**God Behaving Badly - Week 2 - Sexist or Empowering?**

**Message Big Idea:** When we read certain stories in the Old Testament, it’s hard not to wonder… Is God sexist or empowering?

**Scripture:** Genesis 1:26-28, Genesis 2:18-23, Genesis 3:1-6, Genesis 3:14-19

**Note:** With the videos, this is a 30-minute message.

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**Introduction: Stories You Never Heard in Sunday School**

*(Series Graphic)* Quick show of hands if you grew up going to Sunday School, confirmation classes or some kind of children’s ministry? *(hands)* There are certain stories in the Bible that are slam-dunk favorites for little kids.

* For example, **Noah’s Ark.** I can still remember the flannel graph pictures of all those animals, two-by-two, being loaded onto that giant boat.
* Or how about **Daniel in the Lion’s Den**? That was a popular one! God rescues Daniel from being devoured by a pack of lions. (Good thing it had a happy ending – imagine that on the flannel graph)

But there are other stories in the Bible we never seemed to hear about in Sunday School - Stories that are strange, weird, and even downright alarming.

For example, there is a story in Genesis 19 where two angels are sent by God to see if the people of a city were too wicked to be saved or if only a man named Lot and his family could be rescued. That alone makes the story hard to hear, but it gets way worse.

The disguised angels find shelter at Lot’s house, and that evening the men of the city demand that Lot turn these visitors over to be tortured and raped. Lot tries to reason with the mob, but rather than telling them to go away, he offers to send out his two daughters to keep the visitor’s safe.

It’s hard to know what to do with a story like this, and, sadly, it’s stories like these that have led lots of people to believe that the Bible is a sexist book and that God **himself** is somehow sexist. And if you’re disturbed by stories like this, you’re not alone.

**Series Recap**

*(Series Graphic)* We are in Week 2 of our series, **“God Behaving Badly**.**”** During this series, we’re tackling some of the difficult and confusing passages we find in the Old Testament trying to make sense of some these seemingly contradictory pictures of God. And today we’re asking the question: Is God **Sexist or Empowering?**

As a reminder, during this series, we’re using the **personal** name for God, **Yahweh** – it’s how he is referred to in the Old Testament more than any other way. The name Yahweh reminds us that God **wants** to be on a first-name basis with his people.

Maybe you grew up like me – I couldn’t call an adult by their first name until I was an adult myself. Why? Because there is something personal about calling someone by their first name. And God desires *that* kind of personal interaction with his people. And this is important because what we believe about God will directly affect whether we either **pursue** him or **avoid** him. (Repeat) And it’s interesting that the people in the Old Testament who knew Yahweh best -- desperately desired to be close to him.

So, let’s tackle this question: Is Yahweh **Sexist or Empowering?**

**The Genesis 19 Story**

Before we examine the larger arc of this question, let me go back to this disturbing story we started with. In trying to digest this story, there are a few things we should consider.

First, the culture in which these events took place was a sexist culture. There’s no getting around it! But just because the **culture** was sexist and the Bible **records a sexist story** that happened **in** **that** culture, that doesn’t mean that **Yahweh** is sexist.

Think of it this way… Every day newspapers print all kinds of stories about murders and assaults and all sorts of crimes. Just because a story is **in** the newspaper doesn’t mean that the editors of that paper endorse these evil acts. These stories are **descriptive**, not prescriptive.

And just because a story is in the Bible doesn’t mean Yahweh **approves** of the actions being described. In fact, you could make a strong case that Scripture reveals just the opposite. For example, in this story, as awful as it is…

* God never offered those girls up to these men, Lot did. And Lot is **never** affirmed for what he did. In fact, he is consistently painted in Scripture as a **negative** example.
* *(Genesis 19:10)* Also, as the story goes on, the two angels sent by Yahweh take action to **protect** Lot’s daughters from what their father proposed. They pull Lot back into the house and shut the door.
* *(Genesis 19:11)* Not only that, the men of the city are **punished** for their behavior by being **blinded**.

So this is a **terrible** story from start to finish, but Yahweh acts **justly**. There is nothing in this story that suggests that Yahweh condones the evil of these men or the sexist actions of Lot. If anything, this story is a great example of how far human beings have strayed from Yahweh’s original dream.

**Yahweh’s Dream**

So what really is Yahweh’s dream?

If you’ve been around churches and Christianity for very long, you know there are lots of different views about Yahweh’s dreams for women, specifically about whether women are to lead and teach in the church. Some people gravitate to two statements in the New Testament that say that women should be silent in the church.

I will acknowledge that these two statements, found in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, can be confusing. But I will also say that we think it’s a mistake to try to understand how Yahweh views women by pulling out two verses and ignoring the larger arc of the story of scripture. As New Testament scholar, Scot McKnight says:

**“It’s like asking about marriage in the Bible and gravitating toward the divorce texts.”**

 **– Scot McKnight, The Blue Parakeet**

We could spend most of our time explaining why these texts aren’t exactly what they seem at first glance, but, like McKnight, we believe it is critical that we examine the whole of Scripture when we ask questions like:

* What is Yahweh’s dream?
* How does Yahweh view women?
* Is Yahweh sexist or empowering?

So let’s start at another place that people on all sides of the issue go. Let’s go back to the beginning – Genesis.

After the universe was created, then Yahweh created animals, birds, fish, and **finally** humans. *(Genesis 1:27)* From the beginning, humans were created unique. We were created with the capacity…

* for wonder,
* for thought,
* for invention, and wit.

We were created in the image of God.

However, it **is** significant that what Yahweh says about women first -- is that they are **like** **him**.

* Women are made in the image of God!
* Women are Godlike!

Now, guys, you are Godlike too, but most of you already think that. (I’m kidding ☺). What we see from the beginning is that both men **and** women are created by Yahweh to be a reflection of his Godliness.

If we turn the page to Genesis 2, we find another account of the Creation story. *(Genesis 2:7 and Genesis 2:21-22)* In this account, we see that Yahweh creates the man first, and then, from one of the man’s ribs, creates the woman. Some suggest that this order indicates some sort of hierarchy, but that’s a stretch!

If the order of creation says something about position or importance then . . .

* **darkness** is more important than **light**,
* **animals** are more important than **plants** and **trees**,
* and **all** of these are more important than **you** and **me**.

We actually see the order of creation getting **more** **complex** and **more** **wonderful** as the days go on with human beings as the crescendo of all of creation! So if you ever thought there was something significant to the fact that God created the man first and the woman second, well, you may be right. *(pause)* Let’s be honest guys, which is typically better, the first draft or the second? ☺

However, there is another reason some people are tempted to read hierarchy into the creation story and it comes from this verse in Genesis 2:

***“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him.’”*** *(Genesis 2:18 NLT)*

“Helper” doesn’t sound like a very empowering word, does it? -- “Helper” is the word I would use to coax my kids into emptying the dishwasher. “Helper” can sound…sexist, like men need a good secretary make the business or family run smoothly.

But it’s important we understand what this word “helper” means. In the Hebrew language of the Bible, the word is **ezer** *(pronounced āzer).* Say that after me: ezer. *(ezer)* Ezer is used over 100 times in the Old Testament and guess who it refers to most often? **Yahweh**. It’s most frequent use is to describe Yahweh’s **military** or **supernatural-type** support. This isn’t a 7 year old emptying a dishwasher; this is Yahweh – God of creation!

Ezer is not a **weak** word at all. It’s a word that describes a warrior God who aids, comes to the rescue, and keeps nations safe! Ezer describes generations of women who persevere, endure, and are warriors in the line of Yahweh! Women who are worthy and dignified and capable in and of themselves. If there’s a woman sitting near you, turn to her and say, **“You are a warrior!”** (funny here?)

Still, when we turn the page to Genesis 3, this beautiful scene of Yahweh’s glorious creation comes to a screeching halt. -- **The Fall**. -- Yahweh’s dream for the world is shattered as the first man and woman make a tragic choice to carve their own path.

You know the story, right? Yahweh gave people just one rule: Don’t eat from the tree in the middle of the garden. And one day a snake comes and tempts the woman to question Yahweh’s goodness, and she falls for the deception. *(Genesis 3:6)* The woman takes a bite, and then hands it to the man who joins her in this rebellion.

Now, there are some who look at this story and believe it says something about **women**. After all, the woman fell first, right? Doesn’t that make her responsible?

*(highlight “who was with her”)* And yet, notice that the man was **with** the woman during this **whole** episode. He was right there when she ate the fruit and did **nothing** to stop her. And he, too, ate the fruit without any resistance.

Both the woman and the man chose to go against Yahweh’s plan, and both experience the consequences of their actions. When Adam and Eve sin, they shatter Yahweh’s dream for humanity. Not only did sin **separate** us from God, it had **consequences** for our relationships with each other. When Yahweh says to Eve…

***“Your desire will be for your husband,***

 ***and he will rule over you.”*** *(Genesis 3:16)*

He’s describing not what **should** **be** -- or the **dream**. He is describing what happened as a result of the fall. The systems of hierarchy began, and it broke Yahweh’s heart.

**Yahweh Begins to Restore His Dream**

If you’ve been around Community very long, you know our mission is helping people find their way back to God. And one-way that mission is expressed is by **restoring** God’s dream for the world. As followers of Jesus, it is our mission to do whatever we can to help our world experience the dream Yahweh had from the very beginning.

As tragic as Genesis 3 was for humanity, Yahweh immediately begins to act to **overcome** the consequences of the curse. Even in these words that Yahweh speaks to the serpent we find a **promise** to the **woman**. God says to the **serpent**:

***“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”*** *(Genesis 3:15)*

Most scholars believe Yahweh is referring to how Jesus, Eve’s offspring, will have ultimate victory - he will “crush the evil one’s head” through his death and resurrection. And while this promised victory could have mentioned the man, Yahweh chose to focus this blessing on the woman

And if we look forward through the rest of the Old Testament, despite the sexist culture that emerged from The Fall, *(Yahweh Empowers Women)* we see Yahweh empowering women to play prominent roles among his people.

* Yahweh selected a female “president” - **Deborah** (Judges 4). She was the political leader of Israel and a prophet who would have been viewed as the spiritual leader of the nation.
* Yahweh raised up **Rahab** (Joshua 2) to assist the Israelites in conquering Jericho.
* Yahweh used wise women like **Abigail** (1 Samuel 25)to advise kings and commanders.
* Yahweh blessed **Ruth** (Ruth 1-4) for her courage and devotion, and it was through her bloodline that eventually Jesus was born to Mary.
* Yahweh raised up **Esther** (Esther 4) to save her people when they were threatened with genocide.

*(Jesus Empowers Women)* And then Jesus continued to empower women by honoring them and giving them opportunities that were considered completely counter-cultural for his time.

* Jesus **revealed himself as the long-awaited Messiah –** to a woman first (John 4:25-26)
* In a culture where men didn’t speak to women in public, Jesus **consistently engaged women in conversation** (John 4:27).
* Women were included in his **expanded group of disciples** (Mark 15:41).
* **Mary of Bethany** was permitted to sit next to men as she learned from Jesus teachings, something unheard of in that culture (Luke 10:39).
* Following his resurrection, Jesus **first appeared to a woman** in spite of the fact that a woman’s testimony would carry no weight in a court of law at that time (John 20:1-16).

Jesus came to restore Yahweh’s dream for the world. The early Christian leaders recognized that. That’s why the Apostle Paul declares:

***“For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus…There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*** *(Galatians 3:26, 28)*

Women like Junia (Romans 16) and Priscilla (Acts 18) and Philip’s four daughters (Acts 21) led and taught and prophesied in the early church.

And yet, despite **all** that Yahweh has done to empower women, in too many places we continue to perpetuate the downward pull of the Fall. Yahweh and Jesus are incredibly progressive in how they honor women, but sadly too often we are not… Here are a few stories from some women on our staff at Community . . .

**Video: Women Who Have Experienced Sexism**

**Challenge: Join Yahweh in Restoring His Dream**

Yahweh’s dream has always been for both men and women to flourish in who he created them to be.

And Jesus came to restore Yahweh’s dream for men and women. But sadly, the restoration of Yahweh’s dream is a work in progress…

That’s why we **all** have a role to play in restoring God’s dream for men **and** women. This is the responsibility of **anyone** who believes **all** people were created equally in the image of God. If you are a Christ-follower, the fact that women do **not** have the same opportunities as men and are often **not** treated equally to men is an injustice we are called to reverse.

And while we are committed to this at Community, we recognize that we have a long way to go. So, here are a couple challenges:

**Challenge #1**: **Don’t Perpetuate the Curse.**

Listen and look for the subtle and not-so-subtle ways we contribute to prolonging the curse. Ignoring or diminishing the voices and accomplishments of women is one way we prolong the curse. Overlooking women when considering leadership opportunities is another. Let’s call out remnants of the curse when we see them in the church or in our culture or in ourselves and refuse to accept the curse as “just the way it is.” Let’s live according to Yahweh’s dream – let’s live as Yahweh originally intended.

**Challenge #2: Partner to Restore God’s Dream.**

To the **Women** in the room: That voice inside your head that whispers “you can’t” or “you don’t belong”… that voice is **not** from God. And so my charge to you is to step into all Yahweh created you to be. Stop carrying the limitations of the curse and don’t put those limitations on other women. Cheer for and encourage each other. Never ever forget…

* You are made in the image of God.
* You are gifted to carry out his purpose in this world.
* So step into all God created you to be!

To the **Men** in the room: It matters to women that we stand ***with*** them and stand ***for*** them like Jesus stood with the women of his day. Often in our culture and in the church, we hold many of the positions of power and influence. So I ask: Will you use your position to help restore God’s dream? Listen to the women around you, speak up, advocate for your sisters. Why? Because that’s what Jesus did, and he calls all of us to follow his example.

**Conclusion: Vision for Our Church**

Like I said, we have a ways to go, but I am thankful that COMMUNITY is a place where both men and women use the gifts God has given them to contribute to the mission. I’m also thankful for my “sister warriors” who God is using in a powerful way to lead here at Community. *(Acknowledge women at your location…)* Warriors like…

* Sharie Behnke who teaches on weekends.
* Amy Plummer who leads Community 412 and Community Freedom.
* Tammy Melchien who leads our Teaching Team.
* Evelyn Cortazio who leads us in worship.
* The many women leading Small Groups and Ministry Teams.
* I could go on and on and on.

I am grateful for the strides we are making in restoring Yahweh’s dream for men and women, but let’s not stop until every little girl that grows up in our church has the opportunity to fully develop and exercise the gifts God has given her and laughs at the notion that there was once a time when her gender might have limited her opportunities to contribute to the mission of Jesus.

Is God sexist? No.

* Yahweh is empowering.
* Jesus is empowering.

Let’s join God in restoring his dream for the world.

As I close, I’d like for us to stand together and join hands as a community of people collectively reflecting the image of God and commit to partnering together to carry out the work of restoring God’s dream for the world. Would you stand and pray with me?

**Communion Idea**

If we back up just a few lines prior to what we read earlier from the Apostle Paul we find these words:

**“When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing.” -Galatians 3:13**

Sadly, we continue to experience the ramifications of the Fall. That’s what is meant when people say “We live in a fallen world.” But that’s not how Christ-followers are meant to live. Jesus last prayer was that his followers would live *in* the world, but through the power of his spirit may they not be *of* this world.

In Jesus death and resurrection he overcame the curse, the fall. And in communion we celebrate that victory that gives us what we need to push back against the fall and the injustices we see around us every day. The bread represents his body that was broken and the juice represents his blood that was shed. Let’s use this communion time as a moment of recommitment to following the path of Jesus and living out his redemptive mission of restoring our world and our relationships to the dream God had for them from the beginning.