

A gold-colored line drawing of a flowering branch with several large, open roses and smaller buds, positioned in the top right corner of the cover.

Never less than

*Living Empowered, Esteemed, and Equipped
When the World Tells You Otherwise*

SHARON JAYNES

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This book is a revised edition of How Jesus Broke the Rules to Set You Free by Sharon Jaynes, previously titled What God Really Thinks About Women.

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PART 1

The Backdrop





CHAPTER 1

The Worth of a Woman

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.

"I don't understand God. It seems like He's 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's 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 as valuable or competent as her male counterparts. She saw herself as less than 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 his side. ‘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 from seminary with a degree in theology. “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?”

When I met Jan, she was a 26-year-old seminary graduate, working as a secretary in a growing church. As she considered her role as a woman in ministry, she couldn't find any role models. She was 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 valid questions. She was brave enough to voice what many women feel, and we struggled with her questions together. I know what it's like to be in Jan's place of frustration, but in the two decades plus that I've journeyed to answer those

questions, God has opened my eyes to witness what He truly thinks about women.

In my early adult years, 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 looked at women in the Bible through the wrong end of the telescope, making them appear much too small in comparison to their male counterparts. But God kept needling me to take a closer look. Through the years I've asked a lot of questions, read many respected theologians' interpretations and opinions, and examined more Greek and Hebrew words of Scripture than this Southern girl knew existed. But I just kept coming back to Jesus' ministry, miracles, and messages. 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 [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.

God spoke audibly to Jesus two times in the Gospels. God said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased," after Jesus' baptism recorded in Matthew 3:17. And again, at the mount of transfiguration, God said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Then He added, "Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5). So I have been trying to do just that: listen to Him.

As we turn the page from Malachi 4:6 to Matthew 1:1, God breaks 400 years of silence, and 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, the rhythm of "the father of, the father of, the father of," comes to a screeching

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). Altogether, five women are listed in this genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. The fact that they were listed at all is reason for pause.

God was up to something. It was time for the female image bearers to come out of the shadows and into the light. And that light is the light of Christ.

In God's infinite wisdom, He 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. Eugene Peterson paraphrases John 14:9-10 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" (MSG).

Jesus spoke exactly what the Father told Him to speak and did exactly what His Father told Him to do. He was the "image of the invisible God" and "the exact representation of His being." By observing Jesus' treatment *of* women, we discover God's love *toward* women. He called women out of the shadows of society and placed them center stage. We can consider this freedom in two ways: freedom *from* and freedom *to*.

- Jesus came to liberate women *from* centuries of oppressions that told them they were less than. He set them free *to* impact God's kingdom and the world—a freedom that has not been duplicated in any other religion.
- Jesus set women free *from* the culture's view that females were less than their male counterparts, freeing them *to*

step out of the shadows to be integrated as valuable members of God's family.

- He set women free *from* being sequestered in their homes and set them free *to* go out into the world to tell the Good News of Christ.

In a culture that kept women tucked away in the recesses of the home to be neither seen nor heard, Jesus pulled them from behind the scenes, positioned them front and center, and shone 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 called women out of the shadows of society and placed them center stage.

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 culture's "least of these" received the best of Him.

Paul wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Sometimes we humans can take a simple message and make it very complicated. But the Word couldn't be more clear: There is no "less than" in the body of Christ or in the world at large. Jesus valued and validated women throughout His ministry in ways that astonished those within earshot and left slack-jawed those within eyeshot.

What I saw, and what you're going to see, is that Jesus crossed man-made social, political, racial, and gender boundaries to address women with the respect due 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.

By observing Jesus' treatment of women,
we discover God's love toward women.

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 causes of sexual sin. Women were considered a “lower animal species.”¹ Men divorced their wives on a whim and tossed them out like burned bread. Women lived in the shadows of society, rarely seen and seldom heard. Much like a slave, a girl was the property of her father and if married, the property of her husband. Women were uneducated, unappreciated, and uncoun-
ted.

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.

“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. 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 wildlife galore. Then, on the sixth day, God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26).

The LORD God formed a 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, emphasis mine).

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

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. 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 in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found (Genesis 2:19-20).

Can’t you just see Adam watching the animals prancing and flitting about, two by two, male and female? The bright-red male cardinal and his demure, grayish songbird. The bushy-faced lion and his sleek, adorable 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 accept 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 then 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 sleep, 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 when she came into view.

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' promise, "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 Woman was not an afterthought, but God’s grand finale. Eve was not less than Adam, but part of a whole 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 what 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, emphasis mine). With the debut of woman, what was “good” now became “very good.”

Woman was not an afterthought, but God’s
grand finale. Eve was not less than Adam,
but part of a whole created to complete
the picture of God’s image bearer.

GOD CREATED AN *EZER*

So who is this woman and why was she created? Like two pieces of a puzzle, Eve was created to complete man. 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.

The Bible tells us Eve was created to be Adam's helper. It is the word *helper* that has caused much discussion and debate over the years, so let's address that right from the start. The Greek word for *helper* can also be translated "partner."

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*. 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, "LORD, be my help" (Psalm 30:10). "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 21 times in the Old Testament. Two times it is used of the woman in Genesis 2, 16 times it is used of God or Yahweh as the helper of His people. The remaining three references appear in the books of the prophets, who use it in reference to military aid.

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).⁵

Whatever we may believe about a woman's roles and responsibilities, it is clear that man's decided aloneness was a dilemma that needed divine attention. Woman is introduced as a partner in vocation, procreation, and relational habitation. Together they shared a common calling—to fill, subdue, and rule the earth. 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, there was no distinction drawn at creation.

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*. In fact, 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 and 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 in the sky 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.

Each of the sixteen times *ezer* is used in reference to God as our

Helper, it also carries military connotations. Even the Proverbs 31 woman—the 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. 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.” Consider Paul’s words to the churches in Ephesus and Corinth that encourage us to stand in the spiritual battle as praying men and 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 with him, procreate with him, and 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 fashioned by Almighty God. You are a woman.

AFTER THE FALL

So what happened? How did woman move from a mutual place of honor as image bearer in the Garden of Eden to a burden bearer moving in the shadows of the cultures that followed? Well, let's not leave the garden just 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 gain. 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 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.⁶

In the end, both believed Satan's lies and disobeyed God. Consequently, sin and shame entered the world, and their harmonious relationship with God and each other was broken. Adam and Eve sewed

fig leaf aprons in an effort to cover their shame and crouched behind the bushes in an effort to hide from God.

But then, in the cool of the evening, God strolled through the Garden and asked, “Where are you?” The first recorded question in the Bible was not man questioning God, but God pursuing man (Genesis 3:9). That is the question He still asks today as He pursues humankind to restore what was broken with that first act of disobedience. “Where are you?” God wasn’t asking because He didn’t know where they were, but He was calling them out in the open to confront their sin and explain the consequences to come.

The serpent, the woman, and the man were all judged, but only the serpent and the ground were cursed. In Genesis 3:15, God said the offspring of a woman would crush the serpent’s head and the serpent would strike his heel. That might seem like an odd verse, but God isn’t just talking about snakes. He’s talking about the devil himself—and about the offspring of a woman defeating the devil once and for all. All along, it was God’s redemptive plan for the Savior of the world to be born of a woman. God certainly didn’t have to do it that way, but He chose to use a woman in the unfolding of salvation’s plan. Satan clearly understood that his demise would come from a woman’s womb. And from the very beginning, he has tried to destroy her.

Previously, Adam and Eve ruled together, but all that was about to change. To Eve God said, “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (verse 16). From that time on, relational tension between man and woman was the new reality.

But the good news is that God had a plan to make all that went wrong in the Garden of Eden right again in the Garden of Gethsemane. While the tree in the garden brought spiritual death and the curse, the tree of Calvary brought spiritual 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 in

the meantime, 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 teachings were for women, we need to understand the world Jesus stepped into. Now, don't let me lose you here. This next section is a bit academic, and I promise the rest of the book will not feel like a history lesson. But we need to understand how women went from being God's final masterpiece at creation to being viewed as insignificant shadows at Jesus' incarnation. We can't fully understand how radically freeing Jesus' actions were toward women until we understand how culturally bound they were.

Much of the ancient world was influenced by philosophers and their teachings. For most of us, ancient philosophy might not have much impact on our day-to-day lives, but 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.⁷ 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.⁸

Socrates taught Plato, who believed that women were a “degenerate form of manly perfection,” and that men who did not live righteous

lives would be reincarnated as females.⁹ He believed this is how the entire female gender came into existence.¹⁰

Plato passed his teaching along to Aristotle, who declared, “The courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying.”¹¹ He taught that women were inferior and needed to be commanded by men and used for their pleasure. Men who were serious about their studies were encouraged to avoid women altogether, as women were considered a distraction and temptation. Aristotle 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 before naturalists discovered the leader was indeed a “queen bee.” (You go, girl.)

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.”¹²

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 only drew conclusions from what their naked eyes could see. It wasn’t until the 1800s that scientists discovered women had eggs. Before that, women were thought of as holding tanks. It makes sense that if women are thought of as the “dirt” into which the seeds are planted, then they will be treated like dirt as well.

The Romans didn’t view women quite as harshly as the Greeks, but they still believed that women needed to be kept under men’s control.¹³ 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. Roman men tended to share the Greek view of women as either objects of pleasure or sources of temptation.¹⁴

These ancient philosophers were bright men who were darkly deceived. 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 seeks to kill, steal, and destroy (John 10:10).

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 prostitute, who rescued the spies from soldiers of Jericho; and 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, Jewish 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 her actions constituted 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!"¹⁵

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 upon seeing a woman on the street, causing them to walk into walls and houses.¹⁶ Each morning a Pharisee

began his day by thanking God that He had not made him a “Gentile, a woman, or a slave.”¹⁷

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. Women were considered the dregs of society and were thought to be responsible for much of the evil in the world. They were segregated in the social and religious life of their communities and considered inferior, unteachable creatures whose sole purposes were for domesticity and a man’s sexual pleasure.¹⁸

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 for men and women as co-image bearers that began its downfall in the garden. He came to restore fallen humanity in every sense of the word. Part of that restoration included restoring Eve to the 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’ interactions with women as somewhat ordinary, but the God-made-man broke a man-made rule every single time He interacted with a woman in the New Testament. 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.

Now, let's walk the well-worn paths with Jesus and discover how He surprised the world by the way He interacted with women.

The God-made-man broke a man-made rule every single time He interacted with a woman in the New Testament.



CHAPTER 4

Redeemed

The Rock Dropper

What are we going to do with this Jesus?” the chief priest asked the group. “He is going about healing people left and right. Everywhere I go the buzz is about Him. It’s Jesus this, Jesus that. And the crowds are calling Him the Messiah! Everyone knows the Messiah will not come from Galilee. If we don’t get rid of Him, we’re going to have an insurrection on our hands.”

“And ever since that loaves and fish situation, His followers have multiplied like the lunch he served,” another priest added. “He must be stopped.”

“I have an idea,” Lucius responded with a gleam in his eye. “I happen to know a certain married man who is sleeping with his mistress at this very moment. I saw him slink into her house last night.” And as the hard-hearted Pharisees gathered round, a mean-spirited plan to trick Jesus began to unfold.



The sun was just peeking through the securely locked shutters of Moriah's bedroom window. The early morning stillness was sweetened by birdsong on the ledge. Moriah was a tangle of sheets, arms, and legs, and the man she loved lay sleeping beside her.

"Oh, Zachariah," she whispered as her fingertips brushed a stray lock of hair from his closed eyes. "If only you could marry *me*."

Moriah's musings were interrupted by a banging on the door.

"Open up!" the gruff voice demanded.

"Who is there?" Moriah cried.

"Open up or we'll break the door down."

"What's all the commotion?" Zachariah mumbled as he groggily sat up in bed. "What's going on?"

Before Moriah could even think to answer, an angry mob of religious men broke through the simple lock and into the lovers' hideaway.

"What is the meaning of this?" Zachariah barked. "What do you think you are doing?"

"What do you think *you* are doing, my friend?" the Pharisee countered. "That is the real question here."

"Moriah, daughter of Omar, you are under arrest for adultery and breaking the law of Moses!" the moral police spat. "Get dressed and come with me."

The Pharisee tossed Moriah her night robe, but he failed to turn his head as she slipped her trembling frame from the cover of the sheets and into the thin garment. He grabbed her by the arm and began dragging her to the door.

"Where are you taking me?" she cried.

"You'll find out soon enough," the Pharisee growled.

"What about Zachariah? Isn't he guilty too?" the youngest man of the group inquired.

“Just leave him. We don’t need him.”

“Wait!” Zachariah called. But already he could see that protesting was no use.

“Why don’t you go back to your wife?” the Pharisee called over his shoulder as the group left the room. And with that, the conspiring mob continued their trek to the temple with the half-clad, quaking woman in tow. Two men flanked her on either side, dragging her through the early morning bustle of the city. The bait was on the hook; now it was time to catch the fish.

A meddlesome stream of townsfolk joined the parade. Jesus was already teaching in the courtyard with a group gathered around Him. A distant herd of feet grew louder and louder as the curious mob and determined Pharisees approached. They marched right into the middle of the circle of listeners gathered around Jesus and thrust the woman at the Teacher’s feet.

Moriah’s unbound hair fell around her bare shoulders. Her shame-filled eyes stayed riveted on the ground, refusing to meet condemning eyes. Then one of the men pulled her to her feet and placed her on display.

“Teacher,” the pious Pharisee began, “we caught this woman in the act of adultery. The law of Moses says she should be stoned. What do You say?”

Jesus didn’t look at the woman’s half-clad body. He looked into her soul.

After a moment, Moriah lifted her head and peered into the eye of love.

She heard the Pharisee’s question and understood Jesus’ dilemma. If He set her free, the Pharisees would accuse Him of ignoring the law of Moses and deem Him a heretic. If He sentenced her to death by stoning, His followers would question His teaching on grace and forgiveness.

The religious leaders already held stones in their clenched fists,

anticipating Jesus' reply. Their hearts were as hard as the rocks in their hands. But rather than giving a quick answer, Jesus stooped to the ground and began writing in the dirt. A chill swept through the Pharisees. Beneath their robes, they felt the shame of naked exposure as Jesus looked up at each of them and silently uncloaked their sinful thoughts and desires. With one look from Jesus, they stood, their souls more exposed than the half-dressed woman before them.

Finally, Jesus rose and delivered the verdict.

"If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

Then He squatted once again and continued writing.

One by one the Pharisees unclenched their fists, dropped their stones, and slunk away through the crowd. The older men who had accumulated a longer list of sins turned to leave first, with the younger ones not far behind.

After the last of the Pharisees cleared the scene, Jesus straightened up and asked, "Woman, what happened to your accusers? Does no one remain to condemn you?"

"No one," she replied.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your sinful lifestyle once and for all."

The woman turned to leave, but not before picking up a discarded stone to take with her.

"To remember," she whispered.

FACE-TO-FACE WITH GRACE

Jesus' ministry and miracles caused quite a stir everywhere He put His sandaled feet. His authoritative teaching to the masses, passionate clearing out of the temple courts, and confusing prophecy of the destruction and resurrection of the temple made people sit up and take notice. Jesus expanded His ministry to include the shunned Samaritans

and Syrophoenician Gentiles. He commanded a lame man to take up his pallet and walk, and He fed 5,000 men—plus women and children—with no more than five loaves and two fish. The multitudes wanted to make Jesus king. The scribes and Pharisees wanted to make Jesus disappear.

Jesus knew the Jewish religious leaders wanted to kill Him, yet He continued ministering publicly and prophetically. They looked for reasons to discredit and denounce Him, so they came up with a plan to publicly humiliate Him by putting Him in what they thought was a no-win situation. Let's take a closer look at how they used a woman as bait but were snared by their own trap.

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives (John 8:1).

The night before this incident, Jesus had been on the Mount of Olives praying. The mount is directly east of Jerusalem and rises about 2,700 feet. This summit offered a magnificent view of the city and the temple below. How appropriate that Jesus would spend His time alone with God looking down at the apple of His eye.

He sat down to teach (John 8:2).

Early the next morning, Jesus came to the temple to teach. John tells us "all the people gathered around." When I see the word *all*, I think *all*. The radical Rabbi was teaching both men and women. And even though the present culture did not even count women as people, as we see in the recording of Jesus feeding 5,000 men who were counted and a multitude of women who were not, Jesus taught in places where women would naturally gather.

Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery (John 8:4).

The Sanhedrin, or religious leaders, forced their way into the center of those gathered around Jesus and interrupted His teaching. I suspect Jesus was expecting them all along.

The fact that she was “caught in the act” smells of a setup. Perhaps they planned the tryst and planted a man to seduce her. Or the relationship could have been common knowledge, and everyone had turned a blind eye until this opportunity to exploit it. There were no video cameras or private investigators with revealing photos back then, so when they say, “caught in the act,” that means they walked in on the scene. Whatever the case, they knew where to find her and what she would be doing.

I doubt these men gave the accused time to fully clothe herself or pin her hair back in place. The idea of a woman walking through the streets with her hair unbound was scandalous enough, much less being half dressed and manhandled by angry pious priests.

The Pharisees were considered the “custodians of public morality.”¹ They were supposed to be the good guys, but in most biblical accounts they were the bad guys. Jesus said this about the religious leaders: “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40).

These men had the Scriptures in their heads and were pretty proud about that. But they didn’t have God in their hearts and were pretty blind about that.

There was no denying the accusation. So they cast the bait.

*In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women.
Now what do you say? (John 8:5).*

Ah, excuse me, boys, but someone is missing here. Last time I checked, it takes two to commit adultery. As for the law, let’s take a look at what it really said:

If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death (Leviticus 20:10).

If a man is found sleeping with another man's wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel (Deuteronomy 22:22).

It seems they were baiting the hook with only half a worm.

While we do not know if this woman was another man's wife, it was not the first time, and would not be the last, that a woman was left alone to carry the consequences of sexual sin. Jesus didn't address this detail, most likely because He knew that seeking justice was not the purpose of the Pharisees' visit in the first place. They couldn't have cared less about the morality issue or the law of Moses. If they were truly interested in keeping the law, then both partners would have been standing before Him. Their only concern was setting a trap.

To those looking on, it might appear that Jesus was caught between a rock and a hard place. But they didn't realize that since Jesus *is* the Rock, there is no hard place He can't handle.

Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger (John 8:6).

I'm sure it threw them off a bit when Jesus stooped to write in the dirt. This is the only time that Scripture records Jesus writing anything. Could it be that He was trying to distract the people's attention away from the half-dressed woman and onto Himself? It sounds just like something my Jesus would do.

What did Jesus write? Nobody knows for sure. Some commentaries suggest He scribbled down the sins of the Pharisees. Some suggest He was doodling to present a pregnant pause or give the accusers time to think. What He wrote is not important, but what He said was powerful.

Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her (John 8:7).

What an answer! Jesus uncovered their own hearts and left them exposed and spiritually naked before the crowd. Now who was stuck

between a rock and a hard place? Each man standing knew his own life was riddled with sin. The prophet Isaiah, whose writings they knew very well, wrote: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way” (Isaiah 53:6). For a man to throw a stone and thus imply that he was without sin would have been the greatest heresy of all.

Isn't it interesting that the only person qualified to throw a stone at the woman is the One who set her free?

*Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground
(John 8:8).*

Sometimes the shortest answers are the most powerful. Jesus gave His answer and then let them think on it. No hurry. Just chew on that for a while. I think it would be a good time for us to chew on it ourselves. If I were sitting right there with you, I'd want us to chat about what “Let any one who is without sin throw the first stone” means in our own lives. It is easy to smirk at those self-righteous, pious Pharisees and say, “Ha! Take that!” But what about you and me? When is the last time you or I threw a stone at someone? Maybe not a literal stone, but a stone-hard judgmental attitude tossed someone's way? Even the smallest stone is too heavy for us to carry.

Those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first (John 8:9).

The Pharisees brought the woman to be condemned, but Jesus freed her by extending grace. The accusers came to Jesus in self-righteous superiority, but they skulked away in self-defeated shame. The accusers became the accused.

Many commentaries note that Jesus and the woman were left alone. However, before the confrontation began, Jesus was teaching “all” who came to the temple to hear Him. There is no indication that those people left. It could be that only the accusers slipped away. I imagine

the onlookers were glued to their seats watching the drama unfold. I know I would have been.

But as Jesus so often does, He sees through the crowd and zooms in on one hurting soul that needs His attention. One woman who felt less than because of her past mistakes and failures.

Has no one condemned you? (John 8:10).

The Pharisees spoke accusatorily about her. Jesus spoke respectfully to her. The woman caught in adultery stood before Jesus in disgrace but was met with divine grace. That's my Jesus. We do not read of this woman's verbal statement of faith, but Jesus knew what was in her heart. He knew she was repentant, and He freed her *from* condemnation and freed her *to* start anew. The religious leaders put her down like dirt. Jesus looked at her with compassion and lifted her out of it. How refreshing it must have been to meet a man who was not interested in exploiting her but freeing her.

LIVING IN YOUR GRACE SPACE

Maybe you haven't been caught in the act of adultery. Maybe you have. But we all have pages of our stories that we'd like to rip out, sentences we'd like to block out, and chapters we'd like to throw out. Know this, sister: The splinter of your story that you hate the most does not define the entire narrative. You are more than your worst pages. Why? Because of grace.

Friend, you are never less than because of your past mistakes and failures. When you ask God to forgive you, He does. John wrote, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Notice Jesus said to the woman, "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11). That is the very definition of repentance—to turn and go in the opposite direction. Let's be very clear. Jesus did not say that what

the woman did was okay. He called sin a sin. And yet He extended grace and opened the door for her to start anew—to write a new chapter to her story. And that’s exactly what He does for me and you.

In another book I wrote, “We can wrest redemption from the jaws of brokenness and then allow God to use it for good.”² Shame is a universal destroyer of destinies, dignity, and callings, and when Jesus says, “Then neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more,” we must believe Him and take Him up on the offer. To refuse is to continue in a story line that will bring nothing but heartache.

Your greatest mistakes have the potential to become your greatest miracles. This encounter with Jesus as He extended grace rather than throwing a rock was her miracle. Our encounter with Jesus’ grace is ours.

Friend, you are never less than because
of your past mistakes and failures.
