

Equally Redeemed From the Fall

The Bible teaches cooperation between strong, Godly men and women. How can we come to better understand our roles as co-heirs of God's grace?

The well-poised woman leaned across the table, closing the gap between us, while her husband shifted in his seat. "Do you know the greatest challenge to being a strong woman in ministry?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," I replied.

She sighed deeply. "The hardest part of being a woman in ministry," she said, "is consistently being confronted with gender-related issues. My 'womanhood' seems to overshadow my purpose.

"Everything I attempt for the kingdom of God is filtered through my femininity. My ideas are often rejected on the basis of my gender, not their merit.

"My calling in God is undeniable, and I am secure in Him," she continued. "But my place in life is subject to the fact that I am a woman living in a man's world."

Now her husband leaned forward. "I respect my wife's strength, even though many men find it intimidating," he said. "But it isn't threatening to me, and it shouldn't be to them.

"Her self-assurance is complimentary to my personal strength. It isn't fair for her to be judged as overassertive because she carries herself with confidence."

With that, they both sat back, waiting to be challenged on their "unconventional" views. But that challenge wasn't about to come from me!

Following that encounter, I found myself reflecting on our conversation and reminiscing about the strong women who have impacted my life over the years.

My earliest childhood memories involve pictures of my mother—mental snapshots of a time when life was simple and satisfying. My formative experiences in life, prayer, play and learning were definitely guided by my mother's watchful eye and purposeful hand.

My father makes an occasional appearance in those memories; and when he does, his presence is always reassuring. But balancing his role as a bi-vocational pastor with the responsibilities of providing for a young family left him precious few moments for nurturing in those days.

Throughout my teen years, however, my primary relationship began to shift ever so gradually to my father. My mother continued to play a significant role in my life; but as our relationship changed, I began to see her in a new and different way.

I remember the first time I recognized pain in my mother's eyes—the pain of being misunderstood, rejected and told to get in her “place” (although not in so many words). After that, I saw the pain many times.

Often the demand was communicated by a look, a raised eyebrow or a sharp glance from an insecure man. The meaning was unspoken but unmistakable: Who are you to lead us? Get back in your place.

THE BLAME GAME Where did so many Christian men (and women) get the idea that all strong-willed women are “Jezebels” who need to be put in their “place”? Perhaps the answer goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden and the insecurities of the first man, Adam.

When Adam tasted the forbidden fruit, he was surrendering to

the lust in his own heart. Yet he failed to take responsibility for his personal weakness. Instead, he blamed his weakness on the woman, Eve.

Men and women have been in relational conflict ever since. Men fight to recapture a place of leadership; women fight to find a balance between following and leading, struggling with the tension.

Unfortunately, Adam's propensity toward blame displacement left Eve unprotected in her relationship with him. She moved from a warm place of security and fulfillment to the icy realm of uncertainty and striving.

The birth of her first son revealed the transition that took place in her heart. She named him Cain, which means, "I have acquired him from the Lord."

In short order she and Adam digressed from the relationship-based acceptance they had known in the Garden to performance-based acceptance. They deteriorated from fully functional human beings to fully dysfunctional human doings.

The bell rang, ending round one of the battle of the sexes. Adam and Eve went to their separate corners to prepare for a lifetime of striving.

Today many of Eve's daughters find themselves still struggling with the same issues Eve did—especially when they see modern men choosing to follow the same course as Adam.

NO SECOND-CLASS CITIZENSHIPS If you are a strong-willed woman, you have probably wondered, Why am I different from other women who seem to accept the roles society offers them without resentment?

Again, the answer goes back to the Garden—and to God's original design for women. The Bible tells us that the first man was created in the image of God, out of the dust of the

earth. The first woman did not evolve from the man; she, too, was created in the image of God, out of the substance of the man.

Clearly, God never intended for Eve to be a second-class citizen but for her to rule in conjunction with Adam. Genesis 2:18 describes the purpose of Eve's creation: "The Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him'" (NKJV).

God created men and women not only to be redemptively and socially equal; He created them also to be functionally and experientially different. God gave Eve to Adam because she completed him. She brought a unique perspective to their partnership that Adam would never have had otherwise.

The same is true for men and women today. Women bring to leadership in the home, the workplace and the church what Eve brought to leadership in the Garden: grace, vulnerability and beauty, yes; but also eyes that interpret behavior, ears attuned to pain, hearts that are nurturing and resolved, courageous curiosity and insight that transcends the limitations of the male perspective.

God never intended for the woman to be relegated to the sidelines while the male of the species fulfilled the dominion mandate. Women are not designed to be spectators or competitors with men; they are designed to be facilitators of the grace of life alongside men.

Yes, the Lord leads His people through purposeful men. But He also delights in directing our paths through strong, decisive women.

STRENGTH IN SUBMISSION So what are we to make of Bible passages such as Ephesians 5:22-24: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the as the church is subject to Christ, so let wives be to their own husbands in everything"? Can a woman be both strong-willed and submitted?

The answer is found in the original definition of the word submission. Today we tend to think that submission is akin to subjection. But the Greek word translated submission is nothing like the contemporary definition of the word subjection.

Just as meekness is not weakness, submission is not subjugation. The word subjection carries the connotation of “dominating by force or power”—as when ancient rulers humiliated their conquered enemies by walking them through the streets of the city in shame.

Submission, on the other hand, was originally a military term meaning “to arrange troop divisions in rank under the direction of a leader.” Soldiers were (and still are) strategically placed in positions that allowed them to defend and protect one another, thereby minimizing casualties and maximizing victories.

In the kingdom of God, we, too, have been divinely placed in positions that are complimentary to one another for the purpose of minimizing casualties and maximizing victories. For a Christian—male or female—serving in submission simply means understanding and fulfilling one’s place.

And therein lies the dilemma. What is a woman’s place?

Any place God has sovereignly chosen to set her!

Serving in submission does not imply the loss of rights, privileges or strengths. Rather, it involves the voluntary yielding of rights, privileges and strengths for the greater good.

Strong-willed women (and men) in Christ yield their strength when necessary to achieve the objective they are assigned to accomplish. They choose to submit for the greater good of the kingdom.

Proverbs 31 gives us a snapshot of a “model” woman who is both strong and submitted. This woman does not allow society to define or exploit her. Confident in her calling, she carries herself with regal beauty and grace.

The Proverbs 31 woman is strong in her will, her purpose and her resolve. She is also totally submitted to God’s plan for her life, content to be who God designed her to be—no explanations, no apologies.

HEROINES OF THE BIBLE The notable women of Bible history were definitely not timid creatures cowering before their male counterparts. The Bible describes these women as bold, fearless, wise and strategic in the way they used their influence.

They played vital leadership roles—domestic, social and spiritual—in the accomplishment of God’s kingdom plans.

When called upon to stand against injustice, for example, the great women of Scripture arose and defied the enemies of God’s people.

Think of Deborah, the judge, who was unflinching in her determination to lead Israel into peace and prosperity. Or Esther, who strategically used her feminine qualities to gain the heart of the king and spare her people from genocide.

These strong-willed women were not afraid or ashamed to use their strength for the good of others. Shouldn’t women today have that same freedom?

CHARACTERISTICS OF STRONG MEN AND WOMEN Let me share a few insights I have gained about strong-willed women. I don’t claim to be an expert, but as a husband who shares a bedroom and a boardroom with a strong, purpose-driven woman, I have come to several conclusions:

- * The greatest challenge for strong, decisive women is

learning how to accommodate the insecurities of weaker men who surround them.

- * Most strong-willed women aren't vying to lead as much as they are wanting to be heard and to have their perspective valued.

- * Many strong women suffer because they have not mastered the art of revealing themselves only to those who will understand, appreciate and protect them.

Thankfully, there are many strong-willed men who love and appreciate strong-willed women. Here's what I've discovered about such men:

- * They respect the gifts, callings, and abilities Christ has placed in their feminine counterparts and unashamedly acknowledge the limitations in their own lives.

- * They value purpose more than peace and tranquility.

- * They know that making room for each other is an ongoing process.

- * They appreciate the energy and the synergy that results when two people with different but equal gifts and abilities work together.

The truth is, God never intended for women to be confined by cultural constraints or the insecurities of weak men. He wants all of his daughters to be free to be who He created them to be: unique image-bearers of their sovereign Image Maker, imbued with great dignity, power and purpose.

Whatever our gender, let's commit to appreciating and celebrating each other's strengths and covering each other's weaknesses. Let's take our places in the kingdom of God and allow God to strategically place other people—male and female—in theirs.

As we do, Christ will be exalted. God's purposes will be advanced. And a small corner of Eden will be restored in a dry, fallen world that has yet to see God's kingdom as it was always meant to be.

Read a companion devotional.

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