



We have human longings—to be valued and understood, and to contribute in meaningful ways. This book showcases God’s noble design, gives voice to women’s desires, and encourages us to hold fast to truth. Dahl invites women to embrace their dignity and delight that God made them female.

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## *Beckoned*

### ON KNOWING YOUR GOD AND YOUR OWN MIND

*“One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”*

JESUS, LUKE 10:42

**O**n the eve of my seminary graduation, I stood before my professors, classmates, friends, and family and gave a speech reflecting on my time as a student. At a loss for how to sum up the joy and agony of those nearly four years of graduate school, I settled on a poem I wrote about what it was like to walk through those years as a woman. I called it “Your Mom Went to Seminary.”

I started crafting the poem during one of my first classes, summer Greek, an intensive course that inaugurates most students’ seminary training. It’s six grueling weeks of Greek paradigms, daily quizzes, and anxious prayers the professor won’t call on you for the next exercise. Class meets for the first couple of hours in the morning, takes a break, and then resumes in the afternoon. The pace is swift, the memorization unrelenting.

When my husband, Jordan, took summer Greek a year prior, I distracted myself with our three children (then four, five, and nine) in our new California home. We did zoo trips and beach days, ate cereal for dinner, and did our back-to-school shopping while Jordan stayed at the library until it closed and returned when it opened, doing his best to juggle class and work.

### *Your Mom Went to Seminary*

The next summer it was my turn. Fortunately, we were entering the “arrival” stage of family life, where everyone could feed themselves breakfast, and all we had to do was yell, “Get ready to go!” and somehow, we managed to leave the house with everyone having shoes on. On top of that, it was summer vacation and Jordan worked from home. He could loosely supervise (as in, make sure the house didn’t burn down) while our kids benefited from the group parenting that was seminary housing.

Nonetheless, my transition to student status was challenging. Despite Jordan’s help and encouragement and the support we received from the village surrounding us, I never felt okay about spending my days at the library as my classmates did. Re-

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SEVERAL YEARS.**

calling our summertime adventures the year prior, my kids had expectations. So I crammed for quizzes at the crack of dawn, did as many Greek exercises as I could in my break between classes, and then raced home so we could get to the beach.

Meanwhile, my classmates lamented their lack of time to properly study and prepare for class. I felt a bit bewildered as I pondered my own juggling act.

This is where the poem started. “Your Mom Went to Seminary” began as a list of ways my seminary experience differed from my peers. If I’m honest, it was rooted in resentment as I compared myself to my classmates, knowing that many were single and others had the support of wives who kept everything afloat while they gave all their time to studying.

But over time, I realized this list I had been documenting was about more than wanting my professors and peers to acknowledge my challenge of going to graduate school as a wife and mom of three children. It was me working out the reality of being a Christian woman, sifting through tensions that had been developing ever since I came to faith eight years earlier.

### *Though I Was Blind, Now I See*

I entered the church as a single mom with a buried abortion story and a lot of questions. My childhood faith had floundered in college, and by the time I graduated, I was angry at God and done with His people. So when I stumbled back into a worship service a few years later, my two-year-old in tow, I expected to hate what I found there. Instead, I heard the gospel proclaimed in its simplicity and glory. It was like I’d never heard it before. I had “exchanged the truth about God for a lie,” I realized (Rom. 1:25). But I also understood for the first time that there was nothing I could do to make up for the sins of my past, nor was there any need—Jesus paid the penalty for my sins in full (Col. 2:14), setting me free from any and all condemnation (Rom. 8:1) and granting me His record of perfect righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21).

### NEW WOMAN, NEW EYES, NEW LEARNING

Maybe it goes without saying, but I never tire of telling this story: I was a new woman! I had so much to learn, but I felt like

the blind man after he received sight: “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25). After years of trying to hold myself up, determined to protect myself and my daughter Hadley from the ways the Bible had been used to shame and stifle me, I found refuge in its pages. There, I beheld a wise and merciful God who orchestrated all of human history to accomplish salvation in His Son. I experienced His grace in tangible ways as Hadley and I were welcomed like family into a community of believers.

I was eager—but cautious. As I looked at the Bible with new eyes, I saw God’s intense love and grace rather than disappointment and condemnation. It made me wonder what other ways I’d missed seeing God, settling instead for man’s poor interpretation. I felt like I’d been lied to all my years in the church. Because of those feelings, I met every new claim about God or what the Bible said with some suspicion, requiring proof from my new Christ-centered understanding of the Scriptures. I noticed my questions—directed to women who stepped in to mentor me—were often passed along to more knowledgeable men. But I didn’t want to lean on anyone else’s Bible understanding. I wanted to forge my own. And I couldn’t learn fast enough. I read and listened to everything I could get my hands on.

Along with learning, I jumped into the life of the church but found myself struggling to understand my value and contribution. My pastors meant well, but they believed focusing their efforts on discipling men and raising them up as leaders would necessarily result in care for the women. I felt silenced and unsure of my place, and I could see other women experiencing similar confusion. But our pastors taught the Scriptures and spoke of a beautiful complementarity between the sexes that stirred longing in my heart. I wanted to be protected, cared for, and cherished.

And, as the truth of the gospel transformed my heart, I also wanted to be prepared to do and be whatever He called me to. I needed to know what it meant to be a Christian, yes, but I was also deeply concerned about what it meant to be a Christian woman.

#### DISCERNING GODLY WOMANHOOD

In those first months of my discipleship, I found and learned from voices who confidently defined biblical womanhood in vocational terms. The godly woman embraces her high and holy calling as wife and mother, these writers taught me. They convinced me that embracing my God-given role was an act of defiance against a feminist culture seeking to rob me of my true femininity, and I strove to live up to this ideal. It was a bit of a challenge since, as a single mother, I had only half of the equation (and had gone about it in the wrong order). But after meeting and marrying my husband, I settled into my new role as a homemaker and went about having more babies.

**OUR PASTOR SAT  
BEFORE THE  
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AND APOLOGIZED  
FOR THE WAYS HE  
HAD FAILED TO  
CARE FOR WOMEN  
AND VALUE THEIR  
GIFTS.**

We didn't thrive. My babies were sweet and my husband is amazing. But I was depressed and a little bored, trying to be someone I wasn't. As Jordan and I began to revisit our early convictions about men's and women's roles, we lamented together the ways we had unnecessarily boxed each other in, creating rules where God gives freedom. We found new voices from people who shared our theological convictions, still esteeming womanhood but also creating space for a diversity of experiences and expressions. I was inspired by thoughtful women who loved God and the Scriptures and sought to serve His church faithfully.

So we started pressing in, asking our elders more questions and challenging the narratives and practices surrounding men and women. Eventually, our pastor sat before the congregation and apologized for the ways he had failed to care for women and value their gifts. He invited me to come alongside him to help create spaces for women to be heard, disciplined, and serve our congregation.

Though my views had changed in some ways, my study of the Scriptures still persuaded me toward a version of what has been labeled “complementarianism,” the belief that men and women are created by God with equal dignity and value, that God has called married men to lead their households, and that He has reserved the role of pastor/elder in the church for qualified men.

But those convictions didn’t preclude me from believing God has a place for women like me—women who want to love Him with our minds as well as our hearts, who have a vision for meaningful vocations both inside and outside our homes, who want to serve the church in meaningful ways. And so, this mom went to seminary.

### *Rattled Identity*

Seminary exposed something I hadn’t wanted to admit: Before pursuing graduate school, I felt secure and validated in my role as a stay-at-home wife and mom. Despite my shifting convictions toward a more spacious expression of womanhood, the part-time job I worked serving the church only occupied the nooks and crannies of my time. I wrote in the morning hours and hosted Bible studies in my home during naptime. I leaned occasionally on babysitters but did my best to keep my ambitions from robbing my family of anything.



But when I started seminary, my identity was rattled. It was normal for seminary wives to audit an evening class or two, often with a nursing baby in arms. But to take the bold step of becoming a full-fledged student alongside my husband—to miss my kids’ field trips and band concerts and feed my family another round of In-N-Out, all while betraying the fact that my ambitions stretched outside of our home—*that* was venturing onto shaky ground. I fielded questions from classmates about why I needed the education. “Do you hope to be a pastor?” some would ask, their misgivings obvious. (The answer is no.) My baggage from my early years in the church resurfaced as I tried to discern truth from error about biblical womanhood, the role of men and women in the church, and my calling as a woman.

#### MAKING IT PRACTICAL

I did more reading, but mostly I came up short. I struggled to find people who held to complementarian convictions alongside a practical vision for men and women partnering together in ministry. Conversations around these topics were vitriolic and racked with suspicion, quick to throw out the accusation of “feminist” or “liberal.”

Though I was confident my education was valuable, I struggled to justify it to myself and others. Instead, I tried to make it work without costing my family too much, all the while feeling plagued with guilt over my many failures as a wife and mom. Meanwhile, my poem, “Your Mom Went to Seminary,” continued to develop in my heart, evolving into a letter of apology. While we ate our takeout in the car with Greek songs playing in the background, I silently pleaded with my children not to hold this season against me. I desperately wanted them to understand.

But something remarkable happened during those years of seminary. Jordan finally confronted my guilt, refuting my assumptions that he resented my ambition. “Your education is just as important as mine,” he would say as he offered to do the drive-thru run. We began to learn what partnership in marriage could look like, taking turns and propping each other up.

My professors respected me, welcoming my voice and painting a picture of the myriad ways women contribute to the church. My classmates and I sat around the fire debating the role of women and, over time, these became sharpening conversations for all of us—future pastors thinking deeply about how they could better care for women and leverage their gifts for the good of the church.

I began to dig into the passages of Scripture most often flung around during these debates, and what I found there was a renewed conviction regarding differentiated gender roles in the church, seeing behind them a God who is purposeful and wise and who created both men and women for His glory and each other’s good.

As I worked through all these things, I started to see in my children glimpses of who God is shaping them to be. And suddenly it struck me: All this work God was doing in my heart—to soften the rough edges, to strengthen my faith, and to give me confidence in my calling as a woman in the church—wasn’t robbing my children, it was *for* my children. Especially for my daughters. I want to raise them to know and experience what their dad and I have come to believe with our whole hearts: The church has a place for women who know their God and who know their own minds.

So, as I concluded my time as a student, I climbed the stairs to the podium and leaned into the microphone, looking my children in the eyes as I said, “Your mom went to seminary. And she’s not sorry.”

*My Fear*

The summer after graduation, a friend came to visit, and we spent many hours catching up late into the night. She was weary, facing a crisis of faith, and poised to leave the church altogether. She could no longer accept the God she'd been trained to believe in. She couldn't continue in a community that didn't value her voice. She was tired of feeling bound and silenced, and those who beckoned her to freedom became louder and more compelling.

I understood. I'd experienced those things too. But I was afraid the liberation she was being sold wouldn't actually set her free. I wasn't necessarily afraid she might change her views on women in the church; we can disagree there while still sharing orthodox faith. But the treatment she'd received as a woman in the church had caused her to doubt God's goodness. I was afraid she was in danger of missing the beauty, kindness, and mercy of God and His purposes for His people.

**I WONDERED, HOW  
MANY WOMEN  
HAVE LOST SIGHT  
OF THEIR VALUE?**

Our conversations that week left me wondering about how many women sit in the pew, weary like her. How many have believed the lie that they are a means to an end, only valuable as someone's wife or mother? How many have tried to offer their perspective or gifts only to feel stupid or silenced? How many have felt like an afterthought, something nonessential in God's economy? I wondered how many women have left their faith over these things. How many have mistaken the sin and failures of people for God's carelessness?

We live in a world that claims to value women while peddling false promises of freedom that hinder our flourishing. At some point, every woman will likely feel her vulnerability threatened or exploited. We'll feel the weight of trying to do it all and the

guilt of falling short. We will feel like too much and not enough, lamenting the liability of our womanhood.

Some of us will belong to churches that preach the equal dignity of women but have no vision for their unique value and essential contribution. We will feel like second-class citizens, wrestling with where we belong.<sup>1</sup> We will grow weary of the scandals, injustice, and abuse.

We will long for a reckoning.

But we'll also be so tired.

As I left my friend that day, I wept for her. But I also wept for my daughters. And for myself—for all of us who are trying to be or raise faithful women in this fraught time and place. And then, since I was done writing that poem, I decided to write this book.

### *To Know Your God and Your Own Mind*

I love to recall those early days of ministry in the church God used to draw me to Himself. As the new women's discipleship director, the first event I planned was a theology workshop. A hundred women showed up. Maybe that doesn't feel like a lot to you, but to me, it was momentous. As I partnered with my pastor and a team of godly women, our church culture began to shift toward one that celebrated women's necessary contributions and perspectives. We invited women to love God with their minds as well as their hearts, and they showed up hungry. It was remarkable to behold.

But as I watched those hundred women flood through the doors, I panicked. I had prepared to teach them about the freedom I'd experienced as I laid down the heavy burdens of trying to achieve some standard of womanhood beyond what Scripture prescribes. I was eager to proclaim the truth of the gospel, to invite women to live with me in light of Christ's work on our behalf. But suddenly, I felt inadequate for the task.

I withdrew, texting my husband: “I just want to hide in the bathroom.”

His response? “*Coram Deo*.”

*Coram Deo* means “before God’s face.” R. C. Sproul writes, “To live *coram Deo* is to live one’s entire life in the presence of God, under the authority of God, to the glory of God.”<sup>2</sup>

This is what it means to live as women of conviction.

And it’s also become our family definition of courage.

I have two goals for this book: I want to help you form conviction, and I want to instill courage. I want you to know your God, and I want you to know your own mind.

## CORAM DEO

We live in an age where conflicting narratives clamor for our allegiance. And if we’re going to stand firm on God’s truth, we have to know what it is. We need to know our God. We need to know His heart, how He’s revealed Himself in His Word and throughout history, who He says we are, how He calls us to live. We need to be able to withstand lies, to evaluate the claims of pastors and professors, to be like the Bereans who were “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). We need to be like Mary who chose “the good portion”—to sit at Jesus’ feet (Luke 10:38–42). This is my primary aim in part one of this book, to help you form biblical convictions about what it means to be a woman.

And when we are women of conviction, we will be so compelled by God’s love for us in Jesus that we will live *coram Deo*—before His face. We will be women of courage—women who fear the Lord and not others, who can stand up under the onslaught of the enemy. We will know our own minds. We won’t be swayed by claims that we must trade our womanhood to get dignity.<sup>3</sup> We won’t be persuaded by those who tempt us to doubt God’s heart

toward us or his actions in history. We won't be willing to trade a lifetime of delight in our Savior for the promise of power here and now. We will be women who speak the truth, who advocate for the least of these, who live for a kingdom not of this world. We will be women who face the future without fearing for ourselves, or for our daughters. This is my goal for part two, to offer some field notes for feminine life in a challenging world. To instill courage.

As I write these words, I confess I feel a bit like I did that day: so convinced of God's heart toward women; so desperate to call you to believe it too. And also, like I just want to hide in the bathroom.

But I'm convinced this path through conviction toward courage is the call for God's daughters and those who love them, and I hope this book provides support, language, and hope for the days ahead. Though I have not figured out all the ins and outs of being a woman, I'm a woman raising women nonetheless. And I firmly believe the Bible teaches that there is a place for me, and there is a place for you. So I stand *coram Deo*, looking to the Scriptures for courage and clarity, and I offer this book to help point the way—for my daughters, and for you.

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