

# Saved Through Childbearing

An Exposition by Robert Jackson

If Paul said or taught anything before he died, it was that we are saved by faith, and not by works. Given this fact, 1 Timothy 2:15 causes great difficulty for many Bible readers, who cannot help but be shocked by the seeming implications of such a bizarre-sounding verse. I intend here to provide a solid, contextual interpretation of this verse which is, on analysis, well within our grasp and, I would argue, a significant and inspiring verse.

Please note that in this analysis I will not be commenting on matters of dress and modesty in 1 Timothy 2:9-10, and I will deal only in passing with matters of women's authority in 1 Timothy 2:11-14. This is not because these issues are insignificant, which is far from the truth, but simply due to that fact that my unrivalled focus in this paper is v15 – that women will be "saved through childbearing".

## The Wider Context – 1 Timothy

The general context of the verse is, of course, the book itself. However, this is misleading. 1 Timothy is not a "book", it is a letter. Any letter must be read just as you would read a letter today – from start to finish. More so than narrative and poetic sections of the Bible, epistles build up an argument – they are coherent treatises with an occasional (specific) purpose. Taking verses out of context is always dangerous, but I am led to feel that it is never more dangerous than in a New Testament epistle.

The occasion of 1 Timothy is a series of church problems facing Timothy, who was involved with leading a pillar church in Ephesus. The issues included doctrinal controversies (1:3-4), insubordinate women (2:11-15), uncertainty concerning leadership (3:1-15) and poor widows placing huge financial strain on the church (5:4-16). I could go on, suffice to say that the church had a series of challenges, which Paul addresses. The book can fruitfully be read in parallel to Ephesians (which was written about five years earlier) as well as Acts 19 (which describes the planting of the church).

The city was a thriving metropolis, and the home of the great goddess Artemis, deity of hunting. This is significant, because in Greek (as well as Roman) culture, women were second class in every area of civil and public life *except* worship. Women were more spiritual than men; and closer to the gods. They led the temples and often the services. For deities such as Artemis, all of the "clergy" had to be priestesses. Above all, the great Oracle was, of course, a woman! This, too, forms a significant background to the epistle.

## The Immediate Context – 1 Timothy 2:1-15

Narrowing in, the "paragraph" of our topic verse deals with the place of women in worship at church. Paul just spoke of worship in v10, but most significantly, he has stated worship as the topic of this section of discourse in 2:1. I don't see any way that Paul could be talking about affairs such as business or government – this tears the

passage right out of context. Hence, I would see Adam Clarke (the 19th Century Methodist commentator) as misguided in his following gloss on v13:

And by this very act [that of making Adam first] God designed that he should have the pre-eminence. God fitted man, by the robust construction of his body, to live a public life, to contend with difficulties, and to be capable of great exertions. The structure of woman's body plainly proves that she was never designed for those exertions required in public life. In this the chief part of the natural inferiority of woman is to be sought.

Clarke is arguing for the domestication of women, but this is grossly out of place in 1 Timothy 2:11-15, which deals strictly with worship. In many ways, Clarke's comment here is simply out of date – women leaders in all walks of life are readily observable in the 21st century, which causes serious difficulties to Clarke's argument, but no problem at all to Paul's!

## The Genesis Context

Perhaps the most significant Biblical context to this verse is that of Genesis 2 and 3 – the creation and fall of Adam and Eve. Paul's basic reference is simple enough: Adam was made first, and so men lead – and the fact that Eve sinned first only reinforces this. But then where does v15 come from? Adam Clarke sheds some light on this straight away:

It does not appear that Satan attempted the man; the woman said: “The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.” Adam received the fruit from the hand of his wife; he knew he was transgressing, he was not deceived; however, she led the way, and in consequence of this she was subjected to the domination of her husband: “Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” – Genesis 3:16.

What is Clarke saying? He is saying that v14 is a reference to the curse on Eve. Man's curse was to work; women's was to submit. Become deeply familiar with Genesis 3:14-19, and there is no doubt that Paul had these verses at the forefront of his mind as he penned this paragraph in 1 Timothy. What is the significance of this link? Well, the curses of Genesis 3 contain the first Messianic prophecy – it is right there in Genesis 3:15 – one of the most powerful, compelling and provocative Old Testament predictions of the cross. If you're not familiar with it, I recommend looking up some analyses of it straight away! It is based on this identification that Dr Macknight gives the following exposition:

However, though Eve was first in the transgression, and brought death on herself, her husband, and all her posterity, the female sex, shall be saved (equally with the male) through child-bearing – through bringing forth the saviour – if they live in faith, and love, and chastity, with that sobriety which I have been recommending.

The word “saved”, in this verse refers to “the woman”, in the foregoing verse, which is certainly *Eve*. But the apostle did not mean to say that she alone was to be saved through child-bearing, but that all her posterity, whether male or female,

are to be saved through the child-bearing of a woman; as is evident from his adding, "If they live in faith and love and holiness, with sobriety." For safety in child-bearing does not depend on that condition at all; since many pious women die in child-bearing ... The salvation of the human race, through child-bearing, was intimated in the sentence passed on the serpent, Genesis 3:15 ... Accordingly, the saviour being conceived in the womb of his mother by the power of the Holy Ghost, he is truly the seed of the woman who was to bruise the head of the serpent; and a woman, by bringing him forth, has been the occasion of our salvation.

This is an exemplary analysis, but this is not the final word on the passage. More can yet be said on textual grounds from the verse itself.

## The Verse Itself – 1 Timothy 2:15

The Greek construction of the verse itself actually provides fascinating insight to help understand the verse. Firstly, the beginning connective of the phrase ("but" in the NIV) could well have the force of "Notwithstanding", or something similar. Furthermore, the preposition ("through") need not mean "by means of", but could actually have the force of "amidst". These kinds of ideas are brought together by Jamieson, Fausset and Brown:

Be saved in childbearing ... Through, is often so used to express not the means of her salvation, but the circumstances *amidst* which it has place. Thus 1 Corinthians 3:15, "He . . . shall be saved: yet so as through (that is, amidst) fire": in spite of the fiery ordeal ... he shall be saved. So here, "In spite of the trial of childbearing which she passes through (as her portion of the curse, Genesis 3:16), she shall be saved." ... Some think that there is a reference to the Incarnation "through *the* child-bearing" (Greek), the bearing of the child Jesus. Doubtless this is the ground of women's child-bearing in general becoming to them a blessing, instead of a curse; just as in the original prophecy (Genesis 3:15-16) the promise of "the Seed of the woman" (the Saviour) stands in closest connection with the woman's being doomed to "sorrow" in "bringing forth children," her very child-bearing, though in sorrow, being the function assigned to her by God whereby the Saviour was born. This may be an ulterior reference of the Holy Spirit in this verse; but the primary reference required by the context is the one above given.

Once again, we have a fascinating and thoughtful biblical analysis. Brown convincingly argues that Paul's sense is that women will be saved despite the trials of childbirth, in accordance with the curse of Genesis 3, and the comparison to 1 Corinthians 3:15 is incredibly instructive (that same preposition is used in both verses). Paul often uses child birth as an image of great pain (Romans 8:22, Galatians 4:19), so this interpretation fits the Pauline context as well as the Genesis one.

Brown has also shown that this reading need not contradict the earlier view that the verse is a reference to the coming of the Saviour through child-bearing. He is happy to accept this as an "ulterior reference", because it all intimately links in with the "primeval curse". Many scholars have spared no expense in pursuing the message of this verse; we need only claim our right to be heirs of their labour.

There is a clear consensus among the Evangelical scholarship which I researched that either or both of the main analyses which I have put forward so far are indeed correct. Matthew Henry presents the view that this verse teaches that women will be saved despite being under the curse of childbearing, so long as they continue in faith, propriety and holiness. Another commentator, John Gill, argues for this view as well as a secondary reference to the bearing of the Saviour as the means of all of our salvation.

It can be seen, then, that what is seen by many as a perennially frustrating, and perhaps even unsolvable verse, is not only capable of sound and fulfilling interpretation, but, in fact, Protestant scholars are basically all in agreement as to what the verse means. For me, this is at once a cause of encouragement and deep concern – encouragement that answers can indeed be found, and concern that this is so rarely done.

## Conclusion

So, my view is simple: "Saved through childbearing" refers primordially to Eve, in that the coming Saviour, Jesus Christ, would one day be born of a woman, as specifically stated in Paul's base text – Genesis 3. Not only that, but the verse also has a more general application, which is that holy and devout women will undoubtedly enter God's eternal rest, despite the suffering (the curse, in fact) of childbirth. This reading is not only supported, but also encouraged, by the text itself.

Paul's point in the verse, then, is likewise straightforward: Women *do* need to be silent and submissive, and, yes, they *are* under the curse of Eve, but don't dare think for a moment that they will miss out on any of the spiritual blessings of Christ! Far from it, remember that it was childbirth that brought about our Saviour, and even though that same thing gives you great pain in this life, if you continue in faith, you will be saved, the curse of childbirth notwithstanding.

It is my hope not only to have shed light on this difficult passage, but to have shown conclusively that it is not beyond our reach to exegete this passage wholly and soundly, not only by paying attention to the various contexts in which it lies, but also by giving close attention to the structure of the verse itself.