

Saved Through Childbearing? A Fresh Look at 1 Timothy 2:15 Points to Protection from Satan's Deception

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Editor's note: Scripture references are to the NASB unless otherwise noted. This essay is a summary of the author's argument in "Ascertaining Women's God-Ordained Roles: An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:15," *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 7 (1997): 1-38.

"But women will be saved through childbearing" (NIV): this simple statement has mystified average Bible readers as well as Christian scholars for centuries. Is Paul here suggesting salvation by works? In what sense can a woman be "saved" by bearing children? What would be so virtuous about bearing children that could become the cause of women's salvation? And what about single women or married women who do not or cannot have children? Even apart from these interpretive questions, the passage sounds horribly sexist and out of date in the days of female Prime Ministers or Supreme Court Justices. How are we to understand this passage, and how are we to apply it?

Consulting The Translations

Turning to existing translations does not alleviate the difficulty. The NASB reads, "But women shall be preserved through the bearing of children"; the NIV has, "But women will be saved through childbearing"; the *New Living Translation* adds to this in a footnote, "Or 'will be saved by accepting their role as mothers,' or 'will be saved by the birth of the Child.'" To which the *Contemporary English Version* adds, "Or, 'saved by being good mothers.'" Clearly, there is no agreement on what this passage means!

Checking The Commentaries

Consulting commentaries likewise does not solve the problem. Indeed, the array of alternatives surely must cause most to throw up their hands in utter despair of ever arriving at the verse's meaning. Some church Fathers, such as Augustine, thought Paul was here speaking of the bearing of "spiritual children," that is, good works. Other ancient interpreters, such as Chrysostom and Jerome, thought women's salvation was contingent on their (physical) children's perseverance in holy lives of faith, taking the latter part of the verse ("if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint") as referring not to the women themselves but to their offspring. Or perhaps Paul, as G. Knight claims, is here speaking of "the" childbirth, Mary's giving birth to Jesus the Messiah, which became the cause of our salvation. But then why is 1 Tim. 2:15 merely referring to women and not also to men, since surely men are the beneficiaries of Christ's saving work as well?

In light of the high rate of women dying in childbirth in the ancient world, some, such as C. Keener, have suggested that the verse speaks of women's physical preservation through

childbirth. But what of the Christian women who were not kept safe but rather died while giving birth? Non-evangelical interpreters may claim that the author (not the apostle Paul) really believed, for some odd reason, that women would experience spiritual salvation by fulfilling their procreative role, however that may be understood. This, of course, would introduce a contradiction into the canon, since the statement could hardly be reconciled with Paul's adamant insistence that it is "by grace you have been saved through faith — and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

Finally, the most common interpretation among conservative evangelical interpreters today is that women will eventually be spiritually saved by adhering to their God-ordained role centering around the home. This view seeks to alleviate the difficulty of the phrase "saved through childbearing" by interpreting the term "saved" as referring to a woman's consummated salvation on the last day rather than the salvation she already has received at the time of her conversion. And "childbearing" is understood as referring not merely to the birthing process but, by extension, also to the raising of children and the managing of the home.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Is this really the best interpretation we can provide? Even the most common current view does not entirely remove the dilemma of finding Paul here speaking of salvation by works. Merely shifting the temporal point of reference from past or present to future does not completely solve the difficulty. Moreover, the meaning and significance of the statement "women will experience final salvation by giving birth to and raising children" remains unclear. This interpretation has little explanatory value and still leaves us without adequate help in knowing how to apply the message of this passage to our everyday lives.

I believe that there is a better way to interpret this puzzling verse. While I hasten to add that not all conservative evangelical scholars (or even members of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood!) hold to this view, I submit the following attempt to find a way out of the interpretive labyrinth of 1 Timothy 2:15 to all those who are, like I was, dissatisfied with the above efforts at getting at the meaning of the verse.

Interpreting 1 Timothy 2:15

The close parallel of 1 Timothy 5:14-15

We start by examining the only other passage in the New Testament where the word for "bearing children" is used, a close parallel passage in the same epistle. In 1 Timothy 5:14-15 we read, "Therefore, I want younger widows *to get married, bear children, keep house,* and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; *for some have already turned aside to follow Satan.*" Three observations arise from a comparison of this passage with 1 Timothy 2:15: first, both passages deal with the proper role of women; second, in 1 Timothy 5:14-15 the phrase "to have children" (*teknogonein*; compare *teknogonia* in 1 Tim. 2:15) is linked with the expression "to keep house" (*oikodespotein*). It may be that Paul used the phrase "childbearing" in 1 Timothy 2:15 as a shorthand for **the woman's involvement in the domestic sphere**. This would alleviate the difficulty of applying the verse to childless women, single or married, since concern for one's family and the home are not limited to women with children.

The third observation pertains to Paul's concern that women be kept safe from Satan. In 5:14-15 Paul explicitly refers to Satan as the enemy from whom women are to be kept safe: "for some have already turned aside to follow Satan." And how is this to happen? *Women* (in this case young widows) *will be kept safe from Satan if they devote themselves to marriage, family, and the home.* Our study of the close parallel passage in 5:14-15 sends us therefore back to 1 Timothy 2:15 with the following questions: from whom or what are women to be "saved" there? Could it be Satan and his efforts to subvert the woman's natural and spiritual callings? And what does "childbearing" mean? Does it merely refer to the birthing process or extend to the entire realm of marriage, family, and the home?

"Saved Through Childbearing" In 1 Timothy 2:15

Arguably, the question of the meaning of the term commonly translated "save" (*sōzō*) lies at the heart of the interpretation of the present passage. A look at the usage of *sōzō* in the New Testament reveals that the Gospels usually employ the term in the sense of "to be healed," "to be made whole," "to get well." Thus the woman who sought to receive physical healing from Jesus thought, "If I just touch his garments, I shall get well" (Mark 5:28 par.). But the meaning assigned to *sōzō* in the Gospels can hardly be the correct one in 1 Timothy 2:15. How can a woman be "physically healed" or be "made whole" by having children? Note also that people often approached Jesus and were healed physically, but sometimes there is no indication that they were also saved spiritually (see e.g. John 5:1-18).

Paul uses the term *sōzō* differently. In the vast majority of instances, the expression refers to spiritual (religious) salvation. Romans 5:9 may serve as an example: "Much more then, having now been justified by his [Christ's] blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through him." However, this meaning for *sōzō* can be applied to 1 Timothy 2:15 only with difficulty. As mentioned, Paul's teaching of salvation through childbearing in 1 Timothy 2:15 would appear to stand in direct conflict with his teaching of salvation by grace elsewhere in his letters, a fact that even the best efforts at reconciling these two strands of Pauline teaching cannot entirely escape. In our search for possible alternatives, we turn to several remaining passages in Paul's writings where the more common meaning of "spiritual salvation" cannot easily be squared with the context. This last group of passages includes the following references:

- 1 Corinthians 3:15: "If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire";
- 1 Corinthians 7:16: "For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?";
- 1 Timothy 4:16: "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you";
- 2 Timothy 4:18: "The Lord will deliver me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom."

Let us briefly consider each of these instances. In 1 Corinthians 3:15, the phrase "shall be saved" may include the notion of experiencing ultimate spiritual salvation. Yet the reference is still unusual. A person's "salvation" here seems to be spoken of in terms of an escape from danger, a

common Greek idiom in Paul's day (see Josephus, *Vita* 304; Strabo, *Geog.* 3.5.11; 9.2.11). This reflects the common non-religious Greek usage of *sōzō* in the sense of physical preservation from any kind of danger, be it enemy forces, shipwreck, or any other harm. The specific danger was implied or explicitly stated in the context. Christian usage then merely applied this secular usage to the religious sphere by identifying the danger from which people were "saved" as sin, death, Satan, or the curse.

Still, the original secular usage occasionally persists in the New Testament, such as in Acts 27-28 where *sōzō* is found several times with reference to Paul and his fellow travellers' preservation from death and dangers at sea (*sōzō*: 27:20, 31; *diasōzō*: 27:43, 44; 28:1, 4).

The difficulty with the next two references, 1 Corinthians 7:16 and 1 Timothy 4:16, is, of course, that a spouse cannot in an ultimate sense said to be the "savior" of his or her marital partner, just as Timothy can hardly be said to literally "save" his hearers. For in Scripture it is always God, not man, who saves. Moreover, seeking to alleviate this difficulty by distinguishing between *ultimate* and *intermediate* agents, in the present case God on the one hand and the spouse or Timothy on the other, does not entirely resolve the problem. It may work in 1 Corinthians 7:16, where the reference is to the conversion of an unbelieving spouse, a conversion of which the believing spouse may be said to be the intermediate agent.

But the reference in 1 Timothy 4:16 is to Timothy's ongoing efforts to "save" his hearers by watching his life and doctrine closely. In what sense can Timothy be said here to be the intermediate agent of his hearers' salvation? A better solution involves the recognition that being "kept safe" from harm or danger is a perfectly legitimate meaning for the Greek term *sōzō*. In that case, Timothy is merely said to help keep his hearers safe from the dangers of succumbing to false teaching in their beliefs and practical life application.

Finally, 2 Timothy 4:18 ("The Lord will deliver me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom") also seems to carry the connotation of "providing safe passage to" in the sense of preservation from all (spiritual) harm, an understanding corroborated by the fact that translations such as the NIV or the NASB translate *sōzō* here with "bring [Paul] safely" into God's heavenly kingdom.

What do we learn from all of this? Simply put: that *sōzō*, the term in the passive frequently rendered "be saved," may in certain contexts denote a person's physical or spiritual preservation from danger or harm. This is further confirmed by the fact that three standard Greek lexicons (*Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich; Liddell and Scott; and Louw and Nida*) all include preservation from danger in the range of meaning of *sōzō*. Is "be kept safe from" therefore the meaning of *sōzō* in 1 Timothy 2:15? (Note that the NASB translates the passage as follows: "But women shall *be preserved* through the bearing of children.")

Indeed, this rendering would cohere well with the passage already discussed which is found in the same epistle, 1 Timothy 4:16. Will Timothy, by his example and teaching, literally "save" his hearers who are already Christians? Of course not. Or will he perhaps "save" them in some other sense, such as "ensure their (ultimate) salvation" on the last day? If so, this end-time reference point is not made clear in the context which seems to be concerned with Timothy's *present*

ministry and believers' *present* experience. Arguably, a better understanding of the passage is that Timothy will help to *keep* believers *safe* from falling into the errors of the false teachers, heretics who, in turn, are frequently unmasked in the Pastorals as instruments of Satan (see e.g. 2 Tim. 2:26).

Paul's Concern For Believers' Protection From Spiritual Harm

Once alerted to the possibility that *sōzō* may refer to spiritual protection rather than salvation in 1 Timothy 2:15, we discover that Paul's concern for the spiritual protection of believers pervades his writings. In 1 Corinthians 7:5, he counsels that husband and wife not make themselves vulnerable to Satan by prolonged abstinence from sexual intercourse. In Ephesians 4:27, he warns that unresolved anger would give the devil a foothold.

The theme of believers' spiritual protection is particularly prominent in the Pastorals. In 1 Timothy 3:6 and 7, Paul warns that new converts should not be appointed as overseers and that overseers must have a good reputation with outsiders lest either group fall prey to Satan. Younger widows should remarry and devote themselves to their family and the home, which some have failed to do, turning away and following Satan instead (1 Tim. 5:14-15). Paul also is concerned that those who want to get rich might fall into temptation and a snare (1 Tim. 6:9-10; see 2 Tim. 2:26). The entire epistle of 1 Timothy closes with Paul's warning against succumbing to heretical teaching (6:20-21).

Numerous references in 1 and 2 Timothy speak of a person's need to guard what has been entrusted to him or similar expressions (see e.g. 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:12, 14; 4:7, 15, 18). Conversely, Paul warns against following the example of those who "strayed" or "turned aside" from the right way (see e.g. 1 Tim. 1:6, 19-20; 2:14; 3:6, 7; 4:1; 5:12, 13, 15, 21; 6:9-10, 21). This list impressively demonstrates that underlying Paul's writing to Timothy was a strong concern that believers under Timothy's care be kept safe from the errors of false teaching (including life-style implications) and the false teachers themselves, who ultimately were instruments of Satan. Paul conceived of the pastoral task therefore as a struggle for the protection of believers from Satan and for God.

Women's Protection From Satan

If this be so, and "women shall be *kept safe* by childbearing" is the likely rendering of 1 Timothy 2:15, what are women to be kept safe *from*? On the basis of what has been said thus far, and without much further demonstration, it can be argued that what women are to be kept safe from is *being deceived, ultimately by Satan himself*.

Three factors combine to make this the probable understanding of the passage: first, the close parallel of 1 Timothy 5:14-15 where, as mentioned, Satan is explicitly referred to and where "childbearing" is likewise mentioned as the way by which women will be kept safe; second, the fact that Satan is clearly in view in the preceding verse, 1 Timothy 2:14, where Paul conjures up the scenario of the Fall as one of two reasons why women are not to occupy roles of ultimate authority over men in the church (see vv. 12 and 13): "And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner." Eve, Paul implies, was not kept safe at

the Fall; she was deceived. Why? Because she left her proper domain under her husband's care. What happened as a result? She became an easy prey for Satan. How can women under Timothy's charge (and in churches everywhere) avoid repeating the same mistake? By "childbearing," that is, by adhering to their God-ordained calling, including a focus on marriage, family, and the home. 1 Timothy 2:15 thus turns out to be Paul's prescription for women as a lesson learned from the scenario of the Fall described in the preceding verse.

Third, the understanding of 1 Timothy 2:15 in terms of women's being "kept safe" through childbearing is supported by Paul's above-mentioned concern for the spiritual preservation of believers which pervades the Pastorals.

What does it mean, then, for a woman to be "kept safe [from Satan]"? It means, among other things, that she will not yield in her mind to false notions of what it means for her to be a woman and in particular a woman of God. It means that she will respect divinely set boundaries in the exercise of her spiritual gifts and ministry calling in trust and obedience to God's Word. It means that she will find fulfillment in her domestic calling, in her relationship with her husband, in her role as mother and maker of the home, and in proper ministry involvements in God's "household," the church (see 1 Tim. 3:15).

The women who overstep these God-given boundaries, on the other hand, will not be "kept safe from being deceived [by Satan]." By pushing and transgressing the limits set by the Creator, those women will actually suffer a degree of loss of their God-given femininity. They will forfeit, at least to some extent, fulfillment in marriage, family, and the home. They will fall prey to error in interpreting Scripture, error very possibly not confined to their understanding of women's roles in the church. They will disrupt (male-female) harmony in the church, creating division rather than promoting harmony as women and men serve God and others alongside each other in appropriate, God-ordained roles. And there may be other consequences, not the least grieving the One whose commands are ignored.

Conclusion

We've come a long way in our efforts to understand the true message of 1 Timothy 2:15 for women in Paul's and our day. What we have argued is that Paul here expresses concern that women be kept safe from being deceived by Satan, and that he therefore encourages women to embrace and pursue their God-ordained calling centering around the family and the home. Our concern today should be, like Paul's, that women discern and adhere to their God-given calling in life. This involves many people. *Husbands* ought to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain, wrinkle, or any other blemish, but holy and blameless, fully kept safe from (being deceived by) Satan and kept safe for God (see Eph. 5:25-33). *Pastors* are to help women embrace their God-ordained calling and to encourage their involvement in appropriate ministry roles. *Mature Christian women* are to "encourage the younger women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be dishonored" (Tit. 2:4-5). *Men* are to treat women as fellow-heirs of grace, seeking to encourage them in their quest for godliness and as participants in the life and mission of the church. *Women themselves* are to learn through formal and informal

study of Scripture, to serve at home and in a great variety of functions in the local church. And *we all* are to praise our Creator and Savior who has made us male and female and who is faithful to keep us from all harm and will bring us safely into his heavenly kingdom (see 2 Tim. 4:18).

The above presented interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:15 also strongly affirms a complementarian understanding of biblical manhood and womanhood. Women, like men, were assigned by their Creator certain roles, and it is part of "working out our salvation" (Phil. 2:12) to adhere to these roles in our Christian lives and ministry. Salvation in Christ does not obliterate these role distinctions, as egalitarians claim-it rather aids believers in living once again within the parameters originally established by the Creator, as creatures saved from the curse of sin and restored to God's original design for men and women.

At the same time, the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:15 advocated here has explosive implications for so-called "biblical feminism." For if our reading of 1 Timothy 2:15 is correct, women will be vulnerable to Satan if they devalue and abandon a focus on the family and the home or encourage others to do so. They would be an easy prey for his age-old enticement (see Gen. 3) that the roles assigned to creatures by their Creator are too confining and that people must rebel against these roles and find self-fulfillment apart from God. In light of the fact that teachers will be judged more severely (Jas. 3:1) and that Jesus held the Pharisees responsible for not only failing to abide by God's standards themselves but also leading others astray, those who encourage women today to ignore God-ordained parameters in the way they function in the church need to ponder seriously the weighty consequences of their actions.

By clarifying the message of 1 Timothy 2:15, we also hope to commend the passage's teaching to those who previously did not apply it because they did not understand it. 1 Timothy 2:15 does not merely contain an obscure, situation-bound injunction for women in Timothy's Ephesus at the end of the first century A.D. It is grounded in the wise counsel of the Creator and pertains to the sphere of the outworking of our salvation in this life. How are women kept safe from the allurements of Satan? How are they to avoid falling into temptation as Eve, the mother of women, did? By adhering to, and finding fulfillment in, their God-given role centering on the family and the home.

Does that mean that women are to be "confined" to the home? Not at all. The mandate for women to *center* their calling around the home does not mean to *limit* it to the home. As passages such as Proverbs 31 make very clear, women will participate in a great variety of activities from their home as a base and thus be great blessings to their husbands and children. More than that, women, by bearing children and thus fulfilling their natural procreative and biological functions, actively participate in humanity's rule over creation (see Gen. 1:28: "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it"). Single women, likewise, can take an active part in God's work as they devote themselves to matters pertaining to "God's household" (1 Tim. 3:15; see 1 Cor. 7:29-35).

But these concluding observations cannot be exhaustive, nor has the primary purpose of this essay been to prescribe specific detailed points of application. Women can expect to be kept safe from (Satan's) deception and the spiritual and life-style implications of false teaching if they adhere to their God-given role centering in the family and the home. While the interpretation

suggested above may not solve all problems of application, it should nonetheless be obeyed if it faithfully reflects biblical teaching. May God give today's Christian women grace as they ponder their God-given calling and as they live it out for his glory and their good.