

Women: Radically Glorified, Oppressed, or Set Free?

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### **Abstract**

A woman's identity in society has often been debated, starting from the beginning of time. The answer to this identity question has been sought in systems ranging from oppression, slavery, radical feminism, and over-exaltation of power. This thesis suggests that the value of women and their role is not found in those systems but in the knowledge of their Creator. Two questions will be posed, including how women's identity has been previously defined and can a woman's identity be found in her Creator God. The history of women in biblical times will be reviewed, as well as how Christ valued women. A review of the emergence of radical feminism and the oppression of women in Saudi Arabia will also be contrasted. The results of this review will indicate that neither one of these man-made systems will give women the purpose they are searching for; a woman's identity can be found in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus gives women an identity different than what the secular world offers. This truth will set women free from radical feminism and oppression.

## **Women: Radically Glorified, Oppressed, or Set Free?**

Throughout history, questions regarding women have been proposed and still need a modern solution. Why do women exist? Do they hold the same value as men? Where does their value come from? History suggests that women have sought answers in different spheres, including religion, power, and roles. Has a solution been found?

This thesis seeks to answer the questions of where women's identity has previously been found and if God offers an internal identity greater than what the secular world can offer. This thesis explains the root of oppression, particularly in Saudi Arabia, and the source of radical feminism. Both man-made systems provide an invitation for a woman's identity that is external and confining. The thesis then explains examples of the value God places on women in scripture and offers an invitation that their identity is internal and cannot be taken away. The thesis will conclude with a practical application of how the identity God gives to women can transform both systems of oppression and feminism for ministry purposes.

### **Oppression**

Oppression can be defined as the "inequitable use of authority, law, or physical force to prevent others from being free of equal; a type of injustice."<sup>1</sup> Oppression is not limited to one people group, one period, or one legal system; however, the system has deep roots that can be seen throughout history. Africans in Europe and America, Jews in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe and the Bible, and Natives during colonization are just a few examples of extreme oppression throughout history.

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Napikoski, "Oppression and Women's History," ThoughtCo (January 21, 2020), accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.thoughtco.com/oppression-womens-history-definition-3528977>, 1.

## Oppression in Saudi Arabia

Oppression has existed since the garden of Eden. Eve chose to give Satan rule over her by no, giving oppression a gateway to enter the world. Oppression entered the world at that moment and has flourished ever since. Oppression is not limited to a specific period or location. It spans social and economic borders, with different levels existing in other places

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<sup>2</sup> Kristine Beckerle, “Boxed In,” Human Rights Watch, last modified November 24, 2020, accessed January 19, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/16/boxed/women-and-saudi-arabias-male-guardianship-system#:~:text=I>, 64.

<sup>3</sup> “What Is Sharia Law? What Does It Mean for Women in Afghanistan?,” BBC News (BBC, August 19, 2021), last modified August 19, 2021, accessed January 19, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-27307249>, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>5</sup> “Ending Male Guardianship in Saudi Arabia,” *Equality Now*, last modified November 1, 2021, accessed January 19, 2023, [https://www.equalitynow.org/ending\\_male\\_guardianship\\_in\\_saudi\\_arabia/](https://www.equalitynow.org/ending_male_guardianship_in_saudi_arabia/), 2.

approved by a male guardian as well as freedoms such as driving, traveling, and more. Until 2018, women could not drive a car, attend movies, or attend concerts alongside men.<sup>6</sup> Until 2019, women in Saudi Arabia were universally treated as legal minors.<sup>7</sup> Before this time, women and children were treated as less than humans. They needed their male guardian's permission "for decisions including occupation, family records, and applying for a passport."<sup>8</sup> It was not until January 2019 that marriage for girls and boys under 15 was prohibited, and court approval was needed for those under 18.<sup>9</sup> Practically, this freedom is still unfavorable toward women and children because of the many loopholes and requirements of a male guardian's permission to marry. It is not legal for a woman to divorce unless she obtains approval from her husband. The husband could have his wife criminalized for desiring divorce, leaving women stuck.<sup>10</sup> Women in Saudi Arabia gained the right to obtain their ID cards, but this was recent freedom. Legally, women were not considered guardians of their children until 2019.<sup>11</sup> Until 2019, women had to have a male relative traveling with them, regulated by a program on cell phones, and in 2019, women gained the right to travel alone.<sup>12</sup> These laws mentioned do not begin to explain the severity of women's oppression from Sharia law or the depth of the ingrained system.

The male guardianship system stems from a rigid interpretation of the Quran called Fatwa. The Quran says, "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has

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<sup>6</sup> "Ending Male Guardianship in Saudi Arabia," Equality Now, last modified November 1, 2021, accessed January 19, 2023, [https://www.equalitynow.org/ending\\_male\\_guardianship\\_in\\_saudi\\_arabia/](https://www.equalitynow.org/ending_male_guardianship_in_saudi_arabia/), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

given the one more [strength] than the other, and because they support them from their means.”<sup>13</sup>

To most Muslims, the meaning of this passage can be ambiguous; however, Saudi Arabia has held to the strictest interpretation. This passage shows the system “built on the premise that women are *legally minors*.”<sup>14</sup> The economic status is insignificant. The class is insignificant. Restrictions vary based on those factors; however, the system is so deeply ingrained into the nation that all women are affected somehow. Muslim scholars and women from outside Saudi Arabia communicate that Islam is not an oppressive religion. They state that Islam does not claim men’s superiority, so the root issue with the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia is not religion.<sup>15</sup> The root issue is something more profound.

In 2001, Saudi Arabia created the Convention on Eliminating All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>16</sup> With the ratification of CEDAW, Saudi Arabia must pursue programs and policies to end discrimination against women. Statements are included that explain this idea, such as “women have equal rights with men to acquire, change, or retain their nationality and that of their children,” and “women have the right to work, employment opportunities, equal remuneration, free choice of profession and employment....”<sup>17</sup> These statements are clear, so where is the gap between policy and practice? The answer to that

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<sup>13</sup> Kristine Beckerle, “Boxed In,” Human Rights Watch, last modified November 24, 2020, accessed January 19, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/16/boxed/women-and-saudi-arabias-male-guardianship-system#:~:text=I>, 47.

<sup>14</sup> “Ending Male Guardianship in Saudi Arabia,” *Equality Now*, last modified November 1, 2021, accessed January 19, 2023, [https://www.equalitynow.org/ending\\_male\\_guardianship\\_in\\_saudi\\_arabia/](https://www.equalitynow.org/ending_male_guardianship_in_saudi_arabia/), 4.

<sup>15</sup> (Ohio State University, 2021), <https://u.osu.edu/cs1100sp21finver/2021/03/24/male-guardianship-system-in-saudi-arabia/>, 2.

<sup>16</sup> “Ending Male Guardianship in Saudi Arabia,” *Equality Now*, last modified November 1, 2021, accessed January 19, 2023, [https://www.equalitynow.org/ending\\_male\\_guardianship\\_in\\_saudi\\_arabia/](https://www.equalitynow.org/ending_male_guardianship_in_saudi_arabia/), 17.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

question lies in two broad reservations implemented with CEDAW. The first reservation explains that if a policy were to contradict Islamic law, the law should be held above the policy. The second reservation states that there are a few paragraphs of CEDAW that they are not bound to, with two of them being the statements listed above.<sup>18</sup> While reforms are being exercised and sought after, the deeply ingrained system of oppression is the way of life. Activists for women's rights are being detained, abused, and deprived of contact. Reforms that sound nice are not practically implemented. Women are still victims of oppression. The male guardianship system is evidence of oppression in Saudi Arabia and proves that oppression still exists in the world today.

### **Oppression in the United States**

Oppression is not limited to Saudi Arabia or even the Middle East. Throughout history, women in all parts of the world have been subject to oppression, including in the West. It is estimated that 15,000-50,000 women and children are forced into sexual slavery in the United States each year, though it is difficult to predict the exact number.<sup>19</sup> This data is only for sex trafficking in the United States, not including other locations or other types of trafficking. There are an estimated 40.3 million victims of trafficking in the world today, with 71% of them being women and girls.<sup>20</sup> That equates to 5.4 victims for every 1,000 people in the world.<sup>21</sup> Each

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<sup>18</sup> "Ending Male Guardianship in Saudi Arabia," *Equality Now*, last modified November 1, 2021, accessed January 19, 2023, [https://www.equalitynow.org/ending\\_male\\_guardianship\\_in\\_saudi\\_arabia/](https://www.equalitynow.org/ending_male_guardianship_in_saudi_arabia/), 17.

<sup>19</sup> "Facts about Human Trafficking in the US," *DeliverFund.org*, last modified January 18, 2023, accessed January 19, 2023, <https://deliverfund.org/blog/facts-about-human-trafficking-in-united-states/>, 6.

<sup>20</sup> "Human Trafficking Statistics: Global & State-by-State Data [Report]," Houston Criminal Defense Lawyer Neal Davis, last modified 2020, accessed January 24, 2023, <https://www.nealdavislaw.com/criminal-defense-guides/human-trafficking-statistics.html>, 9.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.



number stated above represents a human. A story. A purpose. A living, breathing soul trapped in slavery. Oppression in the West can look more subtle as well. In 2020, “women ages 25 to 34 earned 93 cents for every dollar a man in the same age group earned on average.”<sup>22</sup> This number is slowly increasing, yet 1 in 4 employed women stated that they still earn less than a man doing the same job.<sup>23</sup> Why is there a wage gap? Some attribute the gap to educational opportunities: some to work experience, and some to motherhood. No matter the cause, there is a clear distinction between men and women in the workplace that can sometimes result in discrimination against women.

### **The Root of Oppression**

The problem of oppression is apparent, but what is the root? In each of these systems, it can be concluded that women are found valuable based on specific characteristics. There is something that gives them purpose in each of these systems. However, the root is external: “Many cultures and religions justify the oppression of women by attributing sexual power to them, which men must then rigidly control to maintain their purity and power. Reproductive functions—including childbirth and menstruation, sometimes breastfeeding and pregnancy—are seen as disgusting. Thus, in these cultures, women are often required to cover their bodies and faces to keep men, assumed to not be in control of their sexual actions, from being overpowered.”<sup>24</sup> Historically, a woman’s identity has been found in roles based on the body they were given. They are alive to be mothers and wives, according to these systems. They are alive

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<sup>22</sup> Amanda Barroso and Anna Brown, “Gender Pay Gap in U.S. Held Steady in 2020,” *Pew Research Center* (Pew Research Center, June 8, 2022), last modified June 8, 2022, accessed January 19, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/25/gender-pay-gap-facts/>, 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Linda Napikoski, “Oppression and Women's History,” *ThoughtCo* (January 21, 2020), accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.thoughtco.com/oppression-womens-history-definition-3528977>, 12.

to be used for their body. And the systems train them to believe that this is their sole purpose.

The environment shapes a woman's purpose so much so, especially when oppression is claimed for religious purposes, that it becomes just a way of life. The root of oppression is external. The root of oppression is the value given based on what a woman can do or what a woman has, most of the time being her body. Women in these systems are starting to learn a deeper purpose. They are fighting for educational rights, fighting for freedom. However, these oppressive systems can be deeply ingrained in the culture, making implementing practical and cultural changes hard.

The invitation oppression offers women is that they can find value in something external. They can find value in their bodies and their roles. They can find value in their cultural identity. But is there something more? Can a woman find her value in something more profound, more valuable than just what she can offer?

### **Radical Feminism**

The fight to end oppression has been a fight to change systems and deeply ingrained beliefs and bring freedom to a society that caters to one group or another. This fight has led to the idea of feminism. The term feminism has different definitions and connotations depending on the group of people, so when a person suggests that they are a feminist, it is difficult to make assumptions about what they believe. In general, feminism is "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression and to achieve full gender equality in law and practice" in political, economic, and cultural spheres.<sup>25</sup> However, this is a stark contrast from the definition of radical feminism, which supports the idea that "men are the enemy and marriage and family are the key

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<sup>25</sup> "Feminism and Women's Rights Movements," *Gender Matters*, accessed November 21, 2022, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/feminism-and-women-s-rights-movements>, 3.

institutions which allow patriarchy to exist.”<sup>26</sup> Both of these definitions technically fall under the feminism category; however, it is crucial to distinguish beliefs between the two. The history of feminism is vital for understanding how radical feminism has grown into the phenomenon it is today.

### **History of Feminism**

Feminism can be traced back to ancient Greece when Plato advocated for a woman’s right to rule because “women possess natural capacities equal to men for governing and defending Greece.”<sup>27</sup> At this point in history, women were treated as second-class, so Plato’s bold statement received pushback from the citizens of Greece. Again, the theme of Plato’s argument centered around a woman’s ability and role, two external characteristics. Plato had many stands in opposition to his statement. However, a different group was fueled by Plato’s conclusion, so much so that they started to protest a law limiting a woman’s ability to gain gold and other goods.<sup>28</sup> The response to Plato’s statement and the protest gained attention from a Roman political leader who stated, “as soon as they begin to be your equals, they will have become your superiors.”<sup>29</sup> The fight against oppression spanned the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution, with limited change for women. The abolition movement in the United States fueled feminism, beginning with Abigail Adams. President John Adam’s wife, Abigail, believed that access to education, property, and the right to vote was

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<sup>26</sup> Olivia Guy-Evans, “What Is Radical Feminism?,” *Radical Feminism: Definition & Theory - Simply Sociology*, last modified August 22, 2022, accessed January 25, 2023, <https://simplysociology.com/radical-feminism.html>.

<sup>27</sup> John Olson, “Feminism,” *History.com* (A&E Television Networks, February 28, 2019), last modified February 28, 2019, accessed November 21, 2022, <https://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/feminism-womens-history>, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

critical for equality.<sup>30</sup> Abigail Adams threatened a rebellion of women's rights; however, this “rebellion” did not start until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>31</sup> Her words were taken to heart as women joined with abolitionists to advocate for women’s rights and the rights of enslaved people. Until this point, fights to end oppression were separate and distinct from each other in different parts of the world. The 19<sup>th</sup> century United States changed this pattern.

### ***First Wave of Feminism***

A convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 birthed the period known as the first wave of feminism in the United States.<sup>32</sup> At this point, women in the United States were allowed to go to school at a much earlier age than in Europe, allowing them to not only read and write but to start to question how society worked.<sup>33</sup> Women began advocating for the freedom of women and slaves, leading to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott’s statement at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. Here, they coined the Declaration of Sentiments, stating, “we hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal,” as well as demands for the right to vote.<sup>34</sup> The right to vote was a long and grueling fight that led to Fredrick Douglas’ argument that if black men had voting rights, so should women.<sup>35</sup> In 1920, women gained the

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<sup>30</sup> John Olson, “Feminism,” *History.com* (A&E Television Networks, February 28, 2019), last modified February 28, 2019, accessed November 21, 2022, <https://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/feminism-womens-history>, 5.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>33</sup> “Feminism and Women's Rights Movements,” *Gender Matters*, accessed November 21, 2022, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/feminism-and-women-s-rights-movements>, 8.

<sup>34</sup> John Olson, “Feminism,” *History.com* (A&E Television Networks, February 28, 2019), last modified February 28, 2019, accessed November 21, 2022, <https://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/feminism-womens-history>, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

right to vote. This freedom was fueled by women's roles in World War I, working factory jobs and providing for the men at war.<sup>36</sup> Again, a woman's role was what fueled her ability to vote—not based on an internal characteristic but because of something that she could do.

### ***Second Wave of Feminism***

Women were entering the workforce due to the impact of the Great Depression and were given stable roles in areas such as teaching and office work. During World War II, even more, women found jobs in industries or the military.<sup>37</sup> The second wave of feminism, also known as modern feminism, was launched by a woman's participation in the workforce. Major works were produced at this time that fueled the movement, including a book titled *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, arguing that women were created for more than just homemaking and childcare. The Equal Rights Amendment, passed by Congress in 1972, "sought legal equality for women and banned discrimination based on sex."<sup>38</sup> Though Congress passed this amendment, there were not enough votes for it to become law, as it is still not in effect today. Roe V. Wade was passed in 1973, which stated that "the Constitution protected a woman's right to an abortion before the viability of the fetus."<sup>39</sup> Feminist women celebrated this law as an advancement in gaining control over their bodies instead of giving men that power. The theme of the second wave of feminism was women's liberation, accomplished through laws, women's studies in

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<sup>36</sup>John Olson, "Feminism," *History.com* (A&E Television Networks, February 28, 2019), last modified February 28, 2019, accessed November 21, 2022, <https://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/feminism-womens-history>, 12.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>39</sup> "Roe v. Wade (1973)." Legal Information Institute. Cornell Law, n.d. Accessed January 26, 2023. [https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/roe\\_v\\_wade\\_\(1973\)](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/roe_v_wade_(1973)), 1.

school, and more.<sup>40</sup> This was also the period when feminists started to disagree on the advancements women needed, producing a group of radical feminists that blamed oppression on patriarchy and capitalism, supporting the statement that “men as a group oppress women.”<sup>41</sup> The second wave of feminism did prove somewhat successful for a specific group of women, but not all. White, college-aged women benefited from the second wave of feminism, but women in the minority, whether by race, sexuality, or education, did not have those same opportunities.

### *Third Wave of Feminism*

The third wave of feminism was fueled by critiques of the first two waves as the benefits of feminism neglected the concern of minority women. The third wave of feminism was characterized by an “increased awareness of overlapping categories such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation” and women's rights around the globe.<sup>42</sup> Media and pop culture have proven vital for this wave of feminism, fueling movements like the MeToo movement and the women’s march in 2017.<sup>43</sup> The MeToo movement began in 2017 as sexual assault allegations against Harvey Weinstein emerged, causing a spiral of assault allegations in the celebrity world. This movement recognized sexual assault culture as evidence that misogyny still existed and that feminists still had work to do to promote equal rights.<sup>44</sup> The women’s march in 2017 was held on the first full day of Trump’s presidency as feminists believed that he was a threat to

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<sup>40</sup> “Feminism and Women's Rights Movements,” Gender Matters, accessed November 21, 2022, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/feminism-and-women-s-rights-movements>, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>44</sup> John Olson, “Feminism,” History.com (A&E Television Networks, February 28, 2019), last modified February 28, 2019, accessed November 21, 2022, <https://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/feminism-womens-history>, 20.

reproductive, civil, and human rights.<sup>45</sup> The third wave of feminism has spread worldwide and continues to impact women today as women are still seeking equal rights and freedom from oppression.

### **Radical Feminist Beliefs**

As previously mentioned, feminism can have multiple definitions depending on the group of feminists. These groups are called *schools of feminism*, as they seem to be united under one movement titled *feminism*. However, group unity is rare because of different motivations, goals, and movements. Ultimately, “feminism is grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified; therefore, the goal is to achieve full gender equality in law and practice.”<sup>46</sup> Radical feminism takes this definition to the extreme as the fundamental theory centers around the idea that society has been dominated in the past by a patriarchal society in an institution and social roles that resulted in the oppression of women. To right the wrong, radical feminists elevate women to the point that men are degraded, and women are glorified to the extreme to eliminate patriarchy.

### **Root of Radical Feminism**

In theory, feminism seems like the logical solution to oppression because one was made to combat the other. Feminism seeks to right the wrongs done to women in the past which are done to them today. In theory, feminism should eradicate oppression. So why is this system not working in that eradication? Why are women still trapped in this cycle of having to prove

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<sup>45</sup> John Olson, “Feminism,” History.com (A&E Television Networks, February 28, 2019), last modified February 28, 2019, accessed November 21, 2022, <https://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/feminism-womens-history>, 21.

<sup>46</sup> Noelle McAfee, “Feminist Philosophy,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2018), accessed January 26, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-philosophy/#Bib>, 19.

themselves, gain ground that they feel has been lost, and remove men in the process? Could it be that oppression and feminism are not the main issues, but the problem lies at the root of those things? Addressing the issues of oppression and feminism is important; however, discovering the motivations behind those systems and improving them could bring actual change from the source, not just behavior change. Therefore, it is essential to define and understand the root of radical feminism. Is it similar to the root of oppression, though the effects are manifested differently? It can be concluded that advancements for women came through women proving their success in relation to men in the workforce and in trying to overcorrect the past suffering of women. When women started working in factories in World War I, they gained the right to vote. When Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* arguing that women were made for more than home roles, the second wave of feminism launched, and the Equal Rights Amendment was introduced. Women proved that their roles were valuable, which gained their freedom. However, women were still given an identity based on an external characteristic, whether that be the gender of their bodies exemplified through marches and rights or their attitudes toward trying to right wrongs. Identity is still based on an external characteristic, as is the root of oppression. Women still have to "work" to gain their identity, right wrongs, and prove and defend themselves. Though feminism and oppression look like opposite sides of the spectrum externally, they both are rooted in a belief that a woman's value comes from her achievements or from her body instead of whom she was created to be and who she is.

### **Invitation of Radical Feminism**

Instead of gaining value from childbirth and working in the home, women gain value from success in the workplace, advancing past men, or even receiving equal rights. None of these things are wrong. Most of these opportunities are great for women's rights. However, an identity



placed in achievement will force women to work toward finding their identity instead of working from the identity they have been given. In attending a feminist play, one author writes, “I saw the combination of anger, vulgarity, and self-assertion not as empowering women but quite the reverse. Their reclaiming of physical autonomy ironically reduced them to sexualized bodies.”<sup>47</sup> In a system that is portrayed as one that will set women free from oppression, there is still anger, self-assertion, and vulgarity. Radical feminism does not honor women. There is still emptiness and a search for purpose. There is a gap that needs to be filled. The invitation radical feminism gives women is that their body and success define them. Their value is based on what they do, which is the same root as oppression. If the source of both oppression and feminism are exposed and corrected, could women in feminism and oppression be set free?

### **Freedom**

The answer may not lie in a system. The answer may not lie in activism or control. Maybe it lies in a name. A name was given to the Creator of women and their identity. A word that changes systems and beliefs. A name that provides a better invitation than a man-made system ever could. A name that gives value to ones who the world deems unworthy. A name that shifts identity to something greater. A name that sets captives free. The name of Jesus. The inclusion of women in scripture can be considered “revolutionary,” which gives insight into how God values women and the freedom Jesus offers them.

### **How does Jesus View Women?**

Conclusions can be made about how Jesus views women by examining His interactions with women in scripture. By examining the value Jesus gave women and what He offered them,

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<sup>47</sup> Karen Soole, “Principles for Reaching Feminists with the Gospel,” A Passion for Life, last modified October 21, 2021, accessed November 22, 2022, <https://www.apassionforlife.org.uk/mission-ideas/principles-for-reaching-feminists-with-the-gospel/>, 3.

it can be concluded that Jesus gives women a different identity: one of purpose, intentionality, and importance. Three stories from the Old Testament will be analyzed to explain God's view of women, which translates into Jesus' view of women in the New Testament, explaining three more interactions with women.

### *Eve's Identity*

The identity God places on women is explained at the beginning of scripture. Genesis 1:27-28 says, "So God created mankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen. 1:27-28, NIV). When God placed Eve on this earth to be with Adam, He gave her equal value. Adam acknowledged the importance that God gave Eve and honored it. God gave Eve a specific purpose and role that she had to play, stemming from God's creation in His image. Her root was secure in her identity as imitating her Father until she chose not to live in that identity.

When God placed Adam and Eve in the garden, He gave them everything they needed for food and security. He gave them one specific instruction to restrain from the tree in the middle of the garden, or it would cause them to die, but everything else in the garden was given to them. However, the serpent tempted Eve to eat from one tree that was off limits: "you will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4-5). Satan used Eve's identity to deceive her into thinking that she deserved more than what God had given her instead of living in her Creator's identity. The woman gave into the temptation to try and give herself a different identity: "when the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing

to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it” (Gen. 3:6). Eve chose to step out of her identity, which resulted in consequences and shame. It resulted in death. It resulted in Eve giving up control to sin. Even though Eve did not choose God, God sought after her. He found her in the garden and provided her with clothes to cover up her shame. God still loved Eve and provided for her by sending her out of the garden to protect her. Her identity was always made in His image, even though she chose to disobey.

### *Hagar's Identity*

Women in the Old Testament were given more rights than women of other cultures and women in the New Testament; however, slave women did not receive these same rights. Genesis 16 begins with Sarai, Abram's wife, giving her servant woman Hagar to him to have a child. Abram and Sarai had been waiting on God's promise for a child for many years, so Sarai chose to use Hagar for a child instead of trusting God. The author of Genesis 16 uses Hagar's name in the story; however, when Sarai speaks of Hagar, she only calls her by the title of slave: “Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her” (Gen. 16:2). Hagar's identity at this point was given through a title and what her body could be used for. Her master decided her identity, so she was known as a slave, and without her consideration, she was used for her body to have a child for Sarai. Before the living God met her, Hagar's identity was limited to what the world gave her.

Genesis 16 continues with Hagar fleeing from Abram and Sarai into the wilderness, where she is met with a name given in stark contrast to her previous identity. Genesis 16:7-8 says, “The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring beside the road to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?” (Gen. 16:7-8). When the angel meets her, the first word Hagar hears is her name. Not

slave woman. Still, Hagar. This would have immediately caught her attention because her name called out was “in direct opposition to her previous experiences.”<sup>48</sup> The angel asks her where she came from and where she is going, addressing her past and future. However, Hagar only answers where she has come from. She responds by stating that she is fleeing from Sarai, alluding to the fact that she envisions no future for herself.<sup>49</sup> Hagar was wrapped in the identity that the world had given her in which she saw no hope. The angel responded with a command to return to Sarai to submit to her, which could make God seem “insensitive and oppressive.”<sup>50</sup> However, God did not send her back powerless. God made a promise to her, declaring that she would have numerous descendants, which gave her hope and a future. God met Hagar in the wilderness and changed her identity. This covenant was groundbreaking for Hagar, and she knew it. He transformed her from being a slave woman to being a woman with the role of slave but with a greater identity and purpose. She now had been met by the living God. She was given a promise that she would have numerous descendants. And she responded by naming God *El Roi*, as God had named her. She felt seen unlike she ever had before. She now had a personal relationship with God where she saw and was seen.

A shift happened in Hagar because of an encounter with the living God. Hagar returned to Sarai and submitted to her, but Sarai still called her a slave. The identity the world had given her did not change, but the belief in who gave her true identity did. Later on in the story, Hagar and her son were sent away again with no hope and future into the wilderness until God met her again:

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<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Tracy, “Hagar: She Who Speaks with God,” *Bible Odyssey* (n.d.), accessed December 15, 2022, <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/hagar-she-who-speaks-with-god/>, 3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, “I cannot watch the boy die.” And as she sat there, she began to sob. God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. (Gen. 21:16-19)

God as her Creator and the One who saw her, gave her a greater identity than the title of slave could ever give her, and it changed her forever.

### ***Rahab's Identity***

Joshua 2 opens with spies sent to Jericho to explore the promised land the Israelites were about to conquer, where they were met by a prostitute named Rahab. The Bible introduced her as a prostitute so that some assumptions can be made from the beginning. First, prostitutes in this day were known by that title. Walking the streets and going into town, her title went with her wherever she went. Not only was this title always attached to her, but she was also ostracized because of it. The shame and dishonor attached to prostitution would have set her apart from society as one who was used and unlovable. She carried around the title of a prostitute, woman, and Canaanite, meaning non-Jewish. These three titles made up her identity in the world, and she was treated as such.

However, Rahab had heard about this God that parted the Red Sea and destroyed other lands, and she believed in Him. This belief changed her identity. Rahab protected the spies of Israel out of that belief and asked for safety when they invaded the land, which they gave to her and her family. When the spies left, God devoted the city to destruction but kept Rahab and her family safe. It would have made sense that Rahab would have been destroyed first because of her sin, yet God had given her an identity greater than what she had done. God spared her life, unlike the rest of the city, which restored her honor, giving her an identity of fearing God over her old

identity. Not only that but God chose Rahab to be a part of His greatest plan to send Jesus into the world. Matthew 1:5 says, “Salmon, the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab” (Matt. 1:5). Not only was Jesus a descendant of Rahab, but Rahab is one of the few women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus that was traced mainly by male figures. Rahab's previous identity given to her by the world held no match to the identity that God gave her as an influential woman, not only in the capture of the promised land but in the story of Jesus. Rahab had a greater purpose than the world had given her because of God, and that set her free.

### *The Samaritan Woman's Identity*

Not only does God give women a greater identity, proven in the Old Testament, but Jesus' interactions in the New Testament give more insight into a woman's value and identity. John 4 shows a picture of a specific incident where Jesus meets an unlikely woman and changes not only her identity but the town's identity. John 4 sets the scene with Jesus walking through a town in Samaria, stopping at a well around noon as a woman was going to draw water. Based on the setting, some conclusions can be made about this woman's identity. First, scripture calls her a Samaritan woman. For Jews, it would be important for them to know that this woman was from Samaria because “Jews do not associate with Samaritans” (John 4:9). Jews viewed Samaritans as mixed blood from an impure race, those less than them. It is also essential to state the obvious: this Samaritan was female. Men of this day would not approach a woman standing alone, let alone a Jewish man approaching a Samaritan woman. This woman came to draw water around noon, the hottest part of the day when the least number of people would be present. This suggests that she may be avoiding interacting with her community for certain reasons, possibly indicating shame or rejection.

At this point, this woman's identity was defined by her gender, ethnicity, and shame. The story picks up this as Jesus strikes up a conversation with her: "When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?'" (John 4:7). Again, a Jewish man never would have approached a Samaritan woman or acknowledged her presence, let alone spoken to her. Questions would be raised at this point: why was Jesus walking through Samaria, and why did He stop to talk to this woman? The woman responds with a question back to Jesus, one with an emphasis on gender: "The Samaritan woman said to him, 'You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?' (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)" (John 4:9). According to *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, "Like Greek, all Semitic languages are highly inflected. A *Shamari* is a male Samaritan, while a *Shamiriyah* is a female Samaritan. As she addresses Jesus, the woman asks, 'Why are you, a Jewish male talking to me, a woman, a Samaritan woman?' The extra verbiage focuses on her gender."<sup>51</sup> Their conversation was a particularly long, full of questions as the woman did not understand who this man was speaking to her. Her identity given by the world develops as Jesus asks a question about her husband, to which He already knows that she has had multiple husbands. This is another indicator of the identity of shame she was living in, and Jesus recognized that in her.

As the woman and Jesus continued to talk, she started gaining insight into who He truly was: "The woman said, 'I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.' Then Jesus declared, 'I, the one speaking to you—I am he'" (John 4:25-26). At this moment, the woman was transformed with the knowledge of Jesus as Savior. The One who told her everything she had ever done. The One who asked her for a drink of water but wanted to give her living water. This One spoke to her, which restored her honor and offered her salvation,

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<sup>51</sup> Kenneth Ewing Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (SPCK, 2008), 205.

which gave her value. No longer were sinful men, the world, or herself determining her identity, but this one Man, the world's Savior, gave her a new and true identity. Like Hagar, an encounter with the living God changed everything about her and her identity. And how can that conclusion be made? Scripture says, "then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah" (John 4:28-29)? The woman immediately went to the people she once avoided exclaiming how Jesus had transformed her.

The woman's life was changed, and it was evident to her community. The townspeople believed in Jesus because of the woman and went to find Him for themselves. Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan woman was revolutionary: "The new movement, centered on Jesus [and not the law], elevates the position of all women. Jesus talks directly to the Samaritan woman... She becomes an evangelist to her community and foreshadows the women who witness to the men regarding the resurrection."<sup>52</sup> At the beginning of the conversation, the woman focused on the law and the racial barrier. Jesus shattered that gender barrier through this conversation: "A Samaritan woman and her community are sought out and welcomed by Jesus. Ancient racial, theological, and historical barriers are breached in the process. His message and his community are for all."<sup>53</sup> Not only did Jesus break gender barriers, but He completely transformed the woman's identity. No longer did she have to believe that she was dirty and full of shame, but she was considered worthy of being encountered by the living Messiah. And she responded with praise and evangelism.

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<sup>52</sup> Kenneth Ewing Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (SPCK, 2008), 215.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 216.



### *The Lady Not for Stoning's Identity*

John 8 begins with the story of religious leaders catching a woman in adultery. They brought her to Jesus to ask what to do, though they had ill intent and were trying to trap Jesus. Though this story is about religious leaders testing Jesus, the leaders made it a gender issue as well: "How do religious professionals catch a woman in the act of adultery? Furthermore, adultery is rather difficult to do alone, and if she was caught 'in the act,' her partner was seen and thereby identified. The law dictated that both should be stoned (Lev 20:10). Where was the man? And why did they not arrest both if they were so zealous for the law?"<sup>54</sup> This passage begs the question of Jesus' view of women because a woman was singled out. Will He stone her according to the law but be seen as cruel and merciless? Is He going to set her free but break the law? The religious leaders wanted to publicly embarrass this woman whose identity was one of sin and shame, as well as test Jesus.

Jesus' response was revolutionary and a good insight into how He views not only women but sin: "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). The accusers started to leave one by one until no one was left: "Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, sir,' she said. 'Then neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin'" (John 8:10-11). This response gives insight into the identity Jesus gives women based on His character: "she knows that Jesus' opponents will be back with a bigger stick and that Jesus is in the process of getting hurt because of what he is doing for her. She is the recipient of a costly demonstration of

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<sup>54</sup> Kenneth Ewing Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (SPCK, 2008), 232.

unexpected love that saves her life. Jesus demonstrates the life-changing power of costly love.”<sup>55</sup> Jesus gives this woman compassion and costly love, which starkly contrasts what the world has been giving her. There is no scripture indicating what happens with that woman, but this public act of forgiveness could not have helped but change the way she saw herself: “The story displays the compassion of Jesus tellingly. The woman’s sin in no way diminished his willingness to get hurt to save her. For Jesus, a woman who had violated the sexual code was not a person to reject instinctively. As Gary Burge has aptly stated, “Jesus had different reflexes.”<sup>56</sup> These reflexes were rooted in the identity Jesus gave women and were reflected in the way He treated women.

### *Mary of Bethany’s Identity*

Jesus’s restoration of identity was not just for suffering women. He gave identity to all women, even His friends. Mary of Bethany is mentioned multiple times in the New Testament and is known to have been one of Jesus’ friends. The identity of Mary before her encounters with Jesus is not clear, but the identity given to her by Jesus and the identity that she chooses to believe is clear. Luke 10:38-42 mentions Mary first, stating she was sitting at Jesus’ feet. Mary was listening to what He said, but her sister Martha was distracted by preparations. After Martha complains that Mary is not helping, Jesus replies with an affirmation of Mary’s actions that flow from her identity: ““Martha, Martha, ’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her’” (Luke 10:41-42). A woman’s role in this period was in the home. It would have been her job to prepare for guests. So why was Mary sitting at a man’s feet? She sat there because she knew who that man was and who she was because of the man. She did

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<sup>55</sup> Kenneth Ewing Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (SPCK, 2008), 237.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

not believe her identity came from preparing food and cleaning the house. She did not believe her identity was in her role. She believed, because of Jesus, that her identity was much deeper than that and that the One who gave her that secure identity was standing right in front of her, so where else would she want to be? Sometime later, as Jesus' time on earth was ending, He raised Mary's brother Lazarus from the dead. At a dinner party, Mary poured expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. Logically, this action did not make sense to the people who were around. The perfume was expensive, Judas was trying to take the money, and Martha was serving Jesus. But again, Mary was sitting with Jesus, unconcerned about things around her and only focused on Him. This man must have meant something to Mary for her to love Him that much. Jesus did not hold her to the identity that the world would have given her based on her value in her role in the home. Jesus set her free from an earthly identity by being her Lord, best friend, and everything she sought and desired. She was set free by sitting in the presence of Jesus, and Jesus noted that "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42).

### **Root of the Biblical Identity of Women**

What is the root of the identity Jesus gives women? Why does He act in this compassionate, freeing way toward women, and where does that come from?

#### ***Word Study***

Genesis 1:27-28 says, "So God created mankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" God gave men and women an identity: "in His own image" (Gen 1:27). Men and women were created in the image of God, and

this is their fundamental identity. There is not space to dive into exactly what “in His own image” means, but in essence, humans reflect God unlike any other part of creation does in moral, intellectual, and spiritual nature. But why did God give a woman this identity, and where did it come from? The foundation for this identity was mentioned in just words before God created it. Because God created, God can give identity. The creator of something is the one to determine who it is to distinguish it from other creations. The definition of identity is “condition or character as to who a person or what a thing is; the qualities, beliefs, that distinguish a person or thing.”<sup>57</sup> The creator had a desire. The creator had the vision to see that desire come to life. The creator created every small part to make the creation. The creator named the creation. The creator gave purpose to the creation based on the purpose for creating. The creator had a desire and a vision for this creation and gave it its name and purpose. The creator, therefore, gives the creation identity. The creator determines who the creation is no matter what any outside force says that the creation is. No outside force can determine the value or identity of a creation because it was not the one that created it. The outside force did not desire this creation or a vision for it. The outside force does not know the time it took to create or all the small inside parts that make up the creation. But the creator does. So, the creator gives the identity, which is how God determines man’s and woman’s identities. Genesis 2:22-23 says, “Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; so shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man” (Gen 2:22-23). God established the identity of man and woman first as made in His image and then gave roles shown in Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 2:22-23. Roles are valuable

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<sup>57</sup> “Identity Definition & Meaning,” *Dictionary.com* (Dictionary.com, n.d.), accessed January 31, 2023, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/identity>.

for men and women but are not their identity. Roles stem from identity, and God gives women an identity that sets them free. The Hebrew word for woman, wife, or female is *iššâ*.<sup>58</sup> This word occurs 383 times in 352 verses, and this only includes the word woman, not including any of the women named. God did not leave women out of scripture. He gives direct purpose and an eternal identity to women that the world cannot give or take away.

### ***Feminine Language***

Not only does God give women an identity beyond any that the world could give them, but the Creator God also takes on feminine language in parts of scripture to describe Himself. This exemplifies the value of women even further. There are many examples of feminine language describing God. Hosea 11:3-4 describes God as a mother when it says, “It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them, I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them” (Hosea 11:3-4). In Matthew 23:37, Jesus uses an illustration to describe Himself as a mother hen: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing” (Matt. 23:37). God is also described as woman or mother in passages such as Hosea 13:8, Deuteronomy 31:11-12, Deuteronomy 32:18, Isaiah 66:13, Isaiah 49:15, Isaiah 42:14, Psalm 131:2, Psalm 123:2-3, Luke 13:24, and more. The book of Proverbs presents wisdom as a woman, using the Greek word *Sophia* meaning wisdom.<sup>59</sup> The word *Yahweh* even has feminine and masculine parts. *Yah*

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<sup>58</sup> “H802 - 'Iššâ - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (ESV),” *Blue Letter Bible*, accessed January 31, 2023, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h802/esv/wlc/0-1/>.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

is feminine, while *weh* is masculine.<sup>60</sup> The characteristics that distinguish women from men do not place women underneath men. They only go to reflect God and His image in a fuller picture.

### **Biblical Identity of Women**

Many scriptures speak to women's identity, but all identity starts with this foundational truth: God created woman in His image with purpose. He sent His Son Jesus to save all women and men to reunite them with Himself out of pure love. God's compassion and mercy are shown through Creation and through Jesus, marking a woman's identity. God's sacrifice of His only Son for all women is a picture of the identity women hold in the eyes of God. They are worth everything to Him. This identity is internal. It cannot be taken from women if they choose to believe it and live in it. There are statements in scripture surrounding a woman's role that are debated in different denominations and belief systems. Still, the foundation of a woman's identity is secure and not up for debate.

### **Invitation and Conclusions**

Based on the examples in scripture, God gives women a new identity based on His identity as the Creator. God's identity sets women free from the identity of the world. He gives them the identity of His image, which translates throughout the entirety of scripture to how God sees women today: "The Gospel authors/editors selected and presented stories from and about Jesus that continued Jesus' elevation of women to a place of equality with men in the community he created."<sup>61</sup> This is why the inclusion of women in scripture is revolutionary: it does not make sense compared to how the secular world views women. However, the inclusion of women offers

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<sup>60</sup> "H802 - 'Iššâ - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (ESV)," *Blue Letter Bible*, accessed January 31, 2023, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h802/esv/wlc/0-1/>.

<sup>61</sup> Kenneth Ewing Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (SPCK, 2008), 237.

an invitation. An invitation to come to Jesus to find value, identity, and purpose that the world cannot give. This identity is internal, unlike the identity that the world gives, which is external. It is not about what a woman can do but who she is because of her Creator.

### **Practical Application for Women in Different Structures**

What would it mean for women to be freed from oppression and feminism? Is that even possible? What would it look like if the gospel transformed women in these systems? How does the gospel get to these women? There are so many questions with so many answers. These questions do not have a correct answer, and they certainly do not have an easy answer, but the gospel can break through systems and change lives, whether the systems in place can be changed or not. Oppression and feminism are ideas that are so deeply ingrained that it would be improbable to eradicate them instantly. However, the gospel transforming the lives of women within these systems is how freedom wins.

### **Freedom for Women in Oppression**

In structures that do not change, such as Islamic law in the Middle East, how can women understand their inherent value given by their Creator? It must start with sharing the gospel. Practically, Saudi Arabia is dangerous ground for the gospel. But scripture also shows that in places of great persecution come great movements of Jesus. If a woman were to become a follower of Jesus in Saudi Arabia, she would risk everything, so women followers of Jesus tend to stay somewhat secretive.<sup>62</sup> If they are not secretive, they first risk persecution and excommunication by their Muslim family.<sup>63</sup> Excommunication from their family causes women to

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<sup>62</sup> “Five Things Following Jesus Could Cost You... | Open Doors Youth,” Open Doors Youth, last modified 2023, accessed January 21, 2023, <https://opendoorsyouth.org/article/five-things-following-jesus-could-cost-you/>, 1.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 2.

risk losing their children, home, and life.<sup>64</sup> Honor killing in Saudi Arabia is illegal; however, the consequences for leaving Islam could result in death.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, death because of following Jesus is not uncommon. Women can be freed from this oppressive structure by moving out of an Islamic state to the West. There are possible ways to work at changing the systems, but it should be done by leadership through politics.<sup>66</sup> For example, “educational reforms have passed through several stages over recent decades, including the introduction of government scholarships and Ministry of Education programs to encourage female students to study a range of in-demand and specialized subjects.”<sup>67</sup> These programs allow women to gain higher education and leadership, giving them a better chance of equality in Saudi Arabia. These programs enable women to travel to the United States to attend school, which introduces them to a way of thinking about women that is different than what Islam teaches. The number of scholarships for women continues to grow, which is a step for Saudi women that has been implemented through the government, but there is still a large gap between women and men.<sup>68</sup> Because Islam and the male guardianship system are implemented by the government, the government would have to change if the system were to be changed. The United States could get involved with the leadership of Saudi Arabia or the Middle East as a whole and work to implement help for women practically, such as providing

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<sup>64</sup> “Five Things Following Jesus Could Cost You... | Open Doors Youth,” Open Doors Youth, last modified 2023, accessed January 21, 2023, <https://opendoorsyouth.org/article/five-things-following-jesus-could-cost-you/>, 2.

<sup>65</sup> “Saudi Arabia - United States Department of State,” U.S. Department of State, last modified June 2, 2022, accessed January 24, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/saudi-arabia/>, 3.

<sup>66</sup> “Five Things Following Jesus Could Cost You... | Open Doors Youth,” Open Doors Youth, last modified 2023, accessed January 21, 2023, <https://opendoorsyouth.org/article/five-things-following-jesus-could-cost-you/>, 2.

<sup>67</sup> Nada Hameed, “How Higher Education Bolstered Women’s Empowerment in Saudi Arabia,” *Arab News* (March 7, 2022), accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2038011/saudi-arabia>, 3.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*



access to equal education. However, the gospel can still radically transform women within these systems. There is a desperate urgency to help women escape these structures; however, she does not need liberation or western standards as much as she needs the gospel to save her soul.

The first question that needs to be asked and understood before sharing the gospel with any Muslim woman in Saudi Arabia is how to support her. Again, women who follow Jesus risk their lives, children, home, and anything else they care about. There must be a plan to help a woman escape safely once she follows Jesus or plans to give her a secure community of believers to support her staying in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia is a closed country regarding the gospel, so the gospel will have to arrive in secret. Saudi Arabia is in the 10/40 window, meaning the area between 10 degrees north and 40 degrees north latitude.<sup>69</sup> This rectangle holds North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, where about 62% of the population is unreached.<sup>70</sup> The 10/40 window not only keeps the most unreached people groups in the world but contains some of the most closed-off countries to the gospel, including Saudi Arabia.<sup>71</sup> Those facts have led to a small number of missionaries being sent and a renewed focus on this area in recent years.<sup>72</sup> These people in the 10/40 window, particularly women in Saudi Arabia, need Jesus. Empowering local churches to send missionaries and fund secret services can be an effective way to get the gospel inside the country and help empower underground movements that are already happening. Missionaries can be sent

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<sup>69</sup> “Saudi Arabia - United States Department of State,” U.S. Department of State, last modified June 2, 2022, accessed January 24, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/saudi-arabia/>, 1.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 10.

to businesses, schools, or humanitarian positions such as social work with refugees as avenues for the gospel. These ways of getting the gospel to Saudi Arabia are not quick, easy, or safe. It takes sacrifice from the global church. It takes building relationships, which is a process that requires time. Relationships are the primary way the gospel can be shared effectively with Saudi women.<sup>73</sup> Saudi women may even spark conversations themselves when they notice actions that seem contrary to how women should act. They will be shocked when they see that a woman works not only with honor toward God or other people but with love, kindness, and fairness.<sup>74</sup> Curiosity will be sparked as they notice behavior different from a typical view of female Christians. Another important aspect of sharing the gospel with Saudi women is that a woman, if possible, should be the one to build a relationship. Gender barriers are broad and deep, as women and men do not interact in public unless they are married.<sup>75</sup> However, there are different ways a female follower of Jesus can present the gospel to a Saudi woman that can be effective and will speak to their identity, the root of oppression.

When the time comes to mention the name of Jesus to Saudi women, Christians should ask questions about what that Saudi woman believes to understand and to build trust with her. After a relationship begins, Saudi women can be taken to the beginning of scripture to learn about freedom from being created in God's image. This fact contradicts what they have been taught their whole lives, so a follower of Jesus must live this freedom out to help a Saudi woman understand. The book of Matthew is then a good place to start because it includes the genealogy

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<sup>73</sup> Tiffany Jothen, "How Can You Share the Gospel with Muslims?," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, last modified April 14, 2021, accessed January 24, 2023, <https://billygraham.org/story/how-can-you-share-the-gospel-with-muslims/>, 23.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>75</sup> Kayla Craigmile, "The Connection: Gender Segregation and Language Formation in Saudi Arabia," *Live Ideas Undergraduate Primary Text Journal* (September 4, 2019), accessed January 24, 2023, [https://www.equalitynow.org/ending\\_male\\_guardianship\\_in\\_saudi\\_arabia/](https://www.equalitynow.org/ending_male_guardianship_in_saudi_arabia/), 7.

of Jesus, as women are included, and a less complicated gospel is presented. Not only will the genealogy show the importance of women in God's eyes, but it will speak to the strong influence and value of family and generations that Muslims hold. This fact will build a bridge with the Saudi woman to where she feels understood and may even captivate her attention. The theme in sharing the gospel with these women is freedom. It understands their inherent value from the Creator God, which sets them free from the influence of oppressive systems, even if practically they cannot escape. Instead of being trapped by the culture's standards, they will have a greater purpose for the Kingdom of God, which can set them free. Oppression comes from the law; however, women in Saudi Arabia can be transformed by Jesus as He saves their souls and gives them an identity rooted in the fact that they are a daughter of God, not based on what they can do. Many more points should be learned and implemented before sharing the Gospel with Saudi women when it comes to cultural barriers and theology differences; however, the issues mentioned are fundamental.

### **Freedom for Women in Feminism**

Can women be set free from a feminist structure? Where do they feel free of the need to prove themselves based on their role or ability to beat a man? The answer to their freedom lies in Jesus, a man different than any man they have ever met, as He is the God who loves them. Feminists need the gospel just like the women facing oppression. To reach them, followers of Jesus first must understand feminist thought. One feminist converter writes, "It burns! It burns! There follows a searingly painful period during which all you can see is gender inequality and sexism, where once there was a meritocracy and cheeky banter. You feel powerless. You can't

shut up about it. No one invites you to dinner parties.”<sup>76</sup> This is an attitude many feminists can adopt, as radical feminists can practice an “us against them” mentality. Gazing at the issue with radical feminist glasses, though, it can be understood. They feel as though they have suffered since the beginning of time because of their gender and that nothing has been done to stop the suffering. So they can carry anger. They can feel like the world owes them. Their ideas can be radical, but many also exhibit a “passionate concern for justice, access to education and healthcare, a commitment to the value of womanhood, and a fight against sexual abuse.”<sup>77</sup>

Radical feminists are passionate, which is where gospel sharing can start: common ground. All passions mentioned are good things to fight for and which Jesus had a heart for, so this is where common ground can be found.

Paul visits Athens in Acts 17, a city marked by idol worship. He chose to condemn the city because of its idolatry; however, he chose something different. Condemnation from Christians has happened in the past and is influential in why Christians and feminists are so primarily separated. However, “Paul found common ground and started where the Athenians were. He then filled in the gaps before he called them to repentance.”<sup>78</sup> Paul chose to grieve for them. If followers of Jesus were to start preaching against feminist ideas and attacking them as people, feminists would instantly turn away. Starting with common ground will show that Christianity and Feminism are passionate about similar ideas. Though having a different root, “feminism recognizes the value of women; so does the gospel. Feminism sees the horror of

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<sup>76</sup>Karen Soole, “Principles for Reaching Feminists with the Gospel,” *A Passion for Life*, last modified October 21, 2021, accessed November 22, 2022, <https://www.apassionforlife.org.uk/mission-ideas/principles-for-reaching-feminists-with-the-gospel/>, 3.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

abuse; God hates injustice, and the Bible explains its origins. Feminism seeks better lives for women; Jesus brings life and reconciliation with God.”<sup>79</sup> Common ground is an important place to start, but pointing out the truths of Jesus in scripture should follow because feminists can have a skewed understanding based on personal pain or opinion. The shared gospel must address Jesus as the Healer, the Just, and the Creator to give them an accurate view of how Jesus views women. Some Feminists see Christian teaching on women as one that keeps in oppression instead of liberation. They see single women as ostracized and having children as the ultimate goal. They see women’s purpose in marriage as providing sexual fulfillment to their husbands. They think that women are treated as less than men and therefore do not have the same value. These ideas have been taught in some Christian circles, and part of the fault falls on churches.

Relationships are how the gospel will most effectively reach people who adhere to radical feminism. Without a relationship, the truth will not be received as well. To begin this relationship, followers of Jesus must listen before they speak to give space for trust. Again, their story matters. Their pain matters. Their past matters. Jesus cares about them, so to reach radical feminists with the gospel, followers of Jesus must care about them as Jesus did. It takes empathy with their concerns and questions about Jesus and the people who follow Him. Radical feminists have likely met someone who claims to be Christian but has hurt them, which has turned them away from Jesus. Empathy is essential in starting a relationship. Topics like abortion, abuse, and women’s leadership may emerge. Abuse is real and has been exposed inside churches, seen in the #ChurchToo movement.<sup>80</sup> These issues should not be diminished, and women should be

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<sup>79</sup> Karen Soole, “Principles for Reaching Feminists with the Gospel,” A Passion for Life, last modified October 21, 2021, accessed November 22, 2022, <https://www.apassionforlife.org.uk/mission-ideas/principles-for-reaching-feminists-with-the-gospel/>, 11.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 13.

pointed to greater help, like counseling if they are wrestling with these things. Allowing them to ask questions without straight answers can make them feel heard. Practicing love and kindness can make them feel seen. The sin of the body of Christ that has failed women should be grieved, and it is okay to acknowledge that. This should then point them to the One who will never hurt them, the One who cares for the women they interact with shown in scripture.

Practically in scripture, Jesus and creation are an excellent place to start. Creation should be addressed first as man and woman were made in the image of God, as equal before God's eyes. Reading through the Gospels will show Jesus' view of women. The Gospels allow scripture to speak for itself, and it is apparent in the way that Jesus views women in those stories. These two parts of scripture should be addressed before church practice or beliefs are addressed: "we need to emphasize both the creation and fall and then point to Jesus, who fills the gap that feminism cannot. Politics and activism have their place, but only Jesus will bring complete reconciliation."<sup>81</sup> Jesus is the answer to everything feminists have been searching for:

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the cradle and last at the cross. They had never known a Man like this Man—there had never been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered, or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them... who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no ace to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious.<sup>82</sup>

The identity Jesus gives women can transform feminism through relationships. Jesus offers feminists something the world cannot give them: an internal identity with no need to prove

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<sup>81</sup> Karen Soole, "Principles for Reaching Feminists with the Gospel," *A Passion for Life*, last modified October 21, 2021, accessed November 22, 2022, <https://www.apassionforlife.org.uk/mission-ideas/principles-for-reaching-feminists-with-the-gospel/>, 13.

<sup>82</sup> Justin Taylor, "Women: 'First at the Cradle and Last at the Cross,'" *The Gospel Coalition*, last modified July 9, 2013, accessed January 27, 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/dorothy-sayers/>, 1.

themselves with their body or role. They are completely loved by Him, and He gives them a purpose greater than having to fight to get ahead.

### **Conclusion**

The question of a woman's identity has been sought after in systems of oppression and feminism, neither one satisfying women because neither one offers women a secure, internal identity. Radical Feminism and oppression limit women to what they can do, but this is not freedom. From the beginning of creation, God gives women the identity of being made in His image. This identity is unchanging and secure because the Creator placed this upon them. If a woman were to choose to believe this identity and walk in it, the gospel could transform these systems and the women in them. The world's identity locks women in chains of striving, but God's identity sets women free.

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