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Faith, Family, and Forbearance

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Faith, Family, and Forbearance

In her work entitled *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682), Mary Rowlandson of the Massachusetts Bay Colony describes her experience of being captured and kept prisoner by a group of Algonquian Indians for 11 weeks. As she relates this history, Rowlandson provides readers with a detailed account of the thoughts, emotions, and opinions she has while in captivity. Throughout this captivity, Rowlandson shows a remarkable faith and trust in God. This faith seems to experience a transformation during her time of imprisonment, from not being of great importance to her at the beginning of the history, to growing greatly through this trial. Further, Rowlandson's faith seems to have an influence on how she views her family and the pain she experiences in regard to them, because of her great love for them. Rowlandson's faith also teaches her the ability to adapt, even in times of great difficulty, and it helps her to develop the quality of forbearance. Finally, Rowlandson's faith seems to grow through her experience of Indian captivity. *Throughout her captivity, Mary Rowlandson's faith experiences a progression as she turns to the Bible for help; her faith helps her face the tragedies in her family, it teaches her lessons about patience, and it grows stronger as a result of her experience.*

Throughout her imprisonment, Mary Rowlandson realizes her unhealthy spiritual condition, and her faith becomes of more importance to her as she experiences great difficulties and sorrows. As related by critic Tiffany Potter, Mary Rowlandson, who lived in Lancaster, MA,

and was a Puritan preacher's wife, became a captive to a group of Algonquian Indians in February of 1675 (154). As if the horror of being captured was not enough, Rowlandson and her child were also seriously injured by the attack (Rowlandson 271). This time of captivity, as noted by Thawivann Lamouth Spalding, lasted three months, and Rowlandson's account of it is called "one of the most personal accounts of the war" that took place "between the colonists and Indians" (2). Although undergoing this frightening journey may seem to be a difficult task, Rowlandson endures it through her faith and trust in God, which experiences a progression throughout the trial of being taken captive by the Indians. In fact, David Downing asserts that this work by Rowlandson is most primarily "a testament of personal salvation" (253). He also claims that the main idea of Rowlandson's work is the highlighting of her spiritual lessons, as she sees everyday occurrences as filled with implications for her faith (257). Rowlandson's growth in her faith during her captivity, and the spiritual lessons she learns, emerge as one of the most prominent aspects of her work.

Soon after her captivity begins, Rowlandson starts to learn lessons in her faith. Downing writes that the first Sunday that Rowlandson experiences with her captors marks the start of her "spiritual crisis" (253). He asserts that she becomes aware of her spiritual state by the presence of her captors, who do not hold to the same beliefs as she does (253). He writes that she has not previously valued Sundays, but now she feels extremely reproachful at herself for failing to appreciate this day (253). Rowlandson relates that she gains possession of a Bible during the third remove, and she calls this gift "the wonderful mercy of God" (274). Downing calls this a crucial shift in the history, as Rowlandson "[admits] her spiritual complacency and [recognizes] her need for repentance," and Downing writes that the focus of the remainder of the history is on the growth of Rowlandson's faith (254). By reading her Bible, Rowlandson learns about

captivity. In his work about Rowlandson, Downing records that Old Testament captivity was meant to teach or discipline, and Rowlandson sees her time of trial as God disciplining her (256). For example, Rowlandson relates a time of repentance during the fourteenth remove, when she confesses her sin and asks God for mercy (286). Downing also notes that the time of trial is ideal for Rowlandson to search herself spiritually, and he writes that many of the Bible passages she records concern security in her faith (253). After Rowlandson receives a Bible, she reads it and learns several lessons that show how her faith has developed through her trial.

Rowlandson's reliance on the Word of God throughout her captivity reveals her growth in faith and shown in her dependence on and many uses of the Bible. One main way Rowlandson uses the Bible is for expression of the events that take place and her feelings regarding those events. For example, Downing writes that Rowlandson uses "sentences replete with biblical quotations and echoes" when writing about the different happenings she experiences during her time with the Indians (252-53). Downing also notes the frequency with which Rowlandson identifies with biblical characters who underwent captivity themselves, including Joseph, Samson, and Daniel (255). Rowlandson additionally finds articulation of her feelings in the writings of Job, which she quotes six times (255). However, David is the biblical character that Rowlandson cites the most, because he "was ever threatened by hostile enemies both from within and without ... [Apparently Rowlandson finds] in the Psalmist the most eloquent spokesman of her grief and despair and also her hope for eventual deliverance" (255). Further, Dawn Henwood, in her work about Rowlandson's use of the Psalms, writes of Rowlandson's application of the Bible to express her feelings: "when Rowlandson reports being very near the end of her physical and emotional strength," she makes use of three somber verses from Psalm 109, which express her feelings towards her captors and herself (175). Henwood notes that the

circumstances of Rowlandson at this time are extremely difficult, and that “she echoes David’s groans” (176). In addition to expressing her feelings, Rowlandson also uses the Bible to find comfort. Henwood writes that Rowlandson clings to the Psalms as consolation of her grief, and this book is in fact influential in her “[survival]” (169-70). Rowlandson describes a time when she and her son Joseph find comfort in the words of Job and a passage in the Psalms during the eight remove, and she gives praise to God for giving her “so many comfortable and suitable scriptures in [her] distress” (279). One final way Rowlandson uses the Bible is in her desire for the punishment of her enemies. Henwood describes how Rowlandson finds comfort in reading Psalm 55, which speaks of the Lord punishing enemies, and Henwood asserts that this idea of the Lord punishing the wicked gives comfort to Rowlandson (177-178). As seen in her many uses for it, possessing a Bible is a great help for Rowlandson, and is a key aspect of her survival.

Rowlandson’s faith also carries over into her views on her family, and this faith helps her through the pain she experiences due to her great love for them. Rowlandson is forced to watch several terrible scenes involving her family. For example, critic Rebecca Faery writes that Rowlandson witnesses the deaths of members of her immediate and extended family, as well as her friends (122). Molly Farrell, in her article about Mary Rowlandson, writes that Rowlandson feels anxiety about her children being influenced by the Indians and not wanting to leave them (70). However, far worse than this concern is the time when Rowlandson and her daughter Sarah sustain injuries during the attack of the Indians on her village. Faery tells readers that “a bullet passed through the child in [Rowlandson’s] arms ... and into her own side” (122). In his article entitled “New Light on Mary Rowlandson,” David Greene writes about the death of Sarah, who dies while being held by Rowlandson (24). Greene describes Rowlandson’s writings about the death of her daughter and her reactions as “one of the most moving passages in colonial

literature” (24), and Molly Farrell notes that it is during this experience that Rowlandson no longer desires to live (80). It is only Rowlandson’s great faith that enables her to endure these painful times. For instance, as Farrell notes, Rowlandson finds comfort in the knowledge that her beloved daughter is no longer with the Indians, but with the Lord (70). Rowlandson’s trust in God gives her great comfort, even in times as difficult as losing her daughter.

Another time Rowlandson’s faith is evident with regard to her family is when she gives God the credit for being reunited with her daughter Mary (Farrell 75). Rowlandson records this thankfulness to God, and she uses Bible verses that speak of the promises of God with regard to family (299). Finally, one more evidence of Rowlandson’s faith as it involves care for her family is given by Greene. He makes the note that one of Rowlandson’s purposes in writing her narrative of this trial is so that her children can gain and grow from the experience like she has (Greene 25). Rowlandson experiences great pain and hardship with regard to her family, and her faith is a vital aspect in helping her endure these great trials during her time of captivity with the Indians.

In addition to helping her with regard to her family, Rowlandson’s faith also allows her to grow in her patience and forbearance as she progresses through her trial of captivity in the wilderness with the Indians. For example, in his article that provides information and thoughts on the faith of Mary Rowlandson, David Downing writes about how Rowlandson feels a sense of affinity with characters from the Bible who also underwent a time of bondage (255-56). Through her study of these biblical characters, Rowlandson learns about the loyalty of the God she serves, and she is able to have assurance by seeing how God did not leave His people permanently, but does indeed deliver them in His own timing (255). These assurances of help that were given by God to His people in the Old Testament also provide great comfort to Rowlandson during her

time of trial, and they make up a great number of the passages that she writes in her narrative (255). Rowlandson's meditation on and remembrance of these passages of God's deliverance reveals a growth in her forbearance, as she is able to continue enduring through her hardships by trusting in the Lord to deliver her, just as He delivered His people in the Old Testament.

Although Rowlandson experiences growth in her patience and forbearance, this does not occur without difficulty. Rowlandson does struggle with patience, as Henwood notes in her article that records Rowlandson's reliance on the Word of God revealed in the Psalms (178). Henwood describes the time in the twelfth remove when Rowlandson admits to losing her patience, and she turns to Psalm 46 for strength and for help (178). Henwood describes how Rowlandson finds what she needs to hear in the contents of this psalm (178). This example further shows the growth of Rowlandson's forbearance as she is able to rest in the Word of God, and it reveals how Rowlandson trusts that her God is in fact able to deliver her and punish her enemies. Rowlandson writes in the twentieth remove how she is able to see the Word of God fulfilled, when she is finally free of her captors and once again with some of her family members (299). Rowlandson has had to wait until the end of her captivity to see this promise fulfilled, and during the time of waiting she has had to trust in the Lord and His Words. Thus, patience and forbearance are developed in Rowlandson during her time of waiting for the Lord's deliverance. In fact, David Downing notes that Rowlandson teaches several principles that she believes should be gained from her experience of the captivity with the Indians (256). Downing writes that Rowlandson's freedom that is recorded near the end of the history shows that God's Words in Psalm 81 do in fact come true with regard to Rowlandson's situation (256). However, patience and forbearance are required in the waiting for each of these promises to come true, and therefore, despite her struggle with patience, Rowlandson does experience growth in her

forbearance as a result of her trial.

Desperate and trying, Mary Rowlandson's trial of Indian captivity proves to have brought about a growth in her faith. Evidence for this is found throughout the narrative, including at the end. David Downing makes a note that clearly proves this fact in his article about scripture in Rowlandson's work. Downing writes that the end of the narrative contains a large number of references to the Bible as Rowlandson writes what she learned from her trial, while the beginning of the narrative does not include nearly as many references to the Bible, even though it is not notably different in duration (253). While at the beginning of the narrative, Rowlandson does not seem as concerned about her faith, her experience in the wilderness with the Indians teaches her reliance on God and His Word, and she grows in her faith as she prays and finds comfort in the Word of God. This is shown by the larger number of scripture references that she uses at the end of her history. Another evidence of the growth of Rowlandson's faith is again found at the end of her history. She writes that she believes that the Lord punishes those who are His own (Rowlandson 300). It takes a great trust in God to believe the truths Rowlandson records here because the trial she undergoes is difficult and painful, even involving the deaths of members her family. Yet, Rowlandson is able to see how God uses even the most difficult hardships to develop her faith. Finally, Thawivann Spalding, in her work on Rowlandson's faith, asserts that her growth is shown in how she accepts what God has for her as she reads and meditates on the Word of God (4). Spalding writes that Rowlandson experiences variations back and forth between what she wants and what God wants, and Spalding concludes that Rowlandson is not only growing in her faith, but is also desiring to grow (4). Thus, the development of Rowlandson's faith is seen throughout the narrative, and especially at the end, as Rowlandson uses her time of captivity to read the Word of God and trust in His promises to

those who are His.

In her time of great difficulty and turmoil, Rowlandson experiences a journey in her faith as she reads the Word of God, receives comfort from it with regard to her family, learns about patience, and grows in her faith. This journey of faith is able to reach many people, because, as Tiffany Potter records, Rowlandson's narrative gained great fame throughout history (153). As Rowlandson progresses through her time of captivity, she ultimately grows in her faith as a result of the trial. Through the obtaining of a Bible, Rowlandson is able to realize her current spiritual state, and she is able to address it. She realizes that God is punishing her and that she needs to repent of her sins and turn to Him. Rowlandson's growth in faith is characterized by her main uses of the Bible, which include the expression of her feelings about events that take place, the consolation of her sorrows, and the desire to see the Lord punish her enemies. Rowlandson also undergoes great turmoil in regard to her family, due to seeing them killed, worrying about their care, and experiencing her daughter Sarah die in her own arms. The faith that Rowlandson possesses enables her to endure these hardships, and she desires for her family to learn from her trials. Rowlandson's faith allows her to develop forbearance during her trials, although she does describe how she struggles with patience. In her reading of the Bible, she learns about God's promises to His people and about how He always rescues them, and she is able to wait on her God. Rowlandson even includes this lesson at the end of her narrative. Rowlandson's growth in faith is made evident in the abundance of her use of scripture at the close of her history. Here she also shows her faith in how she views punishment from God. Rowlandson writes that she believes God punishes His people, and this statement reveals a mature faith. Finally, Rowlandson's faith is revealed in how she views the wishes of God in relation to her own desires. Because of her faith in God, Rowlandson submits herself to His intentions, even if it

involves great pain for her. The trials Rowlandson experiences are in fact biblical, and a discussion of trials is found in the book of James: “[count] it all joy ... when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (*English Standard Version*, James 1.2-3). A few verses later, James writes, “[blessed] is the man who remains steadfast under trial” (1.12). Rowlandson undergoes great trials, and through them she gains many benefits, including the quality of steadfastness. Throughout her narrative, Rowlandson’s progression in faith is revealed in her reading of God’s Word, with regard to her family and the development of patience, and through her trial Rowlandson does indeed grow in her faith.

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Abstract

This paper will explore the character of Mary Rowlandson in *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. The paper will cover the progression of her faith throughout her journey, discussing how she did not give much thought about her faith before she was taken captive, but how she grew much stronger in her faith throughout the trial of being taken captive by the Indians. The paper will also discuss Rowlandson's views of her family, in relation to her faith, and how her faith helped her through the pain she experienced with regard to them, because she loved them greatly. Finally, the paper will discuss Rowlandson's patience and forbearance as she progressed through the trial, and how her faith taught her to adapt, even in the midst of this trial. *Throughout her captivity, Mary Rowlandson's faith experiences a progression as she turns to the Bible for help; her faith helps her face the tragedies in her family, it teaches her lessons about patience, and it grows stronger as a result of her experience.*