

Motherly Wisdom: Katherine Haldane's Example of Investing in Things Eternal

[The following biography is the edited manuscript from a Mother's Day sermon preached at Calvary Baptist Church (Seymour, Indiana) by David Schrock]

I wonder if you heard the news that the producers of *Fireproof* and *Courageous* acquired the rights to *Pirates of the Caribbean*. This move might be a little surprising given the family-friendly nature of their previous movies, but Sherwood Baptist Church thinks they can pull off a pirate movie on the basis of their redemptive plot.

Here how it is set to go:

Basically, the first part of the movie will introduce Jack Sparrow—who may or may not be played by Johnny Depp—doing what pirates do.

But it will also show a more pensive Sparrow considering the value of his piracy. It will reflect back to a time in his life when his mother used to cradle him, sing him hymns, and tell him Bible stories.

This is the beginning of Jack's incredible conversion, where in time this lawless captain of the sea becomes a traveling evangelist who fights pirates and even wins many of them to faith in Christ.

In time for next Mother's Day, this tall tale of the sea should be coming to a theater near you—*Pirates of the Caribbean: The Pearl of Great Price*.

Sounds good doesn't it.

Too bad the rights to *Pirates of the Caribbean* still reside in the hands of Walt Disney and Sherwood Baptist church has no intention of producing a movie with pirates. Though maybe they should!

The story however is not without historical precedence. It is not that of a pirate named Jack who became an evangelist, but a British ship's captain named James Haldane whose conversion launched into a half-century's worth of evangelism around the country of Scotland. Along the way, this naval hero did battle villains, he tamed the seas, and he saw literally thousands of people come to faith under his preaching. (See the captivating biography of his life: [*Lives of Robert and James Haldane*](#))

This brief historical sketch is about his life. Or more precisely, it is about his mother, who in 6 years impacted his life for eternity. Indeed, like the fictitious conversion of Jack Sparrow, James Haldane's conversion came later in life as he sailed the seas and captained a vessel in the Royal Navy. But the seeds of the gospel were sown decades earlier, as Katherine Haldane imparted the gospel to the two boys God gave her.

The Life of James Haldane

James Haldane was born on July 14, 1768—two weeks after his father had died. He was the second son of James and Katherine. James family was a wealthy, influential family in Scotland. His father had inherited an estate and improved his wealth through captaining a ship.

Upon adolescence, James and his older brother Robert, went to boarding school and by their mid-twenties famed for their bravery and naval skill. They were on the fast track to success and acclaim. Yet as a budding naval officer, there was no fruit of faith, no concern for God, God’s word, or his own soul.

James Haldane’s son Alexander puts it this way:

By 1793 (age 25), “there was nothing in their religious character that distinguished them from the great majority of their friends and associates, who were living in the discharge of what they regarded as their social duties. They were at least as moral and correct in their deportment as their neighbors, but in other respects without any concern about Christ or eternity.”

But this was all going to change. As Haldane captained his ship, he began to read the Bible. The Spirit of God was drawing him to faith. As the word of truth turned his mind towards eternity, God sunk his love for the sea and replaced it with a love for the Lord. By 1794 he was converted. Two years later he had abandoned his lucrative career as a captain. And by 1797, he travelled the whole country of Scotland preaching the gospel.

His conversion story is powerful, but you need to know the darkness of Scotland to fully appreciate it. God called Haldane to serve in what some have called ‘the midnight of the Church of Scotland.’ Moderate preaching abounded. The doctrines of grace were replaced with law. Missionary efforts were resisted; itinerant evangelism despised—by the church! As 1 Timothy 4:5 puts it: *It was a day of much religion and little power.*

But with James Haldane, all that was going to change. In 1797, James Haldane and John Aikman struck out for northern Scotland, where they preached 300 sermons, addressed over 200,000 people, and handed out 20,000 tracts. For the next nine years (1797-1806), they ventured to preach the gospel all over Scotland.

Haldane only stopped going on such missions because his pastoral labors had increased to a point where he needed to focus on the labors in Edinburgh. In that city, he labored for 52 years, serving as a Baptist pastor at the Circus Tabernacle. During those years, Haldane gained a reputation as a friend of sinners and those in need. He delighted to take the gospel to individuals, even as he preached to thousands every week—one reporter said of Haldane, what would later be said of Spurgeon, “numbers were awakened or converted by almost every sermon.”

On top of this, for all five decades of his ministry, Haldane never took a salary. He lived off family’s wealth such that he could labor to give away his possessions. These are just the

facts and numbers. The personal anecdotes are even more amazing! Still, the question arises: What's makes a man like this? The answer is clear. God does. And yet God also uses means. And just like the great men of the Bible, Samuel and Timothy, God used a mother to impact James and in his brother Robert in incredible ways. It is to her life that we now turn. And from her life, I would like to suggest five lessons.

Five Lessons Learned from Her Life

1. Give your Children Wisdom for Salvation.

There is no greater gift you can give your children than the priceless, precious word of God. For in the word of God, there is wisdom for salvation. Paul commends the mother of Timothy for introducing her son to the word of God, saying that 'the sacred writings . . . are able to make you wise for salvation' (2 Tim 3:15).

Likewise, in Psalm 90:12, Moses prays that God would "teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." Indeed, godly mothers (and fathers) know the value of God's word and they prioritize God's word as the single greatest thing they can give their children.

Katherine Haldane is a great example of this. Listen to the words of her grandson.

When left a widow, it became [Katherine's] chief concern to bring up her children in 'the nurture and admonition of the Lord.' From their infancy she labored to instill into their minds a sense of the importance of eternity, particularly impressing upon them the necessity of prayer, and teaching them to commit memory and understand psalms, portions of the Shorter Catechism, and of Scripture (13)

Without a husband at home, Katherine was the spiritual caretaker of Robert and James. She had no training in the Bible. She probably felt greatly overwhelmed by the task, but decades later her boys remember that she impressed upon them the necessity of prayer and need to memorize Scripture. She would recite the Westminster Shorter Catechism with them and teach them the truths of the gospel—God's love, man's sin, Christ's atonement, eternal life for those who believe, eternal death for those who refuse.

You might ask, "What sort of impact did this have upon children of such young age?"

Found in James memoirs, he writes, "Her instructions . . . were so far useful, that even when she was not present I was made conscience of prayer. What she said concerning sin and judgment also produced a considerable impression on my mind. I was desirous of avoiding sin, yet frequently committed those sins to which children are particularly exposed."

This godly woman leaned heavily on the Scriptures. As a single mom, she was unable to do much. So, she found wisdom in the word of God and labored to put this before her boys.

You can only imagine the helplessness that Katherine felt, raising two energetic, unregenerate boys. There was not TV to put them in front of. No father was there to discipline them. The Boys and Girls Club had not been invented. No preschools.

Katherine must have felt helpless. Yet, she centered her life and her home around the Word of God, and God marvelously blessed. She is a living testimony to 1 Samuel 2:30: *Those who honor me I will honor; those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.*

Don't despise the word of God. Sow to the Spirit with the Word of God and await the harvest that will come. Plant your children in the Word and the Word in your children. Those who wait for the Lord will not be despised! This is true for current parents, single moms, grandparents, and foster parents. God's word never returns void. When sown liberally in faith, it produces bountifully.

2. Labor to Set Eternity in their Mind

Twice in Psalm 90, Moses speaks of eternal things. In verse 13, his eyes are on the Lord's return. He says, "Return, O LORD How long? Have pity on your servants!" His eyes are on the horizon. He is not trapped in his present circumstances. He is looking to the future return of his God. Then, in verse 15, his heart displays an unusual trust in the Lord's goodness and willingness to correct all that has gone wrong. He prays, "Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil." Moses has the long view in mind.

Too often, we crack under the pressure of TODAY because we are expecting immediate change. When we remember that God is working from eternity to eternity, it liberates us to let God work. He never puts to shame those who wait for him (Ps 25:3), therefore we need (to learn) to live with an eternal perspective. Katherine did this. And not only did she live with eternity in mind, she labored to set eternity in the mind of her boys.

The key word here is labor. As mentioned above, Katherine "labored to instill into [Robert and James] a sense of the importance of eternity." She did this with little boys who on the basis of our two little boys (ages 2 and 4) seemed often to be uninterested in eternal things. Yet, she persevered. Even as her boys grappled to understand the material world, she pointed to an invisible, eternal kingdom. There is much to learn from her zeal for eternity.

Mother's do you labor at impressing your children with eternity? You surely labor at something. Many things. The question is: Do you labor to impress the things of God on your children?

I pray you do. Only those things given to Christ will outlast this world. As another eminent saint from the United Kingdom once said, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last" (C. T. Studd). This reality can never be emphasized enough: only what is given to you *and* returned to Him will reach the golden shores of eternity.

It may seem hard now, but these trying days of motherhood will quickly pass. Don't waste it! Labor to set eternity on your child(ren)'s mind. Yet, even as your labor, do not worry.

Labor but do not lose sleep. Perspire but do not panic. The seed's are His, the field His, the outcome His. Again, Katherine models this labor and this trust, which brings us to the third lesson from her life.

3. Exhibit a Cheerful trust in the Lord

Psalm 90 speaks of this trust in verse 14, when Moses prays, "Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days."

The fight of faith is a fight for joy. Those who finish the race with faith in their heart are those who find daily joy in the Lord. Indeed, the circumstances of life will steal your joy. Your only hope is the Lord whose mercies are new every morning. Moses prays for God to satisfy his people, and so should we. This day and every day, you need the joy of the Lord to satisfy you!

Katherine's hard life exhibits the life-sustaining love of the Lord. Though she enjoyed the privilege of being in what we might call the 'upper class,' she endured the pain of losing a child at birth, a daughter between Robert and James. She was widowed 2 weeks before James was born. Yet, her demeanor did not take on a bitter tone. She was a cheerful woman who trusted deeply in God. This was her enduring legacy: "The instructions of this devoted mother were not weakened or counteracted, as often happens, by apparent inconsistency.

The power of her influence was the example of her life. You can speak all the biblical truth in the world, but if it is counteracted by your life, your children will spit the Bible out of their mouths. And the more of the Bible they know, the more they will have to spit out. As Alexander Haldane recorded, "Her life was a life of practical godliness and of cheerful trust in the Saviour." He continues,

"Often when she had seen her children in bed, and supposed that they were asleep, she was overheard by them, and particularly by her elder son [Robert], on her knees by their bed-side, earnestly praying that the Lord would be pleased to guide them through that world which she felt that she was herself soon to leave; that their lives might be devoted to His service upon earth; and finally, that they might be brought to His everlasting Kingdom."

Katherine deeply trusted the Lord. And daily her trust took her to the throne of grace on behalf of her children. Indeed, even as she surely felt weakness and uncertainty—requisite emotions for any single mother—God renewed her faith as she took to him in prayer.

Had she lived to see her boys grow up, it is certain that she would have had even more pain and sorrow, before rejoicing in their conversion and ministerial calling. Both lived worldly lives until their mid-twenties. They were not outlaws. They were rather successful in their affairs. Nevertheless, she did not pray for her children's moral fitness or occupational safety. She prayed for God to save them and use them for his kingdom. Until they were secured in his love, her heart would have bled for their sins to be covered by Christ's blood.

Again, mothers (and fathers) must learn to do the same. We must trust deeply in the Lord of grace who desires all men to come to the knowledge of the Lord. Mothers pray for your children with passion, and then live with cheerful trust that your Father in heaven will be merciful to the children that you bring to throne of grace.

4. Surrender Your Children into His Hands. Then do it again.

Wise mothers know that God is a far better parent than they are. This is both true in his providence and in his aspirations for his children. Therefore, wise mother's must, like Hannah, give their children to the Lord so that he would do in them what they could never for them.

Psalm 90 affirms this surrender. It reminds us that all 'good things' come from his merciful providence. Verse 17 reads, "Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us and establish the work of our hands upon, yes establish the work of our hands."

This verse is vital for moms and dads, managers and doctors. Nothing that we do with our hands will come to fruition unless the Lord confirms it. The watchman can watch the city, but he cannot protect it without the Lord. Mom's you can give your children 6 decades of devotion and it can come back empty . . . but nothing given to the Lord returns void.

You must, like Psalm 90:17, repeatedly surrender your children to God. Katherine did this and it gave her great peace as she approached her own death.

Apparently, Katherine knew that her life was slipping away. In the final days of her life, she was asked if she would like to see her children one more time. Alexander Haldane, her grandson, records,

Shortly before she expired she was asked if she would like once more to see her children but she declined, saying that it would only agitate her; that she had been enabled implicitly to surrender them into the hands of God, and she would rather leave them there. Her faith was strong, not only for herself, but for [Robert and James]; and that faith was not disappointed.

Katherine was able to give them to God *because* they were already in his hands. She was not trying to cling to them. She prayed and labored that they might in time cling to Jesus.

In this dying hour, her faith rested with her Creator and Redeemer, and thus she once and for all entrusted James and Robert to the Lord. Even as she was received into her Lord's presence, she trusted that her Lord would care for her children. Might we have the same confidence with our children.

5. Sacrifice everything at a young age to ensure godly teaching

This last point encapsulates everything that has been said so far. And really, for parents, it should be the mantra of our lives. Christian parents are gifts to unregenerate children. If you are a Christian, you have been given to your children to live before them the grace and

truth that we have found in the gospel.

We should do this when they are too young to talk; we should do this when we are old and gray and they are struggling to raise children of their own. Parents never stop parenting, and since parenting is meant to reflect God's own Paternal love, we must sacrifice in order to express the love of God to our children.

This is the enduring legacy that Katherine etched on the mind of her young son. James Haldane describes his mother:

My mother died when I was very young, I believe under [the age of] six, yet I am convinced that the early impression made on my mind by her care was never entirely effaced; and to this, as an eminent means in the hands of God, I impute any serious thoughts which, in the midst of my folly, would sometimes intrude upon my mind, as well as that still small voice of conscience, which afterwards led me to see that all below was vanity without an interest in that inheritance which can never fade away."

Clearly, Haldane did not 'know' his mother, but he knew her mother's God. Therefore, as Haldane reflected on his mother's life, he urges Christian parents to invest God's truth into the lives of their children. He remarks,

I mention this more particularly, because it may lead many Christian parents to sow in hope the seed of Divine truth in the minds of their children, and may prevent their considering their efforts unavailing even where the things which they have taught seem to have been uttered in vain. No means of grace is, I apprehended, more, perhaps none is so much, countenanced of God as early religious instruction."

His point is not hard to miss. Since life is short, stop at nothing to impress upon your children the eternal things of God. As we have enumerate here:

1. Be steadfast in the Word.
2. Be constant in prayer.
3. Walk in cheerful trust in the sovereign grace of God.
4. Surrender your children to God.
5. Sacrifice anything that would inhibit them from beholding the beauty of the gospel.

These five things were evident in Katherine Haldane's short life and by God's grace they can be evident in your life. The key though is God's grace. As we hear her biography, we must remember these fruits of faith arise from the grace given to her in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Don't miss this. Katherine was not a wise woman that God decided to bless because of her unique wisdom. She was not a godly woman who merited grace.

She was helpless sinner. One that God took the initiative to love, save, and equip with wisdom so that she would have eternal joy in the two boys who she barely knew on her, but whom she would forever know in heaven. In this way, her life, like every Christian's, is a testimony to the grace of God. Therefore, we close with a word about that grace.

The Grace of God in Katherine's Life

According to Robert Haldane, Katherine “lived very near to God, and much grace was given to her.” While only a short sentence, the truth is profound. It explains the source of her strength and hope.

Her passion for the word did not merit God's favor. Her prayer life did not pull down God's grace. Her sacrifices did not earn her children's fruitful lives. Her singular focus on eternity did not secure her eternal life. In short, it was God's grace that fueled her faithfulness.

This is good news. God is not looking for wise moms; he is looking for worn out moms. He is not looking for strong mothers that he can support; he is looking for weak mothers that he can save. He did that for Katherine. He can do it for you!

Today we must not look at Katherine's life and think “Wow! What a great mom!” We must instead think, “Wow! What a gracious God!”

Anything impressive about Katherine's life comes from God himself and is thus available to you today, if you look to him! This is the beauty of the gospel: God supplies all that He demands.

He calls you to love with patience, teach with wisdom, pray with zeal, and mother with affection. Yet, in all cases, the Father gives you his love, the Spirit supplies his wisdom, and the Son prays for you to become a vessel of grace.

This is the remarkable thing about Katherine's life, it wasn't remarkable. No movie will be made about it. Hollywood will not laud this single mother. But God has a different perspective. In the annals of redemptive history, Katherine shines with his glory. And on the final day, she will receive the commendation: “Well done, my good and faithful daughter.”

A Final Invitation

I wonder how many women today are tempted to believe the lie that their value comes from their looks, their weight, or their career. It doesn't. Such temporary achievements can vanish in an instant.

Feminine beauty and worth is never based upon what Hollywood glamorizes. Self worth is always based on what God says. And he says that any who come to him in weakness will find grace in their hour of need. It is this grace that will sustain the single mom, the mother with six children, or the barren widow.

God's grace is sufficient. It was for Katherine Haldane. It can be for you! Come to Christ and find grace to pardon your past and grace to empower your future. This is true wisdom, wisdom freely given to all who come to God in faith.