



THE  
Calling  
of Eve

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How the  
Women of the Bible  
Inspire the Women  
of the Church

Jacki C. King

THOM S. RAINER, SERIES EDITOR

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*The Calling of Eve: How the Women of the Bible Inspire the Women of the Church*

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# Searching for Womanhood

It was a typical Sunday morning at church. Lots of smiles in the lobby as people stood in small clusters, sipping coffee and visiting before the service.

When the service began, groups of friends and families hustled into the sanctuary, some arriving late with their coffee in one hand and their Bible in the other. We sang. We prayed. We listened intently to the message.

This particular message presented the gospel, including an invitation to come forward and surrender to Christ. At the conclusion of the message, the plan was for all our ministers and pastors to stand at the front of the sanctuary to pray with those who felt the Spirit's prompting. As the minister to women for our church, I would be among them. When the music began to play and I started to make my way to the front, I noticed that our children's



minister seemed to be missing. *She must have gotten pulled away into one of the classrooms*, I thought. This left me as the only woman standing at the front, an experience I'd had many times.

As we began to sing, people started moving through the aisles, asking for prayer. I scanned the congregation and made eye contact with a nine-year-old girl named Langley. I smiled at her as she tugged at her mom's shirt and pointed to me. I wondered what she was saying. Then I caught the eye of one of our teenage girls, Haven, and her younger sister, Reese. They had the same kind of look, both curious and longing, and then they smiled. Next my eyes landed on several of our college girls that I lead in a small group. They broke the serious vibe with silly faces, and one tossed up a heart shape with her hands. Trying to keep my composure and fight the urge to shoot back an equally goofy face, I smiled and shared a quick wink. These were souls and faces I loved to see each week, and God was doing remarkable things in and through them. And I had the privilege of a front-row seat.

As I drove home that day, I couldn't stop thinking about Langley's bright eyes and smile. I had vivid memories of what it was like to be her age and in church almost every Sunday. Mrs. Vicki was my Sunday school teacher, and she faithfully taught our class week after week using flannel board Bible characters and coloring sheets—the cutting-edge technology of the day.

Mrs. Susan was the faithful piano player for our worship services. She was one of the quietest women I had ever met, but her fingers flew across the piano keys at crazy speeds when she played the old hymn “Since Jesus Came into My Heart.”

Then there was Mrs. Blair, who gathered us elementary school-girls together every Sunday afternoon at 4:00 to teach us about different missionaries around the world.

I considered Mrs. Dot an adopted grandma. She and her husband, Brother Tommy, gave me a hug each week as I entered the building. Then Mrs. Dot made her way to the infant room to rock crying babies and change dirty diapers, a role in which she served for decades.

I loved these women and their smiles. I loved how they knew so much about the Bible and God. I loved how faithful they were, that I could rely on them to be there for me and others, ready to share hugs and stories that pointed my heart to Jesus. These were the women who made me fall in love with the church. It was just who they were. It was how they served. It was how they led.

There was never a question in my mind that women were a part of God's Kingdom and mission, simply because from my earliest memories I was surrounded by women. It wasn't until I was a bit older that I began to experience doubts and to question where I fit in as a woman in the church.

### **Where Do I Fit In?**

I was a loud and energetic kid. I mean, really loud. (I blame it on being Cuban.) I was also an off-the-charts extrovert. I constantly got in trouble for talking in school and spent a good bit of time in detention after chemistry class because I was way more interested in catching up with my friends than in anything to do with molecules and periodic tables. I wasn't a social butterfly; I was more like a social June bug. Butterflies are winsome and full of grace as they flit between social settings. June bugs, on the other hand, are a bit awkward, clumsily flying into things. And with their loud buzzing, everybody knows they're coming.

Teachers and coaches told me I was a natural leader, although I sometimes led people in the wrong direction. I remember the stern voice of my youth minister when he called once to reprimand

me. Apparently I had not set a good example for the younger students when I enlisted them to join me in egging the car of an ex-boyfriend. Some might have considered it vandalism, but I preferred to think of it as a team-building activity. In sports, I was the team captain and the person everyone relied on to rally the team when we were behind and in a funk. I led the cheers, and I led the prayers.

I wasn't that great with kids, and I was horrible at crafts. While my friends earned summer money babysitting, I opted to mow lawns and walk dogs. I loved competition, hated glitter and anything pink, and had more questions than answers when it came to life and the Bible.

I think as young girls we were always looking ahead and trying to decide who we wanted to be. That's why sports heroes and fashion models always piqued our interest. So when I looked at the Bible and the church, I naturally looked at the women and wondered who was most like me and who I could become.

Unfortunately, it seemed like the only time women were ever talked about in church, the topic was submission—how Eve messed up by eating the fruit, or that part about how women are to learn silently with a gentle spirit. None of these were bad or wrong, but they sure seemed like a narrow set of lenses on life, womanhood, and leadership in the church. And none of them felt like me—remember, I'm the June bug!

I loved the church. I adored Jesus and wanted to serve him. But I had no idea what that might look like for me. I wondered, *Did God mess up? How much of me was too strong and needed to be reined in? Would I need to always defer and give in? Did being a woman who pleased God mean being a woman who was not like me?*

As a young woman, I thought I was the only one who wrestled with such questions and insecurities. But as I began to have

conversations with other women leaders over the years, I discovered that many of them also had struggles with identity, expectations, and purpose. And yet, when I shared my frustrations and questions with other women leaders, it became clear that many of us had spent more energy trying to live up to our own vague notions of what a biblical woman was supposed to be than actually studying what the Bible says about women. There is a difference.

### **What Is a Biblical Woman?**

Depending on where you grew up, the faith tradition you were a part of, and the home you were raised in, the phrase “biblical womanhood” may have a positive or negative connotation. Your mind might go immediately to the talking points of roles and order of creation. Or you might think of your favorite woman of the Bible and the wisdom you’ve gleaned from her story. The first thing that comes to mind for me is the Proverbs 31 woman.

I used to loathe the Proverbs 31 woman. She was the one who set an unachievably high bar of womanhood and had all her ducks in a row. With ease and the most gracious demeanor, she always kept the plates of womanhood spinning. She never lost her cool or her calm smile. At least, that’s how everyone I knew described her.

If she was the model woman, I was completely lacking—even on my best day—in whatever, apparently, was expected of me. In Bible college, I remember the guys talking about trying to find their “P31 wife.” Not only was I not her; I didn’t *want* to be her. It wasn’t until many years later, when I was asked to speak on Proverbs 31 at a women’s event, that my thinking began to change. And that was because my *perception* of the Proverbs 31 woman was finally replaced by an understanding of who she actually represents.

What if I told you that the Proverbs 31 woman isn't really a woman at all? That when we view chapter 31 through the lens of the entire book of Proverbs—a collection of wisdom writings that often portray wisdom as a woman—we see that it is written as an oracle of a queen who is giving advice to her son about what it would look like to be *married to wisdom*.

The Proverbs 31 woman has been used as a checklist of expectations for women who aspire to become good wives and homemakers, with a variety of skills to master—everything from bringing home the bacon to running her own business. However, a closer look at the chapter reveals a creatively written Hebrew acrostic poem that uses the illustration of a woman who is known and used by God in all different ways and who exhibits the virtues of God to everyone around her.

Seen in this context, Proverbs 31 is relevant for *everyone* who seeks to be transformed and used by God. Once I understood this, the seemingly unattainable high bar of womanhood became instead a celebration of character, grace, compassion, and strength. This was something I very much wanted after all!

In Proverbs 31:11-31, the queen details a list of attributes she champions in a woman:

She is trustworthy (verse 11).

She is a hard worker (verses 13-15, 17, 19).

She is resourceful and savvy (verses 16, 18).

She is compassionate; she sees and cares for the needy  
(verse 20).

She is strong (verses 17, 25).

She is wise (verse 26).

She is loved (verse 28).

She fears the Lord (verse 30).

I am especially intrigued by the attribute of “strength” on this list, which doesn’t always come through in our English translations. But in the original Hebrew text, the strength of the Proverbs 31 woman is conveyed using three different words: *khayil*, *’oz*, and *’amets*.

The first word appears in verse 10: “Who can find a virtuous and capable wife? She is more precious than rubies.” The Hebrew word translated as “virtuous” is *khayil*, which is often used in a military context to describe valor, strength, and might. It is used again in verse 29—“There are many virtuous [*khayil*] and capable women in the world, but you surpass them all!”—to complete the parallel, chiasmic structure of the poem. It’s like there are two bookends, with the verses in between displaying how the Proverbs 31 woman brings virtue, strength, and beauty to the world when *khayil* is the drumbeat of her life.

The second Hebrew word that means “strong” appears in verse 17: “She is energetic and strong.” *’Oz* means strong, bold, or loud. Did you catch that? To be loud can be a reflection of strength! This clause literally means “she girds her loins with strength.” This is a very masculine descriptor of our P31 woman. This word is repeated in verse 25: “She is clothed with strength [*oz*] and dignity.”

The third word is used at the end of verse 17: “She is energetic and strong, a hard worker.” The Hebrew word translated “hard worker” is *’amets*. It means to be courageous, firm, and solid.

Together, these words that convey strength paint a picture of a woman who merits the same respect as a decorated warrior. She leverages her strength for the good of others and for the king she serves.

So, what is a biblical woman according Proverbs 31? Verse 30 summarizes it well: She is “a woman who fears the LORD.”

## **A Woman Who Fears the Lord**

To understand what it means to fear the Lord, it's important to know something about the Hebrew word for "fear" that is used here—*yare'*. The verb *yare'* means to cause astonishment and awe, to make afraid, or to have reverence.

One aspect of *yare'* is similar to the fear you might experience when confronted with a snake or a skunk out in the woods. While walking down a nature trail, you might be terrified of being bitten or sprayed, but there's an element of respect and humility in your fear. You recognize that you are at the mercy of a creature you cannot control. But unlike meeting a skunk or a snake, when we encounter our heavenly Father, our inability to control a perfect and holy God is actually for our good and benefit. This is one aspect of *yare'*. It isn't just being terrified or afraid; it also has an element of respect and humility.

Another aspect of *yare'* is more about wonder and awe. I experienced something like this as a kid when I spent a couple of weeks each summer at my aunt and uncle's farm in the Texas Panhandle. There would be these huge thunderstorms we could see coming for miles as they rolled in. The clouds turned from fluffy cotton ball-like puffs to huge wall-like structures of swirling white and gray. I loved watching the giant streaks of light flash across the sky and feeling the rumbles of thunder deep in my chest. It was beautiful. It was grand. It was way bigger than me and completely out of my control.

It is this mix of respect, humility, awe, and wonder that is the fear of the Lord. It stops you in your tracks, and it humbles you with the reminder that you can't control God or box him in. The God who made the planets and thunderstorms is the same God who reaches down to reveal himself through his Word. In his presence, we experience holy fear in the form of awe, wonder, and

utter respect for who he is, the power he holds, and the humility he requires.

When I am teaching my kids or describing to women what it means to fear the Lord, I always think of the Narnia story. I love the scene in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* when young Lucy first hears about Aslan, whose character is a strong and powerful lion. She asks, “Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.” And Mr. Beaver replies, “Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”<sup>1</sup>

To fear the Lord is to acknowledge that while God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and absolutely sovereign, he chooses in his grace to make himself known to us. We approach him with a healthy reverence because we understand that he is our Creator and we were made for him. He is our Father, and we are his children. He is our King, and we are his servants.

Over the years that I’ve ministered to women, I’ve noticed there tends to be two misguided images we have when we think about what it means to fear the Lord. I call them the angry dad and the fairy godmother.

When God is an angry dad, we think he’s just waiting for us to mess up so he can discipline us. When we read, “Fear of the LORD lengthens one’s life, but the years of the wicked are cut short” (Proverbs 10:27), we imagine God standing by to zap us whenever we lose our temper with the kids or let that cussword slip while driving in rush-hour traffic. In our moments of weakness, we expect to be met with shame and rebuke as our heavenly Father shakes his head with disappointment and marks a strike against us. We hear condemning voices in our head that say, “I told you so” and “When are you ever going to learn?” Our focus is to try very hard not to mess up so we don’t risk exhausting the limits of God’s grace and patience.



In contrast, when we think of God as a fairy godmother, we believe that if we do all the right things and follow a list of dos and don'ts, God will give us what we desire most in exchange for being good. We take pride in being good and right.

I'll give you a picture of this woman. She has a #Blessed T-shirt, coffee mug, and bumper sticker. She lives for the checklist and getting things done, but when hard seasons hit and unexpected brokenness comes, she is left spinning and questioning who she is and who God is. *Why would God allow this to happen to me if he loves me? I'm not as bad as that other lady at church, so God must be mad at me.*

Both the angry-dad and the fairy godmother views diminish the person and holiness of God. The angry-dad view robs God of his compassionate love and results in a fear-based obedience rooted in not making him angry or disappointed. Instead of providing a relationship marked by protection and care, the goal is to avoid punishment. The fairy godmother view reduces God to a "little g" god, someone we can manipulate and control based on our own efforts and devotion. Obedience is rooted in earning favor with God so he will give us what we want.

Fearing the Lord encompasses so much more than this. It means we not only approach God with humility but also make him the center of our lives. When we surrender ourselves to our good heavenly Father and run after him, we don't hide in a corner or live by a list of rules. Instead, we live as women who are free, knowing that God has our best interests at heart and that we aren't alone in either our failures or our victories.

Our aspirations are not merely to become "good humans" or to make sure that, on balance, we are more good than bad. There is so much more to life than that. We must set our sights higher. As we see in Proverbs 31, we can aspire to be strong, trustworthy,

and wise women, not because we fear God's punishment or to complete our checklists, but because God is graciously working to make us more like him—for our good and his glory.

Our strength as women (and for all believers) is directly connected to our fear of the Lord. We live out an authentic fear of the Lord when we surrender to and trust in a holy and perfect God. Instead of our obedience being motivated by trepidation or earning favor, it is rooted in our love for and awe of God. His presence breathes encouragement and empowerment into our souls.

This is where every woman must begin her journey. Do you and I fear the Lord? Are we more concerned with his glory than our own? Do we surrender to what he has for our lives in both the good times and in the hard times? Do we take our walk with Jesus casually, or do we leverage all that we are to know him better? Being a biblical woman has a lot more to do with our surrender than it does with our talents and tasks. It has a lot more to do with being strong, immovable, and mighty for the Kingdom of God than it does with building our own kingdoms.

I love the promise of Proverbs 31:30: “A woman who fears the LORD will be greatly praised.” The root of the Hebrew word translated “praised” is *halal*, which means “to shine.” It is also the root of the word *hallelujah*.

The attributes of the Proverbs 31 woman are not a list of impossibly high standards, nor are they a job description for biblical womanhood. Instead, they describe what a person marked by wisdom—as personified by a woman—looks like. Wherever she goes, her very presence changes the atmosphere in the room—not because she demands attention or has to prove her worth, but simply because of who she is and how the light of God shines through her.

## Changing the Conversation from *Can't* to *How*

When I surrendered to God's call to ministry at age eighteen, I had no clue what that meant. I knew God was stirring in me, but I didn't know which path to walk down or even how to ask for directions. When I looked at examples of women in ministry, I didn't see many who were like me. I had started college with the dream of becoming a physical therapist, so I assumed God was directing me toward medical missions. Still, I felt a longing to study and teach God's Word, and to lead others on a similar path. I began to wrestle with God and to question what it meant for me to walk away from my own plans, and what it would look like for God to piece together my passions and desires with what he had planned for me. I tried to get some advice and wisdom from several pastors about what it meant to be called to ministry as a woman, but more often than not their replies included some form of the statement, "That's great that God is calling you to ministry, but just remember you can't \_\_\_\_\_."

What filled in the blank following *can't* would differ depending on who I was talking to and where they landed theologically on the issue of a woman's role in the church—a topic I hadn't yet fully studied for myself. Quickly feeling discouraged and isolated, I began to second-guess whether God knew what he was doing in stirring up all these passions in me for ministry.

You probably have your own list of phrases to fill in the blank following *can't*. Maybe you've even had a similar experience of excitedly sharing all that God was doing in your life, only to be met with caveats, concerns, and boxes you needed to work within.

What if we changed the conversation by focusing first on a celebration of who God made us to be? What if our starting point was the ways in which we are gifted and strong? What if we took encouragement from knowing that God has given each of us a

unique story, personality, talents, and giftings to leverage for the Kingdom in any number of ways?

What if your confident and strong demeanor was celebrated as Deborah's was?

What if your desire to fill the gap and tend to hurting hearts was esteemed as Dorcas's was?

What if your ability to pore over Scripture was championed as Priscilla's was?

What if your faithfulness and sacrifice for the church was recognized as Phoebe's was?

What if you found yourself in a long lineage of faithful women, all of whom lived lives full of *cans* rather than *can't's*?

When looking at the metanarrative of Scripture, there is so much to celebrate, and a lot can change in this conversation if we simply change the initial reply. Let's work to change the reply from *can't* to *how*.

How can God utilize your strengths to bring strength to structures and systems?

How can you take your deepest hurts and disappointments and turn them into offerings of worship?

How can your passions intersect with gaps and needs within your community?

How can developing your weaknesses and challenging some of your comforts expand your fear of the Lord and help you grow in new ways?

There are an infinite number of ways we can use *how* to live beyond the limits of *can't*.

Locking eyes with nine-year-old Langley on that Sunday morning when I stood at the front of the church reminded me of the only time during my childhood when there was a woman standing at the front of an old sanctuary waiting for me. It was Mrs. Blair,

my counselor at a summer Bible camp. The preacher had asked all the counselors to come down front. I knew God was drawing me and that I needed to surrender my life to him. I caught eyes with Mrs. Blair, and she smiled at me, much like I had smiled at Langley. As a nine-year-old girl, I had also walked down the aisle to declare the most life-transforming decision a person could make. Mrs. Blair hugged me, and we talked through my decision to follow Jesus that day.

I hope Langley and the other girls and women in our church see someone like them when they come to church. I hope they see women who love Jesus with their whole hearts and leverage everything they are to serve, encourage, and share the good news of Jesus, because these are the marks of women who fear the Lord. I hope they see opportunities and pathways where they can use their giftings and personality to build up the church and expand God's Kingdom. And I hope you see these things too.

You may be at the very beginning of your leadership journey, or you may have decades of experience already under your belt. Regardless of the season in which you find yourself, I hope this book will not only reaffirm the need for your voice and gifts within your home, church, and community, but also reignite your passion to take your rightful place in the long line of faithful women who have been used by God to share his message of grace, love, and redemption.

In the pages that follow, we'll look with fresh eyes and eager hearts at some of the women in God's plan of redemption. As we dig into their stories, I hope you will find your own narrative wrapped up in the greater narrative of God's glory. But like any good story, we have to go back to the beginning to understand the author's original intent. So let's journey there together now, back to the opening pages of God's redemptive plan.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- 1. Who are some of the women in your life who showed you Jesus at a young age?*
- 2. What messages did you receive about what it means to be a biblical woman? What misunderstandings were passed along?*
- 3. What characteristics of the Proverbs 31 woman stand out to you, and why?*
- 4. How do you respond to the idea that Proverbs 31 is not a checklist of requirements for biblical womanhood but a celebration of who women are? As you look at the Proverbs 31 woman, which attributes do you see in yourself?*
- 5. What "Just remember you can't" messages have you received in your faith journey? What would it look like for you to walk out your giftings with a "How does God want to use me?" perspective?*