

# Susanna Wesley

## Life Verse, Part 3

### *Proverbs 1:8-9*

While King Solomon walked with God, during his early and middle aged years, he earned a reputation for being one of the wisest men alive.

In fact, when the Queen of Sheba came to visit him, to survey his incredible wealth and kingdom, she said to Solomon before returning to her home, *It was a true report which I heard in my own land about your words and your wisdom. Nevertheless I did not believe the reports, until I came and my eyes had seen it – you exceed the report I had been given concerning your wisdom and prosperity . . . the half had not been told me (paraphrase; 1 Kings 10:7).*

One of most remarkable, yet unseen, unspoken credits to Solomon's life, was the testimony of the woman who became his early mentor and teacher.

In that classic 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of Proverbs, it opens with, The words of King Lemuel, the oracle which his mother taught him.

I believe Lemuel is one of several names referring to Solomon.

We're told in **2 Samuel 12, verse 24 that David named him Solomon.**

The name is simply a derivative of shalom – peace. In other words, David gave his son a name he hoped would become his son's experience – unlike his years of war and bloodshed, David was hoping Solomon would experience a peaceful reign.

We're also told **that God gave Solomon a name. According to 2 Samuel 12, verse 25, the text says, Now the Lord loved him – and sent word through Nathan the prophet, and he named Him Jedidiah for the Lord's sake.**

Jedidiah simply means "loved by the LORD." If two names isn't enough of a legacy, there was a third name – Lemuel.

I would agree with Old Testament scholars who see this, not as a proper name, but a term of dedication – evidently given to Solomon personally by his own mother.

Lemuel simply means, "Unto God."

If you remember his background, Solomon's mother happens to be Bathsheba. And the second son born to her and David, she evidently dedicated back to God.

And the name she gave him – this special name – Lemuel – was used by Solomon as he begins Proverbs chapter 31 effectively stating that these were the principles taught to him by his mother.

When you read through the Book of Proverbs, one of the things you're struck with is how often Solomon's proverbs repeatedly challenge us to listen, not only to the advice of our fathers – which you would expect – but to our mothers.

Every godly mother ought to love the Book of Proverbs – and take heart! Solomon – and evidently the Holy Spirit through him – believed that a mother's advice and counsel is equally significant to your children's lives and hearts.

For instance, Solomon writes, ***Hear my son, your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head and ornaments about your neck. (Proverbs 1:8-9)***

Solomon effectively repeats the same message over in chapter 6 – let me read you a paraphrase of verses 20-21 by Eugene Petersen's The Message: ***Follow your father's good advice; don't wander off from your mother's teachings. Wrap yourself in them from head to foot; wear them like a scarf around your neck. Wherever you walk, they'll guide you; whenever you rest, they'll guard you; when you wake up, they'll tell you what's next. For sound advice is a beacon, good teaching is a light, moral discipline is a life path.***

In other words, listen up when your father gives you godly advice – and don't take your mother's counsel any less lightly.

Listen to her as well!

And all the mother's in here said - ?? Amen!

If you dig back into church history 300 years or so and you'll find one particular woman who attempted to live up to this responsibility, found in Proverbs 1:8-9.

A responsibility to teach and counsel her children with biblical truth.

Her name was Susanna Wesley and she was born into a pastor's family during the late 1600's.

To set the stage for you, the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were among the worst years in England's history.

One author wrote that England had degenerated into a moral cesspool. Thomas Carlyle, the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and author wrote that England had a stomach that was well alive, but the soul was dead. Lawyer, William Blackstone visited the church of every major clergyman in London during this same period and later wrote that in most sermons it was impossible to tell whether the preacher was a follower of Cicero, Mohammed or Christ.

Gambling was so extensive that one historian called England a vast casino. Newborns were left exposed to die in the streets just as in late Roman days. Tickets to public executions were sold as if you were attending the theatre. The slave trade further calloused the nation's conscience.

The same author wrote, "Historians now recognize that the nation of England changed course in the 18<sup>th</sup> century largely through the Great Awakening and the ministry of George Whitfield and John Wesley and others, [including his brother, Charles.]"<sup>i</sup>

Most people know of the founders of Methodism – John and Charles Wesley – rather few know much about the woman who served as their early teacher and mentor, named Susanna.

A woman who probably wouldn't have been all that surprised when two of her sons became the catalyst for a great awakening – two men whom God used to reshape England spiritually, politically, intellectually and certainly morally . . . and for years to come.

Let me back up to the beginning.

Susanna was born into the home of a London pastor and his wife. She was the youngest of 25 children – you heard right – 25 children. And since this was before TV shows featured large families, they had no royalties to live on and thus suffered through poverty.

Susanna's father passed down to his youngest daughter his own passionate personality for justice and the holiness of God. He gave her this backbone of steel. On one occasion Susanna's father was invited to preach to Parliament and he chose as his text, *Job 27:5 – which reads, "Far be it from me that I should declare you are right."*

I don't think he'd do well in Washington either. He was never invited back.

During his father's ministry – which grew tremendously – young seminarians would often visit in their home. On one occasion a young man named Samuel came for a visit. Susanna was 13 at the time and he was 19.

This is the part you might not want your daughters to hear – they struck up a friendship and a few years later married and their first child was a born a year later.

Although Samuel was an Oxford educated scholar, he was placed by the Church of England in a small country parish, 150 miles away from London, with a population of 206.

Their parsonage was literally a mud hut with no glass in the windows – just wooden shutters. One author said the house was perched on a rutted mud road surrounded by little farmsteads with scraggly pastures.<sup>ii</sup>

To make matters worse, Samuel was not well liked, and it wasn't long before parishioners responded with hostility.

One of the forgotten aspects of ministry during these terrible days of spiritual darkness was the price paid by those who preached the gospel.

In my research, I catalogued the following abuses by people living around them – even attending church with them;

- They demonstrated their displeasure by mocking the children;
- They burned the family crops;
- They damaged the parsonage – burning it to the ground on one occasion;
- They slit the udder of the family cow so she couldn't give milk;
- They even killed the family dog.

On one occasion when Samuel's political views defended the King, villagers gathered around the parsonage one night – not knowing that Samuel was away on church business and Susanna and her children were there alone – they shouted through the entire night, beating on drums and firing their guns.

Susanna was just recovering from delivering her sixteenth child; the baby's nurse was so exhausted after the night of commotion and child birth that she lapsed into a deep sleep, rolling over on the baby and crippling it for life.

A few years later, in 1709, villagers torched the Wesley's home in the middle of the night. They all scrambled outside to safety – including Susanna who was expecting her 21<sup>st</sup> child. When they got outside, they did a head count and discovered they were missing one of their children – six year old John.

He had awakened later, but was able to go down the stairs because of the fire. He stood on a chest by the open window and was spotted down below. One neighbor lifted another neighbor up on his shoulders, literally snatching John to safety moments before the roof fell in.

John would later go on to take as his life motto, testifying that he was a, “Brand snatched from the burning.”<sup>iii</sup>

Their troubles weren't over. A parishioner demanded immediate payment of a debt that Samuel was unable to pay and he had the pastor put into debtor's prison.

After a while you might ask God to call you into something a little safer.

Frankly, we have no idea today of what it meant to preach the truth as it relates to current issues of the day.

That little brand plucked from the burning would one day enter the pastorate – his chapel pulpit in London was designed so that it was entered from the balcony and could not be accessed from the congregation below – it designed that way to protect him.

On one occasion, he preached against the evil of slavery and members of the congregation rioted, breaking apart the pews, while John escaped into the balcony and offices just outside.

I've stood in the pulpit and marveled at his courage.

He was well prepared by watching his own parents suffer greatly.

None of their ministry challenges would compare to the pain of losing so many of their children.

In their first 7 years of marriage, Susanna would deliver 7 children, 3 would die – which included a set of twins.

In fact, they would end up having 21 children. But only 9 of them would survive childhood – 11 would die, including two sets of twins.

But it would be these surviving children who mattered most to Susanna.

She literally dedicated her life to them – to live out Proverbs chapter 1 – teaching and counseling their minds and hearts.

Susanna refused to teach her children until they turned 5 – and then they began in earnest. She expected them to memorize the entire alphabet on their first day of school.<sup>iv</sup>

The Wesley daughters were not excluded in an education either – probably influenced by the fact that Susanna's father had taught her to read and

allowed her to roam in his vast library when she was a little girl.

So the girls, along with the boys, learned Latin, Greek, Hebrew, poetry, the classics, history and music. She would teach them 3 hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon.

She was called by one biographer the Queen of Structure.

Everyone was on a schedule from the moment they awakened at 6:00 o'clock to winding down the day with an hour of personal study in the word by each child before candles were snuffed out at exactly 8:00 pm.

She would put it this way – in one of her letters; For a child to grow into a self-disciplined adult, they must first be a parent-disciplined child.

She would tell others that she didn't want her children to become educated ruffians and so they were taught manners and obedience. They were to remain silent at the dinner table, play only with selected companions, required to speak in precise English [without the use of slang.]<sup>v</sup>

For those of you who've read her biography, you know how she became rather famous for her Rules of Conduct – I came across several different versions but they all said the same basic things; some of them are as follows:

1. No sinful act should pass without punishment
2. No child should be beaten twice for the same fault
3. Promises are to be strictly enforced and observed
4. Teach them to fear the rod
5. Eating between meals is not allowed

I'm wondering if my Mom had this same list. This sounds really familiar.

6. They are to be taught to pray as soon as they can speak
7. Give them nothing they cry for, but only that when asked politely.
8. Any intention toward obedience, even if the performance was not as well as it should have been, is to be accepted and encouraged.

But she wasn't simply interested in order and academics and good manners.

She wanted her children to reverence the Lord above all – to live holy lives.

She wrote to her older son, “When the will of a child is totally subdued and is brought to revere and stand in awe of the parents – that becomes the

foundation of a truly religious education – only then is a child capable of being governed by righteous thinking.”

One day one of her daughters wanted to be involved in something that wasn't terribly bad, but it wasn't altogether right either. When Susanna told her she couldn't be involved, her daughter protested. It was late in the evening and she and her mother were sitting beside a dead fire. Her mother said, “Reach over there and pick up that bit of coal.” “I don't want to do that, Mother.” Susanna said, “But the fire is out and you won't be burned.” “Well, I know that but it will blacken my hands.” “Exactly,” said Susanna, “that thing which you wish to do won't burn you, but it will blacken your hands.”

One visitor to their home later wrote that the Wesley children were a cluster of bright, outgoing, argumentative boys and girls, living on the plainest substance, yet learning in an atmosphere of reverence to God.”<sup>vi</sup>

Sometimes Susanna took matters into her own hands – even if it went against cultural norms and raised some eyebrows.

Once, while her husband was in London defended another minister against charges of heresy, he had appointed another man, a Mr. Inman, to preach the Sunday sermon. Evidently he wasn't up to the job and the sermons were boring, stale meanderings.

So, Susanna promptly began an afternoon service for the family, gathering them to sing a few Psalms, praying, and then she read a sermon selected from a book in her husband's library. The service originally began for the Wesley household, but soon others found out about it and began attending. Before long, the parsonage, and the lawns was overflowing with more than 200 people while the Sunday morning service dwindled to nothing.

So Mr. Inman wrote to Samuel and complained that his wife had begun a competing worship service. Samuel wrote to his wife telling her to stop immediately. She wrote back that the meetings were having a genuine and effective ministry to those who attended and that Mr. Inman was the only one objecting.

And the services continued.”<sup>vii</sup>

You can imagine with all the activity and challenges of this household that Susanna never had any time alone. One biographer wrote that she struggled to find a secret place to get away and so she finally gave up, telling her children that when

they saw her with her apron over her head, she was in prayer and could not be disturbed.

Imagine the only way to get alone was to hide out under an apron, pulled over your head.

Still, she found time, not only for herself and her children, but to each child individually.

After her oldest child had moved out, she decided to intensify her personal contact with her remaining 8 children and so devised a plan to spend one hour a week talking with each child.

- On Monday it was Mollie
- On Tuesday it was Hetty
- Wednesday was for Nancy
- Thursday held an hour for Jacky (or John)
- Friday was Patty's day
- Saturday was little Charles day
- And Sunday, two hours devoted to Emelia and Susanna (nicknamed Suckey).

She was dedicated to providing the counsel of a mother to her children.

Like other biographies in our past study in this series, it's tempting to put a period right about here and leave well enough alone.

Most of what I knew about Susanna and Samuel Wesley ended here.

But other factors are worth noting – in fact, in order to have a realistic perspective on the home – on raising children – on educating children – on marriage – on ministry – leaving certain realities hidden behind closed doors often does more damage.

We create not only heroes out of clay pots, we assume that if we do everything they did, our lives will be as satisfied and fulfilled as their lives.

Maybe if I use these 16 rules of conduct, make sure my kids are structured and in bed by 8:00, have devotions under my apron, maybe I'll have the kind of home Charles and Susanna had and all my children will become participants in the great awakening.

That only works if you don't know too much about their home – or anyone's life for that matter.

Samuel and Susanna actually struggled their entire marriage with inflexible personalities and stubborn wills.

On one occasion Samuel prayed at the dinner table for the King and at the end everyone said “Amen” except Susanna. He demanded to know why and she simply told him that King William of Orange was not the rightful king, but King James II was the one who should be on the throne. Samuel stood to his feet, in front of the children and demanded she repent and say “Amen”. She refused.

He then said, “Well, we must part ways for if there are two kings then we shall have two beds.”

And he left the house in a fury.

A couple months later he returned to see if she’d changed her mind and she hadn’t, after which he told her he would leave and never see her or the children again.

It wasn’t the first time he’d left in a rage . . . and it wouldn’t be the last.

On his way out of town, Samuel met another clergyman who persuaded him to persist in his marriage vows regardless of his wife’s political views.

He relented and on his way back to the house, Samuel discovered that the parsonage was on fire – more than likely by villagers once again.

Samuel stayed and rebuilt the parsonage, reconciling with Susanna. Their 15<sup>th</sup> child – John Wesley, was born a year later.

Other issues plagued their marriage and their home life.

Samuel was not only a poor money manager, but evidently someone who didn’t try to repay his debts as he should. He would go to jail twice for failing to pay his bills.

He had several failed attempts to make money beyond his abilities. For instance, he was convinced that what the church really needed was an exhaustive commentary on the Book of Job – written in Latin – which the average person couldn’t read.

One biographer wrote that Samuel used most of their meager funds to fund this publication, which then never sold. He then tried publishing poetry, but it was an embarrassment and became a joke in the community.

He seemed oblivious to it all . . . perhaps you’ve seen in others that lack of self-objectivity where someone is convinced they are good at something and everyone just bites their lip and stays quiet – no one is willing to tell them the truth.

As a result, the Wesley’s lived on the edge of destitution and perpetual debt owing to Samuel’s stubbornness; in fact, his debts were never fully repaid until after he died.

Whatever consistency there was in the home was due primarily to Susanna’s efforts.

While the world knows about 2 of her 21 children, the truth is, Susanna would be challenged and heartbroken over and over again with children who chose not to walk with Christ – even after all her efforts.

Their daughter Susanna – nicknamed Suki – chose to marry an unbeliever who ended up physically abusing her. She nearly died in childbirth and finally, suffering from her husband’s cruelty, fled with her children to London, refusing to ever reconcile.

Their daughter Emilia also fell in love with an unbeliever but ended the relationship after her brothers counseled her. It was evidence again that any relationship with her father was virtually non-existent. Unfortunately, at the age of 44 Emilia was so concerned that she would never marry, that she married too quickly a man without proof of genuine character. He soon took her life savings and left her with his debts and their dying baby.

Another daughter they nicknamed, Hetty, ran off with a lawyer who promised her a future home and marriage; a few months later, he changed his mind and she returned home, disgraced and pregnant. Unfortunately, her father, Samuel, disowned her and then foolishly demanded that she marry a local plumber to rescue her reputation. She agreed and they endured an unhappy marriage. Only after Samuel’s death did she and her mother, Susanna reconcile, and enjoy a rich, affectionate relationship.

Finally, their daughter Martha also married a man without genuine spiritual interests. He was often unfaithful to her, bringing home illegitimate children whom she raised as if they were her own. Her husband eventually left with another woman and died overseas.<sup>viii</sup>

Little wonder that Samuel’s repeated abandonment of the family, his unwillingness to manage his household well, his stubborn arrogance that demanded applause for his minor achievements while overlooking the needs of his wife and daughters – left them without a shepherd and counselor and, as you can imagine, brought great difficulty and pain into Susanna’s life.

Susanna once wrote out a prayer while in the crucible of pain that sheds light on her commitment to the sovereign purposes of God – she prayed, “All my sufferings, by the admirable management of Omnipotent Goodness, have concurred to promote my spiritual and eternal good . . . glory be to Thee, O Lord.”<sup>ix</sup>

Susanna Wesley never preached a sermon or published a book or planted a church but became known as the Mother of Methodism.

And that’s because, while several of her children abandoned the faith she so persistently taught them, two of her children especially, embraced the faith

and would literally impact the world – John and Charles Wesley.

Charles would write more than 9,000 hymns. John preached to a million people as the Methodist movement took England by storm – a movement named after methodical – systematic methods – methods, systems and structured patterns by the way that ironically mirrored the structured upbringing under the tutelage and counsel of their mother.

Unlike her husband, Susanna said late in life, “I am content to fill a little space if God be glorified.”<sup>x</sup>

When his father Samuel died, John Wesley moved his mother into his ministry headquarters that included a church, a school, a clinic, a headquarters where a host of people lived as the movement grew.

Susanna passed away on July 23, 1742. Most of her adult children had gathered in these final days.

Her last command to her children was simply this – and I quote – Children, as soon as I am released sing a psalm of praise to God.”

Her son John bought the land where she was buried and built another home nearby where he would live. He positioned his desk near a window facing the cemetery.<sup>xi</sup>

It was a way of being reminded of the verse that his mother had attempted to live out – ***Hear my son, your father’s instruction; and do not forsake your mother’s teaching – indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head and ornaments around your neck. They’ll guide you and guard you . . .they will be like a beacon to your path throughout your life.***

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i Above quotes taken from Diana Lynn Severance, Feminine Threads: Women in the Tapestry of Christian History (Christian Focus Publications, 2011), p. 212

ii [www.freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~gentutor/susanna.html](http://www.freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~gentutor/susanna.html)

iii [www.historyswomen.com/womenoffaith/SusannahWesley.html](http://www.historyswomen.com/womenoffaith/SusannahWesley.html)

iv Ingvar Hadda, John Wesley (Abingdon Press, 1961), p. 15

v [www.lovetolearn.net/susanna-wesley-homeschool-mom.html](http://www.lovetolearn.net/susanna-wesley-homeschool-mom.html)

vi ibid

vii Haddal, p. 20

viii Adapted from freepages.com

ix Severance, p. 214

x [www.historyswomen.com](http://www.historyswomen.com)...

xi [www.paulbarker.org/susannah\\_wesley.html](http://www.paulbarker.org/susannah_wesley.html)