



IS THE

BIBLE

GOOD FOR

WOMEN?

Seeking Clarity and Confidence
Through a Jesus-Centered
Understanding of Scripture

WENDY ALSUP

Praise for
Is the Bible Good for Women?

“Is the Bible good for women? Some hear the question and scoff: ‘Of course not! It’s antiquated, dangerous, misogynistic.’ Some hear the question and grieve: ‘Of course it is! It’s God’s Word, and it frees women to be who God means for them to be.’ What Wendy Alsup understands and articulates is that even something as good as the Bible can be put to poor use in the hands of sinful people. Thus she approaches the question with care and insight to provide an answer that is thoroughly biblical and so very satisfying.”

—TIM CHALLIES, blogger and author of *Visual Theology*

“The Bible *is* good for women. Yet many misunderstandings and misapplications of the Bible’s teachings harm women and, in harming women, harm the world. Providing helpful textual and contextual insights and backed by careful research and clear writing, this book shows how the Bible has always advanced the flourishing of women and can continue to do so today, if only we will read, understand, and apply it.”

—KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR, author of *Booked: Literature in the Soul of Me* and *Fierce Convictions—The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More: Poet, Reformer Abolitionist*

“Wendy Alsup offers a Jesus-centered way of interpreting some difficult passages of the Bible related to women. These are passages the Bible’s critics love to offer as proof that God’s Word hurts women. Rather than a line-for-line rebuttal, Alsup attempts to shift the debate by providing counsel in how to read the Bible as a whole story focused on our glorious Savior. Even if you don’t agree with her at every point, you’ll be helped to understand the Bible better and why it’s not only good but the best book for women.”

—THABITI ANYABWILE, pastor of Anacostia River Church
and author of *Reviving the Black Church*

“Is the Bible good for women? Many people (both women and men) would emphatically say no. To them, the Bible promotes a patriarchy that has historically crushed women and given men license to suppress and abuse them. After all, how could a book that talks about forcing a raped woman to marry her rapist or tells wives to ‘submit’ to their husbands be good for women? Without flinching at the difficulty of certain parts of the Bible, and while at the same time upholding divine inspiration of the Scripture, Wendy Alsup weaves together answers that are not only consistently Christ-centered but are also true to the heart of the Lord who loves women. As a woman who highly values both women and God’s Word, Alsup gives us answers to some of the most difficult questions about gender in the Bible. Because her answers are deeply compassionate and true to Scripture, this book will be good for you. I highly recommend it!”

—ELYSE M. FITZPATRICK, author of *Home: How Heaven and the New Earth Satisfy Our Deepest Longings*

“Unlike other volumes with the words *women* and *Bible* in the title, *Is the Bible Good for Women?* offers readers more than lessons on femininity via the sacred text. Instead, Wendy Alsup aims to give us a better understanding of the Scripture itself, reminding men and women alike that our ultimate good is found in knowing and reflecting Christ. Whether you are on a personal journey or teaching through a difficult passage, this book provides the necessary context and story arc to understand that, yes, even in its more difficult points, the Bible truly is good news for all of us.”

—HANNAH ANDERSON, speaker and author of *Made for More: An Invitation to Live in God’s Image* and *Humble Roots: How Humility Grounds and Nourishes Your Soul*

“Wendy has done a magnificent job here in answering the question of the book title. If we desire women to flourish in God’s good

design, then we must understand from the whole of Scripture what that design is. Although I don't agree with all her conclusions, this is an excellent book that is serious about the Bible and serious about women thriving."

—MATT CHANDLER, lead pastor of the Village Church
and president of Acts 29 church-planting network

"I know the Scripture is inerrant, yet the first few times I read through the whole Bible, there were directions about women that made me cringe, and I wrote in my margin, 'Help me understand, O Lord!' If you have felt like this, you will be so enlightened by *Is the Bible Good for Women?* A biblical scholar, Wendy Alsup puts these passages in the context of all of Scripture and brings light that will affirm that yes, indeed, not only is Jesus for women, but the Bible is for women! We need this not just in speaking to our secular friends but to our own souls."

—DEE BRESTIN, author of *The Friendships of Women*
and *Idol Lies*

"Wendy asks penetrating questions about the Bible that have lingered in the minds of many people: Can women trust the Bible? What do we do with women like Tamar, Dinah, or the daughter of Jephthah? What about the imperatives for women to submit to husbands and church officers? Is the Bible merely a patriarchal document that supports the oppression of women, or is it God's good Word to all people? Wendy tackles these questions head on, revealing that these are not arbitrary stories and commands but rather meaningful texts that point to a reason and a hope to keep the memories of even these women alive. God does value and care for women, and we see that when we read Scripture interpreted through Christ our Lord."

—AIMEE BYRD, author of *Housewife Theologian*, *Theological Fitness*, and *No Little Women*

“Some pastors and laypeople treat difficult texts of Scripture like the scariest parts of a movie—taking furtive glances through barely parted fingers, fast-forwarding to the parts of the story that seem easier and happier. Others use these texts as proof points to shore up a particular framework or ideological agenda, or to tear one (or all of them) down. This book does neither. Instead, Wendy Alsup shows how reading the Bible as the cohesive story of Jesus and His work on our behalf is the answer to questions some of the most challenging texts in the Bible raise for women to read and receive as good. Whether you’re a pastor or a layperson, a complementarian or an egalitarian, or whether you’re someone for whom such terms create more questions than they answer, you will find insights that challenge and encourage you and be driven to deeper study and trust in the sufficiency of Scripture to answer even the hardest questions.”

—RACHAEL STARKE, writer at GospelCenteredWoman.com
and TheThinkingsofThings.com

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Introduction

Is the Bible good for women? Growing up in the conservative South, I never considered that question. I didn't understand anything of women's rights except the caricatures I saw on the news during attempts to pass the Equal Rights Amendment. But I was one of three daughters, no sons, born to a Christian dad who valued his girls well. Though I experienced my fair share of struggles growing up, female oppression in a patriarchal society did not seem to be one of them. As I got older and watched the news with a more critical eye, a different view of women came into my line of sight. There were countries where women couldn't vote? There were cultures that would put victims of rape to death in honor killings?

Then I moved to Seattle, where women's rights and feminist issues are often center stage in local news and conversation. I couldn't hide from these issues anymore. Female mutilation, legal oppression, and culturally accepted rape were much bigger issues affecting many more women worldwide than I had ever understood. And domestic abuse, the blaming of sexual abuse survivors, and discrimination in the workforce occurred closer to home. My experience of being valued as a female by the men in my life was

not the norm worldwide, but I also came to realize it wasn't the norm in the conservative South either. I was bombarded by women's issues. As a believer in Jesus since childhood and one who loved and valued the Bible, I was barraged with criticism of the Scripture around women's issues as well. Does the Bible address oppression of women in helpful ways? Or does it only perpetuate such oppression among its followers? In a world that is quite often very bad for women, does the Bible help or does it make it worse?

HARMFUL WORLDWIDE PRACTICES

National Public Radio recently highlighted a disturbing practice in western Nepal in which young women are banished to outdoor sheds when they are on their periods.¹ The families interviewed believe that the girls could cause illnesses among the family's elderly if they touch them while menstruating. The humiliation and stigma those girls endure is worth public outcry.

Hinduism is the primary religion (81 percent) in Nepal.² Although Judaism and Christianity have made small inroads into the country, this practice of barring young menstruating women from their homes does not seem to have a direct relationship to Old Testament Law. Yet I can't help but think of similar instructions in the Law (see Leviticus 15:19–33) when I hear of the Nepali practice. I know from Scripture that despite the similarities, the Nepali practice is a perversion of God's intent in the Law. The Nepali tradition attributes to girls on their periods something Old Testament Law never does, it does so without the Law's corresponding instruction to men, and it perpetuates a practice that

Jesus said two thousand years ago was brought to completion through Him. (We will work this out in greater detail in chapters 6 and 7.)

But the comparison puts a question to us, one that many women ask themselves: Is the Bible good for women? How can a book that includes instructions on where a woman can sleep or sit when menstruating be trusted by women today when similar modern practices like that of the Nepalese are clearly harmful for women?

We have not always been suspicious about the Bible's take on women's issues. For long periods in history, people viewed the Bible and Christianity as powers that lifted the downtrodden and demoralized to new places of respect. During the twentieth century, the first wave of feminism gave voice to women whom society had long marginalized. In 1920, women finally won the right to vote in the United States, due in large part to the efforts of Christians. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union led this movement, seeking to apply biblical principles of social justice to larger society.³ Based in part on their understanding of Jesus and the Bible, men and women of faith fought together for women to have the right to vote. This first wave of feminism resulted in women's right to vote and inherit land, along with subsequent benefits to both women and children as women gained a voice in legislation.

But as the century wore on, there came a fork in the road in which orthodox Christianity seemed to go in one direction concerning the rights of women, and second-wave feminism (which focused on birth control, abortion rights, and equal pay) in

another. In the last few years, many pro-women authors (for lack of a better name), even Christian ones, have painted a picture of women in the Bible that is troubling, even referring to certain passages concerning women in the Bible as “texts of terror.”⁴ According to many books and popular blogs, the view in our current culture is that an orthodox understanding of the Bible is threatening and even downright harmful to women. The similarities between Old Testament Law having to do with women on their periods and the Nepali practice that results in shaming menstruating girls seem to only reinforce such a distrust of Scripture.

Other books have dissected the history of evangelical Christianity and the secular women’s movement.⁵ Rather than looking at how we arrived at the twenty-first-century general mistrust of the Bible regarding women, I would like instead to simply challenge it by encouraging us to discover and use a Jesus-centered understanding of Scripture when reading the Bible. In turn, this gives us a Jesus-centered understanding of how the Bible speaks about women and to women in its pages. I believe this process will give us all a life-giving perspective of our gendered selves in God’s kingdom. It will help us see the profound difference in the shame that fathers project onto menstruating Nepali daughters and the dignity God places on His.

CHECK YOUR BAGGAGE FIRST

Before we develop a Jesus-centered understanding of Scripture, let’s examine any personal baggage we might bring to this study. What presuppositions and suspicions do you carry into a discus-

sion of gender in the Bible? What can we agree on as a basic foundation to start the discussion? Secular or Christian, feminist or conservative, most everyone agrees that men and women are not exactly the same. The biological differences are obvious; the role culture takes in influencing other differences is debated. One thing is clear: the basic biological differences in XX and XY chromosomes play out both physically and mentally at some level in differences between the genders for 99 percent of humanity.*

Male and female are overlapping but distinct identifiers. Men and women have similarities as well as differences. In a Venn diagram comparing the two genders, an overlapping middle part exists between male and female. But here is where our baggage comes into play. The conversation around gender in the church often seems to involve two camps: one that loves the overlapping part of the Venn diagram of gender but feels threatened by any reference to distinctions, and one that loves the distinctions but has a narrow view of the overlap.



* According to the Intersex Society of North America, www.isna.org/faq/frequency, some form of biological disorder concerning gender affects approximately 1 percent of the human population. Although biological abnormalities are real, we are focusing here on the predominant statistical norms of gender.

How do you feel about the disparate nature of gender? Do you prefer to focus on the overlapping parts? Do you feel threatened by those who emphasize the distinctions? Or perhaps you find the distinctions more comfortable and feel discomfort with those who emphasize the overlap. It is helpful to acknowledge your preconceptions as you start this study.

Personally, I see a big fat middle part of overlap in my mental Venn diagram of gender as presented in Scripture. Men and women share much responsibility and authority in God's kingdom. But I also love and value the distinct elements of manhood and womanhood. I see value in both sides of the debate, and I have baggage from both sides. We have much to work through here—both you as the book's reader and I as its author!

CHECK YOUR MOTIVE

Once you have checked your baggage, it is also helpful to acknowledge your motive for reading this book. Maybe, for instance, you believe in Jesus and are curious to understand what the Bible says on women's issues. Because you love Jesus, you want to understand better the Scriptures that speak of Him. Or maybe you don't believe in Jesus and want to explore more about the Bible as you decide about Him. How can He be good in general if He is not good for women, right?

There is a third type of reader as well. You might generally believe in Jesus but are not sure what you believe about the Bible. Gandhi famously said that he liked what he knew of Christ but not what he knew of Christians. In this book, I will deal with a

similar but different issue. What happens when people like what they know of Christ *but not what they know of the Bible*, particularly when it comes to women's issues? This certainly presents a problem for someone wanting to know more about Christ. How can we know Jesus in truth without confidence in the primary historical document that speaks of Him?

Despite having come to Christ at a young age, I deeply wrestled with the goodness and trustworthiness of the Bible. I knew that factual evidence existed for some of its supernatural claims. For instance, as a math teacher who appreciates science, I was intrigued that Isaiah spoke of God sitting enthroned "above the circle of the earth" (Isaiah 40:22) some two thousand years before Christopher Columbus first theorized that the earth was round. I found it noteworthy that the Old Testament lawgiver exhibited an understanding of how infectious diseases are transmitted (by sharing dirty items and touching without washing; see Leviticus 15), one that the medical community didn't discover or accept until the late 1800s. There is evidence throughout Scripture of an intelligent being with knowledge above and over mankind's directing the writing of Scripture. Yet I still could not logically argue my way into belief in the trustworthiness of Scripture. In the end I still had to take a step of faith that the Bible is what it says it is.

What exactly does the Bible claim for itself? Its claims are frankly audacious:

- Its instructions are a lamp to guide our feet along a rocky path (see Psalm 119:105).
- No author wrote on his own, but each was moved along by the Holy Spirit (see 2 Peter 1:20–21).

- All Scripture is inspired, or “breathed out,” by God (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Yet big issues can cause our confidence in Scripture’s claims about itself to break down.

THE CHALLENGE

The first issue that can break our confidence in Scripture is that the Bible is big and complicated. It includes prophecies, laws, and history. Large sections teach how to worship God, and other sections give wise advice for living. Scripture details the development of humanity from creation until the very last days that we will live on earth as we know it. The Bible tells a long, winding story that crisscrosses itself again and again. It repeats themes through multiple books, treats the same theme from multiple angles, and teaches truths both systematically and allegorically. Many view it like a calculus textbook from which they quickly turn away because they believe that it is impossible to understand. Both new and seasoned Christians face the temptation to give up trying to understand Scripture or reconcile problem passages.

The second issue is this: if we encounter some subset of Bible truth about women, particularly troubling passages in the Law, without understanding the larger narrative of Scripture, what conclusion could we reach except that the Bible is as bad for women as the Nepali tradition is for Nepali daughters? Passages such as the Law’s command to a rapist to marry his victim (see

Deuteronomy 22:28–29) or the decree to stone a woman who is not a virgin at marriage (see verses 20–21) can, at face value, seem irreconcilable with a good God. In our calculus book example, this is the same as flipping only to a complicated problem in the middle of the book without understanding how the previous chapters set up the problem or how the following chapters resolve it. We slam the book shut, believing calculus to be impractical and worthless, maybe even harmful.

Understanding the Bible does not have to be this way. The Bible does not give us problems that it does not also teach us how to solve. We have help to understand it. Who is this help? The psalmist prayed that God Himself would aid him in understanding Scripture: “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (Psalm 119:18). His prayer reveals that although we understand God through Scripture, we also understand Scripture through God. If we believe the psalmist, there is something wonderful to be seen when we stay engaged in the struggle to understand.

If you are not confident in either Jesus or the Bible, it may feel unsettling to engage God in prayer to understand Scripture. Nevertheless, doing so is helpful at the start of this study: *God, open our eyes to see wonderful things in and through the Bible, even for those of us who are not yet sure what we believe about You or Your Scripture.*

If you come to this study questioning the goodness and trustworthiness of the Bible, I encourage you to stay engaged in the struggle.

GOD THE AUTHOR

As we begin this journey to understand the Bible and women, we should think for a moment about the One who claims to be its Author. You might not be ready to accept that there is a God and He is the author of the Bible, but it is intriguing to consider the implications if there is and if He is. For those who believe the Genesis story of creation, the God who created the world and hung the stars in the sky is a logical mathematician. He was the first Physicist and is still the ultimate Engineer. Yet this same God colored His ordered world with beautiful hues. The God revealed in the Bible is the greatest Artist and the most poetic Author. He is both left-brained and right-brained, and His written Word to us reflects both aspects of His character. The Bible is both logical and artistic. It lays a logical framework, but it fleshes out that framework with metaphor and allusion.

God primarily tells us a *story* through the Bible, one in which womanhood is a major theme and driving force in the narrative. It's been said that the Bible begins with a divorce (God's separation from His people after the fall of man) and ends with a marriage (the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation), and everything in between is the story of God wooing back His bride. This is a helpful way of understanding God's story to us. But it's important to remember that God actually began His story with a perfect relationship between Himself and His people, which sets the stage for the rest of the story. (I will walk through the aspects of His story to us in more detail in chapter 1.)

As we unwrap Scripture in an effort to understand whether

the Bible is good for women, I will rely greatly on a simple principle: *The Bible is the best commentary on itself*. The best way to gain clarity about others' confusing statements is to ask them exactly what they mean or to cross-reference their words with other things they've said. I love to study what others have written concerning the Bible and have learned much doing so. But we won't be able to discern whether the Bible is good for women by reading outside authors the way we can by examining what the Bible says about itself. When we connect the dots in Scripture from, say, Dinah's rape in Genesis 34 to Jesus's interaction with the woman thrown before Him to be stoned in John 8, we see an arc of story that gives meaning to a chapter in Genesis that, without New Testament commentary, ends with hopeless oppression. No outside commentary offers as much insight on Scripture as the Bible offers about itself. Various verses on the same subject serve as data points we can connect to clarify each. As we learn to use Scripture to understand Scripture, we will see that we can trust both the Bible's hard instructions to us as well as its easy encouragements, as each gives insight on the other.

Augustine said, "Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not . . . build up . . . this . . . love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought."⁶ In light of Jesus's greatest command in Matthew 22 to love God and neighbor, I am burdened by the sloppy ways many popular voices, conservative and liberal, have handled Scripture at times, using it as a bludgeon on one side and discarding it as archaic and oppressive on the other. The Bible is life-giving in its

instructions to men and women. When we accurately handle the Bible, it blesses us all and causes us to grow in our love for God and for others. This conviction prompted me to write the book you hold in your hands.

We will weave a tapestry in this study, focusing particularly on womanhood in some chapters and zooming out in others to the larger story of Scripture. My hope is that the garment we weave will grab you with its beauty and encourage you to stay engaged with God through His written Word. I pray we all come to a deeper understanding of the dignity God places on His daughters as they live out His good plan.

How Did Jesus Approach the Bible?

Before we investigate whether the Bible is good for women, we need to first know if the Bible is good in general. To answer that question, we need to understand Scripture. Just as calculus seems much more helpful and good to those who understand it and use it in their fields, few of us are going to value the Bible in our lives if we find it only confusing or impractical. As a math teacher, I love the moment the light comes on in the eyes of students who have struggled to understand a math concept. They move from apathy because the concept seems irrelevant to their lives or from frustration because they need to understand something they can't figure out, to perseverance and enthusiasm once they realize both that they can understand it and that it is relevant to their studies. My hope is for the light to come on similarly for you as you seek to better understand the Bible in the general sense. If you don't understand the Bible generally, you won't understand it specifically about women. In this chapter we start with Jesus

Himself, whose words about the Bible become a great tool for understanding it.

Why does the average Christian need to understand the Bible? Isn't that the job of pastors or seminary professors? Well, it is their job, but it is our job too. Lacking an understanding of Scripture is a great barrier to trusting it. Carolyn Custis James wisely said, "We ask too much of ourselves to try to trust a stranger."¹ We cannot trust a God we don't know. And we cannot know Him without understanding Him through His revelation of Himself to us through His Word. We need to know and understand Scripture to trust it and the God it tells us of, and key to such understanding is seeing how it speaks of Jesus throughout its pages. This applies, too, to those who are not yet sure what they believe about either Jesus or the Bible.

Though I know not all will agree with me, my presupposition is that God inspired Scripture and has preserved it until all He said has been proved true and witnessed by humankind. Even if you disagree with me on that point, we can at least agree that Jesus affirms this understanding of the Law in particular in the Gospels: "Truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5:18).

Whether or not you personally accept that view, come with me on a journey through the Word. I hope our time opens your eyes to the beauty of Scripture's connected story of God's love and redemption despite our sin. As Paul told his protégé Timothy, God breathed out Scripture that is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man [and

woman] of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17, NIV). May any growth we experience in understanding the Bible be followed by trust in its usefulness to us, its goodness, as we navigate life.

THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

Let’s begin examining the Bible in what might seem an odd place, Luke 24. The setting is the road to Emmaus outside Jerusalem, after Jesus’s resurrection but before He revealed Himself to His disciples. Two disciples were walking along the road discussing all that had happened: Jesus’s ministry, His miracles, their former confidence that He was the one predicted by the prophets to free Israel from oppression, and His crucifixion, which shook everything they thought they understood about Him. As the two talked, Jesus drew near and began walking with them. They did not recognize Him even when He asked what they were talking about. After they explained what had happened the last few days, Jesus responded, “‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (verses 25–27).

Later Jesus told them,

“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (verses 44–47)

In this moment, Jesus decoded large portions of the Old Testament for His followers. He told His disciples how He understood Scripture and how they should too. Note that the climax of whatever specific things Jesus told them about the Old Testament was that Christ should suffer and rise again and that “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name” in all places. This is the culminating message of the Old Testament. It is the gospel.

In Luke 24, Jesus gave us the foundation for a Jesus-centered understanding of Scripture.

SEPARATE FILE FOLDERS OF STORIES

Unfortunately, many well-meaning Christians today use what I refer to as a separate-file-folder approach to the stories of Scripture. In that paradigm, Psalms contains separate file folders of reassuring words for hard moments. The Genesis file folder is full of interesting moral lessons. The Proverbs file is useful when one needs good advice. The Law and Minor Prophets? Many aren’t sure of their purpose, and the file folders containing those Old Testament stories often gather dust. In the very back of the file

cabinet, with a “Do Not Touch” note on them, are the files containing troubling stories, such as Dinah’s abuse in Genesis 34, archaic instructions of Deuteronomy 22 for those who are raped, and the rape and dismemberment of the concubine in Judges 19.

This separate-file-folder approach to the Bible misses the connections between the Old Testament and the good news that Jesus explained on the road to Emmaus. The solution is for us to follow the references to Jesus and His coming sacrifice through the Old Testament. Once we understand how to look for connections to the gospel in the Old Testament, the separate file folders open up. The characters stumble out of our filing cabinet, joining hands story by story from the first of Genesis until Jesus appears in person in Matthew. Each story feeds into the larger story of God’s good plan before time began to redeem His people.

What story did Jesus weave for His disciples on the road to Emmaus? I wish I could have heard Him in person, because I imagine His instructions were much better than my attempt. But I believe He hit on the themes that follow in this chapter, the pictures of Him throughout the Old Testament that had many watchful for Him when He arrived in person in the New Testament. As Philip announced to Nathanael, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (John 1:45).

THE SCARLET THREAD

The phrase “scarlet thread” comes from Israelite spies’ interactions with the prostitute Rahab in Joshua 2:18 (NASB). The spies

instructed Rahab to put a scarlet cord, or thread, in her window so the Israelites wouldn't attack her and her family during the destruction of Jericho. Did the color of the cord reflect the blood of Jesus? The Bible does not say exactly, but the general situation reminds us of God's wrath sparing the Israelites in Egypt who had the mark of blood on their doorposts at the first Passover, which was certainly a reference to Jesus's shedding of blood on the cross. When pastors or teachers refer to the scarlet thread in the Bible, the color scarlet reflects the color of Jesus's blood, and the concept of thread reflects the way the blood weaves itself through the stories of the Old Testament to form the fabric of understanding of what that blood would accomplish for us in the New.

As we walk through this theme of Scripture, it is easy to get bogged down in the details. It may help to think of this chapter as a prerequisite class for a course of study that inspires you. The prerequisites can feel like a burden that you want to get through quickly to get to the good stuff. But a really good prerequisite class gives foundational material you will need later. That is what this chapter does, and I hope you will persevere through this foundation, because what you learn here will form the basis on which we build the rest of the book. (I promise, we'll get back to women and the Bible shortly!)

THE SCARLET THREAD WITH ADAM AND EVE

To understand the story of Jesus in the Old Testament, we must remember that God is both Engineer and Artist, left-brained and right-brained, and His Word reflects both aspects of His charac-

ter. He opened the Bible in the classic form of the best of authors. All was well and beautiful in God's perfect, new creation. But evil quickly entered the scene as the enemy of all enemies dealt a devastating blow against mankind. Yet, in the midst of the fallout of Adam and Eve's sin, God gave the first premonition of coming rescue: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15).

And so the good news of Jesus begins in Genesis. This is the first hint of the coming Messiah. In essence God said to Satan, "You will have enmity [or warfare] with One born of woman. He will permanently damage you, while you will only wound Him." This is also the first hint of God's good news, particularly for women. Despite woman's role in the Fall, she would be the one to bear the Savior into the world.

God then killed an animal for the first time and used the skins to cover Adam and Eve's nakedness. In the death of that first animal, the scarlet thread began, the poetic trickle of blood running throughout the Old Testament that points to Jesus's coming death on the cross.

THE SCARLET THREAD THROUGH CAIN AND ABEL

After God killed an animal to cover Adam and Eve's nakedness, blood next poured out in Genesis 4 as their son Cain killed his brother Abel in a jealous rage. The story of Abel's death may initially seem unimportant, perhaps just a moral lesson on acceptable

sacrifices to God, as I was taught as a kid in Sunday school. But later we learn that Abel's blood teaches us something about God's plan to save His children. Abel joins hands in the long line of characters in Scripture ultimately pointing to Jesus: "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks" (Hebrews 11:4).

Abel died walking forward in his faith, obedient to God. His blood was shed in faith, and his story is in the Bible to communicate something to us about faith, blood, and death. Yet Hebrews also teaches that Abel's story is an imperfect allusion to Jesus's better sacrifice. Hebrews 12:24 refers "to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." Whatever Abel's sacrifice communicated, Jesus's communicates something much, much better.

When we let the Bible explain the Bible, we learn from Hebrews that those first moments of humanity were already giving us hints about what Jesus would come to do once and for all on the cross, the righteous dying while the unrighteous receive mercy.

THE SCARLET THREAD THROUGH ABRAHAM

After giving us small glimpses in the opening chapters of Genesis of His big plan for redemption, God moved the narrative to an entirely different level with the story of Abraham. Abraham wasn't an allusion to what God was going to do. Abraham was where God actually started doing it! The account of Abraham appears in

Genesis 11–25. Hear how the apostle Paul described Abraham’s story in Galatians 3:6–8: “‘He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you’” (NIV).

When did God first announce the gospel to Abraham? Paul was referring to a long interaction between God and Abraham in Genesis 12–17. We often think of the gospel as a succinct summary of Christ’s death in our place. But Paul used the word to refer holistically to the long story of Jesus in Scripture, in this case the promises in Genesis that one would come through Abraham’s lineage to bless all people.

The LORD said to Abram, “. . . I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. . . . And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (12:1–3)

He brought [Abraham] outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (15:5–6)

God then promised to give Abraham possession of the land he occupied and made a covenant with him, commanding him to bring a heifer, goat, ram, dove, and pigeon to sacrifice. Abraham

cut and arranged the dead animals, then fell into a deep sleep: “When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates’” (15:17–18).

Again, we see the scarlet thread in this bloody covenant of Genesis 15, one that feels foreign to many twenty-first-century believers. But such a blood covenant was familiar to the people at the time as a symbolic contract between two parties to seal a relationship. Note the unique thing about this particular covenant: though God tasked Abraham with assembling the parts of the ceremony, the ceremony itself had only one active participant, God Himself. Abraham was asleep the entire time God was sealing this covenant with him. A smoking fire pot and blazing torch passed between the divided parts of the bloody sacrifice, both symbolic pictures indicating God’s presence, not Abraham’s.

It helps us to understand the symbolism of this ceremony by jumping to the story of Hosea and Gomer much later in the Old Testament. There, by taking both parts of the covenant, we start to fully realize just what God was communicating in Genesis 15. God instructed Hosea, as a picture of God’s love for His people, to take a bride who ran from him and ended up in slavery. Hosea redeemed her from slavery despite her betrayal of him, restoring her as his wife. Gomer wasn’t saved from slavery because of her own good works but because of Hosea’s unconditional commitment to her. Though His bride—the family of Christians—is

often faithless, even running away from their commitment to their Groom, God still pursues us.

In His covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, God first demonstrated this persevering scriptural truth. And He did it by commanding Abraham to shed blood via the sacrifice that alluded again to Jesus's coming sacrifice. God took responsibility for both sides of the covenant, and we know that it will be fulfilled, for it doesn't depend on Abraham's faithfulness but on God's. As 2 Timothy 2:13 tells us, "If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself."

At this point of Genesis, very little if any written Word of God existed. Abraham learned of God's plan through conversation. God did not dump onto Abraham a two-thousand-page treatise of systematic theology. Instead, He unfurled His plan for redemption one step at a time. As He did with Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15, God gave just the bud of the flower of redemption in His conversations with Abraham. We know that God was doing something special through Abraham that would eventually bless all nations (see 12:3), and we know He was going to do it through Abraham's descendants (see 17:16, 19). Beyond that, at this point we are not sure what this flower would look like when it fully bloomed.

The climax of God's story didn't take clear shape until Jesus rose from the dead in the Gospels. Then, suddenly, much that was written before made sense. After Jesus's ascension to heaven, the apostles, under the inspiration of the Spirit, put the final touches on this story, and we see that the bud given in Genesis 12–17

bloomed into what we now call the gospel, or good news. As Paul wrote in Galatians 3, “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ . . . And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (verses 8, 29).

JOSEPH AND THE SCARLET THREAD

After God made the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12–17, the next twenty chapters of Genesis focus on Abraham’s son Isaac and Isaac’s sons, Jacob and Esau. The progression of the story slows down in Genesis 37–50 to concentrate on one of Jacob’s younger sons, Joseph, who was Abraham’s great-grandson.

Joseph’s older brothers sold him into slavery, and he ended up in Egypt. There God maneuvered circumstances so that Joseph became second-in-command of Egypt, moving him through a dream to prepare the area for a severe famine. At the height of the famine, Joseph’s struggling family—including his father, his brothers, and their wives and children (who would eventually become the nation of Israel)—was close to being wiped out by starvation. Joseph’s brothers traveled to Egypt desperate for food, which Joseph provided for them along with respite, safety, and forgiveness for their betrayal.

Joseph recognized the profound meaning of the moment that he was able to save his family. He said to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today”

(Genesis 50:20). God sent Joseph to Egypt to prepare a way for his family, Abraham's descendants from the covenant of Genesis 12–17, to be preserved. The winding story of the tiny family of Abraham that grew to great strength and influence as the nation of Israel is full of moments like this. Although God's people were often on the verge of devastation, He again and again saved them. These were His people through whom He would eventually send the Messiah.

These stories in the Old Testament pay special attention to the line of Abraham through the firstborn sons. One clear revelation from the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah is that God didn't choose His children based on their noble character. He didn't pick the wisest, biggest, or strongest. In fact, we are hard-pressed at every turn to find qualities that recommend them. Yet God was faithful to His covenant with Abraham despite their weaknesses.

At this point, women were mostly supporting characters in the stories of these men. But if we treat Scripture as one long story, then as we continue to connect the dots, we will see both the relevance of these stories of the line of the Messiah to women and the relevance of the women in these stories to the line of the Messiah. At this point, I do want to challenge any assumption that because these stories are not dominated by female characters, they aren't important to women. Remember, in our Venn diagram of gender, there was much overlap between the genders, and subsequently there is much overlap in the relevance of stories of particular men to us as women. Most of all, despite the dominance of male characters in these stories, they are primarily stories of how

Jesus came to be born the rightful Messiah, King of the Jews. That is highly relevant to women!

At the end of Joseph's story in Genesis 50, the children of Israel were protected from famine in Egypt. After several generations of growing in numbers and influence, they had become the size of a small nation. Then, instead of enjoying the protection of the pharaoh who had set up Joseph as second-in-command, they became slaves under a different pharaoh who never knew Joseph.

THE SCARLET THREAD THROUGH MOSES AND THE LAW

At this point in God's story, the allusions to Jesus rise in volume through the account of Moses, the deliverer, as he led God's children out of slavery in Egypt. We also get new glimpses of the final deliverance God will bring us through Jesus, particularly through the story of the first Passover, where God saved from destruction all those who painted the blood of a lamb on their doorpost (see Exodus 12).

After their deliverance from Egypt, God told His people through Moses to sacrifice animals to atone for their sins against the laws God had given them. God gave detailed instructions for a tent that would house the ark of the covenant, an ornate box that held the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments that God gave Moses at Mount Sinai after the exodus of Israel from Egypt. This ark was placed in the Holy of Holies, an inner room in the tabernacle that represented God's presence

among His people. Once the people received these sacrificial laws and put His practices into place at the temple, there was a clear, specific representation of what Jesus's coming sacrifice would look like (the shedding of blood of one without blemish) and what it would accomplish (atonement of sins that brings open access to God).

As we look back, the temple sacrificial system didn't seem to actually appease God. He told His people at times that He despised their sacrifices and religious festivals because their hearts were still far from Him (see Isaiah 29:13). God longed for their hearts' devotion more than their physical sacrifices of animals. Instead of what they did for God, the temple sacrifices seem most important for what they communicated to His children. Year after year, century after century, these sacrifices communicated to the Israelites—and now to us—their separation from God because of their sin and God's plan to reconcile them to Himself by placing the punishment for their sin on another.

Entwined in the tapestry of this story of blood and sacrifice is Jesus's lineage. We meet Rahab and Ruth, Boaz and Samuel. Each of their stories leads us to the emergence of King David on the scene. David's rule seems to be the high point in the history of Israel, and the later historical stories of the Old Testament wind down to Israel's becoming a marginalized nation, once great, under the rule of another. When the Gospels open in Matthew 1 with the lineage of Jesus, we finally see why these stories of who gave birth to whom are key. Just as God first promised to Abraham in Genesis, we see from His lineage that Jesus is the Son of Abraham and Son of David. We see too the importance of the

stories of women such as Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth as we understand their roles in producing Jesus the Messiah.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SCARLET THREAD

In this weaving together of the story of the Old Testament, four simple categories help identify how each part points to Jesus in the New Testament:

1. The easiest category is made up of passages or verses that offer *prophecies of the coming Messiah*, such as the Genesis 3:15 reference to Eve's seed defeating Satan. Isaiah 53 and 61 are other examples.
2. Then we find *stories that show God's work to preserve the lineage of Christ*, such as Joseph's actions in Egypt that kept Abraham's descendants from dying out. Esther, Rahab, and Ruth's stories fall into this category as well.
3. We also see *pictures of the coming Christ, His work, and His kingdom*. The Old Testament sacrificial system clearly illustrates this. The story of Hosea and Gomer pictures Jesus's coming redemption of His bride, as God instructed Hosea to pursue and restore Gomer despite her adultery (see Hosea 1:2–3). Boaz and Ruth's story reflects aspects of the gospel as well, as Boaz took his place as Ruth's kinsman-redeemer (see Ruth 2–3), foreshadowing Jesus's redemption of His bride, the church.

4. Many stories simply *reinforce our need for a Savior*.

Stories such as the rape and dismemberment of the concubine of an unnamed Levite in Judges 19 reinforce the Israelites' warped sense of right and wrong, inability to be righteous on their own, and need for salvation through Christ.

Most parts of the Old Testament will fit one or more of these four categories.

The scarlet thread began in Genesis with an allusion to Satan's defeat and the first animal sacrifice. It continued through Abel's death and the blood sacrifice at the covenant between God and Abraham. With the bloody Passover and then the institution of the Old Testament sacrificial system, the allusions to Christ took off. When Jesus held up the cup and proclaimed, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28), the scarlet thread was knotted and secured into the garment of God's story. At this point in Scripture, the allusions to the future shedding of blood end. With Christ the shedding of blood was over once and for all. Yet, in some sense, the thread continues today for those of us who practice Communion, though we use wine instead of animal blood to reflect it. The symbols of bread representing Christ's body and wine representing His blood remind us that even today Jesus's blood shed for us so long ago cleanses us from our sin.

The scarlet thread of blood sacrifice and the familial thread of the sons of Abraham through which this Savior was promised to come are major themes throughout the Old Testament pointing

to the good news of Jesus Christ. Follow these threads and you will understand much of God's Word to us through the Old Testament.

In the book of Luke, John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, recognized the significance of both John's birth and Jesus's imminent one:

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come and has redeemed his people.
He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long
ago). (Luke 1:68–70, NIV)

Like Zechariah, when we understand the significance of these Old Testament stories about the coming Messiah, we are able to recognize Jesus as their fulfillment. As Jesus taught His disciples in Luke 24, we then better understand both the Old Testament through Jesus and Jesus through the Old Testament. As we dig deeper together in troubling Old Testament passages, their connectedness to Jesus is key to making sense of them and discovering how God is good through them for men *and* women.

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