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— One —

DENTED

Femininity

The first time you hear a boy say it, it can sting.
“You throw like a *girl!*”

“He screamed just like a girl!”

“Ewwww . . . that’s gross. It’s pink. That’s girl stuff.”

The content of these insults usually lacks any serious substance, but the implication is clear: girls are different. As in, worse. Inferior. If a boy is lacking skill, strength, or speed, he is no better than a . . . *girl.*

From deep within the feminine heart, a primordial protest erupts:
That’s not fair!

I don’t know when this concept dawned on me, but it must have been during grade school. I have memories of competing in field day races and wanting to make sure the all-girl teams did well against the all-boy teams. At one point, the boys were given a few freedoms at recess that the girls didn’t get—perhaps to play some contact sport. So we girls bunched up around the teacher on recess duty and sarcastically played childish kindergarten games to make our point.

By high school, the gender divide became more threatening—and, bizarrely, more alluring. Every girl wanted the attention traditionally

paid to cheerleaders or prom queens, but there was always the risk of locker-room gossip. Girls in high school were no longer accused of having cooties or just being “gross.” By this stage, masculine insults contained a threatening, disrespectful edge, often laced with sexual slander. Yet, some guys were just plain cute. We wanted their compliments and time. We just didn’t know if we could trust them. And sometimes we couldn’t.

This roughly summarizes my understanding of “sexual politics” until college—nothing traumatic or really even mildly dramatic. My family was intact and stable. My father was loving and active in my life, as was my mother. I was involved in lots of school activities. My parents came to every concert, marching band performance, school play, and parent-teacher conference. I floated on the fringes of the popular crowd—not part of the inner sanctum of cheerleaders and football players but close enough to be invited to the occasional party.

None of that really explains why I ended up in that first women’s studies class at college. It’s likely I thought it would be an easier elective than political science or economics. But the reason I took the next women’s studies class was much more purposeful: through feminism, I had been handed a worldview that addressed the covert sexism I had suspected all these years. Things were beginning to click. The problem was . . . *men!* “Patriarchy” and its oppression of women were the true culprits. (Um, make that *womyn*.) As a journalism major, I needed some topic to specialize in, a cause to champion. I found mine in feminism. I made it my life’s mission then to splash the cause of feminism across magazines and airwaves wherever I worked.

There were little skirmishes along the way. Sometime in college, as I recall, my growing feminism ruined Thanksgiving. During dinner, my uncle, a no-nonsense Naval Academy graduate, made some comment—now long forgotten and probably more benign than I recognized—to which I took great offense. I began a tirade about rape, patriarchy, the oppression of “womyn,” and the suffocating roles of wives and mothers. (None of which, with the exception of patriarchy, had I personally experienced.) Any refutation of my sweeping condemnations was met with increased volume and passion on my part. I had lived a mere two decades, but in my opinion I possessed the wisdom of the ages.

Then there was the time I stunned my father with the announcement that if I were ever to marry, I wasn't going to change my last name. At the time, I thought it was a repressive and unnecessary tradition, and I didn't see any reason to change my identity just because I would obtain a husband. I honestly thought my father would champion my idea because he was the father of three daughters and if we all changed our names, the family name would die with him. But he didn't seem pleased, which genuinely surprised me. In hindsight I honestly don't know if it was the information or my attitude that provoked his reaction.

I learned a lot of theory in women's studies classes, but surprisingly, I didn't learn a lot of actual history. We learned about the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, but not anything earlier. I don't recall studying anything written prior to Betty Friedan's influential book from the 1960s, *The Feminine Mystique . . .*, which is to say, nothing earlier than my own lifetime. It would be years before I learned about the suffrage movement that preceded modern feminism, the differing impacts of the Reformation and Enlightenment on gender roles, and, finally, what the Bible says about men and women.

Feminism taught me that men were the problem, but in the end feminist politics left me yawning. While I had no problem agreeing that men in general were the problem, individual and specific men seemed far more agreeable and even attractive to me. After awhile, the strident victimhood of feminism lost its appeal. Though one of my fellow graduates went to work for feminist political action groups—the National Organization for Women (NOW) and then the Feminist Majority—I took my journalism diploma and my women's studies certificate and pursued a career in media.

It wasn't long before my definition and practice of feminism became as generic as that of the next woman clutching *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Social constructs and gender theories were dim memories. I was left with androgynous “dress for success” fashion, a hyperperception of sexual harassment and discrimination on the job, and a caricature of masculine sexuality as a model of freedom for both sexes. Aggression at work and on dinner dates was the legacy of my education.

When I was twenty-nine, I surveyed my life and perceived the emptiness of it. A relentless self-focus hadn't produced much happiness.

The Fractured Feminine Psyche

During this time, a friend of mine lent me a book, telling me how helpful it was for "reclaiming a whole feminine psyche." The book's premise was that women could be restored by studying the weaknesses and strengths of the goddesses from Greek mythology and by seeking to reconcile these archetypes into one complete woman.

I took the test in the book and found out that I tested very high as Athena, the warrior goddess who sprung fully formed from the head of Zeus. This is the section of the summary that I noted in my journal at the time:

It's easy to spot Athena in the modern world. She's out there in every sense of the word. Editing magazines, running women's studies departments in colleges, hosting talk shows, making fact-finding tours to Nicaragua, producing films, challenging the local legislature.

The Athena woman is very visible because she is an extravert, she's practical, and she's intelligent. Men are often a little intimidated by her at first because she doesn't respond to the usual sexual gambits and she will push them to the wall in any intellectual argument. When they have won her respect, she can be the most loyal of companions, a lifelong friend, and a generous fund of inspiration. . . .

Despite her strength, brilliance, and independence, there is a paradox contained in the traditional image of a maid clad in armor. It seems to us that the more energy the Athena woman puts into developing her successful, worldly, armored self, the more she hides her maidenly vulnerability. So, with her androgyny, Athena conceals a conflict, an unresolved tension between her tough outer self and her hidden, unexpressed self that can be a source of great insecurity with regard to her finding an integral feminine identity. We call it Athena's wound. . . .

She will spar with [her mate], compete with him, and often despise him because he is not as tough as she is.¹

That was a fairly accurate portrait of my life then. I really didn't know what to do with my feminine identity, but I certainly knew how to spar with men. Now, in quoting that book, I'm not endorsing it in any way. But I do look back and marvel at how creative God is when He begins to work in our hearts. Because I was nowhere near a Bible at the time, God used that book and its faulty psychological premise to jump-start my thinking. That quote was the last thing I wrote in my journal before boarding a flight to South Africa. I left for that vacation thinking that I needed to do something to address my fractured feminine psyche. I saw the problem—or at least part of it—but I wasn't sure how to resolve it.

It was during my travels in South Africa that God revealed to me more about this dilemma and offered His priceless solution. I was going to visit my sister and brother-in-law, who were living there on a temporary basis to study at a Bible college. My plan was to enjoy an exotic holiday and nothing more. But on Easter Sunday, in a church pushing for racial reconciliation in a nation scarred by apartheid, I heard the greatest message of redemption and forgiveness that would ever reach human ears.

There, sitting among people who had once despised each other for the color of their skin, I learned that hope for change was found in the life and death of Jesus Christ. After explaining the historical evidence for the veracity of Jesus' life, the pastor told us the significance of His death. He started with the problem of sin—our rebellion against God's laws and holy standards. In a place like South Africa, wrecked by prejudice and bloodshed, sin is clearly evident. But even if we've never discriminated against anyone nor murdered anyone, we are not innocent. From the moment we screamed, "No!!" as a toddler to the times we have cheated, lied, and stolen as adults, to the innumerable hours we spend consumed about our self-image and self-assessment at the expense of others, we have accumulated a weight of guilt and sin that crushes us before a holy God.

The pastor explained to us that the Bible says that death is the consequence of sin. We each face death because of our individual sins, but we also live in a broken world because of our collective sinfulness. But God offers us a shocking solution. To break the cycle of sin and death, He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to be our substitute—to live the

perfect life that we cannot live in order to pay the punishment for our sins that we cannot pay. *Jesus died on the cross so that we could live.* His resurrection three days later was proof that His sacrifice was sufficient to break the curse of sin and death. God does not ignore sin or tolerate injustice. He poured all the righteous anger for our sins on His Son so that we could receive forgiveness. Sin does not go unpunished, but in the cross of Christ mercy triumphs over judgment. This is the gospel—or the good news—of Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.

That Easter Sunday, I finally heard and understood the gravity of this message. I saw the anger, the harsh judgment of others, and the selfishness in my life for what it was: sin against God and against others. And I broke down in tears as the good news of Jesus’ saving sacrifice was revealed and offered to me.

For the first time, I had real hope for change. But change was a process. I still straddled the fence in some areas, cynical about the evangelical subculture, televangelism scandals, faked miracles, and denominational division. Throughout the trip, I asked my sister and brother-in-law many tough questions. They responded graciously with the words of Scripture but did not try to sell me on their views. I marveled at their restraint and pondered their words as the dusty red roads of South Africa passed under our wheels.

On the third Sunday in South Africa, we visited a church in Cape Town to hear my brother-in-law’s former pastor. An American by the name of C. J. Mahaney preached a message about the honesty and range of human emotions recorded in the Psalms. C. J. alleviated my concerns about turning into a fake smiley-face button for Jesus. The Bible did not shrink back from the reality of our fluctuating feelings. It also did not leave us wallowing in them. Our emotions were designed by God to propel us toward truth and faith—a progression modeled for us in nearly every psalm.

Submission Impossible

When I returned home, I knew God had done something in my life. Real faith was budding in my life, but I didn’t know what this meant for me. I was different—but I still needed personal mentoring

and instruction. I knew I needed to quit some obvious sin patterns, go to church, and read my Bible, but I wasn't convinced that a whole lot else needed to change. Little did I know that the Holy Spirit was in the process of turning me upside down and shaking loose all my prior beliefs and ideas like so much pocket change.

Point by point, the Holy Spirit used the Bible and the church to renew my mind. I conceded nearly every aspect until I reached one passage in Ephesians: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (5:22–24 NIV).

Submission?! Surely that was one ancient concept that no one practiced anymore! There was no way on God's green earth that I would ever concede that women are inferior and must live as second-class to men. That passage was just wrong, wrong, wrong. All my feminist offenses roused themselves in objection.

But I kept going to church.

That's when I began to hear my pastor and other people talking about another foreign concept: servant-leadership. The awkward phrasing of this concept demanded an explanation. Once again, I was pointed to Ephesians, chapter 5. This time, I read the rest of the offending passage. Though the first part was for wives, the verses that followed for husbands were far more challenging and provided a definition of leadership that was not for self-glory but for the benefit of another.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." (5:25–31 NIV)

This was not autocratic, self-glorifying leadership. This was leadership to serve God's purposes for the benefit of others.

Submission. Servant-leadership. Until that point in my life, these were foreign concepts to me. But before that Easter Sunday in South Africa, so was the third concept: sin. Though I was familiar with the word, it was one I applied to *other* people. Until I heard the gospel, I didn't see sin very clearly in myself. If I saw weaknesses, shortcomings, or failures in myself, I was good at blaming other people for them or minimizing them in me. I was blind to the sins of envy, anger, self-righteousness, judgment, greed, and pride that coursed through my daily actions.

The word I *did* know how to apply to myself was "self." I was all about myself and maximizing my own comfort, opportunity, and pleasure.

God's Wisdom for Women

Slowly it began to dawn on me that the Bible was not presenting just a new set of rules for successful relationships or a peaceful life. It was presenting an entirely new *game*—with radically different goals for victory. Winning was living a life that glorified God. Winning was growing in humility. Winning was trusting God and serving others. Winning was cultivating the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23). Winning was growing in Christlikeness.

All my previous feminist philosophies resulted in merely kicking at the darkness, expecting it would bleed daylight. But Scripture says that it is by God's light that we see light (Psalm 36:9). *The light of God's Word showed me truth*. What I thought was right and true didn't hold up to Scripture. Human observation and psychology could only point out the problem—proud women spar with men they deem to be weaker and not worthy of respect—but offered no credible solution to the tension between the sexes.

I didn't need to reconcile my pantheon of inner goddesses. I needed to repent of my sin.

As do men.

The kicker is that feminism is partially right. Men do sin. They

can diminish women's accomplishments and limit women's freedoms for self-centered reasons. Some men sexually assault women. Some men abuse their wives and children. Many men degrade women through pornography. Feminism didn't rise up because of fabricated offenses. As one theologian said, it is understandable, humanly speaking, why this movement did emerge:

When you realize that men have subjugated women for thousands of years, you can only wonder how it took so long for the feminist movement to form. It is unfortunately rare to find a marriage in which the husband recognizes that he bears the responsibility of headship and exercises it in humility and love rather than force and authoritarianism. While I too am against so much of what the feminist movement advocates, I understand why it has emerged. I believe that if Christian men had been the servant leaders in the home, rather than conceited chauvinists, the feminist movement would have died a quick and easy death. If men had sought ways to see the gifts and talents of their wives developed and utilized rather than taking a beautiful person and making her into little more than a personal slave, if men had not twisted this doctrine of headship, we would not have the current problems between men and women in our society. . . . I am tired of hearing that feminists are responsible for the breakdown of the family. We need to put the responsibility where it belongs—on the heads of homes.²

I agree, but as this book is for women and not men, I'll leave it to the guys to challenge each other. My concern is what we've absorbed from our culture about being women. Feminism (like most other "isms") points a finger at other people for the problems of life. But I learned that Scripture tells us that other people are not the real problem. Our sinful nature (James 4:1–3), spiritual forces of evil (Ephesians 6:12), and the lure of this present world (1 John 2:15–17) are our real problems. But for me—and many women in this present age—the definition, practices, and contours of femininity are where the battles rage. What does it mean to be a woman and not a man? What is the significance of our ability to bear children? How should we handle our sexuality? Should we structure our careers just like

men do? What's the purpose of being a wife?

There are competing answers out there. More than forty years after "women's lib" began, pundits claim that we now live in a post-feminist age. Feminism is a given. We breathe it, think it, watch it, read it. Whenever a concept so thoroughly permeates a culture, it's hard to step back and notice it at work. Feminism has profoundly altered our culture's concept of what it means to be a woman. We need to understand how this movement came about and what its goals have been because these are now our culture's assumptions. We also need to acknowledge that there has been some good that has come out of it. There were some serious inequities that were changed by the feminist movement. I'm grateful for the short-term gains, but the long-term consequences are profound and need to be examined in light of feminism's worldview.

My personal history is no doubt different from yours. You may not identify yourself as a current or former feminist. You may not identify yourself as a Christian—or, conversely, you may have grown up in the church. But chances are that there are aspects of your femininity that have been negatively impacted by feminism, no matter how you identify yourself now. That's why I believe it is important to examine the history of feminism, how it has affected our culture and our churches, and how its claims stand up to the teaching of Scripture.

This is the book I wished I had as a new believer. Over the years, I've tried to retain the impressions and memories I had as a new believer regarding the church, God, the Bible, masculinity, and femininity, just in case I had the opportunity to write it. When I first encountered these concepts as a new Christian, I wanted someone to explain to me how feminism came about, how it influenced my thinking, and why femininity as defined by the Bible wasn't a throw-back to some horrible era. No one around me in the church *looked* unhappy, constricted, or oppressed by the gender roles described in the Bible. In fact, they were surprisingly joyful. The men treated me respectfully. The women smiled and laughed. The children were friendly and generally obedient. No one seemed lobotomized and I never did find any secret cult meetings. So after awhile, I accepted that this was genuine behavior and not a conspiracy to brainwash me into backwoods thinking. That left me free to examine the

claims of Scripture without suspicion.

Fifteen years later, I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to write the book I looked for as a new believer—a book that examines the history of the feminist movement and its major philosophies and gives an explanation of what the Bible teaches about women, our worth, and our roles. If you are a new believer, or even if you are not a Christian, I pray that when you are finished with this book you will put it down with a better understanding of why God made men and women in His image—two sexes, equal in worth and dignity—and why He assigns different roles to us in order to accomplish His purposes in His kingdom.

If you are a longtime Christian, I pray you will be refreshed in your commitment to these godly principles. Biblical womanhood is not a one-size-fits-all mold. It's not about certain dress styles, Jane Austen movies, tea parties, quiet voices, and exploding floral patterns . . . or whatever stereotype you are picturing right now. To live according to biblical principles today requires women to be bold enough to stand against philosophies and strongholds that seek to undermine God's Word and His authority.

You've read part of my story already. In future chapters, you'll meet other women from different churches, backgrounds, and ethnicities—in other words, this book is not just drawn from my experience. I know all of these women, some for more than a decade. These are real women who have trusted God in joy and in sorrow. They join me in celebrating feminine faith in a feminist world.