

"What a treasure!"—LYSA TERKEURST
New York Times bestselling author, president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

A Taste Test of *The Day I Met Jesus*

THE DAY I MET JESUS

The Revealing Diaries of
Five Women from the Gospels

FRANK VIOLA *and* MARY DEMUTH

ENDORSEMENTS FOR

The Day I Met Jesus

“Jesus, from the very beginning, has been ‘good news for women.’ Perhaps that news has rarely been needed more clearly than in our day. One reads of His encounters with the women described in this book with a sense of wonder that these interactions took place two thousand years ago. He is good news for women still.”

—**John Ortberg**, pastor; author of *Who Is This Man?*

“What a treasure this diary-style book is! This impactful message focuses on five broken women in the Bible and their life-changing encounters with Jesus. The way Mary and Frank portray their stories will help any woman who has experienced heartbreak, loneliness, and rejection step right into the extravagant grace and love of Jesus.”

—**Lysa TerKeurst**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Best Yes*;
president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

“Mary and Frank provide a fresh look at biblical women that breathes life, color, and hue into these familiar stories. If you want to better understand the richness of biblical accounts in the context of first-century history, this is a book you won’t want to miss.”

—**Margaret Feinberg**, author of *Fight Back with Joy* and *Wonderstruck*

“*The Day I Met Jesus* is a refreshing look at five women in the Gospels, telling their stories in a way that brings them to life but at the same time based on careful research into the real world in which they lived. **I thoroughly enjoyed this book and could not put it down. Through the eyes of women whose lives Jesus touched, this book invites us to see Jesus more deeply. It ministered to broken places in my own heart.**”

—**Craig Keener**, professor of New Testament, Asbury Theological Seminary

“Step into the first century, as your senses and imagination are engaged in Mary DeMuth’s masterful biblical narrative, deftly exploring the hearts and minds of five women who met the Savior. Then Frank Viola brings his own gifts to the page, opening the Scriptures to help us understand each account more fully. Together, their voices sing of the beauty of Christ and the redemption He offers. ***The Day I Met Jesus* is truly a wonderful book.**”

—**Liz Curtis Higgs**, bestselling author of *Bad Girls of the Bible*



“We all long to lift the veil of history and catch a glimpse of the real story—the one that makes our hearts pound, our faith grow, and our lives change. That’s exactly what Frank Viola and Mary DeMuth offer in this compelling book. You will never look at Scripture or God’s work in your own heart the same way again after you close the final page.”

—**Holley Gerth**, author of *You’re Already Amazing* and *You’re Made for a God-Sized Dream*

“Elegant, stimulating, rewarding, this probe into Jesus’ relationship with women packages the best of biblical scholarship and theology in the spellbinding wraps of story-telling.”

—**Leonard Sweet**, bestselling author; professor (Drew University, George Fox University); chief contributor to sermons.com

“Story. History. His-Story. This book has all of these and immediately gripped my heart.

I held my breath as I read about women who encountered Jesus in their day.

I absolutely love books that compel me to love Jesus more. Together, Frank Viola and Mary DeMuth created a masterful biblical narrative that reminds us once again how Jesus feels about the sinner who desperately needs saving. He loves us. He came to save us.

Enjoy every page of this book. You’ll be glad you did.”

—**Susie Larson**, radio host; national speaker; author of *Your Beautiful Purpose*

“Many Christians fail to experience the full power of the Bible’s stories because they never learned how to imaginatively ‘get inside’ the lives of biblical characters to make them come alive. I don’t know of any book that better helps readers do this than *The Day I Met Jesus*. Combining imaginative creativity, historical scholarship, and great story-telling, Viola and DeMuth help readers enter into the lives of five women in the Gospels to experience Jesus from their perspective. And by this means, they help readers deepen their own understanding of, and love for, Jesus. After reading this poignant and gripping book, you won’t view these five women, Jesus, or yourself the same way!”

—**Greg Boyd**, pastor; author of *Benefit of the Doubt*, *Present Perfect*, and *The Myth of a Christian Nation*

“*The Day I Met Jesus* by Frank Viola and Mary DeMuth is destined to be a classic. Five exquisitely imaginative stories of women from the Gospels describe lives turned upside down by their encounters with Jesus. The book reveals the beauty of our Savior—

His character, His compassion, His humility, His humanity, and His divinity.

This gem of a book will move you, inspire you, and very likely, set you free.”

—**Felicity Dale**, blogger; author of *The Black Swan Effect: A Response to Gender Hierarchy in the Church*



“In *The Day I Met Jesus*, Frank and Mary demonstrate lucid insight into the balanced, candid, focused, tender, and penetrating manner of our Master—Jesus the Christ. See again the Savior who was God and Man embodied to show and transform us by His unpretentious holiness, empowering authenticity—without scorn or condemnation, transmitting love’s purity, life’s vitality, and hope’s eternity. I commend the authors and this book to you: both will enrich and enlarge your thoughts and your life.”

—**Pastor Jack W. Hayford**, founder of The King’s University

“The women you’ve always read about. Now, in real life. This fresh new take on timeless stories of the Bible’s fiercest heroines will leave you inspired, empowered, and thrilled for more. Thank you, DeMuth and Viola, for this gift to women everywhere.”

—**Claire Diaz-Ortiz**, Silicon Valley innovator; author; blogger at ClaireDiazOrtiz.com

“*The Day I Met Jesus* bears the souls of five familiar women from Scripture and the deep significance of their personal encounters with Jesus. Frank Viola and Mary DeMuth have crafted a beautiful account of these women’s stories with a rawness that punctuates the significance of our Savior’s grace. May we be so moved to experience the love, joy, hope, and grace of the Jesus portrayed in these pages.”

—**Jenni Catron**, church leader; author of *CLOUT: Discover and Unleash Your God-Given Influence*

“Through the stories of five unique women from the Gospels, Frank Viola and Mary DeMuth masterfully reveal the truth of Jesus in a riveting, breathtaking way. Each story captivantly invites you on a journey through pain, rejection, and brokenness and leads you right into the heart of Jesus as He meets each woman in an intimately restorative and loving way, as only Jesus can. This book will minister to the broken places in your heart and leave you longing to know Jesus more deeply.”

—**Derwin L. Gray**, lead pastor of Transformation Church; author of *Limitless Life: You Are More Than Your Past When God Holds Your Future*

“For each of us, the day we met Jesus is to be celebrated, held in awe, memorized, and memorialized. In *The Day I Met Jesus*, Frank and Mary have enabled us to do just that alongside five women of biblical fame. Their stories are beautifully framed, permitting us to know them and walk beside them as they meet this Man and are forgiven, set free, transformed by His love and grace. And then we are taken deep into the Scriptures and our own hearts to see how Jesus wants to forgive us and set us free and, yes, transform us. You will want to read this book.”

—**Judy Douglass**, author of *Letters to My Children: Secrets of Success*; wife and partner of Steve Douglass, president of Cru



“Everyone loves an amazing true-life story: one kissed with hope and redemption and love. *The Day I Met Jesus* is a book of such things. Smartly written and personally inspiring, Viola and DeMuth hit the mark on the beautiful lives of broken women who met the God who changed everything. Their powerful stories, written from a first-person perspective, remind me of my own brokenness and the God who rescued me too. I am grateful for this book, and I am moved.”

—**Lisa Whittle**, author of *{w}hole* and *I Want God*

“I thought I knew the women in these stories well, but in this beautiful book I met each one in a fresh, personal, and profound way. The life-changing grace and mercy Christ extended to these our sisters so long ago is here right now for you and for me.”

—**Sheila Walsh**, author of *The Storm Inside*

“It’s one thing to skim a story about women meeting Jesus; it’s another one to dive deeply into their hearts. *The Day I Met Jesus* shines the light on desperate lives and Jesus’ powerful intervention. These stories made me think about my own transformation by the One I love. If you want to love Jesus more, this is the book for you. Scholarly and accurate, but also tender and beckoning, it’s a book you won’t want to miss!”

—**Tricia Goyer**, author of 45 books, including *One Year of Amish Peace*

“Inventive, engaging, compelling, and filled with freedom, this book will help you see the wonder of our Jesus more clearly. Here is very simply the truth about Jesus and His relationship with women: He loved us. What a powerful truth for women in the world today! Jesus is always the hero of the story. Through this book, we see and know that He is the hero of our stories too.”

—**Sarah Bessey**, author of *Jesus Feminist*



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Five Women from the Gospels



FRANK VIOLA *and* MARY DEMUTH



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Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today,
and forever.

—Hebrews 13:8 NLT

Introducing Five Amazing Encounters

Then the two from Emmaus told their story of how Jesus had appeared to them as they were walking along the road, and how they had recognized him as he was breaking the bread.

—Luke 24:35 NLT

In Luke 24, the author tells an incredible story about the risen Christ. It goes something like this.

It's a Sunday evening in AD 30. Earlier that morning the greatest historical event known to humankind occurred: *Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead.*

As the sun begins to set, two disciples of Jesus walk from Jerusalem to the town of Emmaus. They are husband and wife. Cleopas and his wife Mary.¹

This couple has been following Jesus for a number of years. Perplexed and saddened, they had expected Jesus

to save Israel from pagan domination. But instead, the Romans put the young prophet to death in the most violent way. Hanging from a cross with the blood of God and man dripping to the earth. A crown of thorns replaced what should have been a crown of imperial glory.

As Cleopas and Mary walk along the road to Emmaus, a mysterious stranger joins them. The stranger inquires about their conversation. They respond, “We followed a prophet who we thought was the Messiah. We hoped that He was the One who would redeem Israel. But He can’t be the Messiah because He was put to death on a cross.”

This mysterious stranger is Jesus, the risen Lord. But they do not recognize Him.

Fully aware that they do not know who He is, Jesus strikes up a conversation with the couple, and in so doing He reframes the entire Old Testament story. He doesn’t deviate from the scriptural narrative, but He tells the story anew and afresh. He adds Technicolor to the black-and-white way they had heard the story all their lives.

Jesus essentially says, “You’ve not understood the story correctly. You’ve been reading your Bible through the wrong end of the lens.”²

Opened Eyes and Burning Hearts

So beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, Jesus retells the narrative. As He unfolds the story, the “why” of Jesus’ death suddenly dawns on them and their hearts begin to burn.

Still captivated, Mary and Cleopas invite this intriguing stranger for dinner, and He accepts.

As He reclines at table, the Lord breaks bread, blesses it, and passes it on to them. Immediately, their eyes are opened. They recognize this stranger is no stranger at all. It is the risen Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, the One whom they have been following all along.

Luke writes, “Their eyes were opened and they knew.”

This sentence echoes Genesis 3, when another couple ate a different kind of food and “their eyes were opened and they knew.”³

The message is clear: In His resurrection, the Lord Jesus Christ has reversed the fall of man and ushered in a new creation. What once seemed lost is now found. That which is broken beyond repair is restored to life. Dead dreams became resurrected hope—all because of Jesus’ raucous resurrection.

Encountering Jesus Today

Fast-forward to the present.

The world is full of people who walk to and fro, disappointed, disheartened, and perplexed.

Most Westerners have heard a diluted version of the gospel. In fact, they have heard the story incorrectly. The biblical story has been stripped, added to, and complicated. For countless Christians, the story of Scripture has become all too familiar. It lacks color, redemption, and life.

The need of the hour, then, is to tell the story differently . . .

To tell it differently to those who don’t know Jesus.

To tell it differently to the broken and downcast.

To tell it differently to the church.

To tell it differently to one another.

Out of His infinite mercy, we both have experienced Jesus on the road to Emmaus, and it has caused us to exclaim a holy “aha” as we have encountered His outrageous love.

Jesus is a beautiful Revolutionary—not overturning governments, but conquering hearts and making them burn with joy.

The Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich said it best when he wrote, “Neither revolution nor reformation can ultimately change a society, rather you must tell a new powerful tale, one so persuasive that it sweeps away the old myths and becomes the preferred story. . . . If you want to change a society, then you have to tell an alternative story.”

We hope this little book ushers in that kind of change in your heart, your home, and your life.

1



Diary of a Woman Caught in Adultery

I wanted to keep my story to myself, cradle it like a mother caresses a baby in the secret place of the night, but today I remembered that some stories cry their way to the streets. I must have become brazen, or far too graced in the months following my encounter. Because I dared to approach the temple in search of something. Someone.

Jesus, the One who liberated me from shame, met His demise at the hands of both Jew and Roman. Rumors now flew of Him walking the streets of this earth. A ghost perhaps? A wishful hope? After all, many men resembled the simple carpenter from Nazareth. The hope I nurtured felt ragged, and yet the hand of God compelled me to the street today, winding through dusty roads, until I could

almost taste the sacrifices on my tongue. As I paced back and forth, afraid to mount the hill leading to the place of worship, I rehashed the story in my mind with each step I took.

That story began with a man, and it ended with a Man. But oh the difference in between the two. One stole my life; the other offered it back.

Eleazar had struck me across the face that morning. I felt the sting on my cheek through most of the day.

“You whorish dog!” he yelled. Loud enough for my boy, Jotham, to hear. Jotham scampered away, trying to hide in the darkened corner of our small home. If only I could make myself that small, that inconspicuous.

I readied myself for the inevitable second blow. I prayed. *Dear God, Lord of heaven's great armies, do You see me here? Alone except for Jotham whom I desperately want to protect. As Hagar named You El Roi, the God who sees, I cry out to You. I am Hagar today. Unloved. Despairing. She is me. I am her, except that I am bereaved of Your presence.*

Eleazar loomed above me, a sneer decorating his face. He held up the earthen pot containing the morning's breakfast I had scalded. Cooking is still a mystery to me.

“I have had enough of your careless ways, your utter disregard for my family, my son, my home. You are trash! You will pay, and the payment will be swift.” With that he threw the pot on the earthen floor. And it shattered across the house. I sheltered Jotham from its shards.

Eleazar laughed until his voice reverberated the walls. He struck me again in the same place. I sunk to the ground,

holding my jaw, counting my teeth with my tongue. As quickly as he hit me, he left. When he exited, I let out my breath. Had I been holding it for hours? As I gathered up the broken pottery, I realized I was like those shards of earthenware—shattered, broken at inconceivable angles, never to be remade.

I looked at my dear son. His eyes were wide and he breathed heavy. “Why can we not leave him, Mama? He will kill you someday.”

“We would be destitute, son,” I told him. “No food nor shelter. And no way to make a living. The world does not look kindly upon women who leave their husbands. Besides, he would demand you stay within his care. And I cannot let that happen.” I pulled Jotham close to myself, kissed his tousled head. *Oh dear God in heaven, I love this child.*

I hurried outside to ensure Eleazar had left. I could see him far down the pathway, speaking to Shechem, the merchant of stunning cloth who befriended me several Sabbaths ago. Eleazar’s arms gesticulated, rage-filled, and I imaged the conversation. “You cannot talk to my wife. You cannot help her, and you cannot befriend her. She is to be isolated for her insolence.”

Those were the only words he could be saying, so I sunk back into our small home, wiping away tears. Not even Shechem could rescue me.

“Why are you crying, Mama?”

I touched Jotham’s sweet boy cheek. “It is the dust of the day kicking up again. Do not worry.” I wiped my eyes

to show him, but I knew he understood my lies. He had seen so many tears in six years of life.

When my father had told me of Eleazar, my heart leapt. I did not know him as a friend. We did not grow up in the same village or run in packs as children do before they attend synagogue. But I had heard whispers about him from my friends—whispers of his stature, his charm, his intelligence, and his handsome face. And when I spied him after my father told me he chose Eleazar to be my husband, I smiled.

Ours would not be a marriage of two families as much as it would be a union of love.

And it was. For a time. Until Jotham cried his way into the world, bright-eyed and lung-strong. Eleazar's feelings shifted with the birth of our boy. I could see in the way he dismissed me that his great affection changed from loving me to holding this tiny namesake in his arms.

Odd, now in retrospect, as Eleazar does not take care of Jotham and does not teach him as a rabbi would gently lead a learner, does not swing him around on lanky limbs, does not tell him funny stories or pray for him after sundown.

No, he likes the *idea* of Jotham. He is happy to have offspring—a boy to carry on his family name. Had I birthed a girl, would he have loved me longer—in anticipation of an heir?

I gave Jotham some porridge I had hidden. My stomach rumbled.

“You have some too, Mother.”

“No, I have already eaten. It is for you.”

Jotham angled me an I-do-not-believe-you look, but ate the small amount anyway. He then grabbed his satchel and ran toward the House of the Book, our local synagogue, where he had been learning for one year now. Such a smart, smart child.

“I love you,” I said. But the Judean wind stole my words away. I sat hard on the dirt floor, cupping my face in my hands, telling myself to breathe, to feel, to live. Eleazar had stolen so much of me. I used to laugh. I once dreamed of making garments for princes and elders and dignitaries. My skills brought me praise in the market, and Shechem’s fabric made my tunics sing. This one thing brought small shreds of joy, only to have each denarius grabbed from my hand and placed in Eleazar’s purse. At least I could revel in my creations. At least that mended my heart a little.

A noise at our home’s entrance shuddered me. I looked up and then stood.

Shechem loomed there, broad shouldered, eyes smiling.

I thought of my neighbors, how their tongues would wag at this visitor. I looked around, seeing no one, which both excited and unnerved me. Where was everyone?

I wiped my face of tears, hoping he had not seen my vulnerability. “But my husband,” I said. “Just now I saw him talking to you.”

“He says a great many things,” Shechem said. “But I am a man with my own mind. I do not believe everything I hear.” He held up some breathtaking cloth, cobalt blue with pearly white swirls. “You like this?”

“But if he sees the tunics I create from your cloth, he will hurt me. I saw how he stood furious near you.”

“He will not know. You simply tell him you found another cloth merchant. It is really quite simple.” He moved toward me.

I stepped back, nerves tingling through me. Shechem had been so caring, so alert to my needs, to my story. And yet . . .

He touched my cheek, the very place where Eleazar had bruised me.

I pulled away. “No.”

He backed away, arms in the air. “Forgive me,” he said. “It is your beauty that compelled me.”

Beauty? When had Eleazar called me beautiful? I could not remember such a time. I shook my head. “I am married. I may be unhappy, but I am an honorable woman.”

“So you are. A beautiful treasure of a woman.” He noticed something on the floor, picked it up—a shard from the broken vessel. “Did he throw this at you?”

“He did not.” I answered honestly. “He threw it at the floor in anger. I burned the morning meal. I displeased him. So in a way, you could say it was my fault the pot broke.” My familiar friend, shame, slithered through me.

Like the vessel, I deserved to be broken. If only I could perform everything perfectly, to Eleazar’s standards. If I never burned the meals. If I always responded affectionately to his demanding advances. If I parented Jotham correctly so he never acted up. If the home stayed as clean as Solomon’s palace. If. If. If.

Shechem moved toward me. Held my chin gently. I did not retreat this time, though everything inside told me to run. I am Bathsheba bathing on the rooftops, and the king has sent for me. I feel helpless to resist. My loneliness and inward emptiness hold me to the ground, stifling my will to push back.

“You deserve better. You are as Queen Esther, a woman of valor.”

“I am nothing of the sort.”

“Come with me. I have a hidden place where we can be alone. No one will see us. It will be our secret. Eleazar will not find out. The world will never know.”

“But God will know. I will know.” My words sounded entirely small. Helpless words. He slid his arm behind me and pulled me near. I could smell his breath, his sweat. What had God done for me? Why had He not heard my thousand cries of desperation? Why had I been slotted for such a life? All these thoughts coursed through me as I lay my head on Shechem’s shoulder and felt his heart beat through his tunic. To feel his arms around me, to understand tenderness, to be beautifully loved. Is not this what I had asked the Almighty for these six years?

I looked into Shechem’s brown eyes and allowed him to drink in mine. A small voice inside me screamed, *run, run, run*, but Shechem’s draw felt irresistible. Flashes of our childhood friendship flittered through my mind. The kindness. The compliments. How he asked me questions. The many times he praised my work. So unlike Eleazar.

My mind hazed as my desire bloomed in his embrace.

“Come with me,” he said.

I looked around for my neighbors, still no other women. The cry in my heart to be cherished silenced my dying conscience. I had to push Jotham from my mind, but before I could, I envisioned him safe with my parents, safely away from his father. Yes, my son would be safe there.

“I cannot,” I told him. “Others will see.”

He winked at me. “I talked to your neighbors first,” he said. “I told them that the teacher Jesus was near, and that if they hurried, they could see Him. We are alone. But they will return, so we must be quick.”

I did not answer. Shechem took my hand in his. I followed him, sealing my fate. I would be loved. One last time.

At the doorway of a home I had never been to, Shechem lifted me into his arms and carried me effortlessly into its entrance. He set me down, put his hands on my shoulders, and held my eyes with his. He kissed me, then, long and hungry. And for what seemed like eternity, I kissed him back, giving in to his desires, my desires. We nearly became one flesh.

But then a vision of Jotham’s face stopped my forbidden thoughts cold. I backed away, bile choking my throat. I coughed. “My son,” I said. “What will happen to my son?”

But Shechem did not answer. Instead he pulled me again to himself and kissed me, his beard burning my face and the force of his grip aching the cheek Eleazar had recently struck.

“Please, Shechem. If you love me—”

“I know how to prove my love to a beautiful woman like you,” he said. He backed away. “You are free to go,” he said, “but we will not always have this chance.”

I could remedy this decision, even now. I could leave this place, run far away from this man, and we would continue on as if nothing happened. This is what I wanted. Adultery carried a stoning penalty. I turned to leave.

“Do not leave,” he said. Not as demand, but as pleading. Tears streaked his face, gathering in his beard. “I love you,” he said.

And with those three words, I let go of everything sacred—my vow to God to be a chaste and respectful woman, the covenant I made with my husband to love him only, the consequences my actions would have on my son.

We did become one.

And once we did, I felt ill.

Shechem gazed at me, a smile playing on his lips. “Worth the chase,” he said. “Especially after I receive payment.”

“What?”

He stood, now looming over my half-clothed body. “She is here, and I am finished with her.”

Three religious leaders from my synagogue stepped into the room after Shechem stepped away. He secured his tunic, but I lay there half naked. I wondered if they would do what Shechem had done, but they did not. My heartbeat counted to three hundred as the world stopped spinning. They leered.

I shivered.

I gathered my clothes, pulling my tunic around me, but I still felt exposed. One man, one, I think his name was Benjamin, grabbed my arm and pulled me heavenward. “You will stay as you are, Adulteress. No time to cover yourself as you would like. Besides,” he told another man, “her disheveled state will better prove our case.”

I had no name now. Very little covering. No dignity. Instead what I wore was red-faced shame and utter terror.

Shechem slipped away. The three men manhandled me and dragged me outside. I could sense their glee and triumph.

“Now what will Jesus of Nazareth say to this,” Benjamin sneered.

The other two laughed, then each man spat on me. I prayed their spittle would become a shield about me, as God promised King David. Had he not violated the laws of God too? And yet God had mercy on him. Had I not been a woman after the Almighty’s heart? But even as I prayed, the noonday sun pierced through me as we left the shelter of narrow roads and houses that shaded my walk of shame into the broad upward pathway toward the temple. I had tried to cover my head, but Benjamin grabbed the cloth from me.

Dear God, no.

I dug in my heels as rocks pierced my feet. “No,” I said.

But they did not listen. They continued to drag me, hurling insults as they did.

“He paid us well, and we have been amply rewarded,” Benjamin said. “We will now see what the false teacher has to say about her.”

The other two laughed. One said, "Discovering an adulteress in the act is never an easy task."

Who paid them? Shechem? Eleazar?

I looked down at my half-covered body, aware of the stares of children from behind mothers' dresses, widows clucking their judgment, gossip-women wild with fury over my offense. I felt the weight of some men's lust-laden looks. I was dead now. I had a growing sense that I would never, ever live again. "He will finally have to answer for His loose interpretations of the Law." Benjamin yanked my arm. I cried out. "You, little adulteress, will be the trap we need."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

But he hit me across the same swollen cheek. I held my silence, then.

The three men hurled me at the feet of a Rabbi who must have been teaching because a crowd had gathered before Him. I could not lift my eyes, or look up at the crowd. I told myself not to shake, but the shivering continued even as the sun beat upon me.

"Teacher," Benjamin said to Jesus, "this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The Law of Moses says to stone her."

Oh dear God. I will die soon, abandoning my precious son to this cruel world. And I walked willingly to Shechem's lair. I kissed him. I said yes. I deserved this death. But that deserving did nothing to stop my trembling.

A group of men surrounded me. I would not pick my head up to see the stones in their hands. Head down, I could see only their sandals through my tears.

One of them yelled to the Rabbi, “Moses commands us to stone her! What do you say?”

I expected words from this man.

But He stood mute.

I dared to lift my eyes slightly a hesitant moment, only to see this work-worn man stoop to earth and draw in the dust with His finger. What did He draw? Something about this man brought peace to the heartbeat that had lodged in my throat. How He stooped. How He did not give in to the demands of these leaders.

Shouts from the crowd echoed through me. “Stone her! Stone her! Stone her!” I ducked my head and waited for the rocks to crush me.

Benjamin nearly growled his words. “Rabbi, we demand an answer!”

The once-hunched Rabbi sat up straight, and it was then He looked at me. His eyes. Oh dear Lord, His eyes. They saw me. In that hiccup of glances, I somehow knew that He discerned my day, my story, my heart. He knew my entrapment and abduction. Would He shield . . . ?

He looked at the three men, and as He did, the crowd who yelled *stone her* quieted.

He straightened Himself and uttered these simple words: “Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!”

A long pause followed.

Never sinned?

Shame flooded through me. I could not answer for those who wanted to throw stones or even for the Pharisees who

had dragged me here, but I knew myself. I had sinned. Great and small. In thought and deed. If this be true (and I knew it was), at least I could not cast a stone at myself. He made it very clear—only a sinless person wielded the power of life and death.

From where I lay crumpled, I dared not look up. With head down, I squinted through my tears. A sea of sandaled feet populated the horizon. They did not move, tethered to the earth. The men whose feet these were would soon throw heavy stones to crush the life out of me. I trembled, waiting for the first stone to hit my head.

I heard the sound of stones falling to the ground one by one. *Thud*. Pause. *Thud, thud*.

I watched, through tear-stained eyes, as each stone created a dust whirl in the heat of day.

What happened? I coughed. Then tasted copper on my tongue as if I had finally come to my senses—my blood.

I stole a glance to my left and noticed a set of sandaled feet disappear. Then another. Then ten others, one by one. I snuck a peek around me as the circle wanting vengeance widened, stones now marking the place where my accusers once stood.

The Rabbi stooped to earth again and drew in the sand.

I dropped my head, then dared to look up again. I only saw one more set of sandals to my right. Shortly, those sandals also disappeared.

Only two of us stood in what was once my circle of accusers. The soft-spoken Rabbi, who still scribbled in the dust, and me—a woman caught in the act of adultery.

The wind stilled. The rocks stood like sentries around us, tokens of what could have meant my violent death. Would I be Goliath, as David slung a well-aimed rock at my forehead? Would this Rabbi gather stones from the dust and take my life?

The Rabbi sat up again and asked, “Where are your accusers? Did not even one of them condemn you?”

“No, Lord,” I said. For this man was no mere man.

He took the blue and white fabric at my feet and covered me. As He did, the blood in my mouth evaporated in an instant. He touched my cheek where Eleazar had struck, Shechem gripped, and Benjamin hit. The pain ceased. He gently touched my shoulders, and as He did, I sensed that God had indeed answered every prayer I had ever prayed. He had heard my cries of desperation and worry and fear. He was utterly mindful of my lot in life. And He cared. Deeply.

In that circle of two, the entire world fell away. My accusers melted into the Judean sun. My fears sloughed from me in a beautiful redemption.

The Rabbi said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”

I left the temple area a different woman. A loved woman like Bathsheba. A seen woman like Hagar. A queen like Esther. I had been exposed and accused, yet I had escaped the wrath of both man and God. That kind of grace changed me utterly.

That was the day Jesus of Nazareth saw me. And loved me.

In the months following I did not reconcile with Eleazar. He issued a divorce decree, said he did not want Jotham. A gift from the Almighty.

I healed in heart and soul and continued my work with cloth, until Jotham ran to me breathless one Friday. “They are crucifying Jesus,” he wailed.

We ran all the way, me tugging at his arm, he trying desperately to match my stride, until we reached the Place of the Skull where three rudimentary crosses jutted from the earth. The ground beneath us smelled of urine, and I briefly worried for Jotham’s health. But I could not pull my gaze away from the crosses. Flanked by two criminals (they both had been notorious thieves), Jesus awkwardly stood, knees bent, a thorny crown jutting into His skull. Blood ran red from His head, His wrists, His ankles.

Utterly alone, Jesus labored to breathe, pulling Himself up on the spikes to drag in another cupful of air, only to relapse to bended knees and suffocation. This crucifixion was a barbaric practice, I knew. I covered Jotham’s eyes with my tunic, turned him toward me to keep away the horror.

Angry men hurled insults and accusations, though He did nothing to deserve such torment, such untruth. I knew He must have been dragged and beaten and harassed in the same manner as myself, yet He kept his protests to Himself, did not defend Himself.

I could not shout “He who is without sin, crucify this man!” because I feared the crowds. But I felt those words. This man, this Jesus, had no sin—I knew that like

I understood a mother's love for a son. And yet I watched as He chose to endure the cross of His own volition. For me. For them. For this broken world.

In a way He took up stones and threw them at Himself.

Even in agony, even as guards cast lots for his bloodied clothing, He pulled to stand, to drag in another breath and say, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Even then, forgiveness bled from Jesus' mouth. He uttered those words not just for those who jeered and wagged their heads, but for all of us who walked this dusty place called earth, who desperately needed to know that no sin could ever, ever separate us from an extraordinary, loving, sacrificing God.

A God who goes to such lengths as to stand up to the religiously pious and die for all who wore the garment of sin. Their sin—my sin—became the rocks that would kill Him, though it was not stones that took His life. Crucifixion accomplished its terrible job.

He died there, alone, agonized. I felt His death through me, around me, beneath me as the ground shook angry rumbles.

I pulled the multicolored tunic around Jotham and me, both of us shivering from the darkness.

Jotham looked up at me. "Why did He have to die, Mama?"

I had no answer for him then. I could only weep at the injustice of an innocent man dying a criminal's death. And wonder why I had been spared such a fate—a woman undeserving of grace.

Weeks later, the memories of that horrid crucifixion haunted me as I finished my pilgrimage and stood outside the temple. I took note of one of the men who had dragged me to His feet on the day of my shame. He met my eyes, but I could not discern what I saw there. Hatred? Embarrassment? Shame? Anger? Indifference?

He hurried away, but I ran after him. Why? I do not know, nor can I explain what compelled me to do so. "Wait," I said.

He turned, his eyes haunted.

We stood in the exact place Jesus had told me to sin no more. I wondered if the man knew this, or if my chasing had frightened him. We looked at each other, neither speaking for a long moment. I remembered how rocks littered the circle, but not one person had hurled one my way.

The man cleared his throat. His face reddened. "He is alive," he hushed. And with those words, he turned and darted away.

Once again I stood alone in this place, the place of both shame and awakening. At my feet I noticed a rock. I picked it up, felt its weight in my hands. I brought it to my face, forgetting the dust, and kissed it. And as I did, I noticed a Man a few paces away.

Drawing in the dirt.

THE SACRED TEXT

They all went home, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 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 7:53–8:11

WALKING IT OUT

In many Bibles, the story you just read in John 7:53 to John 8:11 is set off in brackets. In other translations, it appears in a footnote.

Why? Because many scholars believe this portion of the text wasn't an original part of the Gospel of John. The earliest manuscripts don't have it, later manuscripts insert it in other parts of John, and some manuscripts place it in Luke.

But whether the text was an original part of John's Gospel or not, it has been held throughout church history that the story is authentic and rings true to the ministry of Jesus. So we believe, along with countless scholars past and present, that the narrative represents a real event from the life of Christ.

The Chess Match

This story opens with the scribes and Pharisees leveling a test at Jesus' feet. Jesus sat in the women's court of the temple, teaching the people.

Seeking to entrap Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees burst into the women's court and threw a married (or betrothed) woman before Him. They "caught" her in the act of adultery and seized her.

Consider the specific test they were putting forth: "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now the Law of Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?"

According to the Law of Moses, “If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, *both of them* shall die” (Deut. 22:22 ESV, emphasis added; Lev. 20:10).

Note that the Law of Moses demanded the execution of both adulterous parties (per the emphasis). Since witnesses were necessary, the sinning parties had to be caught in the act (Deut. 17:6; 19:15).

In this situation the scribes and Pharisees appear to have set this woman up. One indication is that the man is nowhere to be found. It takes two people to commit adultery, so where is he? It’s possible they paid the man off, and he left the scene quietly while they dragged the woman off to the temple courts.

We know from John 8:6 that the leaders’ motives were malevolent. “This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.”¹ Clearly they weren’t seeking honest guidance from Jesus, they schemed to entrap Him.

This shouldn’t surprise us because the scribes and Pharisees often tested Jesus throughout the Gospels (Matt. 22:25; Mark 8:11; 10:2; 12:15). This time, however, they used a woman as a pawn to try to put the Lord into checkmate. Their intention was to throw Him on the horns of a dilemma that He could not escape.

A Dilemma That Only God Can Escape

The scribes and Pharisees think they have Jesus cornered. Here’s why.

If Jesus responded, “Stone her,” He would be contradicting His teachings of mercy, grace, and forgiveness, proving He was just as harsh and cruel as the religious leaders. In so doing He would lose the favor of His followers who hung upon His grace-laced words.

He also could be charged with sedition before the Roman governor. While the Jewish Sanhedrin held the right to *pronounce* the sentence of capital offenses against Jewish laws, the Roman administration held the exclusive right to *execute* people for such offenses (John 18:31).

If on the other hand He said, “Do not stone her,” He would be in violation of the Law of Moses.

So the scribes and Pharisees believe they have the young prophet in checkmate. Jesus was forced to either reject Jewish law (which would turn all devout Jews against Him) or reject Roman rule (which would allow the Jewish leaders to accuse Jesus before the Roman officials).²

Indeed, this was a trap that only God could escape.

But they underestimated the young prophet who was wiser than all of them combined. And this wisdom blended with something they did not possess: grace and mercy.

Words in the Dust

It’s interesting that Jesus ignored the scribes and Pharisees’ testing question. Instead, He simply stooped down and wrote in the dirt.

What did He write, exactly?

No mortal knows.

Perhaps He wrote, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.”

Or perhaps He penned a list of sins . . . the sins of the witnesses who were reaching for stones.

Or perhaps He imitated the act of a Roman magistrate, who first wrote down his sentence before reading it out loud. (Jesus’ verdict is found in John 8:7.) If this is so, He wrote His acquittal first and then perhaps “guilty” as a verdict for the accusers the second time He wrote in the dust.

Or perhaps He wrote the opening words of Exodus 23:1, “Do not help a guilty person by being a malicious witness.”

Or perhaps He alluded to Jeremiah 17:13, “Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the Lord, the spring of living water.”

Or perhaps He mimicked His Father, who wrote the ten commandments with His finger, etching the commandment about not coveting your neighbor’s wife. A text that would render all the Jewish leaders guilty (Matt. 5:28).

Or perhaps He simply doodled, making a mockery of their question with the very contempt it deserved.

Amid the Lord’s silence, the scribes and Pharisees persisted in repeating their question. The disciples probably mused, *How’s He going to get out of this one?*

Checkmate

When Jesus sat up straight and replied with, “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone,” He did more than

shock everyone present. Your Lord was turning the tables on His detractors, and in so doing He put a group of jealous religious elitists into checkmate.

The holy Son of God took all embarrassment away from the woman and placed her shame squarely on the shoulders of the scribes and Pharisees.

To use a different metaphor, the Lord's detractors not only lost their prey that day, but also their bait. One can't help but admire a Lord like that and be in awe at His wisdom and grace.

Jesus and Women

There's something else in this story that's often overlooked. The scribes and Pharisees chose a woman to be their example instead of a man. They could have easily entrapped a man and made him the example to put Jesus to the test. But they chose a woman, reinforcing a common mentality in that day.

The overall culture held women to a different standard than men. They were sometimes treated as scapegoats, and many took their sin more seriously than men's transgressions.

But the Lord stood against sexual stereotyping and religious scapegoating. He had a strong aversion to double standards.³

Throughout His ministry, Christ exalted women as equal to men. He was the only teacher of His day who had female disciples. What is more, every sin that a man committed

was no different in His eyes than if a woman had committed it. And He died for all of them.

“Neither Do I Condemn You”

And now we press the question that is so rarely asked whenever this story is read.

Who is this woman?

The answer may surprise you.

She’s you.

And she’s us.

Perhaps you’ve never been caught in the physical act of adultery, per se, but we have all been “caught” in our sins. Let’s not forget that Jesus called a lustful look adultery (Matt. 5:28). By the same token James said that if you break one commandment, you’ve broken them all (James 2:10). That places all of us, men and women alike, on the same moral level. We have all sinned.

If every Christian would have eyes to see this truth, we would humbly eliminate all self-righteousness from our hearts. In short, we are all made of clay; we all have the propensity to sin.

With one devastating statement Jesus demonstrated that the Law wasn’t wrong, but if everyone saw the Law for what it was, we would understand that we are *all* guilty. Including the self-anointed, puritanical, moral guardians known as the scribes and Pharisees . . . and those who follow in their footsteps.

Greater Than Moses

It's interesting that John 8 opens with a group of men wanting to stone a woman, and it ends with a group of men wanting to stone Jesus.

When people's hypocrisy is exposed, the typical instinct is to kill the person who did the exposing. And that's exactly what Jesus did in this scene. Self-righteous men exposed an adulterous woman. A merciful prophet exposed the hypocrisy of religious leaders.

It's hypocritical for sinners to want to harm other sinners because of sin.⁴ According to Jesus, only the guiltless could rightfully carry out such a righteous sentence of justice.

Unfortunately, this same judgmental attitude lives in the hearts of many self-righteous Christians today. These are those who clearly see the evil in others while being blind to the evil residing in their own hearts. Or as Philip Yancey once put it, some "Christians get very angry at those who sin differently than they do."⁵

In the mind of God, righteousness and justice are grounded in grace. Whenever grace is removed, we are left with the heartless hypocrisy of Pharisaism.

In this story, Jesus Christ didn't overturn the Law. Instead, He reestablished righteousness on the basis of grace. He essentially said to the woman, "Don't sin like this again." Not because she might be stoned. But because grace had rescued her—and she now possessed a new identity as a beautifully loved child of God.

Jesus is the Prophet who is greater than Moses. While the Law demanded execution, Jesus reestablished righteousness on the basis of grace.

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:17)

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age. (Titus 2:11–12)

Don't misunderstand. Sin is heinous. Whether it takes the form of adultery, or slander, or abusive words in a fit of rage, or jealousy, or gossip, or lying (pick your sin), God doesn't ignore it because sin harms the people He created.

Yet a person who brings correction to those who hurt others ought to do it with no hint of self-righteousness in their hearts, knowing full well that they are equally fallen and capable of much worse (Gal. 6:1–5).

If a person is walking in the Spirit of Christ and they confront another person, they will experience more (or as much) pain as the person they are correcting. Why? Because they know how clay-footed they themselves are. And because they are humble, they realize just how precarious they themselves are in living a holy life.

Grace ushers in forgiveness, but it also empowers us to walk in a new way.

Holiness, then, is built on the experience of grace, not on the fear of the Law.

Christ came not to judge the world, but to save it (John 12:47). He's in the business of rescuing and releasing us, while at the same time calling our sin for what it is: self-centeredness.

As mere mortals, none of us has the capacity to correctly judge the human heart. Humans skim the outside, but God delves into the inside (1 Sam. 16:7). "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). And the way in which we judge is the way we will be judged (Matt. 7:2).

Yet only in Christ do mercy and truth shake hands. Only in Him do righteousness and truth kiss one another (Ps. 85:10).

Never forget: You have a Lord who does not accuse you (Rev. 12:10; Rom. 8:33–34). If you have received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you are set blessedly free from condemnation. Not only can you not be condemned, you can't even be indicted. Why? Because you are in Christ, and He's unindictable.

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 8:1 NASB)

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. (Rom. 8:33–34)

Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault. (Col. 1:22 NLT)

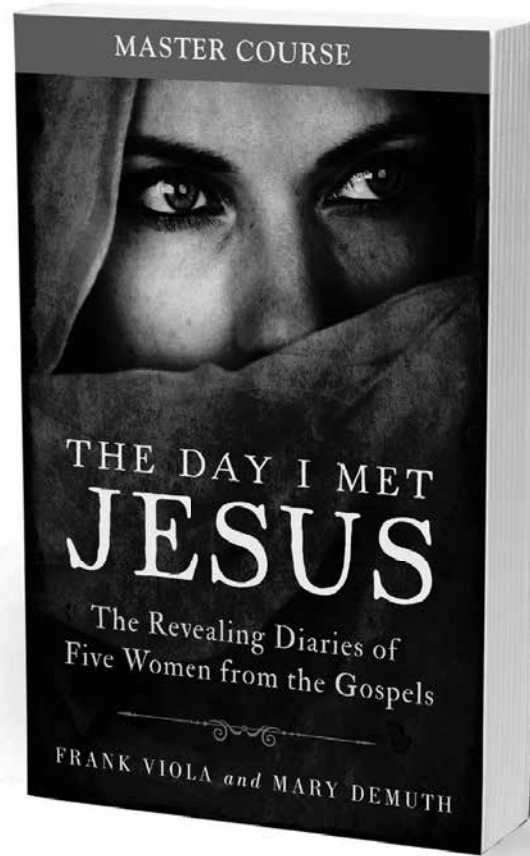
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