

MARY A. KASSIAN

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF

GIRLS GONE WISE

THE
RIGHT
KIND OF

strong

SURPRISINGLY SIMPLE HABITS

OF A SPIRITUALLY STRONG WOMAN

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MARY A. KASSIAN



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BOOKS

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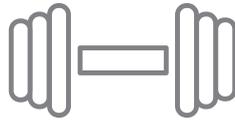
*To my mother
and to
Pearl, June, Marigold, Sarah, and Dorothy—
Strong Women
of the little pink church on the corner*

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O N E

No Weak Girls Here



She dresses herself with strength and
makes her arms strong. . . .

Strength and dignity are her clothing.

—Proverbs 31:17, 25

I was good at arm wrestling.

And proud of it.

I could defeat all the girls at my middle school and many of the boys too.

As the only girl in a household of six kids, I was bent on proving that I was just as strong as my brothers. Anything they could do I could do better. Hitting a baseball? Performing a daredevil balancing act across the train trestle? Building a woodworking masterpiece in Dad's garage? Scuttling up a tree? Collecting a handful of slugs? No problem. I could do it.

THE RIGHT KIND OF *Strong*

Independent. Capable. Confident. Fearless. Strong.
That was me.

My can-do attitude was bolstered by the rise of second-wave feminism. During my childhood the airwaves were filled with Girl Power anthems. I knew most of the lyrics by heart and often hummed them under my breath as I went through my day. Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots are Made for Walkin'" convinced me that a strong woman crushes any man who dares cross her. Look out, guys . . . one of these days my boots might just walk all over you!

Aretha Franklin's catchy tune empowered me to demand boldly that my five brothers (and all the other males in my life) *respect* me. And then there was Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman," which reinforced that I ought to be strong . . . invincible, even.¹

Yup.

I was sure that being strong and invincible was what womanhood was all about. Little patience did I have for girls who didn't grasp this fundamental concept.

The other girls were content to enroll in the obligatory home economics course. Not me. I lobbied my principal to let me take mechanics/shop and drafting with the boys instead, and I think I got the best mark in the class. I was a go-getter. A leader. I started a small business. I started a rock band. I was president of the Christian club.

After I finished high school at age sixteen, I convinced a major department store manager to hire me as a night janitor—a physically demanding position that had, up until then, only been filled by burly males. The salary was four times higher than what I could have earned as a sales clerk or secretary. In the interview I pushed for the opportunity to prove that I could do the job as well as any man. I knew when they probationally hired me that I would need to do it even better.

I saved up enough money from that job to spend a year in Europe and to support myself through college. Of all my six siblings, I'm the only one who earned a professional degree and an opportunity to

climb the corporate ladder. These were lofty achievements for a child of a family of poor immigrants, and especially for a girl.

I was a strong woman.

That is, I was strong in all the ways the world admired.

But as the years passed, I began to suspect that I wasn't nearly as strong as I made myself out to be. The more I read the Bible, the more it challenged my idea about what it truly meant to be strong. I realized that bending my will to do what God wanted me to do required a strength I did not possess. I was strong enough to demand my rights, yet not strong enough to relinquish them. I reluctantly concluded that what I extolled as strength was often little more than stubbornness, insolence, self-sufficiency, and prideful self-promotion.

And then there was Pearl Purdie.

That was her name.

For real.

Pearl attended the church I grew up in, the little pink church on the corner. In my teens and early twenties, Pearl invited me over to her home from time to time to sip Orange Pekoe tea and play some rousing games of shuffleboard.

Pearl was old. Very old. She had tiny blue veins. Blue hair. Dentures. Coke-bottle glasses that made her right eye look bigger than her left. She stood at four-foot-ten—maybe. And that was with her sensible Aerosoles Mary Jane pumps on. Pearl was so frail that a high wind could have snapped her in half.

She didn't have a college degree.

She hadn't climbed up any corporate ladder.

She didn't have the assertive, self-confident swagger of all the powerhouse female achievers I normally hung out with.

But as I got to know her, I discovered that she was a truly strong woman.

Curiously, she seemed even stronger than the strong women I admired and tried to emulate.

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Pearl didn't exhibit the brash, sassy, self-serving, demanding kind of strong that the women's movement had cultivated in me and many of my peers. Hers was a different kind of strong. It was far kinder. Far more beautiful. Far more certain. Far more genuine. Far more profound.

And far more powerful.

Pearl's strength was accompanied by a quiet and gentle spirit. The kind of womanly spirit that the Bible informs us is exceedingly precious to God (1 Peter 3:4). She was a woman of faith with deep, unshakable convictions. This sweet, gentle woman was fearless. Resolute. Passionate. Bold. An eighty-something, four-foot-ten, Orange-Pekoe-tea-sipping, shuffleboard-playing spiritual-giant slayer. A force to be reckoned with.

I learned from Pearl that godly strength has a far different texture to it than worldly strength. I also learned that strength can come in all sorts of shapes and sizes.

Pearl was Pearl. She didn't need to get a professional degree, climb the corporate ladder, or adopt a different set of personality traits to be a strong woman. She didn't need to be young, sexually attractive, and full of energy either. When Pearl's eyesight failed and she was no longer able to strap on her Mary Janes, play shuffleboard, or make the perfect pot of tea, her inner strength continued to shine through—and even brighter—right to the end.

Pearl was my hero.

She was a woman who had made a lifelong habit of clothing herself with the right kind of strength.

Our heavenly Father wants all his girls to be strong. He wants all of us to clothe ourselves with strength and dignity and make our arms strong.

You may be an introvert or extravert. Love pink or hate it. Work as a CEO or a waitress. Know your way around the kitchen or around the racetrack. You may be the type of girl who lists perfume on her

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Christmas wish list, or the type who'd rather receive a power tool. (Brent, if you're reading this, I'd like a Bosch or Makita power planer, please.)

Regardless of our varied personalities and interests and gifts, we can all become strong, godly women.

I suspect the reason you picked up this book is that you want to be strong. Maybe you've had a Pearl in your life who has inspired you with a vision of spiritual strength, a godly older woman who has modeled it well. Or perhaps you suspect that the popular formula for what it means to be a strong woman is lacking and misses the mark. Maybe you feel weak and inadequate. Maybe you're tired of merely pretending to be strong.

Whatever your motivation, rest assured that your desire to grow stronger is in line with what God wants for you.

He does not want women to be weak and wimpy.

He wants us to be the right kind of strong.

SHE DRESSES HERSELF WITH STRENGTH

How do we become the right kind of strong?

The Bible tells us that it starts with believing in Jesus Christ. When we do that, we are filled with *his* strength. The Holy Spirit makes us strong in the Lord. Done deal. We are strong because God makes us strong. He does the work. It's part of the gift we receive at the time of our salvation.

But the Bible also says that we have a responsibility to learn how to *put on* the strength that God provides. A godly woman “dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong” (Proverbs 31:17). Both metaphors imply that strength requires ongoing action on our part.

Dressing ourselves is something we do every day—multiple times

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a day. Gym clothes. Work clothes. Dress clothes. Comfortable clothes. Night clothes. Accessories. Coats and jackets. Shoes. Flip-flops. Snow boots. Slippers.

Making our arms strong also indicates ongoing action. It likens the process of building spiritual strength to the process of building physical strength. Our arms won't grow strong if we only go to the gym once a year to exercise our muscles on the shiny bench press machine. No. We make our arms strong by making a habit of lifting weight on a regular basis.

Proverbs 31:17 shows us that a woman grows spiritually stronger by incorporating strength-building habits into her life.

Habits are such small, seemingly insignificant things. The actions, in the moment, don't seem like much. The changes they produce are so subtle they're almost imperceptible. So it's easy to minimize the importance of them.

What difference does it make if I miss getting exercise today? Or if I enjoy a soft drink? Not much. But if I consistently fail to exercise and continue to consume a soda each day, a year from now my body will seize up like an old rusty bike and I will have put on an extra fifteen pounds.

The individual choices may be small, but they certainly aren't inconsequential. Little choices compound over time. Small things done consistently produce big results.

A series of small, negative choices will lead to significant negative results. A series of small, positive choices will lead to significant positive results. It's the consistency of the habit over time rather than the magnitude of each individual action that makes the difference.

This book is about the surprisingly simple habits of a spiritually strong woman. It's about the little things we can do on an ongoing basis to strengthen our spiritual core. I'm going to tell it to you straight, though: There is no secret formula, quick fix, or magic pill. There are no shortcuts. Becoming a strong woman doesn't just happen

overnight. It takes years of consistent habits, thousands of small, seemingly insignificant steps of obedience.

These small steps, taken consistently, over time, will make a radical difference in our lives. Godly habits are what will turn us into strong godly women.

I debated whether I should subtitle this book *Secrets of a Spiritually Strong Woman* instead of *Habits of a Spiritually Strong Woman*. *Secrets* might have made for a better sell. *Habits* are just so mundane. Unremarkable. Tedious. Humdrum. *Secrets* sound much more mysterious, intriguing, and tantalizing. I thought women would be excited about some brand-new secrets and questioned whether they'd be as eager to be reminded of all the small, routine, day-to-day choices they need to make consistently in order to become strong.

We live in a secret-formula, quick-fix world. So we often lose sight of the simple but profound fundamental truth that steady, consistent effort over time is the best way to make progress.

Is there a secret formula for becoming strong?

No, there is not.

There's just the age-old wisdom that lays out the habits that are necessary to build spiritual strength.

Do these habits take effort?

Yes, they definitely do.

But they are not prohibitive or complicated. They're simple. So simple, in fact, that it's easy to overlook them.

In this book, you will find seven surprisingly simple habits. These habits would likely not top the list if we were to ask women to think of the ones that are important for building spiritual strength. The basic habits of Bible reading, prayer, memorization, church attendance, and Christian fellowship likely would, as they are vital disciplines for a healthy spiritual life. It almost goes without saying that you would benefit from consistently doing these things.

The habits in this book are just as important though. They're

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not meant to replace disciplines like Bible reading and prayer but to accompany and build on them. The list is not comprehensive. There are undoubtedly other habits that could be added. So, why then, you may ask, did I pick these particular habits?

It's because they specifically counter the strength-sapping habits of a group of women the apostle Paul characterized as weak. These habits would have prevented these women from becoming weak and made them spiritually strong.

The seven strength-building habits we're going to talk about in this book are not big, sweeping changes that will take huge amounts of time and effort. They aren't difficult tasks you'll need to add to your daily to-do list. Some may require greater follow-through, but mostly they're just small correctives to attitudes and ways of thinking that won't take much energy to implement. They're simple, little things you can do all the time.

But women who do these things consistently will grow stronger, while women who just think about doing them, or only do them from time to time, won't.

WEE, TINY, WEAK WOMEN

Some women in the church of Ephesus were weak. Paul warned Timothy about ungodly people who would “creep into households and capture weak women” (2 Timothy 3:6).

I don't know about you, but if a prominent male pastor publicly called me weak, I'd feel insulted. Given the connotation of the Greek word Paul used, the women in Timothy's church likely felt that way too. Let me explain why.

The Greek word for *woman* is the feminine noun *gynaikes*, but Paul called these women *gynaikarion*. *Karion* is a diminutive, which is an ending added on to a word to indicate a smaller version or slighter

degree than its root. It can refer to someone or something that's smaller in size or quality, younger, or cuter.

Musicians know that the word *diminuendo* means they should decrease the loudness or intensity with which they are singing or playing.

We don't have many diminutive endings in English, and the ones we do have usually only refer to size, without the other connotations. Like the suffix *let* in *piglet* or *booklet*, for example. But many other languages, such as Greek, Latin, French, and Polish, apply grammatical diminutives to nouns.

German, which was my first language, is another. It often uses the diminutive ending-*chen*. *Brot* is a loaf of bread; *brötchen* is bread rolls. *Katze* is a cat; *kätzchen* is a kitten. *Punkt* is a dot; *pünktchen* is a tiny dot. You get the idea.

Sometimes diminutives can be used to convey a sense of affection. They're frequently used when speaking to small children (Tiny Tim), when expressing tenderness and intimacy (sweetie, kitten, little bear), or in nicknames (calling Michael "Mikey").

But in other contexts diminutives are used to denote that someone or something is weak or childish. For example, one of the last of the Western Roman emperors was named Romulus Augustus, after the legendary first king of Rome, Romulus, and its glorious first emperor, Augustus. But the public added a diminutive *ulus* to his name, dubbing him *Romulus Augustulus*, to convey that he was far less than these great leaders and to ridicule the young emperor's ineptitude. Augustulus didn't even last a year before being deposed.

When Paul called women in Ephesus *gynaikarion*, he wasn't using the diminutive in a positive way. He wasn't commenting that they looked cute in their funky shoes. He wasn't employing an affectionate term of endearment. No. What he said was akin to name-calling. It was a put-down. Paul was literally calling them "little women" or "wee tiny women."

And he wasn't talking about their height.

Gynaikarion contains the idea of being small, underdeveloped, and insufficient. Translating the word into English isn't an easy task. Different versions of the Bible use "weak" (ESV), "gullible" (NIV), "idle" (HCSB), and "silly" (KJV).

The important thing, the concept I want you to take away from all this talk about diminutives, is that these women were less than they ought to have been. They were stunted versions of true womanhood. They were weak in a way that diminished them. They weren't mature, beautiful examples of what strong godly women should be.

They were just wee, tiny, and weak.

STRONG FEMALE FRIENDS

Was Paul a chauvinist? A woman-hater? A casualty of the patriarchal ideology of his time?

Many modern women take offense at the fact that Paul labeled these women weak. If a male pastor or blogger were to use that label for women today, the Twitterverse would explode with rage. He'd be denounced as a vile, sexist misogynist. At the very least he'd be viewed as a politically incorrect boor in severe need of some gender-sensitivity training.

Based on this derogatory label Paul used for the women in Ephesus, and some other things he wrote about women, many conclude that he was a chauvinist who didn't view women as equals. But I don't think this conclusion is justified. Paul had a lot of close friends who were strong women. His letters mention twelve women by name—strong females who worked with him in gospel ministry.

There was Chloe, whose people brought Paul news of division within the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 1:11). Nympha, the woman who hosted the house church in Laodicea (Colossians 4:15).

Apphia, hostess to the Colossian church Philetus Lydia, a wealthy businesswoman who engaged in the lucrative trade of purple cloth, whose home became operation-central for Paul and Silas's ministry in Philippi (Acts 16:14, 40).

And there was Phoebe, who carried and delivered Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul described this strong female coworker as a minister (deaconess) of the church in Cencrea and as a patron. Being a patron (or sponsor) was an influential public role that wealthy women held in the first-century Greco-Roman world (Romans 16:1–2).

There was also Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis—strong women whom Paul lauded for working very hard to forward the gospel (vv. 6, 12).

And then there was Euodia and Syntyche. These two women were such strong forces that they constantly clashed. Paul encouraged them to work out their issues and get along (Philippians 4:2–3).

But outshining Paul's many strong female friends was his special friend Priscilla, the female half of the ministry powerhouse couple, Priscilla and Aquilla.

Like Paul, Priscilla and Aquilla were tentmakers by trade. They initially met Paul in Corinth, where they invited him to live with them and join them in their tentmaking business. While in Corinth, the three friends also worked together to establish a church (Acts 18:2). Later, Priscilla and Aquilla accompanied Paul on his evangelistic journey as far as Ephesus (Acts 18:19).

In Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquilla instructed Apollos in the Christian faith (vv. 24–26). As the number of believers grew, they hosted the church in their home (1 Corinthians 16:19). Their ministry in Ephesus was so impactful that Paul told his friends that all the churches of the Gentiles owed them a huge debt of gratitude (Romans 16:3–5).

Priscilla and Aquilla were mentioned six times in Paul's letters, and four of the six times Priscilla's name comes first. In ancient times,

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the order of names often indicated priority or importance. The fact that Paul mentioned Priscilla first might suggest that she was from an influential Roman family, or that, of the two, she was stronger in ministry and more of a go-getter. Regardless, it's undeniable that Priscilla (who was sometimes nicknamed Prisca) was a woman whose strength Paul respected and admired.

She was a strong woman.

As I mentioned before, she was an integral part of the church in Ephesus. So maybe that was the reason why Paul called those women in the Ephesian congregation to account for being weak. The difference between them and Priscilla was just so glaring.

When Paul disparagingly called them wee, tiny, weak women, his point was that they ought not to have been weak. He wanted them to be *strong* women. The irony is they likely thought they were. But, unfortunately, their concept of what made a woman truly strong was not in line with the Lord's.

They were caught up in bad habits that diminished their spiritual strength.

Perhaps they were mimicking their culture's ideal of what it meant for a woman to be strong.

WOMEN IN ANCIENT EPHEBUS

To get a better idea of why the women in Timothy's church likely viewed themselves as strong, let's take a brief tour of ancient Ephesus.

When you think of Ephesus, don't think of a small, dusty town with dirt streets and a few camels and donkeys tied up here and there. Think of a metropolitan city, one of the biggest in the world, with a bustling harbor and the pace, architecture, and infrastructure of a large, commercial cosmopolitan center. Think Chicago, Toronto, or Los Angeles. That will get you closer to the mark.

Ephesus was a busy urban Greco-Roman port.² In the Romans' time it was called "the first and greatest metropolis of Asia."³ At its height some 250,000 people lived there. It was exceeded in population only by Rome and Alexandria.

A theater mentioned in Acts 19:29 was the largest in the world. It accommodated twenty-four thousand people on three tiers. The doors of the spectacular theater opened onto the great marble main street, which was flanked on either side by tall marble columns. The street was bordered by lovely fountains, civic buildings, houses, shops, a library, baths, and a great marketplace. This cosmopolitan center also boasted a centrally located brothel and casino.

Ephesus was a wealthy city. The multistory residences of its upper-middle class rested on the north terraces of a mountain. They boasted amazing opulence and split-level construction, with floor space often exceeding ten thousand square feet. Some homes had elaborate mosaic floors and marble walls. Many had hot and cold running water and heated bathrooms. They were mansions, even by today's standards.

Of the metropolitan population, at least a third were slaves. The majority were employed in domestic service in households and could expect an easier life than rural free folk. Many slaves earned money. Some had slaves of their own. It's important to understand that slavery in that day was markedly different from the type witnessed in our eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western world. In Paul's day people sometimes sold themselves as slaves, knowing they could have a higher standard of living than if they had to fend for themselves.

According to legend Ephesus was founded by the Amazons, great female warriors, so it comes as no surprise that its people believed that a female deity watched over the city. The goddess Artemis was depicted as a virgin "tomboy huntress . . . with her quiver and bow and dogs by her side."⁴ The Temple of Artemis (also known as the Temple of Diana), just north of the city, was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. As big as a soccer field and three to four times as large

as the Parthenon in Athens, it was the largest and grandest building in the world at the time. One historian testified that it was more marvelous than any of the other six Wonders of the Ancient World.⁵

This state-run temple was famous not only for its great size but also for the magnificent works of art it contained. It was the primary banking and real-estate holding institution of Asia Minor, holding in deposit the money of wealthy locals and even foreign states and kings. It also promoted a profitable tourist industry. Silversmiths, such as Demetrius (Acts 19:24, 38), the leader of the Silversmiths Guild, made their fortunes by peddling souvenirs of the temple and the goddess Artemis to the city's many tourists (vv. 25–28).

The state-sponsored religious cult was also responsible for the city's many cultural activities. Besides daily public sacrifices, the Temple of Artemis hosted feasts, festivals, banquets, processions, contests of athletes, actors, and musicians, and other sacred games in the virgin goddesses' honor. A plethora of other gods and goddesses were also worshipped.

Most women in Ephesus were educated. Roman and Greek culture valued education, so both boys and girls were schooled up to about the age of twelve, learning to read, write, and do basic mathematics. Some older boys, whose families could afford it, would go to more advanced schools where they studied public speaking and the writings of the great intellects. Ephesus was home to a renowned center for philosophical and rhetorical studies, though few people advanced in their formal education to that degree. This elite graduate school was not open to women. But that doesn't mean that women didn't pursue advanced education.

Upper-class women were educated by private tutors. The fact that they read and wrote literature and poetry during this period is illustrated by several tributes and poetic epigrams, proving that females were among the known devotees of literature.⁶ The most famous female philosopher of ancient times, Hypatia of Alexandria, wrote

several treatises and became head of a school of philosophy. While the men in Ephesus routinely gathered in public halls to listen to philosophers' debates and lectures, upper-class women did so in private settings, frequently attending lectures in restricted salons.

The lore that Ephesus was founded by great Amazon female warriors and was watched over by a female deity indicates that women played a significant role in that society. What's more, Roman law guaranteed women many rights and freedoms.

Male and female offspring had equal inheritance rights, so women inherited property. Furthermore, the law stipulated that a wife's property be kept separate from her husband's (except the dowry) and that her money could be reclaimed following a divorce. A married woman could keep her maiden name or use her husband's name. Divorce was easily achieved by either party and was a common occurrence.

There were many independently wealthy women. Although they legally needed permission from the head of the family for legal transactions, this was apparently not hard to come by. Women routinely owned property and businesses and had their own money.

Women of that day couldn't vote or hold office, but that doesn't mean they weren't involved in political life. In 42 BC a wealthy woman named Hortensia gave a famous speech in Rome's forum to oppose a proposed bill that would tax the wealth of Rome's richest women to fund the war against Caesar's assassins.

She wasn't the only woman who wielded significant political influence. A woman named Livia was highly influential in politics—so much so that she was given the illustrious title Mother of the Fatherland. Like many independently wealthy women, Livia was also a noted patron of the arts, literature, and philosophy.

The early church relied on the wealth of these types of women. They hosted churches in their homes and provided financial support for the ministry.

In Ephesus, women could work in just about every profession.

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A woman couldn't be a soldier or a Roman senator, but pretty much everything else was fair game. She could be a shopkeeper, vendor, or jewelry maker, or work in the craft or textile industry. According to historical records, at least one woman was a blacksmith. Priscilla was a tentmaker. Whether or not a woman worked had more to do with her economic and social status than anything else. As I already mentioned, a third of the population in Ephesus worked as slaves, serving the upper class. Many middle-class women worked in trades with their husbands. And many middle-and upper-class women owned businesses. So, it appears that the majority of women in Ephesus were "gainfully employed" in work that extended beyond their roles as wives and mothers.

The vibe of ancient Ephesus was surprisingly much like our own.

The population had a passionate devotion to fitness. Athletes, musicians, and actors were wildly popular and achieved considerable fame and fortune.

Shopping and consumerism were rampant. Women tried to copy the latest clothing and hairstyles of the Roman aristocrats.

Moral beliefs were diverse.

The gossip on the street blazed with the sexual scandals of high-profile women like Messalina, the powerful and influential wife of the Roman emperor Claudius; she welcomed a string of lovers through her bed. And Poppaea Sabina, a commoner who shunned her husband, seduced a senator, and eventually became mistress (and then wife) to the ruthless emperor Nero. Prostitution was legal, public, and widespread. No moral censure was directed at the man who engaged in sex acts with boys.

Ephesus was extremely pluralistic, including Greek, Roman, and various other ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The culture embraced religious diversity, celebrated moral freedom, and encouraged tolerance and inclusion. Anyone claiming to have the right religion, the

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only god, or a corner on truth was bound to face social marginalization and even persecution.

It's safe to assume that many of the females in Timothy's church were literate. The elaborate hairstyles, jewelry, and clothing mentioned in 1 Timothy 2:9 and the warning to the rich in 1 Timothy 6:17–18 prove that there were wealthy women in the congregation. More than a few would have owned their own businesses. At least some of them were privately educated, being tutored by teachers like Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Timothy 2:17–18). A few, conceivably, were highly accomplished in poetry and philosophy.

Given the historical and cultural backdrop, I suspect that the women in Timothy's church would not have considered themselves to be weak. They would have viewed themselves as strong. They were successful, independent, and self-sufficient. Some probably packed a sassy, brazen attitude to go along with their privileged positions and stylish purses. By contemporary Roman standards, and probably by our standards, too, they would have been upheld and extolled as models of strength.

But Paul didn't base his assessment on the community standard. He based it on a spiritual one.

These women weren't nearly as high and capable as they thought themselves to be. Instead, they were small, underdeveloped, and insufficient. They weren't strong like Paul's friend, Priscilla.

They were just weak little women.

Why?

LITTLE GIRL PROBLEMS

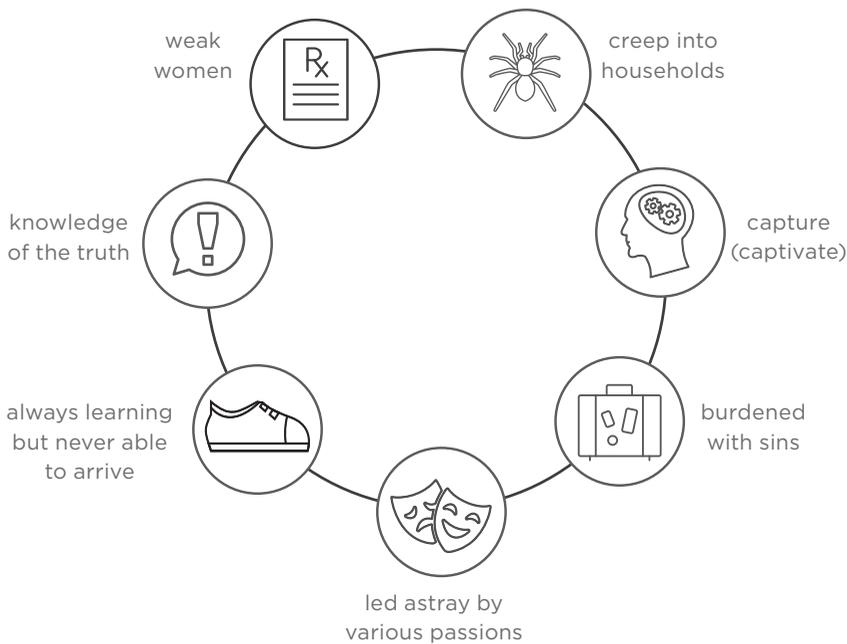
I can't recall anyone ever calling me *little*. Standing at nearly six feet tall, the comment I usually get is, "Wow. You're tall. Do you play basketball?"

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Depending on my mood, I sometimes need to bite my tongue to keep from retorting, “Wow. You’re short. Do you ride ponies?” Sigh. #TallGirlProblems.

As we discussed earlier, Paul used the diminutive *gynaikarion*, which means “little women,” to refer to that group of women in Timothy’s church, and the label had nothing to do with their physical height. These women were spiritually shorter than they should have been. They were spiritual Lilliputians—shrunk, stunted versions of godly, strong women.

Why? What is it that diminished them?



SEVEN STRENGTH-SAPPING HABITS

Second Timothy 3:6–7 is extremely enlightening: “Among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.” If we break this down into clauses, we can discover seven unhealthy habits that shrunk those fine-feathered Ephesian women down into tiny spiritual minikins. #LittleWomanProblems.

1. She tolerates creeps (“creep into households”).
2. She fails to guard her mind (“capture”).
3. She lets things pile up (“burdened with sins”).
4. She’s governed by emotions (“led astray by various passions”).
5. She doesn’t apply what she learns (“always learning and never able to arrive”).
6. She doesn’t have solid convictions (“knowledge of the truth”).
7. She embraces the wrong kind of strong (“weak women”).

There you have it.

Seven clauses. Seven strength-sapping habits that diminished the Christian women in Ephesus. Seven bad habits that you’ll want to avoid if you want to become a strong woman.

Every bad habit has a good counterpart. If smoking is a bad habit, then not smoking is a good habit. In this book you will learn to avoid the habits that make women weak by embracing the ones that make them strong.

If you consistently do the following, you will become strong:

- Catch the creeps.

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- Master your mind.
- Ditch the baggage.
- Engage your emotions.
- Walk the talk.
- Stand your ground.
- Admit your need.

As I said before, these aren't the only habits that will strengthen a woman's spiritual core. But they certainly are some critical ones.

BRAVE. BOLD. STRONG.

This generation has been raised with the idea that *strength* is the most important trait for women. Hollywood resolutely marches out a parade of capable female heroines to show us what it means to be strong. There's been an explosion of campaigns and initiatives by the government, nonprofits, corporations, and educators whose express purpose is to promote female empowerment. Billions of dollars have been spent on this mission.

Girl Power propaganda is reinforced by celebrities, by the media, and in our schools. A crop of Girl Power anthems fills the airwaves to rally our hearts to the cause. Like Beyoncé's "Run the World (Girls)," Destiny's Child's "Independent Women," Demi Lovato's "Confident," Rachel Platten's "Fight Song," Sara Bareilles's "Brave," Britney Spears's "Stronger," and Alicia Keys's "Girls on Fire."⁷ What better way to infuse the idea into the subconsciousness of girls than to have them constantly singing lyrics about women taking charge?

We are literally bombarded with the message that women should be bold. Brave. Strong.

Weakness must be avoided at all costs.

But if you're at all familiar with the Bible, you'll know that being

weak isn't necessarily a bad thing. In 2 Corinthians 12:10, for example, Paul told his friends that he delighted in weakness: "for when I am weak, then I am strong." Paul's frailties and sufferings presented him with the opportunity to rely on Christ's power, so he viewed them in a positive light. As a girlfriend of mine frequently reminds me, "Anything that increases our dependence on Jesus is a good thing!"

Paul felt the same way. There's no doubt that he would have encouraged (and not scolded) women who felt inadequate and lacking in strength. But when Paul called out the women in Timothy's church for being weak, he obviously didn't have the when-I-am-weak-then-I am-strong kind of weakness in mind. That kind of weakness is a positive trait.

And there's the rub.

The Bible's concept of weak and strong doesn't line up with culture's. This is especially the case when it comes to ideas about womanhood.

All too often women think that being strong means foregoing their femininity and denying the most integral and beautiful aspects of who they are as women. Sadly, a woman who thinks she is strong may just be headstrong. A woman who thinks she is brave may just be rash. A woman who thinks she is bold may just be aggressive. A woman who thinks she is confident may just be arrogant. A woman who thinks she is independent may just be standoffish. A woman who thinks she is smart may just be foolish.

Many women have embraced the wrong kind of strong. Christian women aren't immune to having a skewed image of what constitutes a strong woman.

We've all sipped the cultural Kool-Aid.

If we read the Bible, it's undeniable that God wants his girls to be strong—but strong in the right kind of way. Because the wrong kind of strong simply makes women weak—weak in the wrong kind of way.

Thankfully, Scripture makes the difference between the right

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kind and the wrong kind of strong abundantly clear. That's why we're going to rely on the Bible to help us figure it out.

If you like, you can read through Paul's second letter to Timothy before we get started. It's only four chapters long. It's the book of the Bible that contains the passage about weak women. That's where we're going to park and spend a lot of time. If you're ambitious, you can also read Paul's first letter to Timothy. And if you're super ambitious, you can add the book of Ephesians. All three of these letters were written for the congregation in Ephesus. Reading them will give you a richer understanding of what was going on there. (Ha ha! And I said I wasn't going to add any big to-dos to your list.)

God does not want you to be a weakling. He wants you to be a steel magnolia: a soft, feminine woman with fire in your belly, courage in your heart, and steel in your spine. He wants you to have the strength to say no to what's wrong and yes to what's right and to live your life for the glory of Christ.

Imagine what it would be like to be a genuinely strong woman.

I'm not talking about the brash, worldly kind of strength that relies on your own capacities—the kind of strength that's brittle and fragile and shatters when tested—but a soft, quiet, confident strength that relies on the power of the Holy Spirit. The kind that makes you bold to stand for truth and brave to navigate through any kind of storm.

Are you ready to get started?

These surprisingly simple habits offer you more than Girl Power ever could. You only need to take a series of tiny steps, consistently, over time, to strengthen your spiritual core radically. Just think: you can become bolder, braver, and stronger than ever before . . . and best of all, it will be the right kind of strong.

T W O

Catch the Creeps



Sin does not advance by leaps, it advances by creeps—one tiny compromise at a time.

Would you lock yourself in a container with five thousand deadly scorpions? A Thai woman dubbed the Scorpion Queen did. And for thirty-three days at that! Onlookers grimaced as the clicking, writhing, black blanket of curvy-tailed arachnids completely obscured her face. To claim yet another Guinness World Book record, she held a large, pincered, poisonous, eight-legged creature in her mouth for a staggering three minutes and twenty-eight seconds.¹ Yikes!

The Scorpion Queen is an oddity. Most people hate creeping things. Just the thought of spiders, tarantulas, crickets, grasshoppers, snakes, or any other type of creepy-crawly is enough to make us cringe.

Even though I'm not particularly frightened by them, I don't tolerate their existence either. Whenever I encounter a spider scuttling

across my floor, I view it as an unwelcome intruder and quickly snuff out its life.

Sometimes our feelings about creeping things go deeper than disgust. They border on terror. I'm convinced that a guest at a barbeque I hosted in my backyard last summer had a full-blown phobia.

There are always insects buzzing and crawling around my outdoor patio, and most of the time, people simply swat them away in annoyance. Not this time. When a spider slid down a silky thread and nimbly landed on this guest's shoulder, her reaction could not have been more extreme. With a bloodcurdling scream, she jumped up onto the chaise.

Her plate of food went flying in all directions. A slice of tomato slathered in mayonnaise landed on my head. Startled, the dogs started running in circles, barking, and knocking glasses off the coffee table. Some guests grabbed their plates and took cover. Others just stared wide-eyed.

The woman continued to screech and howl, whacking invisible assailants from her hair, swatting at every inch of her body, and hopping back and forth—foot to foot—faster than a football player on an agility ladder.

I froze in confusion when I noticed the horrible red streak on her leg. Had one of the dogs viciously attacked? It took a moment for me to realize that the streak was ketchup. And that her torment (and squalling) would not end until someone got rid of the teeny tiny spider lounging at her feet.

What is this strange, terrifying power of creepy-crawlies?

We shriek when they land on our skin, give them prominent roles in our horror movies, hire exterminators to vanquish them from our homes, and conscript chivalrous males to chase them away.

Fear of creatures like spiders and snakes is right at the top of the list of the world's most common phobias, affecting women four times more than men. Nearly half of all women feel anxious, nervous, or

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extremely frightened when confronted with one.² There's just something alarming and despicable about a creature that creeps.

It's bad enough when we spot a little intruder and can see that it doesn't pose any threat. But it's far worse when we ignore the danger (the Scorpion Queen *willingly* put poisonous scorpions in her mouth?) or when we aren't even aware that intruders have crept in and are causing damage.

Our family has an old cabin at a lake in northern Alberta, Canada. One day I noticed a small pile of sawdust on the ledge of the front window. I quickly brushed it off and didn't give it another thought. The following spring when we opened up the cabin, there was a much, much bigger pile of sawdust sitting on the ledge of the window. On closer examination I discovered why.

Carpenter ants!

That's bad. Not quite as bad as termites; carpenter ants are more like their lazy ant cousins. They typically seek out wood that has been softened by moisture or decay. They don't like to chew wood that's too hard. Nevertheless, these intruders can still cause significant damage and weaken the supporting structure of a building. The infestation can get so severe that the walls start rustling like crinkling cellophane, and large winged ants start to emerge from every crevice.

Thankfully we were able to fix the damage and exterminate them before things got that bad.

CREEPS THEN AND NOW

The first habit of a spiritually strong woman is that she is always on the lookout for creeps. The women in Ephesus had a bad habit of letting them enter into their households.

Some women welcomed the creeps. Like the Scorpion Queen, they didn't seem to think they posed any danger. Others probably had

no idea that they were encroaching. Like the situation at our cabin, they didn't pay attention to the early warning signs and were unaware that intruders had crept in and were causing significant damage.

Apparently, some prominent members of Timothy's congregation were promoting ideas that "swerved from the truth" (2 Timothy 2:18). Their bad theology was spreading "like gangrene" (v. 17). It was whipping up "foolish, ignorant controversies" (v. 23), breeding "quarrels" (v. 23), and "upsetting the faith of some" (v. 18).

Paul noted that these charlatans were finding disproportionate success among the women. Why?

Because in Paul's assessment, these women were not strong enough to resist them. Instead of slamming the door on these rogue teachers and their novel ideas, they were allowing them to walk right in.

The verb that Paul used to describe the actions of these men is *enduno*, which means to enter through devious means or pretense. It can also be translated as "worm their way in, sneak into, infiltrate, or enter on the sly."³ It's a derogatory term that paints these guys as sinister and treacherous tricksters.

To creep is to move slowly or gradually, to advance with subtlety and almost imperceptibly. It's making persistent progress a teeny little bit at a time.

Like the women in Ephesus, many modern women let the wrong kind of guys come into their lives. I constantly get letters from women who were swept off their feet by a Mr. McDreamy only to discover that he was actually Mr. McDreadful in disguise.

I think of Emily, a middle-aged woman who was widowed when her husband of twenty-seven years died of a sudden heart attack. About a year later Emily met Harvey. He introduced himself to her in the church parking lot just before the service. They sat together in church that Sunday. Harvey was charming. He asked her out for lunch. Within two weeks, they were seeing each other on a daily basis. The grief of mourning her husband's death finally lifted.

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Emily felt like a schoolgirl again.

She shrugged off the probing questions from her adult children about Harvey's past. He didn't like to talk about it. Besides, what did it matter? She also shrugged off their suggestion that things were moving a bit too fast. So what? Harvey was perfect. He was funny and attentive and affectionate (very affectionate!). Emily was smitten.

Harvey took Emily on a romantic trip to Mexico. They spent a lot of time alone together in her condo. So much time that it seemed to her children that Harvey practically lived there. Emily bristled when her kids pointed out that she was breaking all the dating rules she had demanded they follow. And she grew extremely defensive when her daughter confronted her about Harvey being there at breakfast one morning when she happened to drop by.

"What does Harvey even do?" her kids demanded. Emily couldn't exactly say. Something to do with business investing. He definitely spent a lot of time on the computer.

Four months after meeting, Emily and Harvey got married. But it didn't turn out to be the happily-ever-after fairy-tale ending Emily had hoped for.

Not even close.

Harvey abandoned her soon after their first wedding anniversary. But not before hoodwinking her into signing over her car. And not before cleaning out all her bank accounts, including most of the money she had received from her late husband's estate.

You may wonder how Emily could have been so blind to Harvey's true intentions. But creeps are notoriously clever and sneaky. They know exactly what to say and do to beguile their prey. They know how to exploit a woman's vulnerabilities and gain her trust.

There's something sinister about creeps.

They come in and infringe. And supplant. And take over. But they do it so gradually and incrementally that a woman is often left

scratching her head and wondering, *How on earth did this happen to me? How did I get from there to here? How did I get myself into such a mess? How?*

I'm sure these are the kind of questions Eve asked herself when she realized what a mess she had gotten herself into, after falling for the sales pitch of that clever old Creep in the garden.

THE BIGGEST CREEP OF ALL

Creeps are nothing new. Since the dawn of time, women have been susceptible to tricksters worming their way in. It all started with that wily old talking serpent in the garden of Eden.

The Bible tells us that he was “more crafty” than any other animal (Genesis 3:1). One translation states he “was the most cunning of all” (HCSB). When it came to creeps, he was the worst. He was evil, shrewd, and exceptionally skilled in deception.

The serpent slid into Eve's idyllic life and engaged her in friendly conversation. To Eve, their banter seemed innocent enough. Little did she know that he was a smooth, calculating trickster. As they talked he bent the truth just a teeny tiny bit. What he proposed sounded right and good and reasonable to Eve. I'm sure she was convinced that he was just trying to be helpful. But he really wasn't.

He had a much more sinister goal in mind.

He was like a slick used-car salesman making a lemon out to be a Lincoln. Using a series of small lies, he duped her into falling for his underhanded pitch. He “deceived Eve by his cunning” (2 Corinthians 11:3).

If she could have imagined the ugly, painful, deadly consequences of her choice, do you think she would have listened to the serpent's lies and disobeyed God? Probably not.

You know the rest of the tragic story. Eve ate the forbidden fruit

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and gave it to Adam, who also took a bite. Their eyes were opened, and they were ashamed and horrified by their own nakedness. They tried to stitch together some big fig leaves to cover up their private parts. And when God came to see them later that evening, they hid.

The first thing God did after asking Adam and Eve to explain their behavior was to curse the serpent. He condemned it to slither with its belly and mouth on the ground forever, eating dirt, which is a posture of extreme humiliation. (Before this, serpents apparently had limbs and didn't slither.) The Lord warned that conflict between the woman and the serpent would intensify and continue. But, amazingly, he hinted that a Deliverer would eventually crush and defeat this powerful foe. The LORD God said to the serpent: Because you have done this, . . . you will move on your belly and eat dust all the days of your life. I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:14–15 HCSB).

Eve had no idea what all this meant.

She didn't know that the serpent was the archenemy of God. She didn't know that the "he" who would strike the serpent's head was Jesus. Before humanity ever sinned, God already had a plan in place to defeat the serpent and conquer sin (Romans 16:20; Revelation 12:9).

I'm sure that Eve listened intently to the curse God pronounced on the one who had crafted her downfall, and to the bad-news/good-news scenario his words contained. God used the word *hostility* to describe the perpetual strife that would exist between the woman and the Creep. In Hebrew this forceful word describes loathing and a murderous level of animosity for a wartime foe. It implies a fierce conflict of life-and-death proportions. This was the type of battle Eve was up against.

This part of God's pronouncement was definitely bad news. Though Eve couldn't have fully understood the good-news part of

the message—the part about someone striking the serpent’s head—I think she must have caught the glimmer of hope.

Eve called the fraudster who had deceived her “the serpent” (Genesis 3:13). She really didn’t know much about him. It wasn’t until later that God revealed more about this Creep and his tactics. Now we know that the serpent has many names. We often refer to him as the Devil. He is also known as Belial, Beelzebul, the Adversary, the Dragon, the Enemy, the Tempter, the Accuser, and the Wicked One.

Satan is the supreme evil being who is God’s Enemy and the powerful ruler of the world (Luke 4:6; John 14:30; Acts 26:18; 2 Corinthians 4:4). He relentlessly opposes God and his people. He is intent on stealing, killing, and destroying everything and everyone who belongs to God (John 10:10).

He commands a host of fallen angels, better known as demons, to carry out his will (Matthew 25:41). He governs over a host of unseen dark evil forces, including “authorities, . . . cosmic powers,” and “spiritual forces of evil” (Ephesians 6:12). He enslaves everyone who does not call on the name of Jesus, conscripting them to obey him and join him in his cosmic rebellion (John 8:34, 44).

There are a few more things that you should know about this highly intelligent, evil Creep. First, his chief weapon is deception, and he uses it effectively.

Very effectively.

Jesus said this about him: “He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (v. 44).

Second, he is the master pretender. He always hides his true nature and intentions. He “disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). This means that he portrays himself as good, wholesome, and even righteous and holy, though his character is the

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exact opposite of this. The fact that he hides behind a mask of goodness makes him tough to spot.

Third, he is extremely patient. Scripture says he “prowls around like a roaring lion,” looking to destroy people’s lives (1 Peter 5:8).

The word *prowl* contains the same sort of idea as the word *creep*. It means to lurk, skulk, slink, or sneak. Like a lion, Satan uses stealth and strategy. He takes his time closing in for the kill. He is willing to wait for an opportune time. He’s in the battle for the long haul, so he’s content to advance just a little at a time.

Fourth, Satan is relentless. He does not give up. Ever.

He is constantly trying to sneak in. When one approach fails, he tries another. If there is one thing you can be sure of, it is that he’s *always* trying to make inroads into your life.

Finally, it’s important for you to realize that Satan is the Übercreep. *Über* comes from the German language, meaning “over” or “above.” Satan is over all other creeps. He is over the fallen angels (demons), principalities, authorities, cosmic powers, and all forces of evil. He is also over everyone who does not serve God and who, therefore—by default—serves Satan instead. He is the father of creeps.

Why is this important for you to know?

Because when you encounter a destructive fraud in your life, you can be sure Satan is ultimately behind it. What’s more, this gives you insight into the nature and tactics of the fraud. As the old adage goes, “Like father, like son.”

Creeps are all made from the same cut of cloth. They wear disguises and pretend to be righteous, just as Satan does. “Such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.” (2 Corinthians 11:13–15).

Creeps are deceptive. They masquerade as something they are

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not. They encroach slowly yet persistently. And they are out to do you great harm.

Scripture warns us, “Be sober-minded; be watchful” (1 Peter 5:8). The fact that we have a powerful and murderous Enemy who is out to harm us is not a point we should minimize or overlook. C. S. Lewis suggests that the two mistakes people make in talking about Satan are either taking him too seriously or not seriously enough.⁴

According to this verse, neither of these is an option. Satan is not a little cartoon man wearing a red suit and horns who you can easily flick off your shoulder. You need to realize that you are engaged in a life-and-death battle with a daunting and cunning foe. To resist his schemes effectively, you need to know your Enemy and his characteristics and tactics.

Because, just as there are tricksters targeting people on Facebook, he and his demons are currently targeting you. They’re tracking your movements, making note of your habits, your friends and family, your conversations, and your weaknesses. Even now, they are formulating a sinister plan to worm their way into your life and destroy you.

That’s what creeps do.

QUALITIES OF A CREEP

As I said earlier, the weak women in Ephesus had a bad habit of tolerating intruders. Some didn’t recognize them as intruders; others didn’t think that they were a problem or that they posed any kind of threat.

If we want to be strong, and not weak as they were, we need to take the threat of creeps seriously. Instead of ignoring or shrugging off the danger, we need to make a habit of catching the imposters who are trying to make inroads into our lives. But since they’re so good at impersonation, how can we figure out who’s who?

We can find a detailed list of the qualities of creeps in the five

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verses that come right before our weak women passage. “In the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:1–5).

Notice that these vices are characteristics of the false teachers who were worming their way into the households of weak women. Creeps try to hide these negative traits, but if we’re on the lookout, we’ll probably see these bad attitudes peeking out from under their good-looking veneer. If you think carefully about this passage, you can learn to spot the fakes.

To make it even easier, I’ve put together a checklist of those qualities to help you determine whether a creep is making a move on you.

A creep is:

- self-centered: self-serving, narcissistic, self-absorbed, looking out for number one
- materialistic: loves money, greedy, covetous, possessive, stingy
- self-promoting: boasting, bragging, swaggering, showboating
- contemptuous: haughty, condescending, snobbish, disdainful
- berating: abusing, insulting, reviling, criticizing, castigating
- insolent: rebellious, defiant, disobedient (especially to parents)
- ungrateful: thankless, unappreciative, entitled, demanding
- irreverent: coarse, crass, profane, vulgar, crude
- callous: heartless, unloving, cold, unsympathetic
- resentful: unforgiving, irreconcilable, implacable, grudge-holding
- defaming: slandering, falsely accusing, bad-mouthing, disparaging

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- ❑ undisciplined: intemperate, unrestrained, lacking self-control
- ❑ malicious: brutal, savage, fierce, venomous, vicious, cutthroat, cruel
- ❑ cynical: despising, mocking, derisive, scornful of good things/people
- ❑ backstabbing: treacherous, betraying, double-crossing, two-timing
- ❑ impulsive: impetuous, reckless, rash, wild, headstrong
- ❑ self-important: conceited, lofty, puffed up, high-minded
- ❑ self-indulgent: hedonistic, self-gratifying, licentious, wanton
- ❑ hypocritical: deceitful, fraudulent, two-faced, posing

Having *one* of these qualities may not automatically mean a person is a creep. But if there are a lot of checkmarks as you go down the list, or if the attitude is severe, sirens should go off in your mind. Don't ignore these red flags!

Too many women ignore these early warning signs in men who are pursuing them. They think that he'll change or that he's just having a bad day. Or they find his impulsive, undisciplined, and insolent bad-boy behavior exciting. Or they rationalize that they're supposed to be salt and light and forgiving of people's sins. Right? Yes, but does God really want you hanging out with a creep?

No. He does not.

The list of nineteen vices ends with the stern command: "Avoid such people!" (v. 5).

The problem with hanging out with creeps is that their attitudes and behaviors tend to rub off. Scripture warns, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals'" (1 Corinthians 15:33). It also advises, "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm" (Proverbs 13:20).

Pretty much everyone has heard this kind of warning from their parents at some point and for good reason—the advice stands the test

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of time. The Bible stresses the importance of good friends. The people we allow into our innermost circle will become key parts of our story for decades to come. Depending on their character, they will either help or harm us.

It's not always easy to spot creeps. They can be smart, charming, funny, and likable. But if we carefully observe them, we can usually discern their dark side. We can spot many of the qualities Paul listed.

A weak woman ignores the warning signs. A strong woman is aware of the danger and stays alert to the threat.

ALL SORTS OF CREEPS

A false teacher, or a controlling obnoxious boor, is not the only type of creep you need to be aware of. There are lots of other types.

A creep might worm its way into your attitude or wriggle its way into your behavior. It might inch into your habits or intrude on your time. It might influence you to compromise your morals, or it might make inroads into your ideas.

A creep is *any* negative influence that enters into your life.

ATTITUDE CREEPS

All of us experience negative thoughts from time to time. But if we allow these thoughts to creep in on a regular basis and fail to restrain them, they'll start to become part of our mindsets.

The most common attitude creep is negativity—negativity toward oneself, toward others, and toward one's circumstances. Having a melancholic, glass-is-half-empty type of personality myself, I've often had to contend with this one.

Negativity is a key characteristic of the Übercreep, Satan. He spends a lot of time condemning and accusing people. The Bible calls him "the accuser of our brothers . . . , who accuses them day and night

before our God” (Revelation 12:10). So it’s no wonder, really, that he likes to see this negative attitude make its way into our lives.

Satan condemns us all the time, so it’s a win for him when we buy into the deception and start to condemn ourselves. Satan also wins when we exhibit a negative, critical attitude toward others. Scripture tells us there is “*no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1, emphasis added). If we have a critical and condemning attitude toward ourselves or toward others, we are going against God.

We are letting the Creep in.

Scripture also says to “do all things without grumbling or disputing” (Philippians 2:14) and to “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). So when we negatively grumble and complain about our circumstances, we’re also letting the Creep in.

What about you? Are you having an increasingly critical attitude toward your husband? Your kids? Your in-laws? Your church? Your boss? Your neighbor? Your circumstances?

You can stop an attitude creep of negativity by intentionally being grateful and by speaking words of blessing instead.

We’ve talked about the creep of negativity, but there are many other types of attitude creeps, such as unforgiveness, resentment, envy, selfishness, thoughtlessness, impatience, or blame. Whenever one of these shows up, we have a choice to make. We can intentionally catch the creep and shut it out, the way God wants us to, or we can passively allow it to worm its way in.

BEHAVIORAL CREEPS

An attitude creep is a gradual negative change in our *attitude*, whereas a behavioral creep is a gradual negative change in our *behavior*. The two are often connected. Jesus said, “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings

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evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Luke 6:45 NIV).

If we harbor ill will, ungratefulness, bitterness, and discontentment in our hearts, it’s bound to show up in our words and actions. Perhaps you berate your coworker and repeatedly slander her behind her back. Maybe you make snide, hurtful comments. Have you become increasingly rude and caustic toward your husband? Are you using more crass and foul language?

Or maybe you claim sick days when you’re really not sick. What about cheating your employer by doing personal things on work time? Asking for cash payments so you can avoid paying taxes? Maybe you tell lies to prevent being embarrassed. Do you have different versions of the truth for different people? Break your word and your budget by buying something you planned not to buy? Or fail to follow through on what you promised?

Whether we find ourselves making more excuses, developing a shorter fuse, becoming lazier, more reckless, or more disrespectful, any incremental negative change demonstrates that we are the victim of a behavioral creep.

TIME CREEPS

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens,” said Solomon (Ecclesiastes 3:1 NIV). There is a time to work. A time to serve. A time to rest. And a time to play. Unfortunately one category can bleed past its margin and steal time from another. We can play when we ought to be working. Or work when we ought to be resting. Or rest when we ought to be serving. What’s more, we can procrastinate and waste time with meaningless activities.

Time is our most precious commodity. The Bible challenges us to make the best use of our time (Ephesians 5:16). Even the fiercely

agnostic Charles Darwin admitted, “A man who dares to waste one hour of time has not discovered the value of life.”⁵

In 2016 the marketing agency Mediakix put together an infographic depicting how much time, on average, people spend on social media and other daily activities across a lifetime. They concluded that the average person will spend seven years and eight months watching TV and five years and four months on social media, compared with one year and three months socializing with friends and six months doing laundry.⁶

Just think: by the time you reach the end of your life, you will have probably spent thirteen solid years watching TV and engaging with social media.

Cutting out the social media alone would have given you the time to climb Mount Everest thirty-two times or to walk the entire length of the Great Wall of China three and a half times. That’s astonishing!

And it’s even more astonishing when you consider that the amount of time people spend on these activities has risen since 2016 and continues to rise.

I think of these statistics whenever I find myself saying, “I don’t have the time to . . .” It’s usually not true that I don’t have the time. The truth is, I often choose to spend my time on things that have relatively little value instead of disciplining myself to use my time wisely.

All those minutes we waste or spend procrastinating add up.

Satan likes to keep us busy with unproductive activities. He likes to distract us from what’s important and occupy us with the unimportant. Are you alert to the time creeps that constantly try to worm their way into your life? Are you doing something to stop them from moving in?

HABIT CREEPS

A habit creep is a negative behavior pattern, and it is often tied to a lack of self-discipline. It starts out as a seemingly harmless behavior,

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but over time it becomes a negative habit—something we customarily do or don't do.

We know we need to get up early, but instead we sleep in and then race around like a madwoman to get out the door on time.

Or we say we are trying to lose weight, but we eat that second piece of dessert anyway (says the woman who just ate handfuls of Halloween chocolate set aside to give to costumed kids). We tell ourselves we'll fit in an extra workout session. But we don't do that either. We have plenty of time to watch Netflix and no time for exercise.

Perhaps quiet time with the Lord somehow gets neglected, and our friends don't see us at Bible study. Our excuses seem rational and good. Then we skip going to church. We have a good reason, but then it happens again. Then three times. Before we know it, our habit of going to church has been replaced with the habit of missing church.

Sometimes this lax attitude about commitment to our convictions spills into areas of vice too. An occasional bad habit turns into an addiction.

Time on our smartphones can lead to a social media addiction. The thrill of making a new purchase can lead to a shopping addiction. An occasional glass of wine can lead to an alcohol addiction. The purchase of lottery cards can lead to a gambling addiction. Frequent exposure to R-rated scenes can lead to a sex addiction. The use of painkillers can lead to a drug addiction. Casual partying can become an increasingly regular way of life.

Small bad habits often lead to bigger, more destructive habits. Watch out for these types of creeps!

IDEOLOGICAL CREEPS

Another kind of creep is an ideological one. It encroaches on our ideas and opinions and worms its way into our thinking. It influences us to accept a worldly point of view rather than a godly one.

The things we watch, read, and hear all impact the way we think.

THE RIGHT KIND OF *Strong*

Paul warned his protégé, “O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called ‘knowledge’—which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith” (1 Timothy 6:20–21 NASB).

We only need to check our social media feeds to see that there’s a lot of empty chatter going on. And that a lot of people are getting caught up in it.

Ideas have a lot of power. They can lead us astray. What’s worse, they can even “shipwreck” our faith (1:19). We’ll talk about false ideas more in later chapters, but for now I just want you to be aware that some of the most relentless creeps you will face are the ones that constantly try to worm their way into your mind.

MORAL CREEPS

And then there are those powerful moral creeps. They are present whenever we compromise God’s standards for moral purity.

One tiny compromise leads to another and then another.

The sex scenes we would have refused to watch years ago become our new tolerated entertainment norm. What was once outrageous doesn’t seem so outrageous anymore. The pull to indulge becomes stronger. The attraction to spicy, scandalous shows or porn becomes more potent. Images get raunchier. Self-pleasuring becomes more frequent. Lust grows. Fantasies and daydreams increase. Sexual standards slip.

We go farther than we’d wanted to, and then we go even farther than that. We end up doing what we never would have conceived of doing a few years ago.

Maybe you end up sleeping with your boyfriend before marriage, or you end up moving in with him. Perhaps you end up having a series of one-night stands. You start picking up guys in bars. Start experimenting. Maybe your sexual behavior gets increasingly kinky and perverted. Maybe you’re married, and you make excuses like, “It’s just

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lunch,” or “We’re just friends.” Instead of fleeing temptation you entertain it. Slowly you become entangled. Lunch with the good-looking married executive becomes a regular thing. The emotional affair leads to a physical affair.

Next thing you know, your life is a mess.

None of the women I talk to who have gotten themselves into a moral predicament ever planned to do that. When they realize how far they’ve fallen, they incredulously ask themselves, *How on earth did this happen to me? How did I get from there to here? How did I get myself into such a mess? How?*

By now I hope you know the answer. Sin does not advance by leaps; it advances by small steps, one tiny compromise at a time.

The compromises, in the moment, don’t seem like much. The changes they produce are so subtle they’re almost imperceptible. So it’s easy to minimize the significance or importance of them. But Satan knows that a series of small negative choices will lead to significant negative results. He loves to prey on weak women who make tiny little compromises.

Positive or negative, it’s the consistency of the habit over time rather than the magnitude of each individual action that makes the difference.

It is how we become enslaved or become stronger.

A strong woman evaluates whether her morals are moving in a positive or negative direction. If she sees them slipping, she immediately acts to stop the creep.

IS IT REALLY A CREEP?

There are so many different types of creeps and ways we can be led astray. There are too many for us to cover them all. The thing is, if we let one type of destructive influence into our lives, we open the door

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for others to follow. An attitude creep becomes a behavior creep. An ideological creep becomes a moral creep. And there are so many more.

How can we know if something is a destructive influence? Well, they all share the same characteristics. To qualify as a creep, it must be something that:

- *slowly encroaches*—Just like a lion, a creep advances and pushes in slowly, subtly, and almost imperceptibly. It patiently and ever so persistently keeps moving its way into our lives. It steadily encroaches, but only a little bit at a time.
- *exhibits the qualities of the Übercreep*—A creep is cut from the cloth of the Übercreep, so it will have one or more underlying characteristics of the father of all creeps. Remember the checklist of nineteen qualities? All creeps are of the same nature and have these qualities, usually many of them.
- *influences us to move in a negative direction*—A creep nudges us over. It pushes us and causes us to shift position slightly. The shift is so small that we usually don't perceive it as significant. We take small steps in a negative direction. We make compromises, rationalize, and start to have a different attitude about things. Often it takes some time before we, or the people around us, notice that things in our lives are sliding downhill.
- *gains power over us*—As a creep's influence continues, we give increasingly more power away and adopt its behavior. As this happens *we* become increasingly self-centered, materialistic, self-promoting, contemptuous, berating, insolent, ungrateful, irreverent, callous, resentful, defaming, undisciplined, malicious, cynical, backstabbing, impulsive, self-important, self-indulgent, and hypocritical.

Lisa could clearly remember the day she clicked on that first link. Her husband had tickets to the hockey game and was out for the

evening. Bored, Lisa surfed the Web. She was reading the entertainment news when the sexy link popped up. At first, she hovered her cursor over the *x* to shut it down. She hesitated for a brief moment. Then, on impulse, she moved her mouse over an inch or two.

And clicked.

The pornographic images shocked her. Aghast at the lewdness, she shut the site down after a few minutes. But she couldn't rid herself of the images she had seen. They haunted her thoughts and dreams.

Over the next few weeks, Lisa revisited the porn site and a few related ones too. Her initial shock morphed into a dark, tantalizing fascination. On a whim she ordered some sex toys to be delivered to her house in an unmarked package. Alone in her locked bedroom, she tried them out but kept that secret from her husband.

And then there was that other link—the one that offered chatting instead of viewing. She saw it several times before she finally summoned up the nerve.

Click.

The conversations with the man she met online were hot and steamy. *All in good fun*, Lisa rationalized. She certainly didn't ever plan on meeting him or following through on their exchange. She planned to remain anonymous. No harm done. She was certain things would fizzle out after a couple of weeks. But they didn't.

Lisa couldn't remember whether he shared his cell phone number first or she did. But at some point the virtual flirting moved from their computers to their phones. And then the sexting started.

She wasn't planning on having an affair. She really wasn't. She planned to meet up with him in a restaurant in a nearby town to call things off. But the sexual attraction was too strong. The novelty was too alluring.

The affair lasted three months. Her husband never knew.

Afterward Lisa's discontentment with her marriage grew. It wasn't long before she was involved in yet another affair. This time, she didn't

manage to keep it secret. Her teenage daughter was the one who got suspicious and had her dad start snooping around. Lisa's husband tried to get her to join him for marital counseling, but her heart wasn't in it.

She had changed. Her attitudes had changed. And so had her behavior, habits, morals, and ideas. Two years after she first clicked on that link and allowed that one little sneak in, Lisa walked away from her husband, children, church, and everything she had once held dear.

THE DANGER OF CREEPS

What's the big deal about little creeps, like clicking on a link or lingering to talk to a coworker? Those don't seem all that bad. You may say to yourself, *I'm just curious*. Or *A little flirting is harmless*. *It's not like I'm sleeping with him*.

The thing is, the danger isn't always obvious at first. And the first time the compromise happens, you may not even realize that it's a creep trying to get into your life. It may seem innocent and random, just an everyday sort of slipup.

Maybe.

But then it happens again.

And again.

And again.

You've likely heard of the parable of the frog in the kettle. In the late 1800s researchers did a series of experiments with frogs. They found that when they dropped a frog in a pan of hot water, the frog quickly jumped out. But when they put the frog in a pan of cool water and gradually increased the temperature, the frog didn't perceive the danger. If the increase in heat was slow enough, the frog would just sit there until it cooked to death.

While modern-day scientists question the results of this experiment, it's still a good metaphor for how you can be damaged by

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seemingly harmless new attitudes, behaviors, or people in your life. Too often you can naively let these things in a little bit at a time and not recognize the danger until it's too late. It's not until sometime later that you notice how drastically the situation has changed.

Has there been a slow, negative change in your attitudes, behaviors, habits, morals, ideas, or how you spend your time? Can you identify any areas where you've been a weak woman and tolerated a creep?

Here are some possibilities:

- a website you shouldn't be viewing
- a book you shouldn't be reading
- a show you shouldn't be watching
- music lyrics you shouldn't be singing
- a secret text or e-mail exchange you shouldn't be pursuing
- a lunch meeting with a married guy you shouldn't be having
- a daydream or scenario you shouldn't be envisioning
- a place you shouldn't be going
- an activity you shouldn't be involved in
- a friend you shouldn't be seeing
- an excuse to skip church you shouldn't be making
- a bitter resentment you shouldn't be nursing
- a marital affection you shouldn't be withholding
- gossip you shouldn't be spreading

Don't rationalize and justify these things by saying, "It won't affect me," "I'm strong enough to handle it," "It's really not a big deal!" or, "That won't happen to me."

You're right, it's probably not a *big* deal—of course it's not, it's a creep! It's one in a series of *little* deals that are taking you off course.

A strong woman knows that it's not the *big* compromise that poses the biggest threat to her well-being; it's all those *little* ones.

THE RIGHT KIND OF *Strong*

It's the little things that have the power to bring about the greatest change. Neglecting the small stuff can lead to great disaster; taking care of the small stuff ensures the greatest success.

I think the apostle Paul would agree. In 2 Timothy 3:5, after spelling out the nineteen negative characteristics of a creep, he warned his friends to avoid them. That word *avoid* is a present direct imperative. Literally it means to constantly turn yourself away from something. Avoiding the destructive influence usually only requires a small effort, but that effort must be consistent and continuous.

The trouble with the weak women of Ephesus is that they were naive to the danger, and they were passive. They didn't see how these little choices, which were developing into attitudes and habits day by day, were a problem. They tolerated false teachers, they tolerated the drift, they tolerated the creeps. And little by little they lost their way.

We can, too, if we don't take creeps seriously.

CURTAIN THE CREEPS

Peter gave us some clues about not only curtailing creeps but also defeating them. Remember what he said about the prowling lion? "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith" (1 Peter 5:8–9). I mentioned this verse earlier. It not only describes the Devil's activities but also offers the antidote to being weak.

Take another look.

Peter mentioned four necessities for warding off the roaring lion. First, a strong woman is aware of the danger ("sober-minded"). To be sober means to have a serious, no-nonsense attitude toward creeps. It means to be well-composed in your mind, clearheaded, and not deluded. A strong woman knows that she has a wily Enemy that is

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always lurking—always wanting to steal, kill, and destroy. Another translation of 1 Peter 5:8 reads, “Be serious!” (HCSB). She takes the threat seriously.

Second, a strong woman stays alert to ways creeps might be making a move on her (“watchful”). Being watchful means being vigilant and staying awake and attentive. Spiritually, she does not snooze off.

She is like a watchman in a tower guarding a city, keeping watch for the enemy. She stands guard over her own heart and household. She is constantly on the lookout for creeps. She doesn’t let them sneak up on her and catch her off guard.

Third, a strong woman actively pushes back (“resist”). She follows the teaching of James 4:7: “Submit to God. But resist the Devil, and he will flee from you” (HCSB).

A strong woman doesn’t passively wait for the creep to make a move. She actively and intentionally counteracts its advance. Maybe she puts a smut filter on her Internet. Maybe she gets an app to put time restrictions on her social media.

Strong women don’t let life happen to them. They are active. Intentional. Decisive. They take a stand and make a point to resist creeps. They stop negative influences and little encroachments before they can gain a foothold.

Finally, she stays anchored in Jesus (“firm in your faith”). To defeat the Creep, our convictions and all of our actions must be secured to an unshakeable foundation. If Jesus is not our anchor, we will not be able to prevent the drift. We will be blown and tossed this way and that (1:6). When the tides of popular opinion change, our standards will change too. A strong woman’s convictions are based on the unchanging standard of the Word of God, not political correctness, feelings, or popular opinion.

So many of us women nowadays think we’re strong, but we’re actually not.

We’re weaklings.

Hapless victims of the drift.

But if we do what Scripture advises us to do—if we remain aware, alert, active, and anchored in Christ—we will be strong enough to resist the power of those sneaky creeps.

THERE'S A CREEP IN MY HOUSE

There's something else I want you to notice in 2 Timothy 3:6, and that's the phrase "into households." The false teachers were creeping into the households of weak women. Their activities affected not only the women themselves but also the people around them. The creeps were messing up entire families!

Another one of Paul's protégés, Titus, faced the same situation in Crete as Timothy faced in Ephesus. False teachers were creeping in and destroying household. "They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach" (Titus 1:11).

Creeps are dangerous because they aim to take down as many people as possible. When the Creep in the garden went after Eve, his plan was to leverage her influence to bring Adam down too. He was gunning for their whole household—indeed, for the entire human family.

As a woman I have a unique responsibility to watch out for creeps that are making a move on my household.

But what about men? Don't husbands and fathers have that responsibility too?

Yes, they undoubtedly do. But by design, God has wired women to be different from men. Most women have been given this amazing internal how-is-everyone-doing barometer. When it comes to people and relationships, we often see things that men don't naturally see,

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clues they might miss. We usually pick up on subtle indicators that something is not quite right.

Mama Bear is the perceiver, the watcher, the snooper, the detective, the cheerleader, the weeper, the burden-carrier, the pray-er, the checker-outer of girlfriends and boyfriends and best friends. That's the way we're wired. As nurturers and guardians of the home, we can't afford to be lackadaisical or inattentive in this role and foolishly allow things to creep in on our loved ones. I can't even begin to count the times I've intervened to prevent creeps from encroaching on my children, my husband, my marriage, my household.

Incidentally, I believe God gives *every* woman a household—a sphere of people—to look after. Psalm 113:9 says, “He gives the childless woman a household, making her the joyful mother of children” (HCSB). You don't have to have a husband and kids to be the mama of a household. Your household may be your volleyball team, Sunday School class, sorority, coworkers, the women in your recovery group or your nursing home. It may be your nieces and nephews or your neighbors.

Think carefully about the people in your life who you have some influence over. God wants you to take up your mantle of Mama Bear and start looking after your household. Watch out for the creeps in their lives. Be a strong woman. Do what you can to protect and warn and persuade them about the danger.

The Bible says that a strong woman “looks well to the ways of her household” (Proverbs 31:27). “The wisest of women builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down” (14:1).

How does this happen?

Either way—whether she builds or destroys—it happens one brick at a time.

JUST A LITTLE BIT AT A TIME

What creeps can you see worming their way into your life? I hope you're eager to get rid of them and that you will act just as swiftly and decisively as you would if it were an ugly, black creepy-crawly inching its way across your kitchen floor.

Don't be a spiritual Scorpion Queen—don't let poisonous intruders crawl all over you. And don't ignore the telltale signs that creeps are encroaching and causing damage. Don't be like me when I brushed that pile of sawdust left by carpenter ants off the windowsill at our cabin.

The weak women in Ephesus shrugged off and denied the danger of creeps. They didn't take the threat seriously.

I hope you won't make that same mistake.

I told you earlier that this book wouldn't add a lot of difficult, burdensome tasks to your to-do list. Catching the creep isn't complicated; it just takes a bit of consistent attention. We need to be aware that we have a mortal Enemy who is *always* trying to encroach. Because of this, we *always* need to be alert and on the lookout for creeps.

If we want to be strong and not weak, catching a creep is one of the most important things we can do.