

HOW
JESUS
broke the rules
TO SET YOU
FREE

SHARON JAYNES



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HOW JESUS BROKE THE RULES TO SET YOU FREE

Formerly titled *What God Really Thinks About Women* (with revised Bible Study Guide included)

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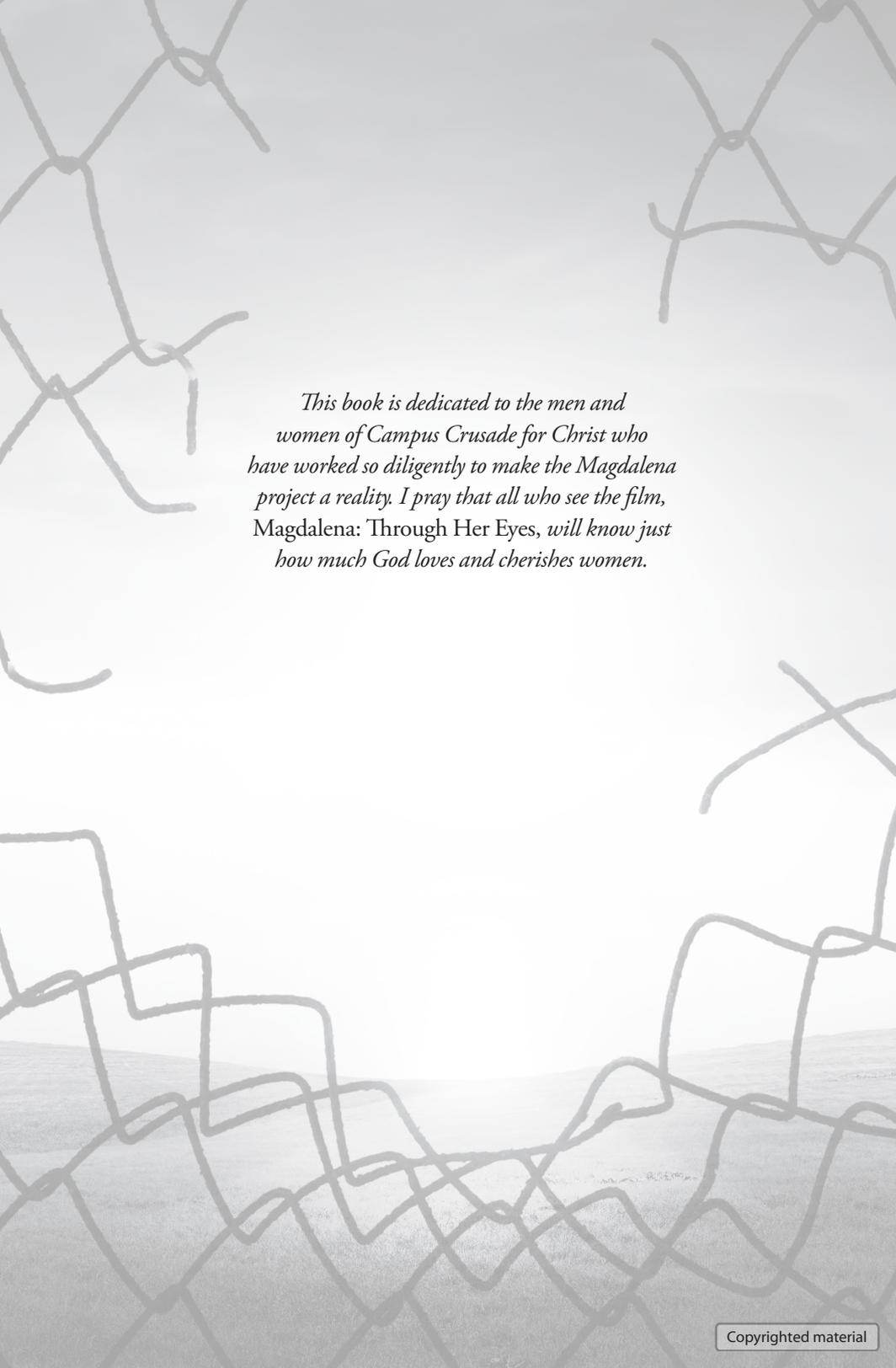
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This book is dedicated to the men and women of Campus Crusade for Christ who have worked so diligently to make the Magdalena project a reality. I pray that all who see the film, Magdalena: Through Her Eyes, will know just how much God loves and cherishes women.

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THE BACKDROP

THE WORLD JESUS STEPPED INTO

She was beautiful.
She was bright.
And she was mad at God.

I sat across the lunch table picking at a salad and trying to digest Jan's words. Her startlingly teal eyes were tinted with frustration at God, primarily because of how she perceived He felt about women.

"I don't understand God. It seems like He is against women. He's set us up to fail. Even our bodies are weaker, and that just invites men to abuse us. All through the Bible I see how God used men in mighty ways. Abraham, Moses, David—you name it; it is always the men. And polygamy. How could God allow that? Today, there's so much abuse toward women. Where's God in all that? There are so many inequalities and injustices between how men are treated and how women are treated. What kind of God does that? I think the bottom line is that God just doesn't like women."

Jan knew her Bible. She grew up in church, had loving Christian parents, and accepted Christ when she was eight years old. "I accepted Jesus because I was afraid of hell," Jan confessed. "It wasn't because I had discovered a loving God who cared about me. I did it because of fear."

Regardless of why Jan became a Christian, her decision was real. She continued growing in her little-girl faith, and she even felt a call to ministry when she was in the eighth grade. She truly had a heart for the things of God.

But all during her growing-up years, Jan felt she wasn't good enough. She saw herself as inferior to her younger brother, and she felt that her parents favored him over her. "They always paid more attention to my brother," she explained. "And if we got into a fight, my parents took up for him. 'Leave your brother alone,' they'd say. But I never heard, 'Leave your sister alone.'"

As is often the case with children, Jan's perception of her earthly father colored her perception of her heavenly Father, and the idea of male favoritism became the sieve through which her spiritual interpretations passed.

Jan graduated from high school with honors, from college with a degree in Communication Studies, and headed off to seminary. "When I got to seminary and started reading about some of the ancient philosophers' opinions of women, as well as some of the early church fathers, and even some modern-day theologians, I just got mad. The more I read, the madder I got. Is it true? Are women less than men? Does God favor one gender over the other? As I considered my role as a woman in ministry, I couldn't find any role models."

Jan is now 26, a seminary graduate, and a secretary working in a growing church. She is frustrated, confused, and, as I mentioned earlier, just plain mad.

We talked for hours, and we have talked many more hours since then. Jan brought up some interesting questions. She was brave enough to voice what many women feel, and we struggled with her questions together. But I have done more than simply struggle with the difficult questions regarding God and how He views women. I have been on a 12-year journey to answer those tough questions for myself. God and I have spent many hours together as He opened my eyes to discover just what He really thinks about women. And I can't wait to share with you what I found.

For the most part, I was very happy in my ignorance and limited understanding of the roles and responsibilities of women in the body of Christ, but God wouldn't allow me to remain comfortable in my shallow understanding of His deep love and multifaceted plan for women. For far too long I had looked at women in the Bible through the wrong end of the telescope, making them appear far too small in comparison to their male counterparts. But God was needing me to be a good student and take a closer look. How thankful I am to the many men and women who have helped me grasp a clearer perspective of how God really feels about women.

For more than a decade I have studied, read, and prayed about women and their roles in the Bible. I have examined God's original intent at creation, the result of the fall, and Jesus' goal to set mankind free from the ravages of sin and the bondage of the enemy. I asked God how He really felt about women, and He showed me through the life of His Son.

When Philip asked Jesus to show him the Father, Jesus answered, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). The writer of Hebrews describes Jesus as "the exact representation of his [God's] being" (Hebrews 1:3). And while I don't presume to know the mind of God, I can understand His character and His ways through the ministry of Jesus, His Son.

Along this pilgrimage I was struck by Jesus' radical relationship with the women whose lives intersected with His during those 33 years He walked on this earth. He crossed man-made social, political, racial, and gender boundaries and addressed women with the respect due co-image bearers of God. But before we begin our journey of walking in these women's sandals, we need to grasp the darkened world into which Jesus stepped—the backdrop for God's redemptive plan for women to unfold.

In the Beginning...

When Jesus entered the world on that starry night in Bethlehem, His first cry echoed the heart cries of women who had been misused

and abused for centuries. By the time Jesus took His first steps onto the dusty ground of Galilee, women were not allowed to talk to men in public, testify in court, or mingle with men at social gatherings. They were considered sensual temptresses and the chief cause of sexual sin. Women were considered a “lower animal species.”¹ Men divorced their wives on a whim and tossed them out like burnt toast. Women lived in the shadows of society, and they were to be rarely seen and seldom heard. Much like a slave, a girl was the property of her father and later the property of her husband. Women were uneducated, unappreciated, and uncounted.

How did this happen? When and where did such a low regard of women begin? Certainly this was not God’s intent.

It all began in the Garden of Eden.

If you have read any of my other books, you know I always like to start at the very beginning. So that’s where we’ll start today...in the beginning.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). Before the creation of the world, there was nothing. Then God spoke the world into existence. He said, “Let there be _____” and it was so (Genesis 1:3,6,9,14,20). God hung the sun and moon and then sprinkled stars about the expanse. He separated the dry ground from the seas and stocked both with vegetation and wild-life galore. Then, on the sixth day, God decided to do something extra special. “Let us make man in our own image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26).

The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (Genesis 2:7).

After each of the first five days of creation, as the sun set over the horizon, God said, “It is good.” Six times, at the end of each phase of His handiwork, He reiterated His approval. We ride the rhythm

of repetition only to be brought to a sudden halt by the Creator's words when He looked at the lone man with no suitable companion. "It is *not* good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18).

And while God knew that it was not good for the man to be alone, He waited for Adam to come to the same conclusion.

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found (Genesis 2:19-20).

Can't you just see Adam watching the animals prance and flit about, two by two, male and female? The bright-red male cardinal and his demure grayish partner. The bushy-faced lion and his sleek, adoring lioness. The udder-dangling bovine and her fiery-eyed bull. Longingly, Adam observes the pairs of God's creation nuzzling, cuddling, and frolicking about. And while he was surrounded by noisy creatures and a loving God, Adam realized, in a sense, that he was all alone.

Adam's aloneness must have grown with each pair of animals that filed by to get their name tags. *What about me?* he might have mused as the last two creatures took flight. Oh, my friend, the best was yet to come!

The LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man (Genesis 2:21-22).

Bruce Marchiano paints a beautiful picture for us. "He shapes her frame and shades her skin. He molds her mind and measures her structure. He sculpts the contour of her face, the almonds of her eyes, and the graceful stretch of her limbs. Long before she has even

spoken a word, he has held her voice in his heart, and so he ever so gently tunes its timbre. Cell by cell, tenderness by tenderness, and with care beyond care, in creation he quite simply loves her.”²

When Adam woke from his God-induced anesthesia, he took one look at the fair Eve and I imagine he said, “Now *this* is good!” We don’t know exactly what Adam’s first words were when he initially laid eyes on Eve, but we do know his first recorded utterance appeared at her grand debut.

This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man (Genesis 2:23).

What a beautiful portrait of Jesus’ words, “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:8). Yes, God knows what we need and often waits until we realize it before He provides. Had He created Adam and Eve simultaneously, Adam would have never known just how much he needed her.

Eve was the “crowning touch of God’s creative masterpiece and the inspiration of man’s first poetry.”³ She was not an afterthought, but God’s grand finale. Woman was created to complete the picture of God’s image bearer. Man could not do it alone. Woman could not do it alone. Both were necessary—working, serving, and living in tandem to complete the picture God intended all along.

God concluded the first week of the world’s existence and the curtain fell with the words: “God saw all that he had made, and it was *very* good” (Genesis 1:31). With the debut of woman, what was “good” now became “very good.”

God Created an Ezer

So who is this woman and why was she created? The Bible tells us she was created to be Adam’s *helper*.

Like two pieces of a puzzle, Eve was created to complete man. “To complete” means “to fill up; that which is required to supply a deficiency; one or two mutually completing parts.”

C.S. Lewis paints a beautiful picture:

The Christian idea of marriage is based on Christ's words that a man and wife are to be regarded as a single organism—for that is what the words “one flesh” would be in modern English. And the Christians believe that when He said this He was not expressing a sentiment but stating a fact—just as one is stating a fact when one says that a lock and its key are one mechanism, or that a violin and a bow are one musical instrument. The inventor of the human machine was telling us that its two halves, the male and the female, were made to be combined together in pairs, not simply on the sexual level, but totally combined.⁴

Like a violin without a bow, or a lock without a key, man was incomplete without woman. Together, they were whole.

Let's look at Genesis 2:18 from several different translations of the Bible:

The Lord God said, “It isn't good for man to be alone. I will make a companion for him, a *helper* suited to his needs” (TLB).

The Lord God said, It is not good (sufficient, satisfactory) that man should be alone; I will make him a *helper* meet (suitable, adapted, complementary) for him (AMP).

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a *helper* suitable for him” (NIV).

The LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a *helper* fit for him” (RSV).

The LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an *help* meet for him” (KJV).

While each translation of the Bible uses a different combination of words, they each have the word “helper” as a common thread (“help meet”—King James Version). It is the word “helper” that has caused much discussion and misunderstanding over the years,

so let's address that right from the start. The Greek word for "helper" can also be translated "partner." Umberto Cassuto said, "Just as the rib is found at the side of the man and is attached to him, even so the good wife, the rib of her husband, stands at his side to be his helper-counterpart, and her soul is bound up with his."⁵

While some women may bristle at the thought of being called a mere "helper," we need only to look at the pages of Scripture to see that "helper" holds a place of great honor. The Hebrew word "helper" that is used for woman is *ezer*.⁶ It is derived from the Hebrew word used of God and the Holy Spirit, "azar." Both mean "helper"—one who comes alongside to aid or assist. King David wrote, "O LORD, be my helper" (Psalm 30:10 NASB). "The LORD is with me; he is my helper" (Psalm 118:7). Moses said of God, "My father's God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh" (Exodus 18:4).

Ezer appears twenty-one times in the Old Testament. Two times it is used of the woman in Genesis 2⁷, sixteen times it is used of God or Yahweh as the helper of His people.⁸ The remaining three references appear in the books of the prophets, who use it in reference to military aid.⁹

Theologian William Mounce explains:

With so many references to God as our helper, it is obvious that an *ezer* is in no way inferior to the one who receives help. This is important because this is the word that God uses in Genesis 2:18 when he says about Adam, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a *helper* suitable for him." God then forms Eve as his *ezer*. According to God's design, therefore, the man and the woman, the husband and the wife, have been designed by God to stand together and help each other fight the battles of life. And God is there as the divine *ezer* to fight with them.¹⁰

As Carolyn Custis James notes, "If language means anything, the *ezer*, in every case, is not a flunky or a junior assistant but a very strong helper."¹¹ Bible scholar Dr. Victor P. Hamilton explains:

The new creation (woman) will be neither a superior nor an inferior, but an equal. The creation of this helper will form one-half of a polarity, and will be to man as the south pole is the north pole...Any suggestion that this particular word denotes one who has only an associate or subordinate status to a senior member is refuted by the fact that most frequently this same word describes Yahweh's relationship to Israel. He is Israel's help(er).¹²

Whatever we may believe about a woman's roles in society and in the church, it is clear that man's aloneness was a dilemma that needed immediate attention. Woman is introduced as a partner in work, procreation, and companionship. Together they were to fill, subdue, and rule the earth. Together they shared a common calling. Yes, their roles and responsibilities may have been different. Our physical bodies would dictate such. But as far as being an image bearer of God to fill, subdue, and rule the earth, there was no distinction drawn at creation.

Strangely enough, Adam didn't need someone to do most of the tasks we usually associate with the role of the helper. His physical needs were abundantly met in the shelter and bounty of Eden. A wide variety of food was readily accessible in Eden, his well-stocked pantry. There were no menus to plan, groceries to buy, or meals to prepare. There was no house to decorate or floor to mop, table to set or children to nurture. There were no socks to pick up nor a stitch of laundry to clean. What is more, the first sewing project was a joint effort. Adam didn't wait behind a bush for Eve to sew fig leaves together for him. He did his own sewing. Hard to imagine that God would announce with fanfare a helper, who would do things that man could just as easily do for himself.¹³

Now, don't get me wrong. I love serving my husband and taking care of his needs. Strange as it may seem, I even enjoy cleaning the house! But those duties do not define the word *ezer*.

The beauty of the word *ezer* or “helper” is that God didn’t define what that was to look like. He didn’t write out male/female job descriptions or give Adam and Eve a list of prescribed duties. God said to both of them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28). Adam didn’t say to Eve, “You take the birds and I’ll take the fish.” They ruled and subdued together.

There is nothing more beautiful than a husband and wife who have truly “become one flesh” and entered into the symbiotic dance of marriage, moving as one to the tune of God’s love and the rhythm of His will—working together to be God’s image bearers in the world.

But what about the woman who is not married? Is she an *ezer* as well? Absolutely. Woman was created to be a helper and rescuer no matter what her marital status in life. I was just as much God’s warrior in the spiritual kingdom when I was single as I am today.

As I’ve already mentioned, the word *ezer* is used in the Old Testament two times in reference to woman as man’s helper, sixteen times in reference to God as our Helper, and three times by the prophets in reference to military aid. However, each of the 16 times that the word is used for God, it also carries military connotations.

I was surprised to discover that even the Proverbs 31 woman, this woman who has been held up as a godly role model for centuries, was referred to in military terms. “An excellent wife, who can find?” the passage begins. “Her worth is far above jewels” (Proverbs 31:10 NASB). The New International Version calls her “a wife of noble character.” The Amplified Bible describes her as “a capable, intelligent, and virtuous woman.” The Hebrew word that is translated “excellent” or “virtuous” can also mean “wealthy, prosperous, valiant, boldly courageous, powerful, mighty warrior.”

Did you catch that? “Mighty warrior.” But before you suggest that we exchange our jeans for battle fatigues, brooms for rifles, and summer camps for boot camps, consider the words Paul wrote to

the churches in Ephesus and Corinth that encourage us to stand in the spiritual battle as praying women armed with God's Word:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:10-12).

Though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

God didn't create woman simply because man was lonely, even though that was obviously the case. He created woman to complete man—to love with him, work with him, rule with him, live life with him, procreate with him, and to fight alongside him. She was a female image bearer in this mysterious union of marriage. Woman was and is a warrior called to fight alongside man in the greatest battle that was yet to come—a battle not fought on the battlefield with guns, but on our knees in prayer.

Why have I gone into such great length about this word *ezer*? Because, dear friend, I want you to grasp the full impact of what God created you to be. You are an amazing masterpiece of Almighty creative genius. You are a woman.

After the Fall

So what happened? How did woman move from a mutual place of honor as an image bearer in the Garden of Eden to the oppression we have seen through the centuries? Well, let's don't leave the garden quite yet.

Chapter 3 of Genesis begins with these daunting words: “Now the serpent...” Satan was not happy about these image bearers God had created. Even though he had once been an angel of light, Satan had been cast to the earth with one-third of the angels because of their rebellion against God (Revelation 12:4). He knew he was doomed and wanted to take as many of God’s image bearers with him as possible. So he started with the first two.

We don’t have clear evidence as to why Satan engaged Eve in conversation regarding eating the forbidden fruit, but we do know that Adam stood passively by as the drama unfolded. Even though Genesis 3 states that Satan addressed “the woman,” he used the Hebrew plural form of “you” when he spoke. He wasn’t just talking to her.

Some say that the sin began when Eve tried to get the upper hand in the relationship, but there was no upper hand to get. Adam and Eve lived in harmony with each other. They moved as one. If she had been trying to get the upper hand, then she would have kept the fruit to herself and not offered it to her husband as well.

Some say that Adam sinned because he listened to his wife. But Eve wasn’t created to be a silent partner. It wasn’t that he listened to her as a woman, but that he listened to what she said and ate the fruit.¹⁴

In the end, both Adam and Eve disobeyed God, believed Satan’s lie, and suffered the consequences of a broken relationship with God and spiritual death. We, dear friends, suffer the consequences even today. At that moment of disobedience, fear and shame entered the world, and the first man and the first woman tried to hide from God.

“Where are you?” God called as He uttered the first question recorded in the Bible (Genesis 3:9). That is the question He still asks today as He longs to have a restored relationship with His image bearers. “Where are you?” God brought Adam and Eve out in the open, confronted their sin, and explained the consequences to come.

The serpent, the woman, and the man were all judged, but only the serpent and the ground were cursed. God’s judgment on the

serpent foreshadowed events that were yet to come—the day Jesus Christ would crush Satan’s head with His heel. Satan clearly understood that his demise would come from a woman’s womb. And from the very beginning, Satan has been decked out in full battle array to destroy her.

Another result of the fall was that man would rule over the woman. When Adam spoke to God about their sin, he said, “The woman you put here *with me*” (Genesis 3:12). Previously, they ruled together, but all that was about to change. “Your desire will be for your husband,” God explained to Eve. “And he will rule over you” (verse 16). From that time on, relational tension between man and woman was the norm.

But the good news for us is that God loves turning things around. While the tree in the garden brought death and the curse, the tree of Calvary brought life and blessing. Jesus came to set the captive free. He came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). But thousands of years were sandwiched between God’s words about Jesus, “He will,” and our Savior’s words, “I have.” And, unfortunately, women have been devalued, defiled, and degraded in every way imaginable.

Between the Garden of Eden and the Garden of Gethsemane

Many years passed before God’s kingdom calendar signaled that Jesus’ redemptive plan was to begin. In order to grasp just how radically liberating Jesus’ actions and teaching were for women, we need to understand the world Jesus stepped into.

Much of the ancient world was influenced by philosophers and their teachings. For most of us, ancient philosophy is far removed and of little interest. However, in the fifth century BC, it affected the entire culture. It was the philosophers’ teaching and influence that shackled women and kept them in bondage to a patriarchal society.

For example, in ancient Athens, a city named after the beautiful goddess of wisdom, philosophers held to the belief that women were

inferior to men on every level. These philosophers created the lens through which much of the civilized world looked at life. Socrates (470–399 BC) argued that being born a woman was a divine punishment, since a woman is halfway between a man and an animal.¹⁵ Respectable Greek wives led secluded lives and rarely appeared in social situations. They took no part in public affairs and rarely appeared at meals or social occasions to mingle with the men.¹⁶

Socrates taught Plato, who then passed his teaching along to Aristotle. Plato believed that women were a “degenerate form of manly perfection,” and that men who did not live righteous lives would be reincarnated as females.¹⁷ He believed that this is how the entire female gender came into existence.¹⁸

Aristotle declared, “The courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying.”¹⁹ He taught that women were inferior and needed to be commanded by men and used for their pleasure. Men serious about their studies were encouraged to avoid women altogether, as women were considered a distraction and temptation.

Demosthenes, who was a noted orator during Aristotle’s day, stated that the role of Athenian women was as follows: “We have courtesans for our pleasures, prostitutes [that is, young female slaves] for daily physical use, wives to bring up legitimate children and to be faithful stewards in household matters.”²⁰

Aristotle left the world with a collection of fascinating studies on a variety of subjects. He observed the nature of bees and noted how the swarm was led by one apparent leader, which he assumed was the “king bee.” It would be centuries later before naturalists would discover the leader was indeed a “queen bee.”²¹ (You go, girl.)

Young girls were married at a very early age and received no education except on how to run a household. They never went out of the home alone, shared a public meal with men, or entered into community life. Women were not only considered inferior, but also a distraction and danger to men who desired to pursue wisdom.

The ancients believed that life came from a man’s semen, where tiny human beings were stored. Women simply served as the soil in

which the seed was planted and allowed to grow until birth. They knew nothing of a woman's eggs and therefore drew conclusions from only what their naked eyes could see (no pun intended). It wasn't until the 1800s that scientists discovered a woman had eggs. Before that she was considered just a holding tank. It makes sense that if women are thought of as "dirt," they will be treated like dirt.

The Romans didn't view women quite as harshly as the Greeks, but they still believed that women needed to be kept under a man's control.²² The Romans were more progressive as to what activities a woman could engage in outside the home, but her reach wasn't far from her front door. If a woman was caught in adultery, Roman law gave the husband the right to kill her because she was his property. However, a man could have sexual relations outside of marriage at will.²³ Roman men tended to share the Greek view of women as objects of pleasure or else sources of temptation.²⁴

These philosophers were bright men who were obviously deceived by the enemy himself. "There is nothing so foolish as an intelligent man using his mental gifts to explain away the simplicity of the truth."²⁵ It would be very easy to raise our ire against the philosophers of the past, or even those in Middle Eastern countries who continue to treat women with the same disdain today, but I always go back to the source. It is the devil himself who has the destruction of women in his game plan.

In the Jewish culture, women were not treated much better than their Roman and Greek sisters. Even though the Old Testament is filled with influential women—such as Deborah the prophetess, who advised military leaders; Esther the queen, who saved the Jews from annihilation; Rahab the harlot, who rescued the spies from soldiers of Jericho; Abigail the farmer's wife, who stopped King David's needless assassination plan, just to name a few—women were still considered a commodity.

The Jewish people became more integrated with and influenced by foreign cultures that oppressed women. By the time Jesus was born, women were not allowed to talk to a man in public...even to

their husbands. If a woman spoke to a man in public who was not her husband, it was assumed she was having a relationship with him and grounds for divorce. Women were not allowed to eat in the same room with a gathering of men, to be educated in the Torah (the Scriptures) with men, or to enter the inner court of the temple to worship with men. Two thousand years ago, Rabbi Eliezer stated, “Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman!”²⁶

A rabbi might not even speak to his own daughter or sister in public. Some Pharisees were referred to as “the bruised and bleeding ones” because they would shut their eyes whenever they saw a woman on the street, and therefore they often walked into walls and houses.²⁷ Each morning a Pharisee began his day by thanking God that He had not made him a “Gentile, a woman, or a slave.”²⁸

A woman was considered the property of her father. That ownership was passed to her husband when she married and to her son when she was widowed. There was little hope for a woman devoid of all three. She was not allowed to go out in public without a suitable male escort. This was “not so much to protect her, but to protect her husband’s name from any slips she might make...through improper conduct. Any males who wished to address her had to do so through her chaperone, not directly.”²⁹

A woman was not considered a credible witness and was not allowed to testify in court. Feminine voices and flowing hair were considered sensual and seen as a temptation to men. Women were considered the dregs of society and were thought responsible for much of the evil in the world. They were segregated in the social and religious life of their communities and considered to be inferior, unteachable creatures whose sole purpose was domesticity and sexual pleasure.³⁰

I could say more, but I think this is enough to allow us to catch a glimpse of how women were viewed and why. It was ugly. It was dark. It was oppressive. That is the world Jesus stepped into. That is the backdrop for God’s ultimate drama of redemption to unfold.

Why did Jesus come to earth? John tells us in a nutshell. “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). Jesus came to restore God’s original design and purpose for men and women that was distorted and disturbed in the garden. He came to restore fallen humanity in every sense of the word. Part of that restoration included restoring Eve to her position she enjoyed before the fall. Jesus walked on the scene to see God’s female image bearers hidden in the shadows behind lock and key, and He flung the doors open wide.

It is easy for us of the twenty-first century to view Jesus’ interaction with women as somewhat ordinary, but then it was radical in every sense of the word. Jesus was so far out on a limb, it was a good thing He made the tree. When we understand a bit of the Roman and Greek philosophy and treatment of women at the time Jesus appeared on the earth, we can better understand just how radical Jesus’ treatment of women really was. He took these devalued and degraded female image bearers and placed them center stage to play leading roles in God’s redemptive plan.

Simply put—Jesus shook the house.

A New Day for Women

As we turn the page from Malachi 4:6 to Matthew 1:1, as God breaks 400 years of silence, we get a hint that a new day is on the horizon. In the Old Testament genealogies, families were traced through the males only. However, in the genealogy of Jesus Christ, four women are listed along with Mary: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. The very fact that women were mentioned at all is reason for pause.

The rhythm of “the father of, the father of, the father of,” comes to a halt as a woman’s name appears on the page. “...Zerah, whose mother was Tamar” (Matthew 1:3). Then the usual cadence picks right back up where it left off with “the father of, the father of, the father of.” Once again, the harmonious flow is abruptly arrested with “Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth” (Matthew 1:5).

Friend, the fact that a woman's name was even mentioned in the genealogy gives us a big hint that something is different. God is up to something new. It's time for the female image bearers to come out of the shadows and into the light. How exciting that that light is the light of Christ. Jesus welcomed women into His company, included them in His parables, and invited them to be a part of His ministry team.

The focus of this book is to discover what God really thinks about women. That sounds a bit presumptuous, doesn't it? The prophet Isaiah wrote, "Who has understood the mind of the LORD or instructed him as his counselor?" (Isaiah 40:13). This same verse is repeated by Paul in Romans 11:34 and 1 Corinthians 2:16. At the same time, our greatest joy in life is found in knowing God.

J.I. Packer, in his modern classic *Knowing God*, points out:

The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you.³¹

So how do we know God? Can we really understand what He thinks about any subject? Certainly the mind of God is a fathomless sea of wisdom that our finite minds will never totally comprehend, but at the same time He longs for us to know Him. God created us to be in relationship with Him, and as in all intimate relationships, a deep understanding exists between both parties. Of course, God knows us totally and completely. And, amazingly, He invites us to be in relationship with Him and know Him as well. Whether it is understanding what God thinks about marriage or money, sin or salvation, worry or worship, the answers are in the Bible for us to discover.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians that "the man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know" (1 Corinthians 8:2). In other words, no matter how much we may know

about God, a wise woman understands that she knows very little. But with that reality, we still strike out to unearth the treasures hidden in knowing God.

In His infinite wisdom, God has given us many ways to learn of His character and His ways. We learn of Him through His Word, through creation, and most of all through His Son. Jesus, in one of His final conversations with the disciples, explained: “If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:7,9).

Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase, *The Message*, says it this way: “To see me is to see the Father... The words that I speak to you aren’t mere words. I don’t just make them up on my own. The Father who resides in me crafts each word into a divine act” (John 14:9).

Jesus spoke exactly what the Father told Him to speak³² and did exactly what His Father told him to do.³³ He was the “image of the invisible God,”³⁴ and “the exact representation of his being.”³⁵

So can we really know what God thinks? To some extent, the answer is yes. We only have to look at the life and ministry of His Son.

The focus of this book is JESUS and how He called women out of the shadows of society and placed them center stage. It is about how He came to liberate and set women free—a freedom that has not been duplicated in any other world religion. What do I mean by “set women free”? There are two aspects of this freedom that we will explore.

Jesus came to set women free from...

Jesus came to set women free to...

He did not set women free only to be quarantined in the new order called the church. He set women free to go out into the world to tell the Good News of the gospel and to work among believers to build the body of Christ. In a culture that kept women tucked away in the recesses of the home to be neither seen nor heard, Jesus pulls them from behind the scenes, positions them front and center, and shines on them the spotlight of His divine love and calling. As the

curtain of the New Testament rises, women fill the stage and take starring roles as God's grand drama of redemption unfolds.

Jesus made deliberate choices in the *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where* of His teachings and miracles. It was no accident that many of His healings occurred on the Sabbath. It was no accident that many of His conversations were with women. It was no accident that women were the recipients of many of His miraculous healings. It was no accident that the "least of these" received the best of Him.

Jesus took the keys of truth and unlocked the shackles to liberate women from the oppression that had them bound and sequestered in the nooks and crannies of society. How proud I am of those women who accepted Jesus' invitation to come out of hiding. They were agents who listened to the call of God above the oppressive voices of the culture.

In our time together, we are going to visit with the women in Jesus' life and ministry. When we read the Gospels with familiarity we may miss the wonder and awe of Jesus' radical, life-changing words. We tend to run His words through a sieve of cultural norms and childhood teachings rather than lay them on a fresh canvas. The words become muddied and muted when they are splashed on old landscapes of cracked hues.

Let's walk over to a new easel. One on which an untouched canvas awaits. In the tray lie Jesus' words—new, fresh, vibrant, and alive. We'll not paint them on the old canvas of our minds, hoping to cover up the misinterpreted words that have gone before. We'll look at them with fresh eyes.

Let's get to know a few of the women who encountered the Liberator and began a new life of freedom. Come with me and sit by the well with the Samaritan woman expecting insult and rejection, but receiving acceptance and love. Stand with the woman caught in adultery expecting condemnation and death, but finding forgiveness and a chance to start anew. Reach with the bleeding woman to touch the hem of His garment in secret, only to be healed and publicly affirmed. Rise from the ruins of life with Mary Magdalene, and

run with purpose to announce the miracle of Jesus' resurrection. As we encounter each woman Jesus impacts, I pray you will write your name into the script and experience Him as never before.

Let's observe how Jesus treated God's female image bearers to discover what God really thinks about women.