



BROADCAST TALKS

# Seeing Jesus Through the Eyes of Women

by Rebecca McLaughlin



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**Rebecca McLaughlin**, author and speaker, grew up in the UK and holds a Ph.D. in English literature from Cambridge University and a theology degree from Oak Hill College in London. In 2008, she moved to the United States and spent nine years with The Veritas Forum. In September 2017, she co-founded Vocable Communications. Rebecca is the author of, among other books, *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World’s Largest Religion*; *10 Questions Every Teen Should Ask (and Answer) about Christianity*; *Jesus Through the Eyes of Women: How the First Female Disciples Help Us Know and Love the Lord*, and, most recently, *No Greater Love: A Biblical Vision for Friendship*. She continues her writing and speaking as one of the world’s leading Christian apologists while enjoying her family life with her husband and three children.

The following is adapted from an interview with Rebecca McLaughlin, conducted by Joel Woodruff, President of the C.S. Lewis Institute. It was broadcast on January 27, 2023, as a virtual event titled “Seeing Jesus Through the Eyes of Women”, having been recorded earlier that month.

BROADCAST TALKS presents ideas to cultivate Christ-like thinking and living. Each issue features a transcription of a talk presented at an event of the C.S. Lewis Institute.



**Your latest book, *Jesus Through the Eyes of Women*, is on a very interesting topic, because I think many in the world today have a very jaded perception, perhaps, of how Christians view women. Could you tell me what was behind your motivation in writing this new book?**

At first blush, it sounds like a very modern project to look at the Gospel biographies of Jesus, specifically at how women interacted with Jesus and sort of take the perspective of the women with whom He was engaging. It seems like a 21st-century thing to do, and I think it's important to look at the perspectives of those who've been historically marginalized for whatever reason. But actually, if you look at the Gospel accounts of Jesus's life, you'll find that the first-century authors of those accounts are specifically inviting us to look at Jesus through the eyes of women, not all the time, but at important moments and junctures in Jesus's life and ministry. I have two daughters and a son, and my son is called Luke. Part of the reason I chose that name for him—and I have to say I did choose it . . . Once we found out that he was a boy, I said to my husband, “I really want to call him Luke. Let me know when you're on board with that.” He realized that Luke is, in fact, a fabulous name. Part of the reason is that Luke's Gospel in particular highlights the relationships that Jesus had with women and the ways He interacted with the poor, oppressed,

the marginalized, the sick, and diseased in particular. My other favorite gospel is John’s, for many reasons. One reason as well is the incredible encounters that we see and conversations we see Jesus having with women in that gospel.

So I think there are profound ways—and actually highly countercultural in terms of first-century culture—that the Gospels present to us the eyewitness testimony of the men and particularly the women who saw Jesus, listened to what He said, and engaged with Him. I think my reason for writing this book was to group together the episodes in which Jesus is interacting with both named and unnamed women in the Gospels and see what we learn about Him from their vantage point.

**As you were working on this project, I imagine some of your friends perhaps had communicated to you some of their ideas about the way Christians view or Jesus viewed women. What were some of the misconceptions that you addressed through your book?**

I think a lot of people today who are not Christians see Christianity as denigrating to women, marginalizing women, very male-centered. There are a range of reasons for that. In the Scriptures, it seems to me that there are certain church roles that are reserved for men, and that is profoundly countercultural today, though I think there’s a theological logic behind that. I think the way the New Testament describes marriage is again very countercultural today.

So when Paul in Ephesians 5 says, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church . . .” to my contemporaries today, and even myself, looking back on my student days when I was first grappling with that text, it feels completely unsettling, shocking, even misogynistic, to say that wives should submit to their husbands. It’s only when you read on in that passage and you listen properly to what Paul says to husbands, which is, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,” and you reflect on how Christ loved the Church

and gave Himself up for her—which was naked and bleeding on a Roman cross—that you realize that the picture of marriage is not a mandate for abuse, not a mandate for squashing women down or invalidating their needs or perspectives, actually quite the opposite.

The vision of marriage that the New Testament offers, and that has shaped our thinking on marriage ever since, radically prioritized women in a way that had not happened before. Greek and Roman men were not expected to be faithful to their wives, let alone to pour themselves out in sacrificial love for them. It was fine for them to sleep with other women, often other men as well. The idea that a husband should give himself up for his wife would have been somewhere between wild, absurd, and laughable from the average kind of Greek and Roman man’s perspective. And yet that’s the model that the New Testament gives us.

I think one mistake that more recent Christian authors and pastors dealing with these texts have made is trying to locate or base that text on innate psychological differences between men and women. To say, “Well, wives are to submit to their husbands because men are natural leaders,” or, “Husbands in love with their wives blah, blah, blah.” Actually, that’s not what the text says. The text says that we are to do these things because marriage is a picture of Christ and the Church. My psychological disposition, or my husband’s psychological disposition, is basically irrelevant to what’s going on here, which is us together picturing Jesus’s passion and exclusive, flesh-uniting, life-creating, never-ending exclusive love for His church. So that’s one area where people can grab only one tiny portion of Scripture and miss what it’s saying.

Another reason that people think of Christianity as misogynistic or marginalizing to women is the way Christians have sinfully acted over the centuries. But in reality, we know that it is sinful, for example, for a wife to be abused or for women to be denigrated or marginalized, only

because that's what the Scriptures teach. So in order to diagnose the sin of the Church, we look at the measuring stick of the Scriptures; without that, in the ancient world, it was not at all self-evident that women were innately equally valuable to men. Quite the opposite, actually. So our modern idea that women and men are fundamentally morally equal, equal in value, dignity, deserving the same sort of respect and rights, that's actually something that's come to us from the Scriptures, not something that we need to dismiss the Scriptures in order to uphold.

**It's a powerful point you make, that the Scriptures are the source of many of the positive ideas we have in our modern culture. It's always important to go back and see what the Scriptures are really saying, as you've highlighted. As you looked at the Scriptures, the Gospels in particular, why did you find the eyewitness accounts of women and their relationship with Jesus so important to understanding Jesus Himself and the Christian faith?**

I'm not exactly proposing that we do this exercise, but were you to do the exercise of going through the Gospels and crossing out everything that was not witnessed by at least one woman, you would lose very little of the gospel texts. If you were to go through and cross out everything that is not witnessed by any men, you'd actually lose more.

For instance, in Luke's Gospel, in the early stages of Jesus's life, or even before His conception, we hear about this incredible conversation that Mary, His mother, has with the angel Gabriel. We know that because Mary reported it. So we first hear about Jesus as the Son of God, the King long promised over the centuries to rescue His people through Mary herself. And then we have this incredible interaction between her and her relative Elizabeth, who's carrying the infant John the Baptist in her womb at the time; Elizabeth is, Luke tells us, filled with the Holy Spirit, to recognize who Jesus is, to recognize even the embryonic Jesus as her Lord. So at the very beginning of Jesus's life, we have the eyewitness testimony of



women being vital to our understanding of what's going on. And then we have moments along the way where there are profoundly important interactions Jesus has with women, a couple in John's Gospel that come to mind are (1) Jesus's lengthy conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, which is the longest private recorded conversation that Jesus has with anyone in the Gospels. And they're not talking about flower arranging or changing diapers or any sort of stereotypically female-oriented things. They're talking theology. And Jesus reveals Himself to this woman explicitly as the Christ. She's the first person in John's Gospel to whom Jesus specifically reveals Himself as the Christ.

Or (2) later, in John 11, when Jesus is summoned by His friends Mary and Martha of Bethany because their brother Lazarus is sick. Jesus intentionally delays until Lazarus is dead and then goes to see the sisters. Martha comes out to meet Him. And they have this extraordinary dialogue, in which Jesus says those unbelievable words, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" It is one of Jesus's famous "I am," statements in John's Gospel. But unlike most of the others, which are spoken to groups, this is spoken to one specific grieving woman. Jesus wants her to respond to Him. These words have echoed down the centuries to us, and rightly so. We cling to those promises from Jesus. But in the first instance, He's asking, "Martha, do you believe this?"

We see these sorts of moments along in Jesus's life and ministry where women are profoundly important. Then we see, at the end of His life on earth, that women are the key eyewitnesses of His crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. In all the gospel accounts, we see women as the first witnesses of the Resurrection in a culture where the testimony of women would not be seen as equal to the testimony of men. If the gospel authors were trying to convince people of this crazy story of a man being raised from the dead, they shouldn't have had women as the first witnesses. But



they did, because they're constrained by the truth. They have to report what actually happened.

And Jesus chose to reveal Himself first to women. I say that, because in John's Gospel, we find that Peter and the author of John's Gospel, when Mary Magdalene first came back and reported to the apostles that the tomb was empty, they ran to the scene of the crime, as it were. Jesus could have talked with them right then and there, but instead, He talked with Mary first. So we have these, as I say, moments where we're invited by the gospel authors to see Jesus through the eyes of women in particular, and I think we learn a lot from that.

**Yes. It's quite powerful to think that Jesus chose women to be the first to whom He communicated many very important truths. Many people have noted that Mary, His mother, was the first Christian, first person to believe. And you mentioned the women after the resurrection being the first to bear testimony to that event. From your studies why do you think Jesus chose to make women the first ones to communicate many of these profound and life-changing truths?**

One thing you'll notice if you read through the Gospels is that the only way to really see who Jesus is is basically to be flat on your face. The people in the Gospels who come to Jesus standing up, trying to interrogate Him, seeing Him as an equal or inferior, cannot recognize Him. But the people who come to Him on their knees, pleading with Him with their need, are the ones who can grasp who Jesus is.

One example of this: I love this story, in Luke's Gospel, of when Jesus is at a dinner party hosted by a Pharisee named Simon. Often in the Gospels, the Pharisees are standing up against Jesus, want nothing to do with Him, criticizing Him. But in this instance, a Pharisee has invited Him for dinner, great. But while Jesus is at this fancy dinner, a sinful woman of the city, as Luke describes her, comes in, starts washing His



feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, pouring perfume on them. It's, like, really embarrassing. And Simon, the Pharisee, says, "Gosh, if this man was a prophet, he would know what kind of woman this is who is touching him." If Jesus really was from God, He would want nothing to do with this woman. That's Simon's perspective. But then Jesus lifts up this woman as a moral example to Simon and does a point-by-point comparison where He explains how she has treated Him appropriately in ways that Simon hasn't. Then there's that sort of quelling punchline when Jesus says, "Whoever has been forgiven little, loves little, but whoever has been forgiven much loves much," and He points to, "Hey, yeah, this is a sinful woman of the city. She needed a lot of forgiveness. Guess what? She got it. And look, I can see that in her love." Simon thinks he doesn't need that level of forgiveness from Jesus. We as the reader know that he's wrong. And actually, whereas he might look down disdainfully on this woman, he can't see who she is; he certainly can't see who Jesus is.

So the testimony of women in the Gospels is particularly important because, more often than not, the women in the Gospels are coming to Jesus on their knees. Some of the men are as well, but because women were more likely to be in need and to be marginalized, they're less likely to come to Jesus with pride, and they're more likely to be able to see who He is.

**That's a very fascinating observation. Powerful. As I think about the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah, or the Old Testament teachings in general, the theme keeps coming out that we're supposed to care for the orphans and widows. And then you see Jesus, I suppose, doing just that in the Gospels. I think sometimes people have seen a discrepancy between the New Testament and the Old Testament. How do you see Jesus's treatment of women in the Gospels really fulfilling many of those Old Testament prophecies and the Old Testament teachings?**

I think people often want to draw a too firm and often misleading line between the Old and the New Testament in their understanding of who God is. People say, “Well, in the Old Testament, God is angry and vengeful and judgmental, and in the New Testament, Jesus shows us that God is loving and forgiving.” And Jesus does show us that God is loving and forgiving, for sure. But actually Jesus talks in terrifying language about God’s judgment. In particular, He talks about God’s judgment on people who neglect to care for the poor. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus kind of sends chills down my back, as Jesus rather casually tells us about these two people, rich man, poor man. Both die. Rich man goes to hell. Poor man goes to heaven, to Abraham’s bosom. And then—we kind of go from there in terms of the conversation. But it’s really unsettling if you, like me, are a kind of prosperous 21st-century Westerner.

I think it’s easy for us to miss the fact that the Old Testament is filled not only with the seriousness with which God takes sin, but also with the profound grace and mercy that God shows. And the sin that God takes seriously is often sin related to oppression of the poor, neglect of the widows and the orphans. Often in the Old Testament, idolatry comes part and parcel with the failure to care for the poor and with oppressing the weak and the disinherited. So we can’t actually pull those pieces apart. That is one of the ways in which Jesus is fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies about a King who will come and set things right.

Famously, in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus preaches His first public sermon at His hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He opens the scroll to where Isaiah says, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” That whole vision of who Jesus is, as the one who’s come to set the captives free, to give sight to the blind, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor—it is something that we then see enacted through the Gospels. And it’s fascinating. Our church has been working through Matthew’s Gospel recently, and it’s

fascinating in Matthew how we see John the Baptist sending a message to Jesus saying, “Wait a minute. Are You the Messiah?” And you think, *Well, how can John the Baptist be wondering that, because he was proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah from the very beginning?* But if you look at the proclamation that John the Baptist gave, he was describing this one who was going to come with fire and judgment in His hands, the one who has a winnowing fork within His hands, and He was going to bring judgment, bring justice, suddenly. And Jesus says to John’s disciples, “Go back and tell him what you’re seeing” and then He cites these healing miracles.

We see in Jesus both the one who will bring judgment and the one who is bringing healing now. So we can’t pull those pieces apart. The ways in which the Old Testament again and again and again calls God’s people to care for the immigrant, the orphan, and the widow is something that then carries straight over into the New Testament and Jesus’s concern for women and children and for the foreigners and for the sick and for the marginalized and for the weak and the poor.

**Often we hear sermons about Jesus’s twelve, the men who followed Him, very powerful examples of the very broken men who were used to turn the world upside down. Yet we don’t hear as much about the female disciples who followed Jesus. You’re helping us here today think more about the fact that so many of the eyewitness stories are through these female disciples. Can you tell us a bit more what you learned from the women who followed Jesus as disciples? What can we learn from them?**

It’s fascinating, in the middle of Luke’s Gospel, beginning of Luke 8, Luke tells us about Jesus going on this preaching and healing tour around the cities and towns and villages. And Luke says the twelve were with Him and also many women who had been healed of various diseases. Then he tells us the names of three of these women: Mary Magdalene;

Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager; and Susanna. It's very interesting—there's clearly a larger group of women who are traveling around with Jesus, and we meet various of them at various points. But Luke there is citing three particular eyewitnesses. Mary Magdalene goes on to become by far the most famous of Jesus's female disciples because of her critical role in the resurrection accounts. But we actually know very little about Mary Magdalene aside from her starring role at the end of the Gospels.

All we know from Luke at this point is that seven demons had been cast out from her. We don't know whether she was married or single. We don't know whether she was a mother or not a mother—all the things that we tend to add to women's biographies in particular: You know, "Mary Magdalene, wife and mother of three," we don't know any of that. All we know is that she had seven demons cast out from her. She has a rough background, and she went from that to being a key eyewitness of Jesus's ministry, as well as of His death and resurrection. The middle of Luke is highlighting these women who can testify about the things that Jesus preached and did.

The second woman on the list is very interesting as well. Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager. Honestly, before writing this book, I might have skipped over . . . Those names didn't really leap out to me, and I didn't pay any attention to them. But doing some research for this book and especially looking at this incredible scholar, Richard Bauckham, whom I recommend to anyone. He's a British scholar who wrote a fabulous book called *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, looking at the Gospels as eyewitness accounts, and another brilliant book called *Gospel Women*, where he's looking at the named women in the Gospels in particular and what we can learn about and from them. What Richard Bauckham points out is that this Joanna was married or had been married—we don't know whether Chuza is still alive or not or what the situation is—to a senior court official in the court of King Herod, who



was ruling over the area where Jesus was ministering at the time. The fact that she had left the court to travel around the countryside with this rabble of disciples and this impoverished Jewish rabbi was scandalous.

We see that often. As you see in Luke’s Gospel, we’re seeing Jesus interacting with the poor and the marginalized. Here, we see this rich, high-status woman who is going around with Jesus and the disciples, providing for their needs. It’s easy for us to hear women were providing for their needs as like, “Well, clearly they were along to do the cooking and the cleaning for the guys.” But that’s not what’s happening here at all. I mean, Joanna was a high-status woman who would have had servants to cook and clean for her. That was her background. But she is one of the women who is funding the mission—but not content with funding the mission from a distance, she actually was going around with Jesus everywhere. Now, Mary and Joanna are, respectively—Mary is the most common name for Jewish women of Jesus’s time and place, and Joanna is either the second or third, I forget. One of the more common. So both Mary Magdalene and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, need these qualifying descriptions. Susanna is a less common name, and so we just have her name, Susanna. But Luke is very intentionally drawing our attention to three women whom readers could potentially go and access and find out more.

**You’ve noted that Jesus broke through many cultural and religious barriers through His words and actions with women and others. Can you share how Jesus’s interaction with women not only broke through the cultural and religious mores of His day, but also how that should impact how we treat women today and interact with females?**

There are, of course, so many ways. But one is that, at least historically, churches have organized themselves to have a women’s ministry that takes theological questions less seriously than for the men. There’s



more of a sense of, “Oh, well, women aren’t going to want to engage with meaty theological questions. Better to just give them some sort of inspirational Bible verses here and there and let them get on with their sewing.” I’m caricaturing. But we’ve probably all experienced the sort of women’s ministry conference that ends up being very kind of fluffy, for want of a better word. Jesus didn’t take that approach. He had some of His most extensive and serious theological conversations with women. We fail to take women theologically seriously at our cost and peril, I think. So that’s one thing.

Another: It’s almost comic in the Gospels how often Jesus has to tell His disciples in a whole host of ways that leadership in His kingdom is not about power and privilege, but about sacrifice and service. The twelve cannot get their heads around this. They spend their time arguing about who’s the greatest or trying to get . . . as James and John try to get the seats either side of Jesus in His kingdom. Jesus again and again and again has to tell them, “No, no, no, no. You’ve got this completely the wrong way around.” Yes, that’s how the world works—that the great ones lord it over those underneath them and the powerful ones kick down, but that’s not how Jesus’s kingdom works. We have often fallen for a worldly view of leadership in the church. So we’ve elevated men in leadership roles in the church, as if the main point of leadership in the church is power and privilege, not sacrifice and service. We’ve dismissed and marginalized women. Because the Scriptures do reserve, for example, like a senior pastor role for a man, we’ve then used that as a license for not taking women seriously in church administration and situations. That is a failure of us to understand what leadership in God’s kingdom means.

**In our discussion, it’s been clear that Jesus took women seriously. He viewed them as credible people. Just the fact that He appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other women first after the resurrection—many people have argued that it’s one of the great apologetics for the resurrection because it would have been countercultural. If you’d**



**wanted to tell a story that people would believe, you would never have included the women in that story. The fact that the women are there, that's the way it happened, gives a credibility. How can we, in a sense like Jesus, give credibility to women in the culture and in the church? How can we affirm women and the way God created them and, especially in the church, amend some of the practices perhaps that have harmed women or created an image of the church that doesn't treat women the way Jesus would have?**

One of the big shifts we need to make to become more faithful to the Scriptures is to validate the importance and beauty of singleness. Why do I say that with regard to women? Because there are plenty of men who will serve Jesus as single men throughout their lives, just as the apostle Paul did. But there have always been more Christian women than men. That seems to be the case throughout history and across the world. So that's an interesting data point. And it's not—just a side note—because women are more religious than men. Although Christians are more likely to be women than men, that's not actually true of Muslims or of Hindus. It's not just that women are more religious.

So if Christian women are choosing to marry only Christian men, which I think absolutely should be the case, we will always have more single Christian women in the church. And that's not some great tragedy or a regrettable thing . . . “isn't that unfortunate?” Marriage is a wonderful thing. Parenting is a wonderful thing. But if we listen to the Scriptures and what Paul in particular says, we'll find that singleness is even better when it comes to gospel ministry. One way in which we need to change our culture within the church to become more biblical is to stop raising our kids with the expectation that they will necessarily get married. Many will. One thing I try to reinforce to each of my children is, “I will be equally proud of you if you grow up and serve the Lord all your life as a single person, as if you grow up and get married and have children and serve the Lord that way.” Fantastic, both ways.

But often, especially for women, we've made out that being a wife and a

mother is the highest calling for a woman. So then, if you don't become a wife or you become a wife and not a mother, you feel like, "Well, clearly I've flubbed it. I've missed the thing." But no, Jesus is the thing. We are distorting the Scriptures if we talk as if being a wife and a mother is a woman's highest calling. The woman's highest calling is to be a disciple, just as a man's highest calling is to be a disciple. Now, being a husband and a father, those are very high callings. But actually being a single man serving the Lord with all of his heart is, if anything, an even higher calling.

So I think there's a cultural adjustment we need to make. And this is seemingly a small thing, but it has deep significance. I think we need to change the way we operate in Sunday mornings at church. The default assumption is that Christian families, you know, husband and wife and their however-many children, walk into church on a Sunday and sit together and that the church is mostly a gathering of families. Single people can come as well, and that's great, but actually the families come together, and that's the backbone of the church.

In New Testament terms, the church is the family. My family doesn't go to church. The church is my family. Even in the seemingly small ways of where we sit, we need to make that visible. One of the things that my husband and I do, we almost never sit together in church. Not because we don't love each other, but because it's an opportunity for us to connect with others in our church family and for our kids to do the same. Single people walk into church on a Sunday and often feel lonely and . . . God forgive us, those of us who are married with children, that we make our brothers and sisters feel lonely in, of all places, the family home on a Sunday. So it's just seemingly a small thing, but I think a big thing and something that especially impacts women, because we will, as I say, always have more single women than single men.

**That's a wonderful word. I agree. I do believe that the church has forgotten the gifting of singleness and the importance of that calling for many people. As you mentioned, it's just a reality that there are**

**more women than men in the church, that's bound to be the case. So we can certainly look at our practices both individually and corporately.**

**To wrap up, maybe a personal question, but, as a mother, if you could leave a few words of wisdom for your children in the future, what would they be?**

Follow Jesus at all times in all places. Nothing else is as important. I was talking with my twelve-year-old, who's in a Cambridge public school here, and it's really hard. It's a place where her commitment to Jesus has meant losing close friends who have cut her off essentially because of her Christian faith.

Of course, in our culture today, one area where this is most manifested is in questions of sexuality and gender. She and I have been talking. She's been saying, "Mum, why do I need to go to school?" She said, "I learn more at home than I do at school." She's doing her own little history . . . In terms of education, she could actually get more from sitting at home in her room doing her stuff. I said to her this morning—she's been working really hard to welcome and integrate a couple of fellow students who have recently emigrated from other countries and do not speak English well. I said, "Love, that's why you're going to school this morning, to help that new girl who you've been trying to connect with other people and interpret things for her." It's hard work, but it's work she's doing because she's a follower of Jesus. If that's all she achieves at school today, that is an excellent use of her time as a follower of Jesus.

So I think, my wisdom for my kids and for myself . . . is to look for and ask, what are the discipleship opportunities in the environment that I'm in? How can I show Jesus's love to the people Jesus would see as the most important people in the room—the people who are by themselves, the people who don't fit in, the people who are marginalized for whatever reason?

[Video of the complete version of this talk is available at <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/jesus-and-women/>. Additional information about the topic of this talk is included in Rebecca McLaughlin's book, *Jesus Through the Eyes of Women: How the First Female Disciples Help Us Know and Love the Lord* (The Gospel Coalition, 2022).]



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