering, but insisted on worshipping through giving, small though her contribution was.

As the New Testament unfolds the roles of men and women in the early church, differences seem to become irrelevant. Generally people's contributions to the "cause" related to their station in life, whether male, female, wealthy, poor, educated or illiterate. God used them in ministry because they were willing to be used. No particular significance should be ascribed to their gender other than God uses the willing.

God does not revise society's customs unless they interfere with mankind's relationship to Him.. In His ministry while on earth, Christ made no "activist" attempts to change the norms of society other than by His quiet example. His interaction with people was the outworking of the principle that there is "neither male nor female."

In Christ's tender ministry to the widow of Nain we see a parable of the Elijah message in the last days. Occupying only six verses in Luke 7 (11-16), the story tells Christ's entire mission. A widow is a woman whose husband has died. Her dead son was an orphan. When Christ touched the bier, He identified with the inevitable end of the entire human race. Because He was willing to do that, even the second death, He was entitled to claim the son back from the dead. Upon doing that, He then restored him to his mother.

The spiritual connotations of this story are enormous. The Elijah message will "... turn the hearts of the fathers to the children" (Luke 1:17), and "that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and [that] thou hast turned their heart back again" (1 Kings 18:37). Christ used this grieving woman to demonstrate His message of total restoration. He restores wayward rebellious children to their heavenly Father, and marries a woman without a husband to her heavenly Bridegroom. Taking her place as His bride, she is no longer second class and impure, but having made herself ready, she enters into the joy of her Lord.

—Arlene Hill

[1] SDA Bible Commentary, vol. 1, p. 758

[2] e.g., Commentary on Leviticus, Matthew Henry.