

NO

Kat
Armstrong

MORE

HOLDING

BACK

Emboldening
Women to Move
Past Barriers,
See Their Worth,
and Serve God
Everywhere

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*To my husband, Aaron,
I love our blessed alliance. I love us. Thank you
for telling me to go for it . . . about everything.*

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WHY ARE YOU EVEN HERE?

Just stop!”

The conversation in my class at Dallas Theological Seminary came to a shocking halt. The professor had been leading a discussion on women learning about Jesus. Not women *teaching* about Jesus, which some find controversial, but women *learning* about Christ. I had been quick to join the lively discussion because, after all, that’s why I was there—to learn. And if women in seminary classes can’t engage in a conversation about women in seminary, then where can we talk about it?

Raising my hand, I confessed to the professor, “I’m scared to learn too much about Jesus because I am a woman.”

Even as the words came out of my mouth, I’d started to process how ridiculous it must sound to hear a human—an image bearer of God—say that she feared loving Jesus too much. Jesus’s Great Commandment, found in Mark 12:30, should compel *all* his followers, regardless of gender, to love him with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, right?

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That's when one of my male classmates had started shouting at me: "Just stop!"

He wasn't speaking to the professor or engaging in the class discussion. Instead, his whole body faced me, and he extended his arm, pointed his finger, and raised his voice to warn me: As a woman, I *could* learn too much about Jesus. In fact, when women learn too much about Jesus, he said, they become dangerous; a threat to the local church and a threat to marriage.

You could've heard a pin drop as we waited to see what the prof would say in response.

He slid his glasses off, leaned into his podium, and looked me square in the eye. Choking back tears, he thundered, "*Don't* stop. *Don't ever* stop. Keep going, sister of the faith."

The tension in the room was palpable until the professor called for an unplanned break. Bolting as fast as possible to the women's restroom, I rushed to hide my ugly-cry. Now, in addition to being scared, I was humiliated.

Would you believe that student followed me to the women's restroom? He took one step inside and put a hand on the door to pry it open.

"I have one question for you," he said. "Why are you even here?"

He didn't speak with frustration or anger but with disgust. My desire to learn more about the Bible *offended* him.

With tears rolling down my face and stutter-filled conviction, I tried to communicate that I was a theology student for the same reasons he was, to learn about Jesus. Unsatisfied with my answer, he turned around to leave. It took me several minutes to compose myself, wipe off the mascara smears, and return to class visibly shaken. Nevertheless, I returned.

To be clear, my encounter with this seminary student stood

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out as an exception to my overall experience at Dallas Theological Seminary. All my life I've received the gracious encouragement of godly men urging me to pursue God more. I daresay, I know what it's like to have my brothers in Christ in my corner. They are cosigning on the spiritual gifts of women because they want to see everyone thrive. They remind me often that God designed Adam and Eve to co-rule together, co-subdue together, to be fruitful and multiply *together*.

You would think all this support from my brothers would silence any other voices tempting me to approach discipleship judiciously, but it doesn't. Those annoying, sometimes hateful critics like the older gentleman in my class seem to use a megaphone in our lives, able to drown out a whole cheering section. Has anyone told you to ease up, slow down, or stop because you are a woman? If so, I hope I am not the first to tell you that person was wrong.

The progress we've made to dignify women as image bearers of God is not enough. We may be breaking barriers and glass ceilings in the workplace, our communities of faith are finally starting to hear our voices, and institutional change continues across the board. But some people still caution women to stay in their places. Some women like me still wrestle with the tension of Jesus's aspirational words in the Great Commandment and the harsh filter of reality. What would it look like to take a seat at the table without any mental space reserved for uncertainty?

The seminary student's words held power over me for some time. They served as fuel to a fire already burning in my belief system. But he didn't light the match. My nagging concerns were already smoldering by the time I arrived on campus. I worried that my wholehearted devotion to Jesus was a risk and that my

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education could potentially upset the powers that be. He served to confirm my suspicions and authenticate my doubts by voicing an all too common viewpoint: some aspects of our spiritual formation are delegated to the guys only.

Somewhere along the way, the church has participated in gendering the Great Commandment. And I'm so over it. We have made loving God with our hearts and souls women's work and loving God with our minds and strength men's work. But the Bible tells a different story altogether: women matter to God as much as men do.

The Great Commandment of Mark 12:30—along with verse 31, which extols us to love our neighbors as ourselves—teaches that God expects the faithful to be all in for Jesus. Nowhere in this passage do we find a reference to male or female. Yet I have been unconsciously reading gender into it as long as I can remember. God did not design half of his priorities for women and the other half for men. Jesus included both genders when he explained that the highest goal of all Christ-followers would be to give completely of oneself to God and then to others. Jesus has a more complete vision for us than we have for ourselves.

I shudder to think that women are shrinking back, diminishing their voices, and resisting the prompting of the Holy Spirit because we feel too uneasy to be all in with our faith. And I'm convinced that even in spaces where leadership does champion women, many of us still allow seeds of doubt to hold us back from serving God in the home, at work, and everywhere in between.

So let me ask you, Why are you here? Have you identified your life's goal? Does the Great Commandment pop into your brain when you have to give an account of your identity and calling? It takes different shapes based on how God has wired

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you, but at your core, you are supposed to love God with reckless abandon.

Are you tempering your enthusiasm for God or resisting something he has called you to? Should you be raising your hand more at school, work, or church? I've been there. Women are rising into levels of leadership and influence only dreamed of by our grandmothers, but many of us still ask the question, Is it okay for me to do this? Christian women add another layer of insecurity as we wonder if God affirms our advancement. What will our faith leaders think of our progress? How do the doors opening to women align with Christianity? Maybe doubt-filled questions about what we can and can't do occupy our minds because we are not prepared to answer the real question: Why did God put me here?

The Truth Will Set You Free

If the Great Commandment is gender inclusive, then why would we struggle moving forward in every way possible to obey it? Perhaps it's because we've internalized a number of messages about our nature and calling as women that stand in the way of following Jesus with our whole beings. In part 1, I'll share how five such messages have held me back; then I'll debunk them so they no longer hold power over you.

For one, I expected women to be easily deceived, like Eve. A gross misunderstanding of 1 Timothy 2, which reminds us of Eve's role and the sin in the Garden, led to my fear that women are cursed. If I am Eve's daughter, am I even trustworthy with the gospel message or the C-suite at work? I thought I was

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destined to follow in her footsteps—fumbling obedience. Such foolishness. Believing women are destined for epic failure is so messed up. Turns out the easiest way to get rid of a risk factor is not to bench or restrict women; rather, it is to consider the Savior on the cross, the empty tomb, and the Holy Spirit anointing his people. Curses (real or imagined) die because Jesus lives.

Second, I generally feel like I have little to offer God, even though he asks us to give him our all. I immediately negotiate away prospects of stepping into something new with excuses. When I gain more education, more experience, more confidence—and feel less stressed—I’ll really get serious about it, whatever *it* may be. But I know from experience that seasons without hardship don’t exist. The always relevant Word of God shows us that sometimes the best we can give Jesus is a broken heart, a troubled soul, a confused mind, and a weakened strength. Because in God’s economy, even our smallest offerings have significant value. We may not have a lot to offer, but we must learn the sacred practice of offering everything.

I stumbled most significantly in my faith journey, however, in believing that marriage would be my greatest joy in life, and that motherhood would be my highest calling. When I elevated marriage and motherhood above the first and second greatest commandments, I committed idolatry. For the record, our life stages, ages, relationship statuses, titles, or roles do not determine how we experience the fullness of God’s plan for our lives. Dethroning the idols of Christian matrimony and parenthood does not in any way devalue the institution of marriage or the dignity of mothers. But we do need to check ourselves and the words we use to describe things like joy, calling, and purpose for women. Our words matter. They shape our beliefs, which then

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determine our behavior. Marriage and motherhood will remain valuable, God-given assignments worthy of honor even after we burn up the idols, because all of God's daughters can bring him glory. But wives and mothers do not corner the market on the truest forms of biblical womanhood. Loving God and loving others are life's pinnacles, and we should be sure to say that clearly so there is no confusion.

I also had to admit that I believed I could not be submissive *and* strong. If women are designed for submission in life and in the home, it seemed logical that they could not also be strong. But the two qualities are not mutually exclusive, because *submissive* does not mean *passive* or *weak*. We need to take our cues from Jesus, who submitted to God's will to die on a cross and did so without compromising his supernatural power.

Lastly, I struggled to understand that leading ladies can fit in supporting roles. Everything around me seemed to accentuate the power struggle described in the Fall all those years ago in the Garden of Eden. I felt inner conflict about how my leadership skills fit into subservient roles. I had to reckon with the role of Christ in the church and my life because we are all *his* servants, after all.

My quest to embrace Jesus's calling on our lives meant naming and course correcting these mixed messages. No matter how deeply misunderstanding is buried, the Scriptures can unearth our theological weeds by removing the lies that get in the way of surrender. Pursuing God's most important instructions starts with weed pulling, yanking them out at the root level. Then, free from distractions, we can figure out what Jesus really meant when he cast his vision for women in the Great Commandment.

Researching *heart*, *soul*, *mind*, and *strength* in the Bible, I

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discovered that the meaning of each word goes much deeper than I anticipated. I can't wait to share my findings with you in part 2. While I assumed *heart* was limited to emotions, *soul* meant spirituality, *mind* equaled brainpower, and *strength* was more natural than supernatural, the Scriptures reoriented my opinions and changed my life forever. In addition to clearing the soil of my heart, the Holy Spirit planted gospel truth through each word study.

By connecting love for God with love for ourselves and others, it's clear Jesus is teaching us that surrender and obedience are connected to our flourishing and are blessings to everyone around us. Part 3 explores how letting love in and pouring love out are the natural by-products of internal change. The fruits of our labor are radical self-love and sacrificial care for the people around us.

I've shared my "just stop" story many times, and the typical response is "Oh no, he did not!" Sometimes, women jokingly ask me to hold their earrings as if they are ready to defend my honor, and almost everyone wants to know his name. Thankfully, I don't know his name. And *he* is not the point.

If I could go back in time with my wits about me, I would have explained to my brother in Christ that women who love God with their all do not endanger the local church or the institution of marriage.

Women who love God with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength are a threat to egos.

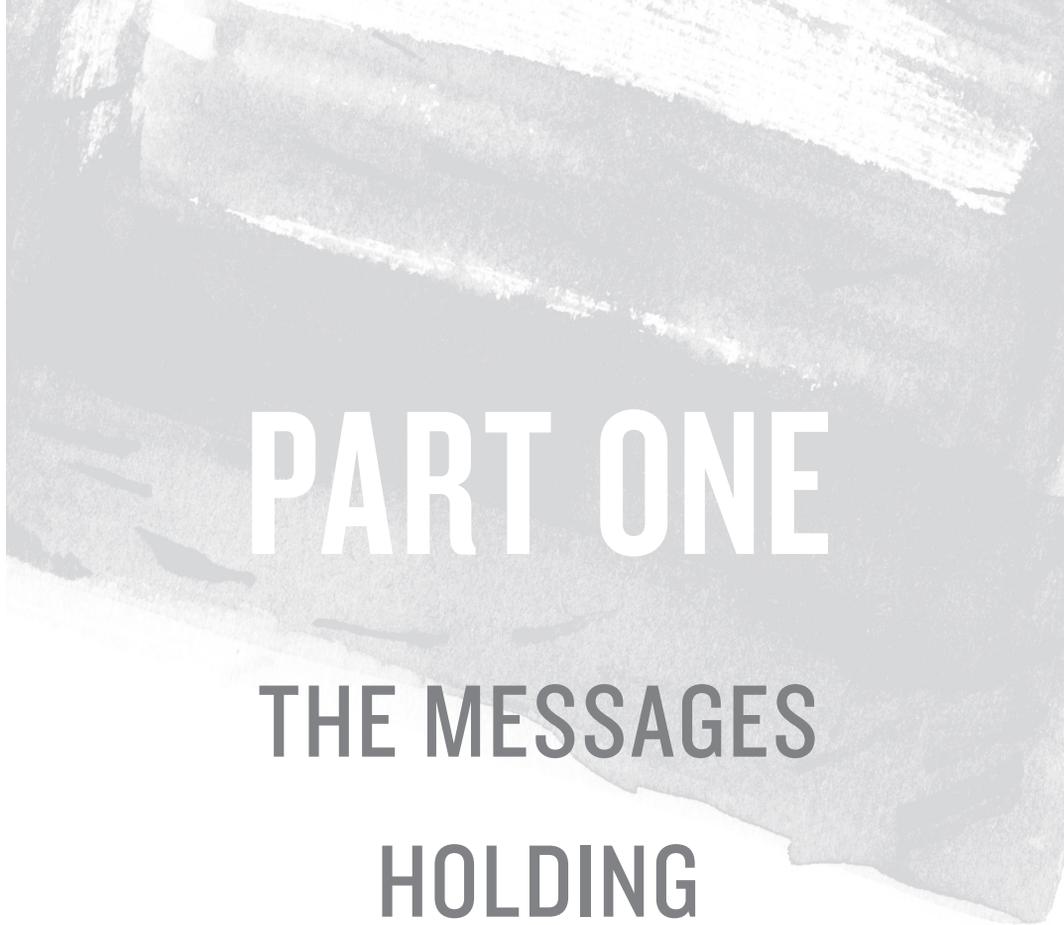
Women who love God with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength are a threat to power structures.

And women who love God with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength are a threat to our enemy!

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Now I can see God's gracious hand redeeming that fork-in-the-road moment. Because the student asked me a question that I would have to answer the rest of my life. When asked in love, it is a valid question we all need to answer. Although he intended to harm me with the words, "Why are you even here?" God has used them for my good. And I hope he is going to do the same for you.

Through ancient words inspired thousands of years ago, our Savior continues to invite women into his timeless priorities, and in doing so he shows us his plan. Throwing caution to the wind, let's be all in for Jesus. That's what he's always intended for us. No more holding back.



PART ONE

THE MESSAGES

HOLDING

WOMEN BACK

ONE

WOMEN CAN'T BE TRUSTED TO LEARN AND LEAD

But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.

—2 CORINTHIANS 11:3 NASB

I used to skip church youth group in high school but not to make out with my boyfriend or swipe doughnuts. I was sneaking out so I could slip into Beth Moore's adult Sunday school class at Houston's First Baptist Church.

Even though I didn't know my Sunday school teacher's influence was growing beyond the walls of our church, I wanted to sit under her teaching. Word on the street was, this very Southern lady with very Southern hair would teach the Bible line by line and her class handouts were filled front and back with dreamy fill-in-the-blanks and footnotes. I started attending alongside a few hundred adults as a brand-new Christian eager to learn more

about God. By the time I left for college, the class had grown to almost seven hundred people.

One day after class, I asked Beth what I should read next since I had devoured everything she had suggested in class, and she encouraged me to attend seminary. I had never heard that word before, so Beth explained the concept: graduate school for the Bible. My first question about it was telling. Could women go to seminary? She assured me that of course they could, and that was that. I was going.

I rushed through my back door and huddled up with my parents to report the exciting news. Somehow, at some point, I was going to grad school to study the Bible. Get hyped, y'all!

Shocked and flustered, my dad asked me if girls were allowed to attend those places, and he pointed out my undergraduate degree in accounting must come first.

You see, underneath my newfound passion for studying the Scriptures lurked an unconscious belief—for my parents and myself: women learning about Jesus was unusual, and seminary was no place for ladies. But why? Why was my first question about Bible school, “Can women attend?” And what is it about the concept of female theology students that did not sit right with my dad?

Easily Deceived?

Two chapters into God’s Genesis story of redemption, we find Eve, the first woman, hoodwinked by the serpent. She doesn’t exactly portray us as trustworthy. Since my childhood, I’ve noticed every storybook picture of the fall of mankind placed Eve

in the center of the narrative as the one who was easily deceived. Her failures follow her to the New Testament, when Paul used the sin in the Garden to explain why first-century women in Ephesus were not permitted to teach men. Here's what Paul had to say about it: "I do not allow a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; instead, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and transgressed" (1 Tim. 2:12–14 CSB).

Children's storybook illustrations and the apostle Paul's references paint a bleak picture of womanhood as it relates to following God's instructions. Generations of respected church leaders and theologians influenced by misogyny made it even harder for me to see past Eve's foolishness and resist taking it on as my own.

Marg Mowcyko, a brilliant student of the Scriptures, compiled the following list of misogynistic quotes of early church fathers.¹

The renowned "Father of Latin Christianity," Tertullian, wrote:

And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man.²

Thomas Aquinas, doctor of the Church, in the thirteenth century, wrote:

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As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence.³

Martin Luther, a German priest, theologian, and Protestant reformer, wrote:

For woman seems to be a creature somewhat different from man, in that she has dissimilar members, a varied form and a mind weaker than man. Although Eve was a most excellent and beautiful creature, like unto Adam in reference to the image of God, that is with respect to righteousness, wisdom and salvation, yet she was a woman. For as the sun is more glorious than the moon, though the moon is a most glorious body, so woman, though she was a most beautiful work of God, yet she did not equal the glory of the male creature.⁴

Augustine thought women's only purpose was to help in childbearing.⁵ And now, in more recent years, pastor and best-selling author John Piper admits that, historically speaking, women have usually been understood as "more gullible or deceivable than men and therefore less fit for the doctrinal oversight of the church. This may be true."⁶

Famous megachurch pastor Mark Driscoll was instrumental in cofounding several influential evangelical organizations, including the Resurgence, Acts 29 Network, and the Gospel

Coalition. Although his Mars Hill Church has now disbanded, his booklet on church leadership concerning women in ministry emphasizes the widely held belief about women being daughters of Eve based on Paul's words in 1 Timothy 2:

Without blushing, Paul is simply stating that when it comes to leading in the church, women are unfit because they are more gullible and easier to deceive than men. While many irate women have disagreed with his assessment through the years, it does appear from this that such women who fail to trust his instruction and follow his teaching are much like their mother Eve and are well-intended but ill-informed.⁷

If the writings of influential Christian leaders and theologians throughout history have taught that women struggle to overcome being duped, one might assume it's not wise for women to be students of theology or hold positions of leadership in the workforce or in the church. Based on their interpretations, Eve did not steward her knowledge well, and look where it got us. According to them, it seems the gospel message was not safe with Eve. So that natural next question is, Will it be with us?

Get an entire gender uneasy about loving God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, and you will see how our enemy effectively sidelines women. Women are often told we need to be careful with knowledge, as if a universal holy reverence for the words of God is not for *all* people. I wonder if we are picturing ourselves in a garden, facing a serpent, tempted to be snared like Eve, and disregarding what Jesus redeemed on the cross.

Epic Eden Redo

In light of these misguided and defeating interpretations of Scripture, we may need to remind ourselves that while there are a select few verses that are confusing about the role of women in the Fall and in the church, there are plenty of timeless truths that all agree apply to women: We are image bearers of the one true living God, and we reflect his glory because we were made in his likeness (Gen. 1:26). We were designed to wage war against spiritual forces, to push back the powers of darkness (Eph. 6:10–17). We have been sealed with the Spirit of the almighty God. As a result, we are competent ministers of the gospel (2 Cor. 3:6). We have been called by God into a holy calling, not according to our gender, abilities, or education, but based on God’s grace, an irrevocable calling to be God’s own (2 Tim. 1:9). Matthew tells us we are the light of the world (Matt. 5:14–16). Sister, Paul says we have everything we need for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3), every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph. 1:3).

And we probably need to be reminded that Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection secured us all an epic Eden redo. John, the beloved disciple, started his gospel with “In the beginning” the same way Genesis does. As a parallel work to Genesis, John’s gospel is like a second Genesis or a second beginning. By the time we get to John 20 and Christ’s resurrection, John has prepared us to see Jesus’s words and actions as a movement of redemption. He wrote:

On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark. She saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran to Simon Peter and

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to the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put Him!” (John 20:1–2 HCSB)

As Peter and John sprinted to the garden tomb to verify Mary’s story, they found the stone rolled away and Jesus’s linens just as she described. Likely distraught by the missing body, both men headed back to the Upper Room to mourn, but Mary stayed at the grave site to cry. Two angels appeared to Mary and asked her why she was sobbing, but they already knew why. Jesus’s body had disappeared, and she didn’t know where to find it. Turning around, she saw Jesus, mistaking him for the owner of the garden. Mary supposed Jesus was the gardener and—I want us to catch this—she was not right, but she wasn’t wrong either. Jesus *is* the Cosmic Gardener, and he was about to replant humanity in the second garden.

Saying her name, Jesus caught Mary’s attention, and she found her Great Teacher. “Don’t cling to Me,’ Jesus told her, ‘for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to My brothers and tell them that I am ascending to My Father and your Father—to My God and your God.’ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord!’ And she told them what He had said to her” (John 20:17–18 HCSB).

For anyone like me, assuming a woman’s passion for service is restrained by Eve’s example, look again at John’s gospel, which highlights Mary Magdalene as a model disciple in the resurrection story.

In the first garden, Eve was placed inside it by God’s initiative, and we can assume it was during the day because the lights had already been turned on (Gen. 1). In Mary’s story, she comes

from outside the garden by her own initiative, and it is still dark outside.

In the first garden, Eve was created *after* Adam, but in Mary's story, she is the *first* person to see the resurrected Jesus—before Peter, before John. She's the first. Hashtag it, please.

In the first garden, Eve faced the fruit-producing tree of life and initiated with her rebellion a curse of death for all. And the fruit was available when she reached for it. In the second garden, Mary Magdalene faced a tomb of death, only to find Jesus had initiated the resurrection life for all. And in the grave, there was no body.

In the first garden, the serpent approached Eve with cunning questions that sow doubt. In the second garden, angels greeted Mary Magdalene and then Jesus himself appeared, all asking compassionate questions that sow hope.

In the first garden, Eve hid her naked shame from God's presence before being ousted from Eden. In the second garden, Mary wept without shame in Jesus's presence, and it was Jesus's clothes that were missing.

Eve was deceived, but Mary was commissioned.

Eve rebelled, but Mary obeyed.

The contrast, the repurposing, is so vivid, so clear. I can barely make it through either passage without weeping. I am no longer a gullible daughter of Eve, and neither are you. When my concerns about biblical deception arise within me, I stand condemned as I hear my enemy say, "You are just like your mother, Eve." Instead, I should replay my Savior's words to Mary: "Go and tell your brothers." The curse of being easily deceived died when Jesus rose from the dead.

Somebody get my Wonder Woman crown; I'm feeling inspired.

Run Like a Girl

I wonder what Mary looked like, running with the gospel news to the Upper Room. I know she wasn't rockin' her Nike Frees; she was wearing dusty sandals. I know she wasn't sporting her lululemon Wunder Unders with four-way wicking stretch fabric. She had to scoop up many yards of cloth in her arms to sprint. And what kind of undergarments support the undignified movements of a first-century woman running? I know she was not wearing antiperspirant or a no-pull hair tie for her waist-long hair. So she must have arrived at the Upper Room crusty, dusty, dirty, sweaty, stinky, hair-all-a-mess, out of breath, and maybe with tears still staining her face. What a sight.

In her contribution to *Vindicating the Vixens*, theologian Karla Zazueta reminded me that since Mary Magdalene had been cured of seven demons, likely suffering severely with various mental and physical disabilities before Jesus healed her, she had a reputation for being unhinged.⁸ Let that encourage us! Even if our running is undignified and we look crazy for doing it, we still go when Jesus asks us to.

Luke tells us that Mary's words to the disciples in the Upper Room seemed like nonsense to them (Luke 24:11), and they did not believe her. I totally get that. If I had been present to hear Mary out of breath, maybe still crying and speaking with urgency while knocking on that door, I would be looking to Dr. Luke for a medical diagnosis on the formerly demon-possessed lady. Could this be a weird relapse, Dr. Luke? *Don't open the door, people! Whatever you do, do not open the door!* Believing women, trusting their testimony, continues to be an issue for us today.

We should open doors, metaphorically speaking, to our sisters. We should believe women.

Although her brothers in the Upper Room did not believe her testimony (Mark 16:11), Mary Magdalene raised her voice for truth. Let her example be a good reminder to us. Even if our brothers or sisters do not believe us, we still go. We tell the truth: he is risen!

What joy it must have brought Christ to redeem her physical and mental handicaps, knowing her future would include moving with speed to communicate the most important message the world has ever heard. Our past does not define our future.

Now, I don't run unless I am being chased, but I've been told by runners that it provides a great space to think. So I wonder what Mary was thinking while she was running. I imagine her processing, *I was destined to carry this message. I was healed to take this message. I was delivered to deliver this message.*

In 2014, Always produced a Super Bowl commercial called "Run Like a Girl" that currently has more than sixty-six million views on YouTube.⁹ To promote their feminine products and win the "epic battle" of young girls' confidence, they filmed responses to the prompt, "Show me what it looks like to run like a girl, fight like a girl, throw like a girl." True to life, the adults (and boys) shown at the beginning of the ad pretended to run, fight, and throw with subpar skills. Per the actors' roleplaying, doing something the way a girl does looks stupid, vapid, weak, and silly.

By contrast, the director asked *young* girls what it means to run like a girl, and without hesitation one child declared it means to "run as fast as you can." The point of the three-minute ad is this: somewhere along the way, doing something "like a girl" has become a put-down. It is used to humiliate people when it should

describe excellence. And I think we do that in Christianity too. Before it became a modern-day criticism, “You run like a girl” could have been an ancient compliment in Jesus’s day for women like Mary Magdalene.

Free to Run

The same year I admitted to my classmates that I was afraid to learn too much about Jesus, Father Juan Solana began construction on a retreat center in Galilee. He wanted to build a respite for Holy Land tourists. Under Father Juan’s leadership, construction workers in Israel unexpectedly uncovered the ancient ruins of Magdala (the town where Mary Magdalene would have been raised). The discovery of the Magdala stone¹⁰—the oldest carved stone block depicting the second temple—and a first-century synagogue was an archaeological marvel. As I was digging up the theological weeds of gender bias and the role Eve had played in my life, people were excavating Mary Magdalene’s hometown to uncover something lost.

In 2017 a friend offered to sponsor me on a trip to the Holy Land with a tour called “Women in the Word,” led by Dr. Jackie Roese. Morning Star Tours was offering their first female-only trip to Israel to study women of the Bible, and I was on it. Two days before leaving, Dr. Roese reached out to me to see if I would preach about Mary Magdalene on-site in Magdala. She pointed out I would be preaching in a place where Jesus’s feet walked the earth. My text back was, “Yaaassss! Thank you! Thank you!”

As Israel and the city of Jerusalem prepared for its seventieth Independence Day celebrations, I was preparing a message about

my freedom in Christ. Although I rarely cry-talk, I broke down in front of the crowd of women gathered at Magdala to study Mary Magdalene's life and see the ancient ruins of her town. Struggling even to breathe, let alone speak, I tried to retell my "just stop" story. Repeating my professor's words to our small band of women, I implored, "Don't stop. Don't *ever* stop. Keep going, sisters of the faith."

After my sermon I used my GoPro to film the diggers sifting through rubble at the Magdala excavation site, and I realized that the gifts of women are much like the ruins being unearthed right in front of me. Our gifts and talents, buried for centuries, have always been present, but now we see that elevating women's voices aligns with the Scriptures. Nothing about our gender hinders us from studying the Scriptures, seeking to know God better, or sharing those truths with others. Nothing about our gender should keep us from following God's lead in our home, with our families, or in the workplace. Like Mary Magdalene, we need to go with the gospel into our spheres of influence at a pace so urgent: We. Must. Run. Run like a girl. Because Jesus commissions us to and because he is risen indeed.

Mary does more than just represent that the testimony of a woman can be trusted, that God chooses women for kingdom purposes, and that we, too, can be used by God to go and tell our brothers (and sisters) his good news. Mary Magdalene is Eve's literary redemption. If Jesus is the second Adam, raised from dust by the power of the Spirit, then Mary Magdalene is the second Eve. Obeying Jesus, Mary fulfilled her mission and was worthy of the truth entrusted to her. The gospel is safe with women.

Nothing will rival her message. Jesus is the news. But we might unleash a generation of women if we teach them that

secondary to the message of “Jesus is risen” is this: a woman was the first preacher to literally *bring it*.

I wish I had been introduced to Mary Magdalene’s no-holding-back heroics before the term *seminary* entered my vernacular. Maybe my first question to Beth Moore would have been “How fast can we run there?” rather than “Can girls go to seminary?” Instead of questioning what races we should enter, what pace we should keep, or what distance is appropriate for our gender, you and I must believe that we are not gullible daughters of Eve but rather commissioned daughters of the King. Sister Mary Magdalene left us a heroine’s legacy.

Let’s follow in her footsteps.

Discussion Questions

- What have you been taught about Eve as it relates to all women?
- Is that message implied or specific in your church?
- What about Mary Magdalene’s story stands out most to you?
- Metaphorically speaking, what gifts are you uncovering about yourself?
- If Mary Magdalene is the first preacher to literally bring the gospel message, how should that influence our communities of faith?
- How would you describe your faith-life right now? (Sitting, standing, walking, running, limping)
- In what area of life do you need one of God’s epic redos?

SIX

ALL YOUR HEART: DEVELOPING A HEART FOR GOD

Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

—MATTHEW 5:8 NIV

My grandmother knew the meaning of hard work in a way I never will; she knew survival. Often wondering how she would put food on the table, she fought the cycle of poverty and conquered it because she was tough as nails. Abuela passed away at the age of ninety-four, having lived independently in the same tiny house for fifty-three years in Harlingen, Texas. That house was the backdrop for long, hot, joy-filled summers eating homemade tortillas. No wonder I love carbs so much.

As a struggling single mother of two kids, she worked several jobs to make ends meet, including housekeeping and working at a cannery. One single light bulb illuminated their house until my mom was in high school, and they had to share a bathroom with

other families in a little building separate from the rented houses where they stayed. Through the course of her life, two different men abandoned her, one while she was pregnant.

We demanded she stop mowing her own lawn when she reached her mid-eighties. Her insistence bordered on ridiculous. But we could never get her to quit gardening. I often wondered how a ninety-year-old would be able to get herself off the ground after hunching over to tend to her plants. When I asked her about it, she said, "*Mija*, I've been lifting myself up my whole life."

I'd like to believe her fierce independence and strength have passed down to me, but it's clear the green thumb skipped a couple of generations. I killed a basil plant last week, and it has joined an ever-growing graveyard of dead plants left in my wake.

Elvira Lopez knew the secrets to having good soil; she knew how to make things grow. Her legacy reminds me of our Cosmic Gardener, God Almighty, and how much of history, his story, unfolds before a garden backdrop. In chapter 1 we talked about Creation and the Fall that took place in the Garden of Eden, and the redemption of mankind at the garden tomb. But there will also be a re-creation when God makes the new heaven and new garden on earth. Clearly, we see a biblical theme meant to catch our attention. He, too, knows rich-soil secrets; his expertise is pruning and helping us bear fruit. It brings new significance to the phrase "tend your garden." And that's just what we have been doing together.

In the first section of this book, we cleared our theological gardens of weeds. Now we can plant the truth. Uprooting a gendered Great Commandment leaves us ready to absorb God's words as he always intended them. The mental energy we used to spend on worry is now freed up to embrace the reason we exist: to

love God and love others. It's time to till the ground by digging deep into the Scriptures.

Breaking Down for a Breakthrough

I'm a newly converted Barre 3 member, which means I'm working out at a Barre 3 *studio* using the Barre 3 *method*. I'm in shape, but I can barely walk. And though I can now sit and eat comfortably in my jeans without unzipping them, I have trouble getting into a seated position.

If you look up *Barre 3*, the website will tell you it's a "full-body workout" that includes "sustained holds, micro-movements, and cardio bursts" that leave your body feeling balanced.¹ I agree. It might be the hardest type of exercise I've ever done, but it's also my favorite so far. Passionate as I am about sharing my newfound love with the women around me, Caleb, my five-year old, has heard all about it maybe one too many times.

Our typical Saturday mornings include a trip to the studio for my Barre 3 class with my little dude. One Saturday morning before my workout, I overheard Caleb telling his imaginary friend, "My mommy loves going to the bar." This is not the kind of thing you want the pastor's kid saying. Calling him into my room and getting on eye level, I asked, "Buddy, what did you just say?" With great confidence, Caleb said, "You love going to the bar and taking me with you." Seeing the horror on my face, he started to doubt himself. "You do love going to the bar, right, Mommy?" Wincing in emotional pain, I hesitantly asked, "Love, have you said that to anyone? Anyone at the church?" Next, I tried to explain some things that would

ensure Daddy, the pastor at our church, still had a job the next Sunday.

“Buddy, buddy, pay attention. Mommy loves going to the barre *studio* for Barre 3 classes. Going to a bar is different. Totally different thing. Please make sure, and this is really important, focus . . . focus, love. When you talk about mommy going to the Barre, let’s just call it the gym, okay?” Unfazed, he returned to his Legos. Meanwhile, I was reaching into the air and whispering to myself, “Literalism is dangerous.”

You better believe I made sure to retell this story in several strategic ways in every potential place on the church campus. Laughing off the confusion, I attempted to get in front of the message: the pastor’s wife frequents the bar with her kid. To anyone who has left our church due to this startling admission from my son, I’d like the record to show if you find me in a bar, it’s usually because it’s got the best burgers in the city. Just sayin’.

Approximately twenty minutes into a Barre 3 workout, the instructors ask you to go one inch deeper into a hold. As your body starts to shake, they reassure you that this is normal. Coaching us to recognize the chaos entering our muscles, causing us to quiver, or in my case quake, they say to breathe through the hold. We all look like fools for thirty seconds, which feels like an hour, while our muscles break down for a breakthrough.

Now I am accustomed to pushing through and even enjoying the challenges in that sixty-minute workout. While sweat flies, my muscles are changing for the better. Even though I can anticipate the part of class that is going to hurt, I know building endurance is for my good. And I really appreciate the fact that all of the instructors in class make a point to remind us of what we are accomplishing physically by staying in a hold

longer than we want. We can get through this, and we will be stronger for it.

Building Heart Strength

Paul spoke to this strength when he wrote to the Romans:

Therefore, since we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have also obtained access through Him by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. This hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Rom. 5:1–5 HCSB)

According to the Scriptures, we can come to a place in our faith when we rejoice in our pain. And that revelation happens when we remind ourselves that hardship produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope.

Building heart strength is a physical discipline for our bodies, but it can also teach us a sacred spiritual lesson about our heart for God. Facing the chaos of life, pushing through it, and enjoying the breakthrough that naturally follows is the kind of exercise our hearts need in order to thrive. And what I know for sure is that when we love God with our whole hearts, he will

breathe into us the grit we need to cross the finish line even when we grow weary.

As I considered how we could live up to Jesus's call in Mark 12:30 to love God with all our hearts, I went to the Word of God for direction. Before looking up how often and in what setting the word *heart* was used in the Bible, I was expecting confirmation that ladies need to control their feelings, because I've grown up hearing how much more emotional women are than men and how much more relational we are than our brothers in Christ. While keeping my feelings in check and directing my affection toward Christ is a worthy goal, it's not the extent of loving God with all my heart. What I thought would be a lesson on tempering our feelings turned into a lesson on integrity. It's a lot more *Braveheart* than *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

I was surprised that even though the word *heart* appears more than a thousand times in the Bible, it rarely describes just our feelings or one of our internal organs. Instead, many of the authors of Scripture use the term more broadly to mean "our truest inner selves." Think about that. Our truest inner selves can sometimes be buried beneath our insecurities, our talents, or the opinions of others, or they may even contrast what we say we believe. When authors of Scripture used the word *heart*, they intended for us to envision the raw, plain truth about our whole lives.

What's Driving Your Heart?

I sifted through commentaries and lexicons to find that the meaning of *heart* in the Bible includes our whole personality and disposition, with an emphasis on reason and will. The best way

I could summarize my findings on the word is that our heart is the driving force behind our actions.² Loving God with all our hearts is not just feeling love toward God or redirecting misguided feelings back to God. It's about letting our love for him determine how we live.

When Jesus asked the scribes, “Why are you thinking these things in your hearts?” (Mark 2:8 HCSB), isn't it interesting that he asked about *thinking* rather than *feeling*? I usually separate those two into different categories, because lots of personality tests make thinking and feeling a binary choice. The truth is, thinking and feeling are deeply intertwined. Jesus's point is that our thought life and emotional well-being are interconnected.

Later, Jesus explained that out of people's hearts come evil actions: “For from within, out of people's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, adulteries, greed, evil actions, deceit, promiscuity, stinginess, blasphemy, pride, and foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a person” (Mark 7:21–23 HCSB).

What a list! Jesus is saying our behavior reveals the contents of our hearts.

In Luke, Jesus said, “Good people bring good things out of the good they stored in their hearts. But evil people bring evil things out of the evil they stored in their hearts. People speak the things that are in their hearts” (Luke 6:45 NCV).

Verse after verse points to the fact that our behavior reveals our authentic selves, which is the meaning of *heart* in the Bible. Loving God with all our hearts is so much more than Jesus-focused mushy-gushy stuff. It's about loving God with our truest inner selves and letting that love shine through our lives and determine our actions. But to accomplish that, we have to

persevere. That's why the word *heart* comes up several times when the authors of the Bible talk about how hard it is to keep going.

Paul and Timothy, two New Testament church planters, wrote a letter to the Christians in Corinth. It's a gut-wrenching message about faithfulness to God's priorities in the midst of harsh adversity. Coupling negative emotions about their difficult circumstances with profound, timeless, and uplifting truths about God, it almost feels as though Paul and Timothy can't decide if they are depressed or joyful. Then you realize they are living in the inevitable tension where suffering and celebration coexist. Similar to my workouts, life is fun and hard and sometimes both at once.

Paul and Timothy described their suffering to the Corinthians this way: "For we don't want you to be unaware, brothers, of our affliction that took place in Asia: we were completely overwhelmed—beyond our strength—so that we even despaired of life" (2 Cor. 1:8 HCSB).

They felt completely overwhelmed, beyond their strength, and at times despairing of life. I can certainly relate. But they also spoke about the "God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we may be able to comfort those experiencing any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:3–4 NET).

While Paul and Timothy first described themselves and others as extremely troubled and overwhelmed by grief, they then transitioned into the happy topic of the Holy Spirit's work in Christians:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from

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ourselves; *we are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you. (2 Cor. 4:7–12 NASB)

Paul said we are pressured but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not in despair, struck down but not destroyed. And I call that life. Real life. Paul and Timothy's letter to the Corinthians encourages principled living to those running out of steam. Exactly what will be required of us if we take Jesus up on his command to love him with all our hearts.

Don't Lose Heart

Paul and Timothy knew that even in light of the remarkable things God does on our behalf, it's easy to lose our motivation to keep on keeping on. To those living in that tough, real-life place, Paul encouraged, "Do not lose heart":

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Cor. 4:16–18 NIV)

Some Bible versions translate the phrase “don’t lose heart” as “do not give up” or “don’t grow weary”—don’t become discouraged or be spiritless, despairing, exhausted, or faint. I wonder if you feel weary today. I wonder if you know all too well the bone-tired exhaustion that comes right before we throw in the towel. God knew we would face the kind of discouragement that makes us consider quitting. That’s why he made sure in his Word to include several reminders not to lose heart. He knew we would be tempted to.

Get Moving

Are you starting to lose heart? I wonder if God is stirring something in you right now. Maybe it’s clear that your inner truest self needs to focus on God. Maybe up until now your relationship with God has been surface level, or maybe you’re trying to hide something from him or from your loved ones or even from yourself. That’s the place where it’s easiest to give up on God and the people of God. Because there is nothing more tiring than knowing you need to get your life right and all the hard work it will take to get there. But how do you get the strength you need to keep going?

Pray

It’s so important to keep a conversation going with God. Always “pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you” (Eph. 1:18 niv). When we talk to God, our prayers do not fall on deaf ears. He is not taking a nap or more concerned about someone else. He is listening to us. Jesus wants us to take heart, not

lose it. This endurance we need to love God with our truest inner selves is only possible when we persist in prayer, because when we pray, his peace “which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7 NIV).

Get into the Word

Another important exercise for our spiritual hearts is immersing ourselves in God’s living Word. It offers instruction and encouragement, and it builds endurance that we need to keep going. The apostle Peter said, “‘The word of the Lord endures forever.’ And this is the word that was preached to you” (1 Peter 1:25 NIV).

Join a Team

Part of the reason I joined Barre 3 in the first place was to appease my licensed professional counselor. After my father passed away, my heart felt as if it had been ripped out of my chest. There were so many things about my dad, myself, and God that I knew to be true, but my actions were not reflecting those truths. On a surface level I was managing my grief well, but underneath was inexpressible hurt that I didn’t want to deal with because I knew it would be a lot of work. It was hard to apply the Great Commandment in that season.

My counselor suggested that, in addition to all sorts of other ways to work through my grief, I needed to be doing physical exercise. I never imagined the spiritual lessons I would learn about loving God with all my heart through cardio strength training and the help of the right instructors in my workout classes.

You see, the best part of Barre 3 workouts is the instructors. I went to social media to describe the stages of appreciation for our

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instructors, and here's how I summarized the emotional roller-coaster workouts: "First, you see the instructor and you think, *Oh, she's smiley; she's here to help me.* And then you get done with warm-up and you think, *This lady is taking it out on us, whatever it may be.* And then by the time she puts us in those micro-movements, you think, *Get away from me, lady; why do you torture us?* But by the end of class, as we rebalance ourselves and lie still to relax, I remind myself, *She's so great; she really cares about my well-being; she's here to help me.*"

In addition to doing the hard work alongside us, they know just when to tell us to keep going. My instructors are well practiced at seeing when I am really feeling the burn, and that's when they tell me to breathe. And many times they ask me to consider going one inch deeper, move a little faster, or sit tight for a few more seconds. In fact, they usually make a point in their coaching to talk about the fact that relief is coming, so give it all you've got in the moment. In essence, they've been telling me not to hold back when things get hard. It's because that is how we develop physical and mental toughness. They remind us that we can carry these lessons into our everyday lives. Because in real life we face challenges and we can get through those too. While all I want to do is find a way out of the discomfort, my workouts have taught me that additional reps are going to make me stronger.

The same is true for our spiritual cardio. As we seek to strengthen our hearts for God, we should build a team of trusted godly Bible teachers, mentors, or friends to walk alongside us to speak into our ears, to keep us moving, to help us hold on when our poses get shaky. In the stressful and downright defeating circumstances in my life, when I can feel the burn, metaphorically speaking, I first turn to Jesus. He is our most reliable,

trusted chief Instructor when it comes to the matters of the heart. His Holy Spirit is coaching us through the hardest parts of life, reminding us not to give up. He will supply all the encouragement we need.

Developing a heart for God will require some hard work, but it's how we build strength and add depth to our spiritual lives. So don't lose heart. That muscle-shaking, strengthening pose will serve to strengthen your character and deepen your faith further than you imagined you could go.

Discussion Questions

- How have you experienced the messages from society or church culture that women are the heart and soul of our communities?
- Before reading the chapter, what was your view on loving God with all your heart?
- Spiritually speaking, how would you diagnose your heart health?
- Describe your plan for strengthening your spiritual heart for God.
- What part of your life tempts you to lose heart?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kat Armstrong was born in Houston, Texas, where the humidity ruins her curls. She is a powerful voice in our generation as an innovative ministry leader and sought-after communicator. Encouraging women to love God and others with their all, Kat teaches the Bible with humor and heart. She is the cofounder and executive director of Polished Ministries (polishedonline.org), an organization that gathers young professional women to navigate career and explore faith together. Kat is invested in the lives of women eager to learn about how the Scriptures are relevant to their everyday lives. She has a master's degree in Christian education. She and her husband, Aaron, have been married for fifteen years; live in Dallas with their son, Caleb; and attend Dallas Bible Church, where Aaron serves as the lead pastor.

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