

WHAT IS A WOMAN?

A Devotional Meditation on Tazria (She Conceives)

Leviticus 12:1-13:59; 2 Kings 4:42-5:19; Genesis 1:26-28, 2:18-24;
Matthew 19:3-9, 22:23-32; Hebrews 11:6; James 2:18-26; 1 John 1:5-12

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Not that long ago, an American government official was asked in a public hearing if she could provide a definition for the word, “woman.” The context was political, and the question was valid, but I wonder whether it was fair.*

What is a woman? I remember when such a question might be asked in a romantic song or poem, but never in a public forum intended to make a political point about the parameters of judicial decisions. That was when no one ever thought to question the established fact of nature that human beings are either male or female. Now we live in a time when everything is questioned, and boundaries are blurred. It’s not that nature or nature’s God have changed, but we as a global society are now in a place where we must reassess what is true.

This process will conclude with reaffirmation of what our Creator established, but it may take a while. Before we get to that point, the multitudes now in the valley of decision will have to learn that attempts to operate outside our Creator’s established order end in suffering. Those who seek peace and freedom by choosing their own realities will find only grief and sorrow from the consequences of their choices.

I say this with confidence because I’m old enough to have learned a bit about our human story. There is nothing new under the sun. Societies that cast off all restraint eventually collapse under their own weight. That’s because casting off restraint not only means removing that which deters people from doing whatever they want, but also cutting themselves off from that which sustains and supports them.

It is God Who sustains and supports us all, of course, whether we believe in Him or not. Belief in a Creator is the first step toward rightly understanding our existence, but only the first step. Even the demons believe there is a Creator, but that won’t help them



Colombian Dentist Liliانا Patricia Gutierrez Freyle and Darfurian cleaner Hawa Awadallah. (Photo: UNAMID - Albert Gonzalez Farran, El Fasher, Darfur, Sudan February 4, 2010, [via Flickr.](#))

* Senator Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) asked that question of Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson on March 22, 2022, during the Senate’s hearing on her nomination to the Supreme Court. The full context of Sen. Blackburn’s questions and Justice Brown Jackson’s responses is available on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/ed0nWrtXr-A?si=sxx763B5KQymw7E1>.

when the final judgment comes. They chose long ago to go their own way in defiance of the One Who made them. We risk the same outcome as long as we disregard our Creator's instructions, no matter how strongly we affirm our belief in Him.

So then, what does our Creator have to say about the essential nature of human beings? How would He define "woman"?

We could go straight to the beginning of God's Book and say that woman is the helper of man. That's too simple, though. The relegation of women to secondary status behind men has been a fundamental problem of humanity for our entire existence. The two are created to be complementary. In a sense, man and woman are incomplete until they come together as one flesh in holy matrimony. That's the ideal for fulfilling the first commandment God gave to our first ancestors:

God created humankind in His image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them. God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the land, and conquer it. Rule over the fish of the sea, the flying creatures of the sky, and over every animal that crawls on the land."

Genesis 1:27-28 TLV

Why do we exist? Not to be gods over our own worlds, but to be like God by doing what He does within the boundaries of what He has given us. We are to have dominion over this earth, taking care of the fish, the birds, the animals, and the environment. It's a massive undertaking, and it requires multitudes of human beings to do it. That's why the first thing our God said was, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the land."

This is where we begin to understand that our Creator is all about life. He is, after the God of the living, not of the dead. That's why He made human beings as living creatures with the capacity to create more living creatures. We can't do it by ourselves. It happens only when male and female humans come together to reenact the holy moment of creation in which God breathed our species into existence.

Now we get to the basic definition of woman: the being that comes closest to doing what God does by making new life.

The man provides the seed, but it's the woman who conceives the new life, incubates it into a human being, and brings it forth into the world. It's a holy function that no man can duplicate.

This holy function of bearing children follows the pattern of creation. God worked for six days to make the world, and then both He and creation rested. That precious time on the seventh day was itself a created space in which the Creator and the creation bonded and grew accustomed to each other. The exertion of creating may not have impacted our all-powerful Creator, but His creation needed to recover, and the seventh day Shabbat provided that opportunity.

This is the pattern that comes to mind when we see God's commandment that a woman who gives birth must remain in seclusion for 33 days after delivering a boy, and 66 days after delivering a girl. She is unclean, to use the Levitical term, and must present the required offerings for her purification when the seclusion is finished. That doesn't mean she is somehow in sin, but that she is ritually impure, having just gone through the

messy business of procreation. It's messy because it involves water and blood, and those, along with the Spirit of God, testify of life.

We may ask why there are different periods of seclusion for male and female infants. It's twice as long for a girl because she, like her mother, will be the bearer of seed one day. The boy, on the other hand, is circumcised because he bears the sign of God's covenant with the nation He created to be the vehicle of redemption for all nations.

This kind of reasoning isn't popular these days, when intelligent people have trouble defining what a woman is. That's because we have ceased thinking as communal custodians of life, and think instead about what pleasure or advantage we can grasp. Holy matrimony is an unnecessary encumbrance when all we desire is a few moments of sexual pleasure, or domination. Under such circumstances, the creation of new life ceases to be a joyous – if difficult – labor of love, and is instead considered a life-threatening burden. Instead of emulating our Creator and honoring Him by choosing life, we shun Him in hope that He does not see the cheapening of His gifts.

This is painful to think about, especially since I have friends who are unable to meet this basic definition of woman. Yet, they still emulate the Creator because they bring life in other ways. It is their choice: they can withdraw into a cocoon of grief, self-pity, hedonism, or some combination thereof, or they can find ways to uplift those around them. That's how the gift of life manifests from their hearts, and they live out the definition of woman in wondrous ways that make the world a better place.