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Scriptural Roots Grow Strong

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Scriptural Roots Grow Strong

For nearly 150 years the novel *Little Women* has stood tall on the bookshelves of many American households. What secret lies at the heart of this beautiful work that resonates with so many hearts? Why do so many people smile at Mr. March's letters, tune their ears to Marmee's wise counsel, and weep with the March family at the death of their beloved Beth? Something sets the March family apart, and yet that something also identifies this family with part of humanity. Undoubtedly, the March family's beliefs are based on the Bible, and their words of counsel seek to follow its commands. Throughout the novel, we read time and again of their desire to follow the Lord's instructions, and while they do not always call His name, they often quote His words. Surely, the Marches' undying roots of trust in God and His Word cause this story to grow strong in the hearts of many readers today.

In the first chapter of the novel, the March women receive a letter from Mr. March, relating some of the details of his life in the army and sending them encouraging reminders of what he has taught them. At the end of the letter he asks Mrs. March to "remind [the girls] that while we wait we may all work, so that these hard days need not be wasted. I know . . . that they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully . . . and conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women" (Alcott 17). The principles he discusses here display many values of Christian families of the time, and they derive much of their basis from the Bible. In two of his epistles Paul clearly

exhorts, “children, obey your parents” (*English Standard Version*, Eph. 6:1 and Col. 3:20) and Matthew commands us to “honor your father and mother” (Matt. 19:19). Therefore, Mr. March’s desire that the girls love their mother and fulfill their duties (to her and to others) relates closely to biblical commands for all believers. Additionally, his reminder for them all to work finds support in such passages as Proverbs 19:15 and 31:27, both of which praise and encourage hard work and diligence over idleness. Finally, his reference to conquering the self stems from the virtue of self-control, which is one of the fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23. Clearly, Mr. March desires his girls to follow fundamental Christian principles, and his encouragement for his daughters undoubtedly derives its message from the pages of Scripture.

Just a few pages later, Marmee also counsels and encourages her girls with wisdom from the Bible. As they are eagerly preparing for their Christmas breakfast, Marmee tells them of a nearby lower-class mother with six children, all of whom suffer from hunger and cold. With true bravery and generosity, Marmee asks “My girls, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present?” (Alcott 21). With surprisingly little hesitation, the girls agree and they all trek over to their neighbors’ to provide genuine love and charity for them. As they walk back to their home at the end of it all, Meg exclaims “That’s loving our neighbor better than ourselves, and I like it” (Alcott 22). This event shows the level to which Mr. and Mrs. March have raised their girls in the teaching of the Word, for their actions clearly represent obedience to Christ’s command to, as Meg said, “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). Additionally, James exhorts believers to “visit orphans and widows in their affliction” (Jas. 1:27). In this section we observe the March women following the commands of Scripture, and bringing a written exhortation to life in a creative way.

Before the novel progresses too far, Marmee again employs her biblical wisdom and counseling to bring peace between her girls. In an act of blind anger and revenge, Amy burns Jo's treasured manuscript, and while Marmee understands Jo's pain, she gently counsels her, "My dear, don't let the sun go down upon your anger; forgive each other, help each other, and begin again tomorrow" (Alcott 72). This advice stems straight from Paul's words to "be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Eph. 4:26) and to "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32). In Romans he writes, "if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Rom. 12:18). Undoubtedly, Marmee's encouragement and counsel are rooted in the Word of God, and she beautifully passes on those words to her daughters.

As the story continues to follow the girls' lives, we read about Meg spending a fortnight with the fashionable Annie Moffat and friends, under whose influence she succumbs to a number of worldly vanities and fancies. When she returns home, she expresses her genuine repentance, but also confesses that "it is nice to be praised and admired, and I can't help saying I like it" (Alcott 90). To this Marmee replies, "That is perfectly natural, and quite harmless, if the liking does not become a passion and lead one to do foolish or unmaidenly things. Learn to know and value the praise which is worth having, and to excite the admiration of excellent people by being modest as well as pretty" (Alcott 90). Once again, Marmee shows a beautiful example of biblical wisdom in practice, echoing Paul's words that "women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works" (1 Tim. 2:9-10). Marmee desires her girls to focus on the inner beauty, not the outer, and this desire clearly finds its roots in Scripture, which states that "the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on

the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). Although she does not directly mention the Lord in this section, through her counsel Marmee teaches her daughters to seek praise based on their character and not their appearance, and this idea certainly comes from the Bible.

Near the end of the novel, the biblical beliefs of the March family come under severe testing when Beth eventually dies. However, their perspective on death, as told by the narrator, is laced with biblical truth. We read such phrases as “Father and Mother guided her tenderly through the Valley of the Shadow, and gave her up to God” and “those who loved [her] best smiled through their tears, and thanked God that Beth was well at last” (Alcott 363). In these pages we observe a family struggling to trust God’s sovereignty, but choosing to believe that His will is best. Although salvation is not mentioned, we hear language of eternal life in such statements as “with tears and prayers and tender hands, Mother and sisters made her ready for the long sleep that pain would never mar again” (Alcott 363). The Marches’ beliefs find support in such passages as Psalm 23 which claims that “even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me . . . Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Ps. 23:4, 6). Although salvation and redemption are not explicitly mentioned, we find clear reference to God and a genuine attempt to trust His will and His word through a severe trial. While we may not clearly deduce from this section whether the Marches are authentic believers, we can at least conclude that many of their stated beliefs about Beth’s death find support in the Bible.

Throughout the novel *Little Women* we repeatedly find themes and ideas that echo biblical statutes. Whether the Scriptural words come from Mr. March and Marmee or from the

narrator as a reflection of the family's beliefs, we clearly understand that the March family saturates themselves with biblical truth. In the time that Louisa May Alcott wrote, these ideas probably represented concepts prevalent in most households. However, when we read this book today, we realize that themes which once were commonplace have now been placed on the shelf of many lives. Yet somehow, this novel continues to survive on the list of classics taught in schools across the nation. Perhaps Marmee's biblical counsel still rings true in many lives. Perhaps this novel resonates somehow in the hearts of its readers. Perhaps the March family's Scriptural roots grow strong because "the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Is. 40:8).

Works Cited

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