

Heroes of the Faith: Susanna Wesley

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Proverbs 31

If people know only one thing about Susanna Wesley it is that she was the mother of John and Charles Wesley, the founders of the Methodist movement. If people know just two things about her the second is probably that she gave birth to nineteen children. That alone from my perspective makes her a hero that causes my jaw to drop!

But Susanna herself was the twenty-fifth born to her preacher father and his wife. She was early devoted to the faith and determined to think for herself. A big controversy at the time split the Church of England and her father was a minister in the dissenting group. At thirteen Susanna decided to stop attending her father's church and joined the Church of England on her own, obviously independent and determined early on.

One of the preachers that gathered in her father's study was to become her husband – Samuel Wesley. She married when she was twenty and he was twenty-six. Their marriage is a fascinating mixture of devotion, love, arguments, commitment, and mutual faith in God. Like some married couples some of us might know they had some fierce arguments. One political difference between them caused Samuel to leave for months. The child of their reunion was John Wesley.

I think from reading about their marriage that the basic issue causing friction between them was how fiercely strong both of them were in their will and opinions. Often in couples, one gives way fairly easily in order to keep the peace. Sometimes both are readily willing to give in to the other. Occasionally both are strong-willed we might say, or less graciously hard-headed, and then the fireworks fly, both holding firm to their own way. Does this hit home with anyone else out there except me?

The good news is that Samuel and Susanna always worked it through, always came back together and reaffirmed their love and commitment to each other. In the years after Samuel's death and before her own, Susanna said she often felt his presence very near her.

One result of their stormy but loving relationship was nineteen children, ten of whom lived past the age of two. Again my admiration for anyone who has had that many losses (nine babies) and keeps a strength and faith through it all. It is her way of

mothering the ten children who survived that really evokes the awe from those who know her story.

Susanna had a singular aim as a mother, to raise children into adulthood who would honor God and live for eternity in heaven. She was incredibly focused in seeing that happen and directed her fierce will to shaping her children into devout followers of Christ.

Here are her sixteen rules that she used in her home to raise not just well mannered children, but devout followers of Christ.

16 Rules of Susanna Wesley

1. *Eating between meals not allowed.* (3 meals a day – no snacks)
2. *As children they are to be in bed by 8 p.m.* (starting with the youngest)
3. *They are required to take medicine without complaining.* (although they did throw up)
4. *Subdue self-will in a child, and those working together with God to save the child's soul.* (main point)
5. *To teach a child to pray as soon as he can speak.* (Lord's Prayer twice daily – then others)
6. *Require all to be still during Family Worship.*
7. *Give them nothing that they cry for, and only that when asked for politely.* (No crying – odious sound – strictly enforced)
8. *To prevent lying, punish no fault which is first confessed and repented of.* (one child trouble, rest readily honest)
9. *Never allow a sinful act to go unpunished.* (willful disobedience or wrongdoing)
10. *Teach children to fear the rod.* (spanked them early – not necessary later)
11. *Never punish a child twice for a single offense.* (once dealt with never mentioned again)
12. *Comment and reward good behavior.* (this freely and positively done)

13. *Any attempt to please, even if poorly performed, should be commended.*
(good job – great try)
14. *Preserve property rights, even in the smallest matters.* (even to a pin, give something away not yours)
15. *Strictly observe all promises.* (Hers and others)
16. *Require no daughter to work before she can read well.* (taught Latin, Greek, all subjects – then duties – EDUCATION 6 hours a day 5 years old and up)

The thing that rather overwhelms me as I read the list and the testimony of her children is her amazing consistency. They knew exactly what was expected of them and what would happen good or bad. She was free with her love and positive reinforcement but they knew perfectly well what would happen if they misbehaved. Susanna Wesley approached being a mother as an awesome stewardship over the eternal destinies of ten human beings. She believed if she did her job well then all her children would follow God's way and be with her in heaven for eternity.

Which brings us to her faith in God; it started early in her life and continued all the way through. She believed very strongly in daily prayer and if she could not find a private place in the house to pray, she put her apron over her head as a sign to the children to be extra quiet, mom was praying.

One famous incident from her life occurred when Samuel was away for almost a year, either in debtor's prison which happened to him more than once or at an extended church meeting in London (sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between those two!) He left another pastor in charge of Sunday services and they were so bad the congregation dwindled down to a handful. Susanna went dutifully with the children but felt like they needed more spiritual encouragement so she started a Sunday afternoon service in the rectory/parsonage where she read her favorite sermons from the library. Word got around and finally with standing room only they had two hundred people in the house. The guest preacher got mad and wrote Samuel to make Susanna stop. Several letters went back and forth before finally Susanna wrote that she would stop the Sunday afternoon services if Samuel would take responsibility for each person's soul at Judgment Day. Samuel dropped it and Susanna kept up the services.

Now all this time young John Wesley is watching and learning. Many of the actions of the Methodist movement can be traced back to Susanna's kitchen and living room: Women in leadership roles, lay preachers, preaching where the people were, and how they set up systems of care.

With ten children Susanna instituted a system of the oldest paired with the youngest for a number of things. She did not attempt to get each child ready for bed herself, for instance. The oldest helped the youngest and so forth. Many believe this experience encouraged John Wesley to give lots of responsibilities to a wide range of people to get the mission accomplished. He never attempted to do it all himself, something he learned from his mother.

And he kept learning from her. As a grown man he wrote her letters and asked her advice. He considered her wise in the ways of God and well worth listening to.

Finally in August of 1742 when Susanna was seventy-three, John Wesley writes this in his journal.

"I found my mother on the borders of eternity. But she had no doubt or fear; nor any desire but (as soon as God should call) "to depart, and to be with Christ."

Fri. 23. – About three in the afternoon I went to my mother. And found her change was near. I sat down on the bed-side. She was in her last conflict; unable to speak, but I believe quite sensible. Her look was calm and serene, and her eyes fixed upward, while we commended her soul to God. From three to four, the silver cord was loosing, and the wheel breaking at the cistern; and then, without any struggle, or sigh, or groan, the soul was set at liberty. We stood round the bed, and fulfilled her last request, uttered a little before she lost her speech:"Children, as soon as I am released, sing a psalm of praise to God."

Sun. August 1. – Almost an innumerable company of people being gathered together, about five in the afternoon, I committed to earth the body of my mother, to sleep with her fathers. The portion of Scripture from which I afterwards spoke was, "I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God, and the books were opened: And the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works." It was one of the most solemn assemblies I ever saw, or expect to see on this side eternity."

She lived and died a hero of the faith, the Mother of Methodism, devout and faithful to God, dedicated as a mother and a follower of Jesus Christ. Like the woman of Proverbs 31: 25-31

Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.²⁶ She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.²⁷ She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the

bread of idleness.²⁸ Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her:²⁹ "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."³⁰ Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.³¹ Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.