



Salome: The Mother of James and John

by Stephanie Catmull



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Her common, everyday title encapsulates her completely: She was simply the mother of Zebedee's sons. However, the utter magnitude of this simple description cannot be overstated because this "simple" role of hers resulted in the most powerful books in the Bible.

Though her name was merely mentioned twice in Mark's gospel, her enduring legacy of following Christ, the audacity of what she asked of Christ, and having raised her sons in Christ became the epitome of what an authentic, strong-willed, confident woman aspired to be. She was the "righteous" Salome of the Bible, not to be compared to her nemesis of the same name (Herod's stepdaughter) who requested John the Baptist's head on a platter.

This Salome was the mother of James and John and as we will see, her contributions to Christ's ministry and to that of her sons were utterly invaluable.

Salome's Character

Salome, completely opposite to what was valued in Jewish woman in the ancient Middle East, was forcefully ambitious. Salome was uniquely positioned by God to raise men who would be part of changing the world for centuries to come. Salome was chosen by Christ **because of her strong character** to upend the strict patriarchal Jewish society where men ruled and women were relegated as weak, inconsequential, and unimportant.

She was a smart, profitable, enterprising businesswoman who assisted her husband Zebedee in their fishing business on the northwest shore of Galilee in Capernaum. She ran her household with precision and fortitude while

embodying the virtues of the Proverbs 31 woman: she was noble, enterprising, diligent, compassionate, giving, wise, faithful, honorable, and above all – she loved the Lord with all her might, soul, mind, and strength. She courageously sacrificed

her societal status and possible excommunication from the Jewish community by following a rabbi who claimed to be the Savior of the world.

By the way, a woman who followed a rabbi in the ancient Middle East would have been considered scandalous and unwholesome. So, this gutsy decision meant that she gave up her rights to be supported in her old age, and she would likely die a slow death of starvation, disease, and loneliness.

She even risked her marriage to Zebedee who enjoyed a close, professional relationship with Caiaphas, the high priest of the Pharisees.

Understand that by choosing to follow Jesus Christ, Salome ran the risk of being excommunicated from her Jewish society. By siding *with* Him, she was siding *against* the Pharisees.

In essence, Salome forced her husband to choose between following Christ or his business and religious status in his community. Zebedee likely still retained a moderate reputation with Caiaphas three years later (probably because he was Caiaphas's fish supplier) since John is widely believed to be the disciple who readily gained admittance into Jesus's sham of a trial with the high priest:

“And Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple [John].

Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and went with Jesus into

the courtyard of the high priest. But Peter stood at the door outside. Then the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to her who kept the door, and brought Peter in” (NKJV, John 18:15-16).

Salome, then, purposefully and courageously railed against the warnings and admonition of the Pharisees to follow whom she knew was the Messiah.

Salome, too, was one of the first women, along with Joanna and Martha, to be highly honored and favored in Christ’s eyes since she was willing to follow Him boldly and unapologetically. Women during this time did not follow nor study under rabbis, but Salome was no ordinary woman.

She also became one of Christ’s few women patrons who willingly gave money from her own coffers to support His ministry. She traveled without Zebedee, bravely garnering heavy criticism from His decidedly male entourage.

Salome as a Mother

Salome was typically known only as the mother of Zebedee’s children. She was a stellar wife of good character within her community, but she was known first and foremost of being the mom of the sons of thunder or

“Boanerges” whom Jesus affectionately nicknamed James and John because of their bold, passionate, and reactive temperaments. They wanted Jesus in Luke 9:54 to “call down fire from heaven to destroy” the Samaritans refused to help Jesus on their journey.

In the same chapter, they forbade a man to cast out demons in Jesus’s name,

and Jesus chastised them for being unnecessarily hostile. They were quick-tempered and defensive in wanting to protect Jesus, and Jesus more than once toned down their aggressive posturing.

Salome had her hands full in guiding her two headstrong boys who likely inherited and learned their ways from their determined mother. In doing so, she proved herself to be a godly mother with strong influence over the lives of her two children, and fulfilled King Solomon's wise saying:

"Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it" (NKJV Proverbs 22:6).

What you do as a mother matters. The difference you are making in this world as you help train up a child matters. Let's say you are not a mother - you may, however, be in a position to guide and mentor a child such as a coach, teacher, neighbor, or volunteer.

Granted, your self-worth and reputation is not necessarily reflected on the *behavior* of your children because they make their *own* choices (just see the difference between Cain vs. Abel, or Jacob vs. Esau, etc.) despite our best efforts.

Still, take inspiration from Salome because she ended up having a powerful, everlasting effect on Christ's ministry because she raised two passionately zealous sons who eventually became two of the prestigious three men within the Messiah's inner circle, along with Simon Peter.

These young men, chosen as teenagers to follow Christ on the sea of Galilee, made a rare and serious commitment to abandon and alienate their own

father:

“When He had gone a little farther from there, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the boat mending their nets. And immediately He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after Him” (Mark 1:19-20).

Notice, though, that Zebedee did not object to their decision, signifying passive support to them and to his wife to follow Jesus’s ministry. Yet, he is not heard from again. His influence in their lives was a mere dot in their timeless, unending narrative. Salome’s influence, in stark contrast, was boundless and ageless. Even 2,000 years later, we relate to her pushing children, wanting the best for them.

Zebedee’s sons’ life-changing decision to leave their father allowed them to be specifically selected by Jesus to witness His magnificent transfiguration where they heard the majestic voices of God, Moses, and Elijah:

*“After six days Jesus took with him Peter, **James and John the brother of James**, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered*

them, and a voice from the cloud said, *This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!* When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. 'Get up,' he said. 'Don't be afraid' (NKJV, Matthew 17:1-7). Christ chose them, too, for the opportunity of praying for Him at the Garden of

Gethsemane before His crucifixion. They privately witnessed when Jesus brought Jairus's daughter back from the dead and when Peter's mother-in-law was healed. There was a reason why Jesus selected them only to behold these specific miracles, and He entrusted this high privilege to them because of their special relationship in closely abiding *with* Him and *in* Him.

James, the oldest brother, became the first apostle to be martyred in 44 A.D. as he was brutally beheaded by King Herod's henchmen because of his continued zealous, passionate evangelism. Younger John, the apostle whom Jesus loved, was boiled in oil and later exiled at the island of Patmos, and eventually wrote the Gospel of John, his letters of I, II, and III John, and the prophetic Book of Revelation at the end of his life.

Salome was *that* mother who raised these Sons of Thunder to be bold like her, to be assertive like her, to be unapologetic and uncompromising like her, and to be supernaturally brave like her. She was *that* mother who took her job seriously, to rear her children in the tradition of the Pentateuch (Moses' first five books of the Bible), the Psalms, and the Prophets until the scriptures became second nature to them.

She tutored them, she mentored them, she expected nothing but the best

from them until they were old enough to join their father's lucrative fishing

business. Against the cultural grain, she continued to be heavily involved in their lives to ensure that they were rewarded for her, and their, efforts.

Notice that John in his gospel never mentioned his brother James. He humbly did not name *himself*. He did not mention Salome because his focus was on Christ, as it should have been. He did not idolize his mother. However, God did make sure that she was recognized and included in the annals of history so that she was always remembered as a woman of character and integrity and as the chosen mother of two apostles. Note, too, that John was specifically requested by *Jesus while He was dying on the cross* to take care of His mother Mary because He fully trusted John's obvious affection, care, and love towards Salome.

Salome, then, was a mother extraordinaire who did not take her responsibility lightly, much like Mary the mother of Jesus, with whom Salome was rumored to be her sister. She was placed in the same hall of fame as Jochebed, Moses' mother, who raised Moses in the Hebrew customs to which he eventually returned after being raised in the courts of the Egyptian Pharaoh's daughter.

She was like Hannah who raised her miracle son Samuel to be the priest of the Jewish nation. She was similar to Elizabeth who raised John the Baptist to become his cousin Jesus' prophet, baptizer, and trailblazer to His ministry on earth. She traveled with Joanna and Mary Magdalene, and supported His ministry with both her finances and service. Like Martha, another strong female character in Jesus's tight circle, Salome commanded dignity and respect, and

she did not shy away from approaching Christ publicly to ensure her sons would be elevated to a high status in His kingdom. Admittedly, older women were given a bit of leniency and grace to behave in “improper” ways. However, Christ admired this, not because she was right (she thoroughly missed the point as Jesus gently pointed out), but because she humbly kneeled before Him even as she boldly approached His throne of grace, and asked for her most earnest desire – to see her sons rewarded in His kingdom:

“Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. And He said to her, ‘What do you wish?’ She said to Him, ‘Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom” (NKJV, Matthew 20:20-21).

(Mark’s account in Mark 10:35-37 slightly differs here in that the two brothers made the request themselves instead of Salome, though this was typical in that her words were essentially being voiced by them. The effect, though, was still the same.)

Why exactly did Salome request the right and left hand of Christ? The left hand, though less important, was considered useful for sanitation and for healing.

The right hand represented power and strength. The right hand was used to give the Mosaic blessing of the priesthood. The right hand administered vows and justice in court. The right hand was that of authority, of

fellowship, of honor and of favor, and would thus be the instrument of carrying out Christ’s wishes and His most important work. That’s why Salome wanted her

sons placed strategically on either side of Christ in His coming kingdom because it would ensure their physical and spiritual security.

True, Salome may have made a crucial mistake of what was meant by Christ's kingdom. However, nearly everyone at the time of Christ's earthly ministry thought that being the Savior meant freeing the Jews from Roman occupation and oppression. This was a common, albeit unfortunate, misunderstanding. No one actually understood that He meant He was saving them – and us – from our sins and restoring us back into right relationship with our heavenly Father.

Jesus, though, did not hold this mistake against Salome, nor did He chastise her for being so ambitious, direct, and forthcoming for her sons. This is important, because Christ was not saying that being great was *bad*. He was not saying that striving for greatness was a sin as long as your goal aligns with God's will.

Instead, Christ responded to Salome's request by turning to James and John, and told them to **count the cost** of their desire to follow Him into His heavenly kingdom. He simultaneously prophesied that indeed their wish of entrance into eternity with Him would come true:

"But Jesus answered and said, 'You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They said to Him, 'We are able.' So He said to them, 'You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by

My Father” (NKJV, Matthew 20:22-23).

Salome was not idolizing her children over Christ because she was following Him, not them. There is nothing wrong with wanting to make sure that your children reach their potential.

There is nothing wrong with pushing them to be obedient and to fulfill the call that Christ has laid upon their lives, whatever that call might be. Make sure, though, that you are *putting Christ first* and make Him the priority in your life so that you and your family are able to reap the rewards of following the Lord because of **His** greatness, not yours, and especially not because of the deeds of your children.

Your happiness is not tied to the success of your children; your joy comes from your identity in Christ and that you are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Incidentally, we never did find out if Salome's request is granted. Perhaps when we get to heaven, we will see who gained the honor of sitting next to Christ. Presumably, if Jesus is sitting at the right hand of the Father, then who gets the privilege of sitting at Jesus's right? Any guesses?

Salome certainly did not expect that the price to be paid for her sons' privileged status to be placed on His left and right side was to drink from the cup of unimaginable suffering. Yet when she heard Jesus's response that this was their future, that her two beautiful sons would endure extreme suffering, she did not take back her wish for their prominence because, for them to follow Christ and to be part of His eternal kingdom, was her most fervent wish of all.

This was not greed nor a power grab, because she herself followed Him at the risk of losing her world including her own life, marriage, reputation, and

earthly security in her old age. She held absolute faith and trust in Him as the Savior and Messiah. What she gained was the treasure of her soul to be joined in heaven with Him throughout eternity.

Salome as a Witness to Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection

Salome was someone who would not back down in the face of adversity because she chose to watch Christ's gruesome crucifixion, in courageous contrast to his disciples, and refused to turn her gaze away from His suffering, even though she could not help him:

"Many women who had followed Jesus from Galilee and looked after him were there, watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons" (NKJV, Matthew 27:55-56).

The ONLY two times that Salome was named was in the same, parallel scene in Mark's gospel: *"There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome, who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee, and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem"* (NKJV, Mark 15:40-41).

The only apostle to be close to the crucified Lord was none other than her son John. No one blamed Salome for standing afar off because of the intimidating, hateful crowd, the violent soldiers, and the horrific scene taking place before her. She was certainly brave, but this didn't mean she would impulsively and foolishly put herself in harm's way. She realized what the "cup

of suffering” which she boldly asked for her sons really meant.

Salome further risked her life to anoint His dead body with spices despite Herod’s threats against His followers. She did not desert Him, even in death. She, by the unlimited grace of God, continued to show her strength of character and resourcefulness as we see again in Mark’s gospel:

*“When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, **and Salome** bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, ‘Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?’...Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid” (NKJV, Mark 16:1-3, 8)*

Jesus died on a Friday. The Sabbath, though, did not end until sundown on Saturday night around 6pm. Because it was illegal for Jewish people to buy and sell anything, including spices for anointing the dead during the Sabbath, Salome and the other women could not arrive to Jesus’s tomb with the spices much before the 5am sunrise on the beginning of the week on Sunday morning, unaware that this would be the morning of His glorious resurrection.

Finally, Salome was one of the few women whom Christ revealed Himself to after His resurrection because she was reliable, dependable, loyal, and loved. She was someone to whom the men would listen because of her authority and close relationship with Christ. She, too, became one of the inner circle of women to whom Jesus first spoke as the resurrected Christ, and that spoke volumes to

the high regard with which Jesus and the apostles viewed her. She faithfully carried His message that He was ALIVE and was resurrected from the dead to those anxiously waiting in the upper room and thus fulfilled His mission for her:

“It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them, who told these things to the apostles” (NKJV, Luke 24:10).

Christ again upended society’s norm that, according to both Jewish and Roman law, a woman’s testimony was of limited value because they were considered unstable. It was to the women, however, that Christ entrusted His resurrection testimony of Jesus’ resurrection, making the first last and the last first.

Salome, then, was not just a spirited, rigorous mother who nurtured her two sons into becoming dedicated followers in Christ; she raised them to reach the heavens and provide inspiration through their writing, their martyrdom, and their exemplary embodiment of being a disciple of Jesus. She showed them through her own example of being persistent and resilient, and to stand firm despite the distorted teachings of the religious leaders and the oppressive cultural norms.

Salome was by no means perfect. She was rash and ambitious. She came on too strong. She was demanding and at times aggressive, just like her sons. And that’s how Jesus made her. He loved her unconditionally because she was righteous to Him due to her unwavering belief in who He is – the Son of God, the Savior and Messiah, and our one true God. She put her belief in Him and



women IN SCRIPTure



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followed Him no matter the suffering that she and her sons would endure

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because she *knew* that He was her King and Lord, and that because of her unwavering faith in Him, she would spend eternity with Him.

Take a page from Salome's story and let it be yours. Follow Christ and allow Him to save you through His unmerited grace and mercy, and we'll see each other as we join His hands in eternity.

Amen.

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