

Chapter Ten

Wise Spiritual Guides: Living Beautiful Lives in an Ugly World

“I am waiting to be next. The door is open. Death will quickly draw the veil and make us see how near we were to God and one another, and did not sufficiently know it. Farewell vain world, and welcome true everlasting life” (Richard Baxter’s eulogy to his wife, Margaret).¹

“And now here is comfort, that I have to deal with a God of mercy that will hear a poor repenting sinner; a God that will in no wise cast out those that come to him, but loves whom he loves to the end” (Margaret Baxter).²

We know the names Richard Baxter, Charles Wesley, and John Wesley. We are much less familiar with the spiritual writings of Margaret Baxter and Susannah Wesley. Yet, when we uncover the rich buried treasure of their soul care and spiritual direction ministries, we have to wonder why in the world the world has not told their amazing stories sooner. These two remarkable women, though vastly different in temperament, background, and ministry, each exemplify unique historic components of feminine soul care and spiritual direction.

Margaret Baxter: An Artful Soul Physician

Margaret Charlton Baxter’s (1631-1681) father, Francis, was a leading justice of the peace and a wealthy man. Growing up as part of England’s aristocracy, “Margaret was a frivolous, worldly minded teenager” when she arrived in Kidderminster to live with her godly widowed mother and to benefit from Richard Baxter’s ministry.³ A sermon series on conversion which

Baxter preached in 1657 led her to a total commitment to Christ-centered worship and service. Richard, who was twenty years older than Margaret, was often in the home she shared with her mother and provided Margaret with ongoing spiritual direction.

Baxter omitted from his memoir of Margaret “the occasion and inducements of our marriage,” so we only know that they wed after her mother passed away on September 10, 1662.⁴ There followed nineteen years of happy life together, till Margaret’s death.

Comfort in My Suffering: The Scourge of Scrupulosity and Melancholy

According to Richard, Margaret was obsessive about her physical and spiritual health, spending much of her adult life in fear of mental collapse, and starving herself for years for fear that overeating would precipitate cancer. While today we might “diagnose” her with various psychological maladies such as “anxiety disorder,” “eating disorder,” and/or “obsessive compulsive disorder,” Richard chooses the historically current category of “scrupulosity.” She was overly conscientious about her spiritual state.

As he puts it, “Her understanding was higher and clearer than other people’s, but, like the treble strings of a lute, strained up to the highest, sweet, but in continual danger.”⁵ She “proved her sincerity by her costliest obedience. It cost her . . . somewhat of her trouble of body and mind; for her knife was too keen and cut the sheath. Her desires were more earnestly set on doing good than her tender mind and head could well bear.”⁶

Baxter also uses the common term of the day, “melancholy” to further describe her emotional struggles, and to depict her victory over them. “When we were married, her sadness and melancholy vanished: Counsel did something to it, and contentment something; and being taken up with our household affairs did somewhat. And we lived in inviolated love and mutual complacency conscious of the benefit of mutual help.”⁷ His prescription for overcoming

“depression” is fascinating, especially given the trend today toward either/or thinking and one-size-fits-all therapy. Yes, counseling was part of her “treatment plan,” but so was the spiritual discipline of learning contentment, the ministry practice of serving God and others in day-to-day life, and the benefit of a marriage of mutual love and affection.

Margaret adds her own assessment of God’s healing powers. Speaking of her physical recovery from a serious illness and her commensurate spiritual peace, she explains, “And now I desire to acknowledge his mercy in delivering me from this death-threatening disease, and that in answer to prayers I am here now in competent health to speak of the goodness of the Lord.”⁸ She then provides her biblical sufferology that defines how God in His goodness uses sickness. “I desire to acknowledge it a mercy that God should afflict me; and though I cannot with the Psalmist say, *but now I keep thy statutes*; I can say, *Before I was afflicted I went astray*. And how many great sins God has prevented by this affliction, I cannot tell; but I am sure that God has dealt very graciously with me; and I have had many comforts in my sufferings, which God has not given to many of his beloved ones.”⁹ Rather than grow bitter at God for her ongoing physical and emotional battles, she blesses God for using them to prune her so she could blossom for His glory.

But “sanctification *today*” does not alone summarize Margaret’s sufferology. She also includes in her healing narrative her *future* heavenly hope. “If I belong to God, though I suffer while I am in the body, they will be but light afflictions and but for a moment; but the everlasting Kingdom will be my inheritance. And when this life is ended, I shall reign with Christ; I shall be freed from sin and suffering and for ever rejoice with saints and angels.”¹⁰ In this Margaret follows the grand church history tradition of *remembering the future*.

Yes, of course salvation has daily implications *now*. But this is *not* all there is. God finalizes the results of our salvation in a future day, in the future heaven. That hope allows us to face life realistically now, as Margaret does. “However it fareth with his children in this house (or howling wilderness), the time will come, and is at hand, when all the children shall be separate from rebels, and be called home to dwell with their Father, their Head and Husband; and the elect shall be gathered into one. Then farewell sorrow, farewell hard heart! farewell tears and sad repentance!”¹¹ Some today tell us that highlighting salvation as heaven *later* is irrelevant to life *today*. Not only is that historically naïve, it is theologically and practically ignorant. As the Apostle Peter says after discussing our future rewards and judgments, “what kind of people ought you to be?” (2 Peter 3:11).

Confrontation for My Sinning: The Freshness of God’s Goodness and Grace

Margaret also practices the historical art of self-confrontation. Having received God’s healing physically, she cooperates with God’s Spirit in finding ongoing spiritual healing (forgiveness) and growth. Consider this covenant with God that she wrote upon her healing. “I here now renew my covenant with almighty God and resolve by his grace to endeavor to get and keep a fresh sense of his mercy on my soul, and a greater sense yet of my sin; I resolve to set myself against my sin with all my might, and not to take its part or extenuate it or keep the devil’s counsel, as I have done, to the wronging of God and the wounding of my own soul.”¹² Margaret perceives the horrors of her sins—they wrong God and wound her soul. She also recognizes the wonders of God’s grace—it is her fresh sense of goodness that motivates her to eschew evil.

Margaret is a master in the art of devil craft. “Though the tempter be busy to make me think diminutively of this great mercy, yet I must not, but must acknowledge the greatness of it.”¹³

What a concise, precise account of the devil's grand scheme—to con us into thinking diminutively of God's colossal grace.

To her self-reconciling, Margaret adds self-guiding. She applies her theological understanding of her personal relationship to the Trinity to the issue of progressive sanctification. “. . . I am already engaged by the baptismal covenant to God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; and to the Father as my God and chief good and only happiness; and to the Son as my Redeemer, Head, and Husband; and to the Holy Ghost as my Sanctifier and Comforter . . .”¹⁴

What difference does this intimate relationship with the Trinity make as she battles besetting sins?

All creatures . . . had nothing that could satisfy my soul . . . which should teach me to keep my heart loose from the creature and not over-love anything on this side heaven. Why should my heart be fixed where my home is not? Heaven is my home, God in Christ is all my happiness, and where my treasure is, there my heart should be. Come away, O my heart, from vanity; mount heavenward, and be not dead or dull if you would be free from trouble, and taste of real joy and pleasure. . . . O my carnal heart! retire to God, the only satisfying object. There mayest thou love without all danger of excess!¹⁵

Here we see a sample of the enduring Puritan tradition of avoiding over-much-love of the creature by passionately pursuing ever-increasing-love for the Creator, our only Satisfier, and the Lover of our soul.

No wonder the master pastor, Richard Baxter, praised his wife as an artful soul physician.

Yes, I will say that . . . she was better at resolving a case of conscience than most divines that ever I knew in all my life. I often put cases to her which she suddenly resolved as to convince me of some degree of oversight in my own resolution. Insomuch that of late years, I confess, that I was used to put all, save secret cases, to her and hear what she could say. Abundance of difficulties were brought me, some about restitution, some about injuries, some about references, some about vows, some about marriage promises, and many such like; and she would lay all the circumstances presently together, compare them, and give me a more exact resolution than I could do.¹⁶

Under the Power of Melting Grief: Telling the Truth about Tears

We learn not only from Margaret's life, but also from her death. Most of what we know of her we glean from her husband's memorial to her, written one month after her death. Baxter published it as *A Breviate of the Life of Margaret, The Daughter of Francis Charlton, and Wife of Richard Baxter*. Later, John T. Wilkinson reprinted it with the beautiful title *Richard Baxter and Margaret Charlton: A Puritan Love Story*.

Baxter prefaces his memorializing with the candid admission that it was, “. . . written, I confess, under the power of melting grief.”¹⁷ Knowing the likely criticism for such openness, Baxter continues, “. . . and therefore perhaps with the less prudent judgment; but not with the less, but the more truth; for passionate weakness poureth out all, which greater prudence may conceal.”¹⁸ According to Baxter, Christians, of all people, should be the most honest about pain. In our grieving, we should not conceal the truth of tears this side of heaven.

It was not simply the shock and nearness of Margaret's death that left her husband so frank. Years later in his autobiography, Baxter expresses how his wife's death left him “in depth of grief.”¹⁹ Interestingly, the original editor of Baxter's autobiography suppressed this phrase. Fortunately, truer historians have uncovered it—for the benefit of all who dare speak the truth about sorrow.²⁰

Richard Baxter understood the truth that *it's normal to hurt*—even for “full-time Christian workers.” His entire biography of dear Margaret is a tear-stained tribute to the affection they shared and the sadness he endured.

Of course, Baxter also understood the truth that *it's possible to hope*—for all Christians. Listen to his mingled hurt and hope. “She is gone after many of my choice friends, who within this one year are gone to Christ, and I am following even at the door. Had I been to enjoy them

only here, it would have been but a short comfort, mixed with the many troubles which all our failings and sins, and some degree of unsuitableness between the nearest and dearest, cause. But I am going after them to that blessed society where life, light, and love, and therefore, harmony, concord, and joy, are perfect and everlasting.”²¹

Perhaps one reason why we practice denial is our fear that entering our grief might so consume us that we will be overwhelmed with worldly sorrow. Baxter’s Christian experience reminds us that this doesn’t have to be the case. We can look fallen life squarely in the eyes, admit the truth that it is a quagmire of pain and problems, and still live hopefully now *if* we also look *toward* life in our heavenly world to come.

In the last paragraph of his tribute to Margaret, Baxter succinctly combines these two realities. “Therefore in our greatest straits and sufferings, let us comfort one another with these words: *That we shall for ever be with the Lord.*”²² Shakespeare’s Romeo said, “He jests at scars, that never felt a wound.” Baxter might have added, “He fears facing scars who never embraces the truth that by Christ’s wounds we are healed.”

Susannah Wesley: Spiritual Guide Par Excellence

We know of Margaret Baxter because of her famous husband. Susannah Wesley (1669-1742) we know because of her famous sons, John and Charles. Yet both women are wise spiritual guides in their own rights.

Susannah was the youngest daughter of twenty-five children of Dr. Samuel Annesley. A minister living in London, he trained his daughter in biblical and classical languages as well as other arts and sciences. A man ahead of his times, he notes that, “I have often thought it as one of the most barbarous of customs in the world, considering us a civilized and Christian Country, that we deny the advantages of learning to women.”²³

Susannah married Samuel Wesley, a minister in the Church of England, and moved to his rural parish at Epworth. She bore nineteen children, only nine of whom lived to adulthood. Her husband was known to be difficult to get along with because he ruled with an iron hand. As a result, parishioners and townspeople alike disliked the family. At one point he was sent to prison for failure to pay a debt owed to one of his parishioners.²⁴

Of her marriage, Susannah ruefully records, “Since I’m willing to let him quietly enjoy his opinions, he ought not to deprive me of my little liberty of conscience. . . . I think we are not likely to live happily together. . . . It is a misfortune peculiar to our family that he and I seldom think alike.”²⁵

Motherly Spiritual Direction: Theological Depth and Relational Focus

Like many such marriages, their distance resulted in her focusing her feminine gifts on her children. John Wesley requested, in adulthood, a letter from his mother detailing her methodical system of child rearing. On July 24, 1732, she penned such a letter. In it she describes not only her method, but her theology behind her practice. “As self-will is the root of all sin and misery, so whatever cherishes this in children insures their after wretchedness and irreligion; whatever checks and modifies it promotes their future happiness and piety.”²⁶ Therefore, “in order to form the minds of children, the first thing to do is to conquer their will, and bring them to an obedient temper. To inform the understanding is a work of time, and must with children proceed by slow degrees, as they are able to bear it; but the subjecting the will is a thing which must be done at once, and the sooner the better; for by neglecting timely correction, they will contract a stubbornness and obstinacy which are hardly ever after conquered, and never without using such severity as would be as painful to me as to the child.”²⁷ According to Susannah, parental spiritual

discipline eschews the world's esteem which they grant for indulgence. To her, it is only the cruellest parents who permit their children to develop habits they know must be afterward broken.

Though strong in disciplining the will, Susannah equally offers forgiveness and encouragement. "If they amended, they should never be upbraided with it afterward. . . . Every single act of obedience . . . should always be commended, and frequently rewarded. . . . That if ever any child performed an act of obedience, or did anything with an intention to please, though the performance was not well, yet the obedience and intention should be kindly accepted, and the child with sweetness directed how to do better for the future."²⁸

Additionally, her focus on the will in no way suggests that Susannah's parental spiritual guidance minimized the life of the mind. She, rare in her era, taught all of her children to read by age five. More than that, in a letter to her daughter, Susan, Susannah produced a lengthy treatise on parental spiritual instruction. "My tenderest regard is for your immortal soul, and for its spiritual happiness; which regard I cannot better express, than by endeavoring to instill into your mind those principles of knowledge and virtue that are absolutely necessary in order to your leading a good life here, which is the only thing that can infallibly secure your happiness hereafter."²⁹

For Susannah, we should never derive these principles from some amalgamation of self-help tenets. Instead, for her we base all spiritual training on the chief articles of the Christian faith, taking for her ground-work, the Apostles Creed. Having introduced the necessity of laying a solid theological foundation, Susannah then exegetes each phrase of the Creed. Page after page with theological precision, she models the depth of theological training, biblical teaching, and spiritual direction that every Christian mother ought to pass on to her children.³⁰ When

Christians today question the relevance of theological depth, they need to ask and answer the question, “What factors produced the two great church leaders John and Charles Wesley?”

While the first factor was theologically precise teaching, this should not cause us to think that Susannah was content with “head knowledge.” She taught her children that the Creed “briefly comprehended your duty to God, yourself, and your neighbor.”³¹ The purpose of biblical truth is to provide us with a renewed mind that leads to loving God and loving others. As a minister, John wrote to his mother about the definition of love. On May 14, 1727, she responds. “Suffer now a word of advice. However curious you may be in searching into the nature, or in distinguishing the properties, of the passions or virtues of human kind, for your own private satisfaction, be very cautious in giving nice distinctions in public assemblies; for it does not answer the true end of preaching, which is to mend men’s lives, and not fill their heads with unprofitable speculations.”³² Clearly, we need truth—theological truth, but never truth for truth’s sake, but truth for love’s sake.

The first two factors that produced the two great church leaders John and Charles Wesley are theologically precise teaching and truth related to daily life relationships. To these, Susannah models two more parental discipleship methods: spiritual conversations and spiritual narratives. After a fire destroyed their home and dispersed the family until a new home could be found, Susannah wrote to her daughter Sukey on January 13, 1710. “Since our misfortunes have separated us from each other, and we can no longer enjoy the opportunities we once had of conversing together, I can no other way discharge the duty of a parent, or comply with my inclination of doing you all the good I can, but by writing. You know very well how I love you.”³³ What is the duty of a mother? To do all the good for a child she can. How does a mother

fulfill her duty? By lovingly conversing about life in light of God's Word (the content of the rest of her letter).

To spiritual conversations Susannah adds spiritual narratives. On October 11, 1709, she wrote to her son Samuel, saying, "There is nothing I now desire to live for but to do some small service to my children; that as I have brought them into the world, I may, if it please God, be an instrument of doing good to their souls." And how would she provide her soul care ministry? "I had been for several years collecting from my little reading, but chiefly from my own observation and experience, some things which I hoped might be useful to you all. I had begun to collect and form all into a little manual, wherein I designed you should have seen what were the particular reasons which prevailed on me to believe the being of a God, and the grounds of natural religion, together with the motives that induced me to embrace the faith of Jesus Christ, under which was comprehended my own private reasons for the truth of revealed religion."³⁴

What if every mother did the same? What if every mother maintained Susannah's high view of her high calling? A mother can make a great difference if her confidence in God's work in her life leads her to "dare" to produce for her family her "faith history," her "spiritual narrative."

Feminine Spiritual Direction: Doing Something More

To which some may say, "So, from Susannah Wesley we learn that a women's place is in the home?" She is not a good source for that bromide. The preeminent biographer of the Wesley family, Adam Clarke, explains that, "When Mr. Wesley was from home, Mrs. Wesley felt it her duty to keep up the worship of God in her house. She not only prayed for, but with her family. At such times she took the spiritual direction and care of the children and servants on herself; and sometimes even the neighbors shared the benefit of her instructions."³⁵

Clarke provides a lengthier original account as transcribed in a letter by a Dr. Whitehead.

During her husband's absence, Mrs. Wesley felt it her duty, as has been observed, to pay more particular attention to her children, especially on the Lord's day . . . She read prayers to them, and also a sermon, and conversed with them on religious and devotional subjects. Some neighbors happening to come in during these exercises, being permitted to stay, were so pleased and profited as to desire permission to come again. This was granted; a good report of the meeting became general; many requested leave to attend, and the house was soon filled more than two hundred at last attending; and many were obliged to go away for want of room.³⁶

Now, lest we think Susannah faced no opposition, it is important to recognize that when she told her husband, he approved of "her zeal and good sense," but objected to the continuance of the meetings because it would look "peculiar," because of her gender, and because of his position as pastor.³⁷ She replied in a letter dated February 6, 1712.

To the objection that it looked peculiar, she responds that is only "because in our corrupt age the utmost care and diligence have been used to banish all discourse of God or spiritual concerns out of society, as if religion were never to appear out of the closet, and we were to be ashamed of nothing so much as professing ourselves to be Christians."³⁸ Susannah further observes that the problem is that people only want to hear from the pulpit and not in "common conversation" anything that is "serious, or that may any way advance the glory of God or the salvation of souls."³⁹

To the objection of her gender, she counters, "That as I am a woman, so I am also mistress of a large family. And though the superior charge of the souls contained in it lies upon you, as head of the family, and as their minister; yet in your absence I cannot but look upon every soul you leave under my care as a talent committed to me, under a trust, by the great Lord of all the families of heaven and earth."⁴⁰ While her thinking may not satisfy combatants on either side of the modern dispute about the "role of women in ministry," her wisdom in navigating the culture of the day is commendable. Susannah understood that ultimately she was answerable to God.

“And if I am unfaithful to him, or to you, in neglecting to improve these talents, how shall I answer unto him when he shall commend me to render an account of my stewardship?”⁴¹

Susannah continues in her letter by explaining to her husband that she had recently read a book about missionaries that inspired her zeal so that she prayed that “I might do something more than I do.”⁴² This prayer surely resonates with many of the women studied in *Sacred Friendships*. Out of their enforced voicelessness due to societal norms, they, like many women today, longed to “do something more than I do.” Susannah further clarifies that she then resolved to start “doing more” *with her family*. “I take such a proportion of time as I can best spare every night to discourse with each child by itself, on something that relates to its principal concerns. On Monday I talk with Molly; on Tuesday with Hetty; Wednesday with Nancy; Thursday with Jacky; Friday with Patty; Saturday with Charles; and with Emily and Sukey together, on Sunday.”⁴³

Then, “something more” mushroomed. “With those few neighbors who then came to me I discoursed more freely and affectionately than before. I chose the best and most awakening sermons we had, and I spent more times with them in such exercises. Since this our company has increased every night, for I dare deny none that ask admittance. Last Sunday, I believe we had above two hundred, and yet many went away for want of room.”⁴⁴ The explosive results were exceedingly, abundantly above all that Susannah could ask or imagine. “But I never durst positively presume to hope that God would make use of me as an instrument in doing good; the furthest I durst go was, It may be: who can tell? With God all things are possible.”⁴⁵

As to his third objection that her ministry reflected poorly on him, she answers, “Therefore, why any should reflect upon you . . . because your wife endeavors to draw people to the church, and to restrain them, by reading and other persuasions, from their profanation of God’s most

holy day, I cannot conceive. But if any should be so mad as to do it, I wish you would not regard it. For my part, I value no censure on this account. I have long since shook hands with the world, and I heartily wish I had never given them more reason to speak against me.”⁴⁶ We see in her words a mild rebuke for her husband’s fear of what people think.

Mr. Wesley “felt the power and the wisdom by which she spoke, and cordially gave his approbation to her conduct.”⁴⁷ Though he gave his blessing for her to continue, others complained to him. He then wrote again to Susannah desiring her to discontinue the meetings. On February 25, 1712, she wrote back. She now replaces her previously gentle admonishment with more forceful words. “I shall not inquire how it was possible that you should be prevailed on by the senseless clamors of two or three of the worst of your parish, to condemn what you so lately approved.”⁴⁸

She then outlines the illogic, the mistaken theology, the false guilt by false association, the jealousy, and the false labeling behind the few objectors, while also noting that the vast majority in the congregation not only approved, but benefited from the meetings. In summary, she says to her husband, “Now, I beseech you, weigh all these things in an impartial balance: on the one side, the honor of almighty God, the doing much good to many souls, and the friendship of the best among whom we live; on the other, (if folly, impiety, and vanity may abide in the scale against so ponderous a weight,) the senseless objections of a few scandalous persons, laughing at us, and censuring us as precise and hypocritical; and when you have duly considered all things, let me have your positive determination.”⁴⁹

Humbly bold to the end, she concludes with this forceful request. “If you do, after all, think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience; but send me your positive command, in such full and express terms as may absolve

me from all guilt and punishment, for neglecting this opportunity of doing good, when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our LORD JESUS CHRIST.”⁵⁰

Dr. Whitehead summarizes the entire account. “Though I find no further record of these transactions, yet I take it for granted that this letter was decisive, and Mrs. Wesley’s meetings continued till her husband returned to Epworth.”⁵¹

As Richard Baxter praised his wife as a skilled soul physician, so Adam Clarke in his biography, acclaimed Susannah Wesley as an expert spiritual director. “The good sense, piety, observation, and experience of Mrs. Wesley, qualified her to be a wise counselor in almost every affair in life, and a sound spiritual director in most things that concerned the salvation of the soul. Her sons, while at Oxford, continued to profit by her advices and directions, as they had done while more immediately under her care.”⁵²

Soul Care in Life and in Death: On the Borders of Eternity

We would be mistaken to assume that Susannah Wesley provided spiritual direction without commensurate soul care. True, in her humility and honesty, she felt at times unfit to offer sustaining and healing counsel. John Wesley wrote his mother concerning affliction and the best method of profiting from it. On July 26, 1727, she responds, “It is certainly true that I have had large experience of what the world calls adverse fortune. But I have not made those improvements in piety and virtue, under the discipline of Providence, that I ought to have done; therefore I humbly conceive myself to be unfit for an assistant to another in affliction, since I have so ill performed my own duty.”⁵³ Though perhaps overly self-deprecating, her words do remind us of the truth that the best preparation for soul care is taking our own soul care issues to the great Soul Physicians.

That Susannah was overly deferential about her soul care abilities is easy to discern given the records we have of her care for hurting people. When an unnamed female friend was afflicted in body and depressed in spirit, Susannah describes to another female acquaintance how she empathized with her. “I heartily sympathize with the young lady in her affliction, and wish it was in my power to speak a word in season, that might alleviate the trouble of her mind, which has such an influence on the weakness of her body.”⁵⁴

Of course, Susannah realizes that human comfort only carries so much weight. So she points this sufferer to her caring Savior. “It is with relation to our manifold wants and weaknesses, and the discouragements and despondencies consequent thereupon, that the blessed Jesus hath undertaken to be our great high priest, physician, advocate, and Saviour. . . . His deep compassion supposes our misery; and his assistance, and the supplies of his grace, imply our wants, and the disadvantages we labor under.”⁵⁵

After sustaining this hurting young women by helping her to see that her illness is normal and not due to her sin, Susannah then shares healing care by persuading her to see Christ goodness. “And here, madam, let me beseech you to join with me in admiring and adoring the infinite and incomprehensible love of God to fallen man, which he hath been pleased to manifest to us in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁵⁶ Understanding that there are no spiritual quick fixes, including in spiritual conversations, she invites ongoing connection. “I shall be very glad to hear often from you.”⁵⁷ Given her many duties in the home and in her neighborhood ministry, it is remarkable what an open heart Susannah demonstrates.

To her son, Charles, who had been struggling with his faith, she writes empathetically on October 19, 1738, “It is with much pleasure I find your mind somewhat easier than formerly, and

I heartily thank God for it. The spirit of man may sustain his infirmity,—but a wounded spirit who can bear? If this hath been your case, it has been sad indeed.”⁵⁸

Humble as she was, Susannah could receive soul care just as easily as she dispensed it. Writing to Charles on December 27, 1739, she shares about a recent visit from his brother, John. “You cannot more desire to see me, than I do to see you. Your brother . . . has just been with me, and much revived my spirit. Indeed, I have often found that he never speaks in my hearing without my receiving some spiritual benefit.”⁵⁹ She increases her vulnerable openness when she admits, “But, my dear Charles, still I want either him or you; for indeed, in the most literal sense, I am become a little child, and want continual succor. ‘As iron sharpeneth iron, so doth the countenance of a man his friend.’ I feel much comfort and support from religious conversation when I can obtain it.”⁶⁰

She could equally accept care from non-family members. “I have been prevented from finishing my letter. I complained I had none to converse with me on spiritual things; but for these several days I have had the conversation of many good Christians, who have refreshed in some measure my fainting spirits.”⁶¹

Perhaps there is no life event where soul care is more necessary than the end of life. John gives the following account of his mother’s last moments as she began her ascent to heaven. “I left Bristol on the evening of Sunday, July 18, 1742, and on Tuesday came to London. I found my mother on the borders of eternity; but she had no doubts nor fear, nor any desire but as soon as God should call, ‘to depart and be with Christ.’”⁶² How we live on the borders of eternity says much about how we have lived up to that point. It also speaks either comfort or despair to our loved ones.

On Sunday, August 1, 1742, John writes of his mother's funeral and shares Susannah's grave inscription.

Here lies the body of Mrs. Susannah Wesley,
the youngest and last surviving daughter of Dr. Samuel Annesley.

In sure and steadfast hope to rise
And claim her mansion in the skies,
A Christian here her flesh laid down
The cross exchanging for a crown.

True daughter of affliction, she,
Inured to pain and misery,
Mourn'd a long night of griefs and fears,
A legal night of seventy years:

The Father then reveal'd his Son,
Him in the broken bread made known;
She knew and felt her sins forgiven,
And found the earnest of her heaven.

Meet for the fellowship above,
She heard the call, 'Arise, my love,'
'I come,' her dying looks replied,
And lamblike, as her Lord, she died.⁶³

Susannah Wesley could die "lamblike" and could die granting comfort to her mourning children because of her conviction that God is our supreme good. Seven years before her death, on November 27, 1735, a few months after her husband's death, she shares that experiential truth with John. "God is Being itself! The I AM! And therefore must necessarily be the supreme Good! He is so infinitely blessed, that every perception of his blissful presence imparts a vital gladness to the heart. Every degree of approach toward him is, in the same proportion, a degree of happiness."⁶⁴ In this last letter she ever penned, she offers spiritual consolation based upon spiritual communion with God. Truly this was a fitting legacy to her life.

Listening to the Silenced Voices

When we listen to the silenced voices of wise spiritual guides like Margaret Baxter and Susannah Wesley, we hear the message of feminine empowerment. Margaret, by her temperament, never seemed destined to powerfully influence others. Susannah, by her marriage to a husband who ruled like a despot, never seemed likely to be a leader on the spiritual care journey. And neither woman lived in a cultural era that encouraged their spiritual propensities to flourish.

Yet, flourish they did. Why? The unique common denominator linking Margaret and Susannah was *their conviction that God was their total happiness and their supreme good.*

While they at times struggled with self-doubt and were doubted by others, their faith in God's loveliness and in His love for them empowered them to live loving lives in an unloving world. Because they refused to diminish God's infinite beauty, they lived beautiful lives in an ugly world.

Learning Together from Our Great Cloud of Witnesses

1. Compare and contrast Margaret Baxter and Susannah Wesley.
 - a. How are they different in theology? Similar in theology?
 - b. How are they different in practice? Similar in practice?
2. What would it be like:
 - a. To have Margaret as your soul care-giver and spiritual director?
 - b. To have Susannah as your soul care-giver and spiritual director?
3. From Margaret's life, what principles can we draw for overcoming scrupulosity and melancholy?
4. Margaret's biblical sufferology highlighted the relevance *today* of our *future* heavenly hope. What do we lose in biblical counseling if we forget to *remember the future*?
5. Margaret exposes the devil's grand scheme to con us into thinking diminutively of God's colossal grace. How can knowing this plot influence how we live and minister?
6. Richard Baxter told the truth about tears. When you are under the power of melting grief, how do you typically respond? What can you learn from Richard's candor over Margaret's death?
7. Susannah's parental spiritual guidance blended theological depth *and* relational focus. How would our parental discipleship counseling change if we shared her balance?
8. Susannah crafted a personal faith history/spiritual narrative that traced and defended why she believed in Christ.
 - a. What is your personal narrative of faith in Christ?
 - b. Will you dare to produce and share your personal spiritual narrative? Why or why not?
9. Susannah also dared to "do something more." What "more" is God calling you to do? When, where, and how will you begin?
10. Margaret and Susannah shared the conviction that *God was their total happiness and their supreme good*. This empowered them to live beautiful, loving lives in an ugly, unloving world. How are you developing and applying the conviction that *God is your total happiness and supreme good*?

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- ¹Packer, *A Grief Sanctified*, 149.
²Packer, 76.
³Packer, p. 21.
⁴*Ibid.*, 22.
⁵*Ibid.*, 47.
⁶*Ibid.*
⁷*Ibid.*, 101.
⁸*Ibid.*, 67.
⁹*Ibid.*
¹⁰*Ibid.*, 70.
¹¹*Ibid.*, 76.
¹²*Ibid.*, 69.
¹³*Ibid.*, 70.
¹⁴*Ibid.*
¹⁵*Ibid.*, 71-72.
¹⁶*Ibid.*, 118-119.
¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 56.
¹⁸*Ibid.*
¹⁹*Ibid.*, 13
²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 197.
²¹*Ibid.*, p. 57.
²²*Ibid.*, p. 149.
²³Wallace, "Susanna Wesley's Spirituality," 163.
²⁴Tucker, *Private Lives of Pastors' Wives*, 53.
²⁵Peterson, *25 Surprising Marriages*, 253.
²⁶Clarke, *Memoirs of the Wesley Family*, 327.
²⁷*Ibid.*, 326.
²⁸*Ibid.*, 329.
²⁹*Ibid.*, 347.
³⁰*Ibid.*, 347-376
³¹*Ibid.*, 347.
³²*Ibid.*, 337.
³³*Ibid.*, 347.
³⁴*Ibid.*, 342-343.
³⁵*Ibid.*, 385.
³⁶*Ibid.*, 386.
³⁷*Ibid.*, 387.
³⁸*Ibid.*
³⁹*Ibid.*
⁴⁰*Ibid.*
⁴¹*Ibid.*
⁴²*Ibid.*, 388.
⁴³*Ibid.*
⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 389.
⁴⁵*Ibid.*
⁴⁶*Ibid.*
⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 390.
⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 391.
⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 392.
⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 393.
⁵¹*Ibid.*
⁵²*Ibid.*, 394.
⁵³*Ibid.*, 337.
⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 397.
⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 397-398.

⁵⁶Ibid., 398.

⁵⁷Ibid., 399.

⁵⁸Ibid., 406.

⁵⁹Ibid., 409.

⁶⁰Ibid., 408.

⁶¹Ibid., 409.

⁶²Ibid., 413.

⁶³Ibid., 414.

⁶⁴Ibid., 341-342.