

The Mother's Blessing

Or

The godly counsel of a Gentle-woman not long since deceased, left behind for her children:
Containing many good exhortations, and godly admonitions, profitable for all Parents to leave as
a Legacy to their Children, but especially for those, who, by reason of their young years stand
most in need of Instruction.

By Mrs. Dorothy Leigh.

Proverb. 1.8. My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother.

Edited by Macy Cloninger

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and are to be sold at the great Southdore
of Paules, and at Brittaines
Burse. 1616.

Introduction

Published posthumously in 1616, Dorothy Leigh's *The Mother's Blessing* was one of the most popular conduct manuals in early 17th century England. Not much is known about Leigh herself, but her book functions as her primacy legacy, with the work communicating a mother's desire for her sons' piety and fulfillment after her death. The book is a devotional manual written to her children, George, John, and William Leigh, whom she addresses in a letter that prefaces the 45 chapters she fills with advice. Though her sons are her self-proclaimed primary motivation for her work, she extends her writing to a broader audience, identifying possible female readers and parents in need of guidance. She basis her advice on her own spiritual experiences and beliefs, which guides her throughout the book, as well as multiple biblical allusions. She begins with a letter to its "protectress," Princess Elizabeth, a move which would have helped solidify her authority over matters discussed within the work.

Leigh maintains a note of humility and competency throughout her piece. She humbles herself before her readership, acknowledging the unique path she takes as a female writing a devotional manual and apologizing for her "boldness" when advising wives, signaling her recognition of the gendered constraints surrounding women's voices in public mediums. However, she upholds herself as a knowledgeable writer and someone to listen to, particularly in her religious expertise and scriptural comprehension. Her instructions are clear and comprehensive as she takes on the motherly role for anyone who opens her book.

One of her primary concerns is to warn against idleness, which is the first lesson she offers in her poem that precedes the book, "Counsel to my Children." She tells a story of the "laborious" and "idle" bee, using their different experiences during winter to advocate against sloth, arguing that idleness will lead to future unhappiness and danger, while labor will allow for eventual happiness and safety. She mirrors this sentiment in Chapter 2, stating that the soul "cannot live" without labor. This labor is defined by reading the scriptures of God and engaging in private prayer, which provides nourishment to the soul. For her, his labor is the most

important and most fulfilling compared to worldly desires. She advises against unthankfulness in rich men, arguing that service to God should provide more than riches ever could.

Her unique understanding of women and the fall of Eve also pervades throughout the book. Similar to her advice against idleness, she advocates for women to take an active role in defying the sin cast upon women by Eve by seeking out Christ. She accepts inherent culpability as a descendant of Eve, but believes in the possibility of ridding it from future generations. In Chapter 28, Leigh continues her speculation on the first humans, specifying that humans were “corrupted by the fall of *Adam* with sin.” Her lapse in specifying the fall as the fault of Eve alone stands as an outlier to most religious thought at this time, which identified Eve as the representative of all women who came after her—a portrayal that framed women as inherently deceitful and more prone to sin. Men and women are placed on near equal terms of culpability in her work, as she states “our own flesh is our own enemy,” because it is made from the earth. It is the connection to worldly desires—which she advises against in chapter 24—and the devil’s corruption of the body which requires private prayer from all people.

She extends her defense of women to her son’s future wives, offering instruction on marriage and a stern reprimand should they ignore her advice. Warning her sons—and other potential readers—against reducing a wife to a “servant and drudge,” she advocates for respectful and reciprocal relations. Further, she connects loving one’s wife with obedience to God, arguing that a man’s constancy of love reflects his spiritual faithfulness. She frames loving one’s wife as both a moral and a religious obligation.

To the high and excellent Princess, the Lady Elizabeth¹ her Grace,
daughter to the high and mighty King of Great Britain, and Wife to the
illustrious Prince, the Count Palatine of the Rhine:²

Dorothy Leigh wisheth all grace and prosperity here, and glory in the
world to come.

Most worthy & renowned Princess, I being troubled and wearied
with fear, lest my children should not find the right way to heaven,
thought with my self that I could do no less for them, then every man
will do for his friend, which was, to write them the right way, that I truly
observed out of the written word of God, lest for want of warning they
might fall where I stumbled, and then I should think my selfe in the
fault, who knew there were such down-falls in the world, that they could
hardly climbe the hill to heaven without help, and yet had not told them
thereof. Wherefore I wrote them the right and ready way to Heaven well
warranted by the scriptures of the old and new Testament, which is the
true word of God, and told them how many false paths they should find,
how they should find them, and what care they should have to shun
them: if they took a false way, what a trouble they should have in
turning again, what danger if they went on: and of many doubts which
the world would make without a cause, and how silent it would be in

¹ Elizabeth Stuart (1596-1662), daughter of James VI and I and Anne of Denmark. She reigned as Queen consort of Bohemia for one winter, inspiring her moniker, "The Winter Queen." She and her husband spent much of their lives in exile because of political tensions.

² Frederick V (1596 - 1632), son of Frederick IV and Louise Juliana of Orange-Nassau. He became King of Bohemia in 1619 and abdicated the throne in 1620. He shares a matching title with Elizabeth, "The Winter King."

danger. Thus when I had written unto them of these things, I was at much peace, quiet and contentment.

But as no contentment in the world continueth long, so suddenly there arose a new care in my mind, how this scroll should be kept for my children: for they were too young to receive it, myself too old to keep it, men too wise to direct it to, the world too wicked to endure it. Then in great grief I looked up to heaven, from whence I knew commeth all comfort, and looking up, I saw a most Angelical throne of Princely Peers and peerless Princes prepared for heaven, and yet by the appointment of God were here to comfort us on the earth: then I perceived that this Throne was the joy of England: then I considered that the highest **blud** had the lowest mind: then I saw humility looking downward, while the sweet slips of her virtue grew upward: then, even then, Princely Lady, I beheld your mild and courteous countenance, which showed, your heart was bent to do good to all: wherefore without fear, and with much faith, I adventured to make your Grace the **protectresse** of this my Book, knowing that if you would but suffer your name to be seen in it, Wisdom would allow it, and all the wicked wind in the world could not blow it away. The Lord multiply his graces more and more on you, and **vouchsafe** unto you a numerous posterity, in whom your Grace may receive much joy and comfort, and Gods Church, and true Religion continual defence and propagation.

blood

protector/patroness

bestow

Your graces, in all humble

and observant duty:

Dorothy Leigh

Counsel to my children.

My Sons, the readers of this book,
I do you not intreat
To bear with each misplaced word,
for why, my pain's as great
To write this little book to you
(the world may think indeed)
As it will be at any time
for you the same to read.

But this I much and oft desire,
that you would do for me,
To gather honey of each flower,
as doth the laborious Bee.
She looks not who did place the Plant,
nor how the flower did grow,
Whether so stately up aloft,
Or near the ground below.

But where she finds it, there she works,
and gets the wholesome food,
And bears it home, and lays it up,
to do her Country good,
And for to serve her self at need

when winter doth begin:

When storm and tempest is without,

Then she doth find within.

A sweet and pleasant wholesome food,

a house to keep her warm,

A place where softly she may rest,

and be kept from all harm.

Except the Bee that idle is,

and seeks too soon for rest

Before she have filled her house,

Whereby her state is blessed.

And then as she did rest too soon,

too soon she sorrow knows:

When storms and tempests are without,

make evil

then she herself **beshrewes**.

She looketh out and seeth death,

Ready her to devour:

Then doth she wish that she had got

more of the wholesome flower.

For why, within, her store is spent,

before the winter's past.

And she by no means can endure

The stormy winters blast.

She looketh out, and seeth death,

and finds no less within,

Then too too late for to repent,

you see she doth begin.

Therefore see you not idle be,

this I would have you know,

Be sure still that the ground be good,

whereout the Plant doth grow:

Then gather well and lose no time,

take heed now you do see,

Lest you be unprovided found,

as was the idle Bee.

Dorothy Leigh

The Mothers Blessing.

Chap. 2.

The first cause of writing, is a Motherly affection.

marvel

But lest you should **maruaile**; my children, why I do not, according to

the usual custom of women, exhort you by word and admonitions, rather

then by writing, a thing so unusual among us, and especially in such a

time, when there be so many godly books in the world, that they mold in

marred

some mens studies, while their Masters are **mard**, because they will not

are eaten away at

meditate upon them; as many mens garments **motheate** in their chests, while their Christian bretheren quake with cold in the street for want of covering; know therfore, that it was the motherly affection that I bare unto you all, which made me now (as it often hath done heretofore) forget my self in regard of you: neither care I what you or any shall think of me, if among many words I may write but one sentence, which may make you labor for the spiritual food of the soul, which must be gathered every day out of the word, as the children of Israel gathered Manna³ in the wilderness. By the which you may see it is a labor: but what labor? a pleasant labor, a profitable labor: a labor without the which the soul cannot live. For as the children of Israel must needs starve, except they gath'ed every day in the wilderness and fed of it, so must your souls, except you gather the spiritual Manna out of the word every day, and feed of it continually: for as they by this Manna comforted their hearts, strengthened their bodies, and preserved their lives; so by this heavenly Word of God, you shall comfort your souls, make them strong in Faith, and grow in true godliness, and finally preserve them with great joy, to everlasting life, through Faith in Christ; whereas if you desire any food for your soules, that is not in the written Word of God, your soules die with it even in your hearts and mouths; even as they, that desired other food, died with it in their mouths, were it never so dainty: so shall you, and there is no recovery for you.

Chapter 5.

³ Manna was a type of food God provided to the Israelites daily as they wandered the desert for 40 years following the Exodus from Egypt.

The third cause is to move women to be careful of their children.

The third is, to encourage women (who, I fear, will blush at my boldness) not to be ashamed to show their infirmities, but to give men the first and chief place: yet let us labor to come in the second; and because we must needs confess, that sin entred by us into our **posterity**, let us show how careful we are to seek to Christ to cast it out of us, and our posterity, and how fearful we are that our sin should sink any of them to the lowest part of the earth; wherefore let us call upon them to follow Christ, who will carry them to the height of heaven.

descendents

Chap. 13

It is great folly for a man to mislike his own choice

Me thinkes I never saw a man show a more senseless simplicity, then in misliking his own choice, when God hath given a man almost a world of women to choose him a wife in. If a man hath not wit enough to choose him one, whom he can love to the end, yet me thinkes he should have discretion to cover his own folly; but if he want discretion, me thinkes he should have **policy**, which never fails a man to dissemble his own simplicity in this case. If he want wit, discretion and policy, he is unfit to marry any woman. Do not a woman that wrong, as to take her from her friends that love her, and after a while to begin to hate her. If she have no friends, yet thou knowest not, but that she may have a husband, that may love her. If thou canst not love her to the end, leave her to him that can. Me thinkes, my son could not offend me in any thing, if he served God, except he chose a wife that he could not love to

shrewdness

the end: I need not say, if he served God; for if he served God, he would obey God, and then he would chose a godly wife, and live lovingly and godlily with her, and not do as some man, who taketh a woman to make her a companion and fellow, and after he hath her, he makes her a servant and **drudge**. If she be thy wife, she is always too good to be thy servant, and worthy to be thy fellow. If thou wilt have a good wife, thou must go before her in all goodness, and show her a pattern of all good virtues by thy godly and discreet life: and especially in patience, according to the counsel of the holy Ghost: “Bear with the woman, as with the weaker vessel.”⁴ Here God showeth that it is her imperfection that honoureth thee, and that it is thy perfection that maketh thee to bear with her; follow the counsel of God therefore, and bear with her. God willed a man “to leave Father & Mother for his wife.”⁵ This showeth what an excellent love God did appoint to be between man and wife. In truth I cannot by any means set down the excellency of that love: but this I assure you, that if you get wives that be godly and you love them, you shall not need to forsake me; whereas if you have wives that you love not, I am sure I will forsake you. Do not your selves that wrong, as to marry a woman that you cannot love: show not so much childishness in your sex, as to say, you loved her once, and now your mind is changed: if thou canst not love her for the goodness that is in her, yet let the grace that is in thy self move thee to do it; and so I leave thee to the Lord, whom I pray to guide both thee and her with his grace, and grant

slave

⁴ 1 Peter 3:7

⁵ Genesis 2:24

that you may chose godlily, and live happily, and die comfortably,
through faith in Jesus Christ.

Chap. 24.

wisdom

The unthankfulness of rich men, a great sin.

Oh, this will be a **witness** against many rich men, which receive many great blessings, and yet they be unthankful: for the devil thought, that he which received gifts and blessings, could not chose but be thankful: and yet when Job was rich, he never did God so much honor nor service in his Church, as when his goods were gone: for before, he was a rich man, and lived well, and gave somthing to the poor: what should he have done with his goods else? & so did many more besides him. But when all his goods were taken away, he did not as worldly⁶ men do, he did not say, I am bewitched; or, it is the negligence of my servants; but he said, “The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh, and as it pleaseth the Lord, so it commeth to passe; blessed be the name of the Lord,”⁷ And thus he became thankful for his losses. This is a thing that everyone cannot do: and he was so patient and thankful, what **crosses** soever it pleased God to lay upon him, that he glorified God in his obedience, and showed that he loved God, and that his love was not set on this worldly wealth. So he might have God without the world, he cared not, he was none of those that must needs have God and the world

adversities

⁶ Belonging to the world of human existence, not connected to the spiritual or other world

⁷ Job 1:21

together, or else they will none; but he was one that left an example to the whole Church of God to be thankful and patient.

Chap. 28.

How long we have need of private prayer.

Now that you and every one of you shall have need of private prayer, from the very beginning of your life, to the very last hour of your days, my own experience teacheth me: and the word of God a true witness, affirmeth that we are wholly corrupted by the fall of *Adam* with sin, and therefore continually we ought to suspect our selves, and to call upon God without ceasing, for his help, grace, and assistance in all our actions: for we know that our own flesh is our own enemy, and that it is made of the earth, and is so heavy and earthlyminded, that it can never seek for heavenly things, without the special grace of God; and the devil hath made an entrance into this earthly body, by reason that our own parents Adam and Eve, did take of the fruit of disobedience at his hands, and did eat at his appointment: so that now he claimeth such an interest in us, that none but Christ can keep him out: and therefore we have no way, but to call continually on the name of God in Christ; to assist us with his gracious spirit, which will keep away the devil, overcome the world, and conquer our own flesh for us.

