

50 WOMEN Every Christian Should Know

LEARNING FROM HEROINES OF THE FAITH

MICHELLE DERUSHA



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“This book is rich in inspiration and information. Reading it opened my eyes, broadened my vision, and challenged my faith. I highly recommend it to both men and women!”

—**Warren W. Wiersbe**, author and former pastor of the Moody Church, Chicago “How does a mom raise a daughter in an age that believes the sum of her appearance must fit into a teeny, tiny, little size 0 box with its edges tightly, perfectly manicured shut? Maybe she shares example after example of what living, breathing, change-the-world courage looks like from the women who’ve come before us. I know that from now on when I’m looking for heroes for my daughter, I will be bookmarking the pages of Michelle’s book for years to come. Fifty women who teach us that famous isn’t about how many people know your name and that brave often looks like pressing on even when you’re afraid. My daughter and I are both indebted to Michelle for introducing us to many women we’d never met before and are sure never to forget.”

—**Lisa-Jo Baker**, community manager for (in)courage and author of *Surprised by Motherhood* “We are, indeed, surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses. In the pages of this book, Michelle DeRusha skillfully introduces us to extraordinary women who lived boldly and bravely and who planted their feet solidly on faith. Often their unwavering belief resulted in excommunication, mistreatment, torture, or even death. In the face of some of the same questions, temptations, and doubts we encounter today, these women were pioneers. Their stories give the church of today—men and women alike—a courageous and brave example of living faith and of living out faith, the evidence of things unseen.”

—**Deidra Riggs**, managing editor of *The High Calling* and founder of *Jumping Tandem* “This beautiful book is an invitation to a journey—a journey that moves from kitchens to slums to plantations . . . and always straight to the heart of God. Pick up this book and let your very soul brush up against the fringes of the hearts of our sisters, whose stories span centuries of our collective faith. In this thoroughly researched and well-written work, Michelle DeRusha invites us into the lives of fifty women whose stories are *our* stories. This book inspired me, challenged me, and made me feel so proud to be a woman who belongs to Jesus.”

—**Jennifer Dukes Lee**, author of *Love Idol*

To my mother, Maureen—
my own personal heroine of the faith

And in memory of my grandmothers,
Elizabeth and Eileen

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Thank you for showing me how it's done.

And finally, to the fifty women featured in this book. You are my sisters in faith, women of valor, heroines all. Thank you for your courage, your inspiration, your determination. Thank you for paving the way. *Eshet Chayil!*

Introduction

Before I started to write this book, I had already set each of these fifty women on a pedestal, in a place of honor and respect. I admired them, even revered them. Their names alone left me a little bit awestruck. But would I relate to them? I wondered. Would they speak to me personally? Would their stories resonate with me right now, here in the middle of my everyday, ordinary life? I assumed no. I assumed this was merely history, not applicable to me.

And I was wrong.

I knew the life stories of the following fifty women would be fascinating and inspiring, but I didn't expect their stories to impact my personal twenty-first-century life. I didn't expect to relate to these women as real people. After all, as the subtitle states, the fifty women included in this book are *heroines* of the Christian faith. These women saved lives. They founded new denominations. They walked new paths. They advocated for the poor, the sick, the dying, and the neglected. Some even died for their faith. Their stories and contributions span nine hundred years of Christian history. They were missionaries, preachers, writers, abolitionists, doctors, educators, and activists—true leaders in every sense of the word. They are women who are known far and wide and whose very lives are a testament to the Christian faith: Teresa of Ávila. Florence Nightingale. Catherine Booth. Amy Carmichael. Harriet Tubman. Corrie ten Boom. Dorothy Day. We know their names.

As I researched each of these women, my preconceived assumptions were dismantled one by one. I assumed these spiritual giants never struggled in their faith, but Lottie Moon, Mother Teresa, Madeleine L'Engle, and several others proved me wrong. I assumed these women were never swayed by earthly temptations or materialistic desires, but Teresa of Ávila and Elizabeth Fry set me straight. I assumed these Christian heroines never questioned their God-given calling, but Hannah More, Ruth Bell Graham, and Ida Scudder turned that notion on its head. I assumed these leaders were all born and bred die-hard Christians from the start, but Edith Stein, Pandita Ramabai, and Simone Weil demonstrated that age and history are no match for God's transformative power. I assumed

each of these women was virtually flawless and morally spotless, yet every one of them turned out to be fallible, just like me.

What I discovered in researching and writing this book is that the stories of these fifty women are our stories too. True, many of them lived centuries ago, in places, times, and circumstances far removed from our own. But their battles are our battles. Their grief is our grief. Their doubts and questions are our doubts and questions. We walk similar valleys. We scale similar mountains. We weep the same tears of anguish and triumph in similar moments of joy. Their love for God mirrors our own. Behind the long list of accomplishments and contributions are real women with fears, struggles, challenges, distractions, and sorrows much like ours.

While we have never suffered through the atrocities of life in a concentration camp, we can understand something of Corrie ten Boom's anguish and loss. Although we haven't forged an unmarked path as the first ordained female minister, we can relate to the insecurity and fear Antoinette Brown Blackwell faced along the way. While most of us haven't founded a mission or preached to thousands worldwide, we might identify with Catherine Booth's unrelenting determination.

In the end, I was surprised by how well I related to many of the women included in this book. The fact that they lived decades or even centuries ago didn't matter. The fact that their vocations and their callings varied dramatically from mine was irrelevant. The fact that many of their names are known and esteemed was not important. In short, I observed my own struggles, flaws, desires, and joys reflected in their stories and in their lives. I finally understood that these women are not only our heroines, they are also our sisters in faith.

1

Hildegard of Bingen

“Say and Write What You See and Hear”

(1098–1179)



At first she ignored it entirely. Although she had heard the message loud and clear, she didn't pay any attention. After all, the order was a radical one. *Say and write what you see and hear*, he had said. But she ignored him. What was she—a nun sequestered in a German convent, a woman living in the twelfth century—supposed to do with that message? How could she follow a command so countercultural, so revolutionary? Not knowing how to respond, she ignored God's call . . . until the day came when she could ignore it no longer.

“Say and Write What You See and Hear”

As her parents' tenth child, Hildegard was dedicated to the church as a tithe when she was eight years old. At age sixteen she officially “took the veil” and entered the convent of Disibodenberg, near Bingen, Germany, as a Benedictine nun. Hildegard was elected abbess of the convent in 1136, and it was around this time that the visions she had experienced since she was a young child began to intensify and were clearly revealed to her as interpretations of the Scriptures.

“And it came to pass in the eleven hundred and forty-first year of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, Son of God, when I was forty-two years and seven months old, that the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain,” wrote Hildegard in the preface of her first major visionary work, *Scivias*. “And so it kindled my whole heart and breast like a flame, not

corruption of corruption, say and write what you see and hear.”² And just so there was no mistaking the command, this particular vision was repeated three more times to Hildegard on three separate occasions. Initially she resisted, and you can imagine why. God seemed to be instructing Hildegard to do what virtually no other woman was doing at the time. As a woman and a nun living during a time in which most women were illiterate and certainly not encouraged to write or preach, she was terrified and overwhelmed by the directive.

Hildegard did her best to ignore God’s command until finally he made it impossible for her to do so any longer. She succumbed to illness, an illness she believed was a direct result of her disobedience: “Although I heard and saw these things, because of doubt and a low opinion (of myself) and because of the diverse sayings of men, I refused for a long time the call to write, not out of stubbornness, but out of humility, until weighed down by the scourge of God, I fell onto a bed of sickness.”³

Hildegard overcame two major obstacles in order to produce the great volume of writing for which she is remembered. First, there was the fact of her gender, a significant barrier. Second was the extent of her education. Male theologians in the twelfth century benefited from years of a classical education, including a practical and theoretical understanding of Latin, as well as music, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, theology, and sometimes even law and medicine. Although she learned to read and write in German and Latin, Hildegard’s education was rudimentary at best. As biographer Sabina Flanagan writes, “For someone to write on theology who lacked such a background and was also a woman was a bold step indeed.”⁴

Yet try as she might to ignore the call to write, she couldn’t suppress God’s persistent command. Finally, desperate and ill, Hildegard reached out to her friend and confidant Bernard, the Abbot of Clairvaux, for advice. Not only did the abbot reassure her, he was also instrumental in gaining Pope Eugenius’s official sanction of her writing. And with that, Hildegard was free to record the visions that would eventually comprise three comprehensive theological works: *Scivias* (*Know the Ways*), *Liber Vitae Meritorum* (*The Book of Life’s Merits*), and *Liber Divinorum Operum* (*The Book of Divine Works*).

book following a similar format: a description of the visions and then the explanation that Hildegard received from God. Vacillating between concrete and abstract language, *Scivias* covers a wide range of topics, including creation, the fall of Lucifer and Adam, the church and its sacraments, and redemption, concluding with an apocalyptic ending of the last judgment and the creation of the new heaven and earth.

Hildegard's *Liber Vitae Meritorum* (*The Book of Life's Merits*) was written between 1158 and 1

Causae et Curae differs from *Physica* in its discussion of more than two hundred specific diseases and maladies—including baldness, migraines, asthma, nosebleeds, epilepsy, and sterility—and their cures. Rather than avoiding the topic of human sexuality altogether, Hildegard approached it both pragmatically and poetically, without a hint of prudishness. Not only did she describe sexual intercourse and conception, she also included a rare account of the nature of sexual pleasure from the woman's point of view. The result was that *Causae et Curae* addressed the topic of human sexuality more comprehensively than any writings by her contemporaries.

While she worked on *Liber Divinorum Operum*, Hildegard also wrote a number of musical works, poetry, dozens of letters, and a play, *Ordo Virtutum* (*Play of Virtues*), which was performed at her convent. During this time she also traveled to monastic communities in Wurzburg and Kitzingen to preach and, in 1160, to Trier, where she preached in public, a highly unusual act for a woman at that time. She traveled twice more to preach—to Cologne and Werden around 1163 and, in 1170, to Zwiefalten.

Listening and Obeying The visions Hildegard received from God impacted not only her writing but her life and the lives of the nuns she managed as well. While she was writing *Scivias*, Hildegard suddenly announced one day that she had received a command from God to relocate her convent from Disibodenberg to Rupertsberg, about nineteen miles away. The monks strongly opposed this proposal, as did many of the parents of the young nuns in her convent. They couldn't fathom why Hildegard would want to move her nuns from relative comfort amid lush vineyards and rolling hills to a hardscrabble, bare-bones existence with fewer amenities. They also accused her of suffering from delusions.

Faced with such strong opposition and accusation, Hildegard collapsed into illness again. When an abbot saw the extent of her suffering, he deemed her illness a divine intervention, and Hildegard was granted permission to move the convent. She purchased the site, and she and twenty of her nuns traveled on foot over a day's journey from the well-established, stone-built monastery to the dilapidated quarters at Rupertsberg.

“They said, ‘What is the point of this, that noble and wealthy nuns should move from a place where they wanted for nothing to such great poverty?’” wrote Hildegard later. “But we were awaiting the grace of God, who showed us this place, to come to our aid. After the burden of these troubles God rained grace upon us.”⁵

Toward the end of her life, when Hildegard was in her eighties, she received word from God allowing her to bury an excommunicated nobleman at the convent

2

Saint Birgitta (Bridget) of Sweden

God's Emissary

(1303–1373)



Birgitta Persson made a name for herself before she even entered the world.

When her mother, Ingeborg, was several months pregnant with Birgitta (who was named after her father, the knight Birger Persson), she was miraculously rescued from a shipwreck by the king's brother. Although dozens died in the wreck, Ingeborg survived the tragedy. In a vision she experienced the night following her rescue, a person dressed in brilliant, glowing clothing informed Ingeborg that she had been saved because of the good she bore in her womb, a gift given to her from God. A few months later, on the night of Birgitta's birth, an elderly priest in the local parish experienced a vision as well, in which Mary appeared to him with a book in her hands, informing him that a girl had been born "whose voice will be heard throughout the world with admiration."¹

The Impediment of Marriage

Despite her auspicious beginnings, the girl who later became known as Saint Birgitta of Sweden (and by English speakers as Saint Bridget of Sweden) did not immediately show signs of the mysticism that would eventually lead to her canonization. In fact, for the first three years of her life she didn't speak a single syllable, leading her parents to fear she was a mute. Finally, when she was nearly four years old, Bridget began to talk, surprising everyone by uttering not rudimentary words and phrases but fully articulated sentences.

By the time she was a young teenager, Bridget aspired to lead the life of a holy woman. But as she

Swedish family, religious life wasn't an option. Despite her reluctance, when she was thirteen years old Bridget wed the eighteen-year-old nobleman Ulf Gudmarsson.

Bridget landed in a tricky position. In the fourteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church still maintained that marriage was an inferior state. The traditional view of the three states of womanhood—virginity, marriage, and widowhood—emphasized virginity first and foremost as the only state in which women could achieve

within which was suspended the likeness of a human being. “Woman, hear me; I am your God, who wishes to speak with you,” the voice said. “Fear not, for I am the Creator of all, and not a deceiver. I do not speak to you for your sake, but for the sake of the salvation of others. . . . You shall be my bridge and my channel, and you shall hear and see spiritual things, and my Spirit shall remain with you even until your death.”⁵

Up to

often predicted dire outcomes if they did not take note of God's commands. For example, in Book IV of her *Revelations*, Bridget attacked the corrupt and decayed moral state of Rome. She compared the city to a meadow overgrown with thistles, desperately in need of a thorough weeding with a sharp iron, a cleansing with fire, and plowing by a pair of oxen.⁷ She described the shocking, immoral behavior of the canons, priests, and deacons, whom she called "the devil's whoremongers,"⁸ for abandoning

Perseverance in Trust

Bridget's determination to see the papacy restored to Rome did not diminish over the remainder of her life. Just five days before her death in 1373, she appealed to Pope Gregory XI for the last time, despite the fact that she'd been told by God in a vision that she would not live to see the pope's return to Rome. "If Gregory asks for signs, give him three," she wrote to her confessor, the priest Alfonso Pecha. "That God has spoken wonderful words through a woman. To what purpose is not for the salvation of souls and their bettering. . . . It is my will that he come now, this fall, and that he comes to stay. Nothing is dearer to me than this: that he come to Italy."¹¹

Some might say Bridget ultimately failed in her God-given calling. After all, she dedicated much of her life to restoring the pope to Rome, yet she didn't live to see that mission come to fruition. Likewise, she founded her monastic order at Vadstena, yet she was never a true member of the order herself, nor did she ever return to Sweden to see the results of her vision.

However, Bridget served in an extraordinarily unique capacity during her life, not only as a prophetic visionary but also as a political and social emissary who courageously criticized the moral decline of society, even at the risk of ostracism, excommunication, and death.

Even more important, perhaps, is that Bridget never wavered in her faithful trust in God. Despite the fact that she witnessed few concrete results after nearly three decades of effort, she persevered in obedience and trusted God's calling for her. Pope Gregory XI eventually made his solemn reentry into Rome on January 17, 1377, four years after Bridget's death, and while she did not witness the historic event in her own lifetime, she never doubted God's word that it would eventually come to be. Bridget of Sweden reminds us that although we may not always see God's promises entirely fulfilled in our own lifetime, the contributions we make in faith and trust are a necessary and important part of his ultimate plan.¹²

3

Julian of Norwich

“And All Shall Be Well”

(c. 1342–c. 1416)



The solemn group processed to the cell as the final notes of the somber requiem hung in the air. Making the sign of the cross, the bishop blessed the space and led the woman inside, sprinkling ashes over her head and shoulders and scattering them across the cold, stone floor. Then, leaving the woman inside the tiny, barren room, he stepped across the threshold, shutting the heavy wooden door behind him and bolting the lock from the outside. Julian of Norwich, the woman who remained alone behind the locked door, would spend more than forty years in the small room, crossing the threshold only one time—when her corpse was carried over it to the grave.

The Life of an anchoress

Julian of Norwich was a medieval anchoress—a holy woman who sequestered herself in order to devote her entire life to God. The practice of such extreme solitude was rooted in the traditions of the fourth-century Desert Fathers, who retreated from the cities to live alone in poverty and austerity in order to nurture a deep connection with God. The English word *anchorite* is derived from the Greek verb meaning “to retire.” An anchoress literally retired from the world, sealing herself into a small enclosure, called an anchorhold, which was usually adjacent or connected to the village church. The rite of enclosure, with the sprinkling of dust, the final blessings, and the bolting of the door, symbolized the death of the anchoress—she was considered dead to the world, entombed with Christ.¹

The anchoress, though confined, was not entirely secluded. Julian's anchorhold had at least two windows, as was typically the case. One window opened to the inside of the chapel so that she could follow the daily Mass and receive Holy Communion. A second window opened to either the outside or a parlor so that the anchoress could counsel visitors who sought her guidance. And then finally the door opened to a separate room in which a servant stayed. (This room was connected to the outside world so the servant could come and go.) The servant was responsible for the real-world necessities of the anchoress—cooking, cleaning, emptying the chamber pot

that moment all of my pain left me, and I was as sound, particularly in the upper part of my body, as ever I was before or since.”³ Julian concluded that she was experiencing a miraculous relief from the pain in death, and those around her assumed she was on the verge of dying as well. At one point, her mother, thinking her daughter had passed, reached out to close her eyes.

But Julian didn’t die. Instead, over a period of days, she experienced a series of sixteen visions, which she would later refer to

crucifixion—was, as Julian understood it, the supreme manifestation of God’s love.

Julian’s liberal theology was far from typical for the time, but her status as an anchoress protected her from accusations of heresy. While many of her contemporaries argued that the Black Death was a sign of God’s punishment of the wicked, Julian believed in a broader, more merciful theology, suggesting that God demonstrated only love, never wrath, for his people. Julian even applied her understanding of God’s love to sin

accept that a concrete answer couldn't always be uncovered, and that God's proclamations required faith rather than a practical, rational understanding.

You Will Not Be Overcome

Julian wrestled with and contemplated the meaning of her visions over her entire lifetime, and *The Revelations of Divine Love* was her attempt to communicate God's message to her fellow Christians. Although many questions remained unanswered, Julian's conclusion—her final words in *The Revelations*—offered light and hope:

And this word: Thou shalt not be overcome, was said full clearly and full mightily, for assuredness and comfort against all tribulations that may come. He said not: Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be afflicted; but He said: Thou shalt not be overcome. God willeth that we take heed to these words, and that we be ever strong in sure trust, in weal and woe. For He loveth and enjoyeth us, and so willeth He that we love and enjoy Him and mightily trust in Him; and all shall be well.⁹

While she didn't always find a concrete answer, especially to her questions about the existence of sin and suffering, she did offer a convicting example of the depth and breadth of God's love—words as deeply compelling to modern readers as they were to her contemporaries more than five hundred years ago.¹⁰

4

Catherine of Siena

A Holy Resolution of the Heart

(1347–1380)



When she was twelve years old, Catherine Benincasa's parents began to make arrangements for her, their youngest of twenty-four children, to be married. Catherine, however, had other plans. Unbeknownst to them, she had taken a private vow of chastity five years earlier, and she had every intention of entering the convent and dedicating her life to Christ.

"It would be easier to melt a stone than to tear this holy resolution out of my heart," Catherine told her parents. "You only waste time in trying to fight against it."¹ Her parents were devastated. But after they'd both wept bitterly over Catherine's fierce declaration, her father, Giacomo, surprised everyone by acquiescing to his daughter's resolution. "My dearest daughter, it is far from us to set ourselves against the will of God in any way, and it is from Him that your purpose comes," he told Catherine. "Keep your promise and live as the Holy Spirit tells you to live. We shall never disturb you again in your life of prayer and devotion, or try to tempt you from your sacred work."² He then warned his wife and children not to lay any obstacles in Catherine's spiritual path.

Giacomo, a dye-maker, arranged a small space for Catherine near his workrooms in the basement of their home, a place where she could be quiet amid the bustle of a busy house. Catherine used a wood plank for a bed and a wooden log for a pillow. A few stone steps led from the 10-by-16-foot room to a small, barred window that overlooked the narrow lane behind the Benincasa home. Catherine spent three years in this cell, emerging only to attend early morning Mass at the Dominican church in the village.

herself with an iron chain three times a day—once for her sins, once for the sins of all living people, and once for the souls in purgatory—as was the custom of her spiritual father, Saint Dominic. Catherine’s mother, Lapa, appalled by her daughter’s extreme self-denial and punishment, tried every means possible to subdue her, but her efforts were futile. In the tradition of the Desert Fathers, whom she had read so much about in her youth, Catherine’s underground cell-like chamber became her desert. She was steadfast and immovable in her

In 1376 Catherine traveled from Siena to Avignon to visit Pope Gregory in person. Though without education, wealth, or rank, she entered the palace confidently and spoke to the pope through an interpreter, exhorting Gregory to lay aside his own self-interest and return to Rome. “Do not be a boy, be a man,” Catherine boldly cajoled him.⁵ Her rhetoric, though risky, was ultimately successful. Several weeks after her visit, Pope Gregory sailed from Avignon to Genoa, where he stalled, hesitant and fearful, unwilling to continue to Rome until he spoke with

The fact that a woman served as a political envoy during this tumultuous time is nothing short of astounding. Her letters—more than three hundred of which have been preserved and published—illustrate her fierce determination and fearless conviction, as well as her savvy negotiation skills and her ability to influence even the most fiery and powerful political figures of the time. It was no secret that Pope Urban VI was a difficult man, prone to volatile and even violent outbursts. Catherine's ability to appease yet also persuade Pope Urban VI, as well as dozens of other high-level officials, is a remarkable testament to her steely determination and her peacemaking skills.</

standard valediction: “Sweet Jesus, Jesus love.”⁹ Three months later she died, praying audibly until the last moment for the church and Pope Urban VI.

Today Catherine is honored as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church and is remembered for her numerous contributions to Christianity, including her voluminous and articulate letters, her mystical revelations from God, and her unique ability to influence the most powerful political and religious men of the time. Even beyond her historical contributions, though, we admire Catherine of Siena for her strong-willed determination, her courage, and her obedience to God, no matter what the cost. God instructed his disciple to go forth without fear. Catherine never wavered in heeding that command.¹⁰

5

Margery Kempe

Medieval Memoirist

(c. 1373–c. 1438)



In 1934, when Colonel William Butler-Bowdon discovered an original manuscript crushed amid the historic volumes in the library of his English country house, he suspected he had uncovered a rare treasure. Little did he know that the pages he had pulled from the stacks would come to be considered the first autobiography ever written in the English language. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, lost for centuries before it was unearthed in the colonel's family library, was dictated in the early fifteenth century to two scribes by the illiterate Margery Kempe—daughter of an English mayor and Parliament member, wife of a medieval merchant, and mother to fourteen children.

Not Forsaken

Margery Kempe's narrative opens with a description of her difficult first pregnancy. Gravely ill and fearing imminent death, she summoned a priest to hear her confession. The problem, however, was that Margery hid a deep secret of a sin so atrocious she was unable to bring herself to confess it to her priest. Fearing eternal damnation as the result of her unconfessed sin, Margery was overcome by hallucinations. As images of fire-breathing devils tortured her day and night, she threatened to commit suicide, thrashing in the bed and scratching and biting herself so violently that her husband tied her to the bedposts for weeks at a time. Then, almost as abruptly as the delusions began, Christ appeared to Margery. Clad in purple silk, he sat on the edge of her bed and gently asked her, "Daughter, why hast thou forsaken me, and I forsook never thee?"¹ Before she

could answer, he ascended to heaven on a beam of light, leaving Margery with a profound sense of peace and joy, as well as the desire to devote her life fully to God. This was the first of many visions Margery experienced over her lifetime.

Margery Kempe considered herself a mystic first and foremost, even above her duties as a mother and a wife. Although she bore fourteen children, she eventually negotiated a bishop-sanctioned vow of chastity with her husband after sexual relations with him became

As a woman traveling without the protection of her husband, Margery also faced the unique threat of abandonment by her fellow travelers. In short, her constant chatter about religion, her pious refusal to eat meat or drink wine, and her frequent fainting and prolific tears of devotion irritated her companions. After weeks of friction and frayed patience, the group parted ways in Constance, Italy, at the foot of the Alps. Margery was left with only one companion, a feeble, elderly man whom she paid to accompany her over the formidable

Margery's violent spiritual outbursts and the fact that she dressed all in white like a nun, despite that she was officially still a married woman, drew the attention of the public and both church and government officials. She was accused of being a Lollard, part of the group who proclaimed the Catholic Church to be corrupt and advocated for the reduction of the priests' authority in favor of an emphasis on Scripture alone.

En route from a pilgrimage in

Margery was familiar with the medieval tradition of monks, priests, nuns, and other holy people who left a record of their lives as a testament of their faith. Aspiring to follow in their footsteps on her way toward possible sainthood, Margery embarked on a similar project after hearing directly from God that he approved of her writing. “‘Dread you not, daughter. . . . He who writes pleases me right much,’” wrote Margery in Book One. “‘You should not please me more than you do with your writing, for daughter, by this book many a man shall be turned to me

6

Katharina Luther

The Deeper Story

(1499–1550)



The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once noted that Martin Luther might as well have married a wood plank. His point was that the famed leader of the Protestant Reformation had married Katharina von Bora for one reason only: to prove that he condoned clerical marriage. Katharina, according to Kierkegaard, was but one tiny plank in Luther's Reformation platform.¹

A closer look at Katharina's life and personality, however, reveals a deeper story. After all, Katharina was a nun who courageously abandoned the convent during one of the most tumultuous periods in Christian history. She was a woman who risked marrying one of the most controversial men of the time—a man who could have very likely been burned as a heretic at any given moment. She was a woman who raised six children; ran a boardinghouse; oversaw a working farm complete with fruit orchards, livestock, and a fish pond; and advised and cared for her husband, who was prone to illness and bouts of depression. Far from a mere plank in her husband's platform, Katharina von Bora was an integral part of the entire foundation.

Escape in a Herring Wagon

Little is known about Katharina's early life and childhood, including the exact date or place of her birth. Around the age of five, following the death of her mother, she was sent by her father to a Benedictine boarding school. Later, at age nine, she was placed in a Cistercian convent in Nimbschen, Germany. In 1515,

two years before Luther would nail his ninety-five theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Katharina officially became a nun at the age of sixteen.

By the 1520s Luther's Reformation writings had circulated around Germany and had even made their way into the convents and monasteries, inspiring a number of monks and nuns to rebel. On Easter Eve, April 5, 1523, Luther himself arranged for Katharina and eight other nuns to escape from the convent, hidden

heretic, she would likely receive the same punishment. And then there was the age difference to consider—with nearly twenty years between them, Katharina was aware that she would likely be left a widow, even if her husband didn't die prematurely as a religious heretic. In short, marrying Martin Luther in 1525 was not only a radical, controversial, history-altering decision on Katharina's part, it was also a courageous one.

kidney stones, and it was Luther's good fortune that his wife was exceedingly skilled in medicine. She often tweaked his diet to help alleviate his kidney stones, concocted herbal remedies and poultices to quell his depression, and used massage to ease his anxiety.

Katharina was also no ordinary housewife. The family lived in an abandoned monastery called the Black Cloister, where she raised not only her own six children

We might be tempted to diminish Katharina Luther's role in Christian history, either by overlooking her entirely or, at best, defining her, as Kierkegaard did, as nothing more than a tool Luther used to illustrate his convictions about clerical marriage. In doing so, though, we risk making a caricature of a woman who in reality was a courageous risk taker; an unsentimental, determined survivor; a savvy businesswoman; an astute advisor; a devoted wife and mother; and a woman of faith.

While she did not impact history in the public sphere as did many of the women included in this book, her legacy as the enterprising and loyal partner of Martin Luther should be acknowledged and celebrated. She may not get much credit in the history books, but Katharina Luther was an integral part of Martin Luther's success.

7

Teresa of Ávila

Afire with a Great Love for God

(1515–1582)



Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada had a penchant for fine clothes, and her expressive fashion complemented her vivacious personality. As a young woman she draped herself in decadent fabrics and jewels, from glittering earrings, enormous brooches, and opulent rings to rich silks and exquisite lace. With her hair elaborately coiffed in the latest style and her body scented in perfume, she often spent her evenings on the town, dancing and reveling with her friends and suitors. She was equal parts effusive and temperamental, depending on the day or the hour. She also loved laughter, frivolity, gossip, and entertainment; relished lively music; and enjoyed an appetite for good food as well as the good life —“There is a time for penance, and a time for partridge,” she once quipped.¹ More than anything, she craved attention and was often at the center of it.

As difficult as it is to reconcile this Teresa (bold, beautiful, materialistic, and vain) with the perception of Teresa of Ávila (mystic, Carmelite nun, theologian, and saint), the two are indeed one and the same. So the question is, how was this fashionista socialite transformed into a faithful saint?

Wrestling Demons

Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada was born in 1515 in Gotarrendura, Spain, the daughter of Alonso Sanchez de Cepeda and Alonso’s second wife, Beatriz. She was one of twelve children in the wealthy, prestigious de Cepeda family, and she

servants, and a home filled with intricate Flemish tapestries and carpets, wrought-iron chandeliers, and stately oak furniture.

Although Teresa was inclined toward the frivolous, she had a deeper, more troubled side as well. As a young girl of seven, she pored over the pages of the *Flos Sanctorum*, a popular collection of stories about the saints and martyrs. Convinced it would be more expeditious to martyr herself

conversations with him. “I began to grasp that truth which I had heard as a child, that all is nothing, and that the world is vanity and on the verge of ending,” she wrote. “And I began to be afraid that if I had died right then, I would have gone to hell. Even though I couldn’t make myself want to become a nun, I saw that was the best and safest thing to do; and so, little by little, I decided to bully myself into doing it.”³

drew it out I thought he was drawing them out with it, and he left me completely afire with a great love of God.”⁶

The problem, of course, was that some church officials suspected that Teresa’s raptures were the work of the devil, or worse, her attempt to commune directly with God. In these years following the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church was highly suspicious of even remotely unorthodox behavior—they didn

Church officials doubted Teresa's divine visions, insisting instead that she was possessed by the devil. And the Inquisition itself came knocking more than once at Teresa's convents, demanding to inspect documents and threatening excommunication and imprisonment. In 1576 she was forced to "retire" to St. Joseph's convent in Toledo, and it was only after three years and several pleading letters to King Philip II of Spain that the investigation of her and other reformers was finally dropped.

Numerous essays and biographies about Teresa of Ávila attest to her rich and fruitful legacy as a heroine of the Christian faith. More than four hundred years after her death, she continues to be lauded as a relentless and courageous reformer, saint, writer, theologian, and mystic. Yet beyond the convents she founded and the words she wrote is perhaps an even greater legacy and an example for modern-day Christians.

As it turns out, Teresa of Ávila was not much different from us. Wooed by worldly pursuits and conflicted over what direction her life should take, she turned to God in desperation and slowly learned to listen to and obey him. She struggled with some of the same temptations and sins we struggle with today and was frustrated with what she saw as her flaws and shortcomings. Yet she persevered in prayer, despite the fact that it initially did not come easily to her. Through practice and persistence Teresa learned to connect with God on a progressively deeper level, and when she finally heard his voice amid the cacophony of other distractions, she heeded him. God, in turn, transformed Teresa of Ávila from a woman distracted by the world to a woman who changed it.⁸

8

Anne Askew

More Than a Martyr

(1521–1546)



The woman who stood shivering next to the rack in the dank, cold cell was given one last chance to recant. Name the others who believe as you do, she was told, and you will walk away unharmed. Refusing to utter a word, she was stripped to her cotton shift and forced to climb onto the rectangular wooden frame, where her wrists and ankles were bound with ropes and fastened to the rollers.

The woman was quiet at first as the Lord Chancellor Thomas Wriothesley and Sir Richard Rich, a member of King Henry VIII's council, slowly began to crank the ratchet. But as tension increased on the ropes, a loud popping noise echoed throughout the chamber, the sound of cartilage and ligaments snapping as her limbs were pulled in opposite directions. First moaning and then screaming, the woman finally fainted from the pain, her body pulled so violently that it was stretched taut, suspended five inches over the rack itself. By the time the torture was halted, her shoulders and hips had been pulled from their sockets, her knees and elbows dislocated, her muscles stretched beyond repair. She was now permanently disabled, and still she had not uttered a single name.

Her torturers ordered her removed from the rack and carried back to her prison cell. Seventeen days later, on July 16, 1546, Anne Askew, age twenty-five, was burned at the stake as a heretic.

A Gentlewoman Turned Rebel

Born the daughter of a knighted member of Parliament and a high sheriff of Lincolnshire, Anne Askew could have slipped easily and unnoticeably into a life of leisure and wealth. Although almost nothing is known about her childhood, one can surmise from her in-depth knowledge of Scripture and her writing ability that Anne was most likely well educated and affluent. As English professor Elaine Beilin notes, Anne Askew “could have lived a prosperous, conventional life as a gentlewoman in Lincolnshire, England. Instead, she broke

Today Anne Askew is considered a Protestant martyr, best known as the only woman on record to have been both tortured in the Tower of London and burned at the stake. In fact, a 1998 episode of the Learning Channel's *Tales from the Tower* focused almost exclusively on those aspects of her character, highlighting her gruesome racking and burning at the expense of the bigger picture. "Askew's *Examinations* has been fragmented and fished for the parts needed to shape the reinvention of Anne Askew as required for hagiography, ballad, sermon, novel—or television episode," Beilin observes.⁹

The truth is, there's much more to Anne Askew than her macabre demise. To overlook her contributions as a writer, an eloquent speaker, and a woman of faith in favor of the dramatic, grisly details of her death does her a grave disservice. Anne Askew wrote and spoke eloquently and convincingly about her convictions, and more importantly, she lived out those convictions until her dying day. While we twenty-first-century women need not fear death at the stake for proclaiming our faith, we would do well to ask ourselves a simple question: Would we be willing to declare our faith with even an iota of the courage and conviction of Anne Askew?

9

Anne Hutchinson

The Perseverance of a Puritan Preacher

(1591–1643)



The judges filed silently into the crowded meetinghouse on a chilly Tuesday in 1637 and sat knee to knee on wooden benches at the front of the hall. They were followed by eight somber, black-robed ministers who would serve as witnesses in the trial. The last judge to enter the hall, Massachusetts Bay Colony Governor John Winthrop, sat primly in the cushioned chair before the benches, and with a sharp rap of his gavel on the desk, he quieted the unruly crowd as he called the defendant forward.

Dressed in a long black cloak, a white linen smock laid over her black dress and petticoat, and a white coif covering her neatly plaited hair, the forty-six-year-old mother stood alone, without an attorney or an advisor. In the early stages of pregnancy with her sixteenth child, she might have been any other Puritan woman in seventeenth-century New England. But despite her pious, maternal appearance, Anne Hutchinson was considered by many on that dank November day to be an imminent danger to the Massachusetts Bay Colony: a witch, an instrument of Satan, and a heretic. And forty male judges were poised to put her back in her place.

A Puritan Preacher Is Born (Who Just So Happens to Be a Woman)

Anne Hutchinson was born Anne Marbury in Alford, Lincolnshire, England, in 1591, the daughter of Francis Marbury and Bridget Dryden. An Anglican pastor

with strong Puritan leanings, Francis was imprisoned for two years and placed under house arrest for his outspoken criticism of what he considered the clergy's lack of suitable education. During his years of house arrest, Francis taught his children, including his daughters, despite the fact that education was almost exclusively offered only to boys and men during that time. Although he died suddenly at the age of fifty-five, Francis Marbury left an indelible mark on his nineteen-year-old daughter, Anne. She would carry on her father's questioning nature, his contempt for authority

views on religion, arguing that an “intuition of the Spirit,” rather than good works, was the only valid evidence that one was chosen by God for eternal salvation.

Anne’s Puritan theology had its foundation in the basic tenets of Calvinism, which maintained that salvation is God’s free gift, a gift that humans cannot attain through rituals or good works. But in advocating the practice of reading the Bible in the vernacular, meditating on

through verses in Isaiah and Daniel, Anne gathered steam, concluding her testimonial with this emphatic declaration:

Therefore, take heed how you proceed against me, for you have no power over my body. Neither can you do me harm, for I am in the hands of the eternal Jehovah my Savior. I am at his appointment. The bounds of my habitation are cast in Heaven. No further do I esteem of any mortal man than creatures in his hand. I fear none but

Amsterdam (what is now northern Bronx, New York). She was eager for a fresh start, especially for her youngest children, and was relieved to find that she and her extended family were the only English settlers in the newly formed Dutch colony.

The Hutchinsons and the Dutch families lived side by side but culturally distanced from one another. They didn't speak the same language or share the same customs, and while Anne's neighbors viewed her as harmless—they

steadfast in her faith and convictions, convinced that she had the right and the authority as a believer to communicate directly with God.

Today a bronze statue of Anne Hutchinson, her eyes lifted toward heaven, her arm encircling a young girl, stands in front of the Massachusetts State House in Boston. “Courageous exponent of civil liberty and religious toleration,” reads the inscription on the marble pediment. A number of other memorials in Rhode Island and New York, as well as the Hutchinson River and Hutchinson River Parkway in New York, are named in her honor and testify to her legacy and contributions. Yet the most telling testimony of Anne’s legacy isn’t inscribed on a memorial or echoed in the name of a busy highway or a meandering river. It’s in the example of her steadfast conviction, her determination, and her unwavering faith in God. Anne Hutchinson sacrificed her own life for the right of religious freedom, a right most of us take for granted today.

10

Anne Bradstreet

Colonial Kindred Spirit

(1612–1672)



One hundred passengers pressed against the rails of the *Arbella* to catch their first sight of the New World. As they breathed in the sweet scent that breezed from the shore, they glimpsed a pigeon soaring over the ship's deck, the first sign in sixty-two days that life existed beyond the roiling waves. Three days later, on June 12, 1630, the sea-weary travelers disembarked to survey their new home: Salem plantation, three thousand miles from their native England. Anne Bradstreet, seventeen years old and newly married, was one of many who stepped foot on the foreign shore. As she stood in the mud amid her family's crates and trunks, her heart sank at the desolate sight.

It's easy to understand her dismay. Anne's life in Northampton, England, had been one of comfort and leisure. Her father, Thomas Dudley, had been employed as a steward to the Earl of Lincoln; her mother, Dorothy, was a woman of noble birth. As a young girl, Anne had lived in a large, comfortable home, complete with numerous servants to handle most of the domestic chores. She had enjoyed afternoon tea, whiled away the hours browsing her father's personal library full of hundreds of books, and occupied herself with a bustling social life.

Compare that cultured existence to what Anne glimpsed as she stepped from the *Arbella* onto the shore of the New World. The primitive settlement consisted of about forty crude dwellings, only a third of which resembled actual houses. They were constructed of roughly hewn oak frames and pine boards. They had thatched roofs, oil-paper windows, and wattle-and-daub chimneys made from woven strips of wood bound with a sticky mixture of dirt, sand

into hillsides or “English wigwams,” tent-like structures made with pliant branches and covered with boughs.

Life for the colonial settlers was fraught with discomfort, sickness, and death. Summers seared hot, while winters were frigid and damp. Few of the colonists were as fortunate as Anne and her family, who did not lose any immediate family members. Hundreds of settlers died of illness, scurvy, and starvation during the first year, and hundreds more retreated to England, disheartened by the crippling illnesses, grinding homesickness, and unrelenting hunger and cold.

Because Salem village was overcrowded and provisions were in short supply, some of the newly arrived colonists, including Anne, her husband, Simon, and her parents and siblings, relocated to Charlestown, near the mouth of the Charles River. However, Charlestown was quickly deemed unsuitable, and Anne, her family, and a group of other colonists eventually moved to Newtown, a few miles up the Charles River. There, in her second year in Newtown, Anne fell gravely ill with a “lingering sickness like consumption,” which, she later wrote in her private memoirs, she believed to be “a correction I saw the Lord sent to humble and try me and do me Good: and it was not altogether ineffectual.”¹ When she recovered, Anne wrote what’s now considered one of her earliest poems, entitled “Upon a Fit of Sickness”: Twice ten years old not fully told since nature gave me breath,

My race is run, my thread spun,
lo, here is fatal death.
All men must die, and so must I;
this cannot be revoked.
For Adam’s sake this word God spake
when he so high provoked.
Yet live I shall, this life’s but small, in place of highest bliss,
Where I shall have all I can crave,
no life is like to this.
For what’s this but care and strife
since first we came from womb?
Our strength doth waste, our time doth haste, and then we go to th’ tomb.
O bubble blast, how long can’s’t last?
that always art a breaking,
No sooner blown, but dead and gone,
ev’n as a word that’s speaking.
O whilst I live this grace me give,
I doing good may be,
Then death’s arrest I shall count best, because it’s Thy decree;
Bestow much cost there’s nothing lost, to make salvation sure,
O great’s the gain, though got with pain, comes by

Stepping-Stone Poetry These early attempts at verse are not considered her best work. Described as “technically amateurish” and “remarkably impersonal even by Puritan standards,”³ the poetry was less an expression of Anne’s day-to-day experiences in the settlement than, as poet Adrienne Rich points out, “a last compulsive effort to stay in contact with the history, traditions, and values of her former world.” Yet these early poems are a

lure of worldly temptations, and she accepted her recurring illnesses, fevers, and fainting spells as God's way of reforming her and redirecting her spiritual course. In a 1657 journal entry Anne writes about her physical suffering, noting, "I trust it is out of His abundant love to my straying soul which in prosperity is too much in love with the world."⁶

That there is a God, I see. If ever this God hath revealed himself, it must be in His word, and this must be it or none.”⁹

Likewise Anne struggled with her religious denomination, wondering aloud whether the “Popish religion” (Catholicism) might in fact be the “right” one. The Catholics have the same God, the same Jesus, and the same Scriptures, she observed, but they interpret it all a bit differently. Then again, she decided, their “vain fooleries,” “lying miracles,” and “cruel persecutions of the saints”¹⁰ were enough to turn her back toward Protestantism.

By the conclusion of the confessional letter to her children, Anne reported that she had largely overcome her spiritual conflicts. “I have not known what to think,” she wrote, “but then I have remembered the works of Christ that so it must be . . . and I can now say, ‘Return, O my Soul, to thy rest, upon this rock Christ Jesus will I build my faith.’”¹¹ Despite the letter’s positive conclusion, though, Anne’s admissions would have been considered blasphemous by many of her fellow Puritans, including her father, who was, as White notes, a “staunch condemner of anything that suggested a ‘toleration.’”¹²

The fact that Anne laid out her struggles so honestly in this heartfelt letter to her children is a testament to her search for truth, as well as her conviction that her faith—as well as her children’s, should they struggle in the same way—would prevail over doubt. It’s clear that Anne endeavored to offer her children solace and hope on their own faith journey and was willing to risk being deemed a heretic, should it come to that, in order to speak truthfully about the fact that faith did not always come easily to her.

Anne Bradstreet lived four hundred years before us, and she faced trials and hardships we will never live or understand. Yet she is also a real, relatable woman who walked through many of the same spiritual questions we grapple with four centuries later. As she poured her heart into the pages of her journal in poetry and prose, we see ourselves—our own questions, our own doubts, our own hopes—reflected in her authentic words. And just as she offered her sage and honest advice to her children, so that they “may gain some spiritual advantage by [her] experience,”¹³ we too can find comfort and hope, as well as a kindred spirit, in Anne Bradstreet.

11

Margaret Fell

“I Shall Stand for God and Truth”

(1614–1702)



Rumors flew as the traveling preacher made his way over the craggy landscape toward Swarthmoor in northern England. Margaret Fell, mistress of Swarthmoor Hall, was eager to meet the man who was said to have founded a brand-new religion. Two days later, as George Fox stood on a pew in the parish church and preached, Margaret rose to her feet in amazement. Then, as Fox rebuked those who understood the Scriptures only for themselves, without the illumination of the Spirit of Christ, she sank back into the pew, crying bitterly. “This opened me so, that it cut me to the heart; and I saw clearly that we were all wrong,” Margaret wrote later. “I cried in my spirit to the Lord, ‘We are all thieves; we are all thieves; we have taken the Scriptures in words, and know nothing of them ourselves.’”¹

That pivotal moment in the church pew was the beginning of a half-century of work for the Quaker Fellowship—work that would bring Margaret Fell to the royal court of King Charles II, as well as to the prison dungeons of Lancaster Gaol.

A People of Peace

Before she committed herself to the Quaker movement, Margaret needed to address an urgent domestic concern. Her husband, Judge Thomas Fell, had been traveling during Fox’s visit, and as he made his way home from London, he was intercepted by the parish rector and several neighborhood friends, who warned him that his wife and children had been bewitched by a traveling preacher during

his absence. Startled and angered by this disturbing accusation, Fell hurried home to Swarthmoor Hall to confront his wife. That night during dinner, with all seven children silently gathered around the table, Margaret described her conversion experience to her husband.

After Fell spoke with Fox himself, he was somewhat appeased, but not enough to abandon the Anglican Church. Instead, he allowed his

Gloucester, via letters, in which she explained in detail why the Quakers refused to take oaths. She also wrote a paper entitled “A Declaration and an Information from Us the People of God Called Quakers,” which was delivered to the king. It was the first document to proclaim the Quakers’ belief in peace and their refusal to use weapons for any purpose:

We are a people that follow after those things that make for peace,

Exasperated, one of the justices called out, “Mistress Fell, you may with a good conscience (if you cannot take the oath) put in security, that you will have not more Meetings at your house.”⁵

When she adamantly refused to cease holding the Quaker Meetings in her home, the clerk held the Bible out to her a final time, urging her

Though the Lord had provided a habitation for him, yet he was not willing to stay at it, because it was so remote and far from London where his service most lay. And my concern for God and his holy eternal truth was then in the north, where God had placed and set me; and likewise for the ordering and governing of my children and family; so that we were willing both of us to live apart for some years upon God's account and his truth's service, and to deny ourselves of that comfort which we might have had in being together, for the sake and service of the Lord and his truth.⁸

In fact, the couple was apart so often, Margaret saw her husband only once in the six months preceding his death in 1691. She received the news of Fox's death by letter from London. "A prince had fallen today in Israel," wrote fellow Quaker and longtime friend William Penn.⁹

Distance wasn't the only difficulty associated with Margaret's second marriage. Her only son, George, had deeply opposed the union. He was adamantly against Quakerism and resented George Fox for converting his mother. He had suffered bitterly during her long imprisonment in Lancaster, and his hostility increased after he married and became a father himself—so much, in fact, that he was instrumental in his mother's second imprisonment in Lancaster Castle. George accused his mother of breaking the Conventicle Act of 1664, which forbade religious meetings comprised of five or more people outside the auspices of the Church of England. As the result of her only son's vicious accusations, Margaret spent 1670 to 1671 imprisoned once again.

For God and Truth Till the End

In her eighty-eight years, Margaret Fell never put herself, nor anyone else, before her God. Not a single person ever swayed her from her service and loyalty to the Lord—not a judge nor a jury; not the king nor his council; not even her own children, who watched their mother led to prison twice for her refusal to compromise her beliefs. Still writing just five months before her death in 1702, Margaret renewed her commitment to the Religious Society of Friends and to God. "I give this my testimony, while I breathe upon the earth," she wrote, "that I shall stand for God and Truth."¹⁰ From the moment she rose to her feet in church until the moment she breathed her last, Margaret Fell remained faithful to the tenets of Quakerism. She had indeed stood strong and resiliently "for God and Truth."

12

Susanna Wesley

More Than the Mother of Methodism

(1669–1742)



Susanna Wesley stepped down from the coach and stood in the yard, absorbing the village and landscape around her. She spotted the tiny church across the field where her husband, Samuel, would preach on Sundays. She observed a handful of rustic village homes; the flat, wind-beaten land; the scraggly reeds springing from muddy ditches and a few ravaged trees bent in the distance. A thick mist had settled over the barren fields. Susanna then turned and crossed the threshold of the rectory, the modest home where she would bear nineteen children, raise ten of them to maturity, and spend the next thirty-nine years of her life.

Country Life and Problem Parishioners

Susanna Wesley's new life as the wife of a pastor in rural Epworth, England, was a far cry from her upbringing in London. Born the youngest of twenty-five children, she was educated at home, and although she never attended college or even boarding school, she was raised a gentlewoman, with many of her lessons supplemented by the intellectual atmosphere encouraged by her father, a prominent London pastor. Dr. Annesley frequently entertained theological scholars in his home, and one such scholar was Samuel Wesley, whom Susanna married in 1689 at age nineteen.

Life in rural Epworth was difficult for the Wesleys. A rigid, moralistic pastor with a penchant for fiery rhetoric, Samuel did not connect well with his uneducated parishioners, who viewed him with suspicion as an outsider. Indeed, the city-born and city-bred Samuel was an inept farmer who also proved himself

13

Hannah More

Setting the Stage for Sunday School

(1745–1833)



She stood in the back of the church, her lace veil shielding her tears, a bouquet wilting in her hands. The guests shifted in the pews, murmuring to one another and turning to glance over their shoulders at the bride waiting nervously at the end of the aisle. After stalling for what seemed like hours, the bride's family finally told the guests to go home. Clearly the groom was not going to show up. Again.

Hannah More was jilted at the church altar not once but three times—each time by the same suitor, a man by the name of William Turner. After the third no-show, a humiliated and heartbroken Hannah fled to the English countryside to recover, vowing she would never consider marriage again. There was, however, a silver lining in the disaster. The fickle groom compensated Hannah for her distress with a lifetime annuity of two hundred pounds, enough to ensure her financial independence. At the time, Hannah likely could not have imagined or foreseen the impact this love loss would have on her life, not only as a famous English playwright, but also as a Christian writer, an evangelist, and a philanthropist.

A Fame Turned Sour

Unlike most fathers of the time, Jacob More believed in the education of women and thus taught his five daughters, including his fourth-born, Hannah, a wide variety of subjects, from the basics of reading and writing to the more traditionally masculine pursuits of Latin and mathematics. Hannah wrote her

deeper, more spiritual level. “Action is the life of virtue, and the world is the theatre of action,” she once wrote.¹³ While she yearned to make her mark on the world, Hannah was interested in a particular kind of influence—not simply as a famous playwright who wrote about virtue and godliness but as a woman who actually lived it. What Hannah More didn’t realize was that her life of virtue would have such a lasting impact more than two centuries after her death.

14

Phillis Wheatley

'Twas Mercy

(1753–1784)



The slender teenager stood before eighteen of the most prominent, powerful, and respected men in colonial Boston—among them Massachusetts governor Thomas Hutchinson, Lieutenant Governor Andrew Oliver, statesman John Hancock, and Reverend Charles Chauncy. Altogether the esteemed group was comprised of seven ordained ministers, three poets, six government officials, and several key figures in the battle for independence. They were gathered for one reason: to determine whether the shy, young girl was, as she claimed, the legitimate author of the twenty-eight poems she clutched in her hands. The men in the room, along with most of Boston's literate public, doubted the girl's literary authenticity. After all, as an African slave, she was considered intellectually inferior and incapable of writing such high-caliber poetry.

As she stood poised before the tribunal, the girl prepared herself to endure an oral examination that would not only determine the course of her own life and work but also impact an entire race. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. noted, "The stakes . . . were as high as they could get for an oral exam. She [was] on trial and so [was] her race."¹ Furthermore, as Gates noted, the "jury" wasn't exactly an association for the advancement of colored people. Not only were the eighteen men assembled arguably the most highly educated and powerful men in Boston at the time, but the majority owned slaves. One even worked as a slave dealer.

No transcript of the exchange between the tribunal and the poet exists, so we can't know for sure the nature of the examination or the questions that were asked that day. But we do know this: at the examination's conclusion, Phillis Wheatley walked out with a certificate of authentication signed by all eighteen

elegy on the death of a neighbor. She was allowed access to a dictionary and was given a place to write, where she studied her favorite authors, including Alexander Pope and Homer and Ovid in translation. As Carretta observes, “The education Phillis Wheatley received . . . would have been very impressive for a white man of high social standing at the time.”⁵

“The Most Reviled Poem in African-American Literature”

As an ardent Congregationalist, Susanna Wheatley felt obligated to introduce Phillis to Christianity, and she dealt with her slave’s spiritual education as conscientiously as she did that of her own two children. Phillis was baptized in 1771 and subsequently came to believe that God’s providence included the enslavement of Africans, a view that infuriated African Americans in the twentieth century, particularly during the 1960s and ’70s.

“Let us rejoice in and adore the wonders of God’s infinite Love in bringing us from a land Semblant of darkness itself, and there the divine light of revelation (being obscur’d) is as darkness,” Phillis wrote to her friend and fellow native African Obour Tanner in 1772. “Here the knowledge of the true God and eternal life are made manifest; But there, profound ignorance overshadows the Land. . . . Many of our fellow creatures are pass’d by, when the bowels of divine love expanded toward us. May this goodness & long Suffering of God lead us to unfeign’d repentance.”⁶

Phillis’s best-known poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” was written when she was fourteen years old and has been called “the most reviled poem in African-American literature.”⁷ The eight-line poem follows the argument she made in the letter to Tanner—namely, that it was God’s mercy that brought her as a slave from Africa to America, subsequently allowing her the opportunity to know Jesus:

’Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew,
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
“Their colour is a diabolic die.”
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,

Phillis Wheatley's life as a Christian seems overshadowed by her historic contributions as an African American poet. But think for a moment about her thirty-one years. Wrenched from her home and family at seven years old, she endured inconceivable atrocities on the long voyage from Africa to America, arriving naked, half alive, alone, and terrified, to be sold like an animal to strangers in a land where she couldn't speak a word of the language and knew not a soul. She served as a slave, was considered nothing more than a piece of property, and was forced to defend her intelligence before a group of white men who defined her as an "uncultivated barbarian." Yet in spite of the profound suffering and humiliation she endured, Phillis Wheatley praised God as good—a God of kindness, mercy, and love. Given similar circumstances, how many Christians would stand as firmly as she did, with their trust in God's benevolence unshaken?¹⁵

15

Elizabeth Fry

Quaker Prison Reformer

(1780–1845)



It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dimness, but when they did, she was astonished by what she saw. Nearly three hundred women were packed into two rooms, most of them in tattered rags, their hair matted, faces streaked with grime. Some were attempting to cook in the cramped quarters, while others hunched over buckets of dirty water, trying to do their washing. Many sprawled motionless on the filthy straw. As the stench of unwashed bodies filled the frigid air, the woman struggled to resist the urge to hold a handkerchief over her nose. Babies screamed, and as she stood there surveying the scene, she watched as two prisoners stripped off the clothes from a dead infant to clothe a baby still living.

Elizabeth Fry left London's Newgate Prison that day, went home, bathed, and changed into fresh clothing. The next day she returned, this time with armloads of flannel baby clothes, blankets, and clean, thick straw. She and a friend distributed the supplies, comforted the mothers, and helped to dress the babies in warm flannel. Her lifelong ministry as a prison reformer had begun.

Transformation

Elizabeth wasn't an obvious candidate for such grueling work. She was considered "delicate" as a child, and illness, anxiety, and depression plagued her from youth through her old age. She suffered from nervousness, stomach upset, and relentless toothaches, symptoms that isolated her from both her peers and her siblings, who also found her socially awkward and withdrawn. After her mother's death when Elizabeth was thirteen, the young girl's self-isolation

16

Jarena Lee

The Power to Speak

(1783–?)



The young woman leapt to her feet before she even realized what she was doing. Standing at her place in the pews, she interrupted the bishop's sermon on Jonah and began to preach on the text herself. As the bishop stood speechless in the pulpit, the church members turned to gape at the woman preaching from the pews. When she was finished, she collapsed into her seat, mortified by her own outburst and terrified that she would be immediately expelled from the church. Instead, to her surprise, the bishop turned to the bewildered congregation and claimed that Jarena Lee was called by the Lord to be a preacher.

The Lord's Handmaiden

Aside from the few details she provides in her own autobiography, not much is known about Jarena Lee's childhood. We know that she was born to free parents in Cape May, New Jersey, and was sent at the age of seven to work as a maid about sixty miles from her home. We know that she didn't see her parents again for fourteen years, and that Jarena saw her family only four times in her entire life. We don't know Jarena's maiden name, the names of her parents or siblings, or how she learned to read and write.

Despite the fact that her parents were irreligious, "wholly ignorant of the knowledge of God,"¹ Jarena's faith was strong. Her first order of business when she moved to Philadelphia at the age of twenty-one was to find a church. She tried a number of different denominations, but when she discovered the African Methodist Episcopal Church led by Reverend Richard Allen, Jarena felt

