As a preschooler my favorite book was Cinderella. Each day I brought my worn-out, hardback copy to daycare in hopes the teacher would read it to the class. I never grew tired of hearing how Cinderella escaped her misfortune (although the teacher became very tired of reading it and told me to bring another book). Cinderella made a huge impression on me. In my logic her equation was simple:

Fairy godmother + new dress + prince = princess

All I needed was to find a fairy godmother; she could do a full makeover. I wasn’t so into the prince part because who needs one of those at age four? But since the prince didn’t speak in the book or movie, I decided he could be a part of my story too. At recess I waited for the fairy godmother, and my heart crumbled realizing she wasn’t
coming to "bibbidi-boppidi-boooo_ me into a better life. I was forced to face the anguishing truth every preschooler girl must face: Cinderella wasn't for real. Sighhhhh. The next best thing I had was Jesus; he was going to have to do. I was a little concerned because Jesus didn't know much about fashion or how to be selected to dance with the prince (or how to dance with a prince). In my young eyes Jesus seemed more concerned about sheep, church, and planning a secret comeback mission to destroy the world.

My favorite story presented Cinderella as a beautiful housekeeper who was easy to look at and nevertheless joyful in her position of forced domesticity. She was compliant, yearning, quiet, and in need of being rescued. Many of the stories I heard about women in the Bible largely followed this princess narrative as well. Both Disney and Sunday school told stories about boys with painful lives; however these boys' anger wasn't masked. Their righteous indignation was validated, which empowered them to fight their way out and achieve victory as mighty warriors. King Arthur and King David were underdog boys who became heroes because of their grit and a little divine intervention.

Stories leave an impression that shapes our personalities and thinking. The stories of women being saved, in contrast to the boys saving themselves, have imposed boundaries on the imaginations and faith of girls and women. They have limited our power to attracting princes. These stories micromanage the rule of female expression and shape what it means to be female. For generations ideal feminism was to become a princess: beautiful, soft, passive, and in need of rescue by a man. This has also meant the female was not to take initiative or impart ideas on how someone could help her because, heaven forbid, she might end up telling a man what to do! I might add this meek(ish), docile exemplar of a woman clearly reflects
how male writers have preferred women to be and not so much how women are.

Princess theology is sometimes taught in Christianity where the assumption is that the highest calling for a woman is to become some sort of spiritual princess. This theology grooms women and girls to be soft and pretty, while it grooms boys to be fierce. Its equation is like Cinderella’s, but it replaces the fairy godmother with Jesus:

\[
\text{fairy godmother + Jesus + new dress + prince = princess}
\]

The princess theology equation sets a low bar that when crossed is pointed out to be “not a woman’s role.

Years ago I confronted my husband about the organization of our home, and I was told by a male church leader that I should have had a male church member do this for me; evidently that was callousing my femininity to express my frustration. Is a wife not endowed with the power to confront her husband in their home? Princess theology assumes a female to be a fragile beauty that God, or a male Christian, will fight for and defend. There’s nothing false about God’s desire for us or the Almighty’s willingness to fight and defend us. There’s also nothing wrong with a Christian brother advocating for a sister. However, the “being fought for” message cannot stand alone because it omits the part of God’s love that empowers women to be a force in their own lives. Princess theology expects women to dress and express traditional femininity, to gloss over the spiritual armor we are to wear faithfully to fight with God’s powerful strength:

Finally, brothers and sisters, draw your strength and might from God. Put on the full armor of God to protect yourselves . . . And this is why you need to be head-to-toe in the full armor of God: so you can resist during these evil days and be fully prepared to hold
your ground. Yes, stand—truth banded around your waist, righteousness as your chest plate, and feet protected in preparation to proclaim the good news of peace. Don’t forget to raise the shield of faith above all else, so you will be able to extinguish flaming spears hurled at you from the wicked one. Take also the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:10-17, The Voice)

As Christians, women are called to fight the same fight and are given the same spiritual armor as men. However, in my experience, using the sword of the Spirit (God’s Word) is taught and modeled much differently for women. I have yet to see a Christian resource for women with a sword or battle symbol on the cover. There’s a severe deficit in Christian resources that teach women how to be spiritual warriors and rescuers, though there is an overabundance of stories that hand us the script to be (spiritually) beautiful and rescued. Take a walk through a Christian bookstore—the title treatments on the covers of women’s resources are softened with elegant loops and tails. Sunsets and floral fields are backdrops for the flowing words; it’s all about beauty. Open the books and you will see that many of these resources share a message stating the deepest desire of a woman’s soul is to be beautiful, loved, and rescued. No swords; no righteous anger; no deep-down, dirty grit—absolutely no conquering power. Princess theology shames women into feeling they are not real women or righteous because they are angry about their circumstances or don’t fit into the beautiful princess image.

Growing up with princess theology limits girls—and women’s confidence and drive to lift ourselves out of our painful circumstances. I’m grateful my daughter has grown up in the twenty-first-century with princesses such as Merida, Tiana, and Queen Elsa as her Disney princesses and queen. These female story characters
all got angry and did something to change their world. There are some Christians who balk at Disney's feminist messages (and anything Disney altogether), ignorant of how the Bible shares stories of women who didn't need to be rescued, but in fact became the rescuers.

In the Old Testament book of Judges, Jael (a Kenite foreign woman) is hailed as a heroine of Israel for killing the fleeing Canaanite military general. She committed one of the most graphic murders in the Bible by using a wooden mallet to drive a tent peg through the head of her foe into the ground (4:18-24). We don't read about what clothes Jael wore or about her feminine beauty in submission. We read about her clever plot, forcible actions, and her weapons! Jael acted in direct opposition to her husband's political position and changed the course of history for God's people because she fought for what she believed was right—justice for the Jewish people. Princess theology ignores Jael's audacious kill because it embodies expressions that don't fit into the box of righteous femininity. I'm not a fan of upholding the Bible's violent texts as stories of exemplary heroes and heroines, but I do hold out that there should be some gender equity in the hero category. If little David is hailed a hero using his slingshot and sword to eventually decapitate his enemy and save God's people, then Jael should be given the same honor. They were both underdogs, used unorthodox military strategy, and ended enemy occupation to free the nation of Israel. Jael, a foreign woman, did not rise to power as David did. The disproportionate notoriety on David's kill with his slingshot begs the question whether we are honoring male power and ignoring God's power to work through all people regardless of race or gender.

Princess theology uses its own weapon to chisel out separate roles for women and men as the rescued and the rescuer. It's a tragic
narrative that carves a women's special place and expression to be passive in the palace. She is expected to be beautiful and serve, and not to wield power as a forceful hero, especially if it contests the power of a man. Princess theology makes women feel guilty for being a force. It also creates pack mentality in churches and families. I've met so many women whose spirits are gouged by being put into a position of having to choose between the love and acceptance of their families and church, or wielding their power to move their lives. If these women break the prescribed princess boundaries, they are left to become lone wolves, which is right where we find Cinderella at the start of her story. It's noteworthy that the chisel of princess theology breaks men as well, because they are led to feel unworthy if they can't find or save the right kind of princess.

Cinderella's story is told through the lens of princess theology, framing her as a passive agent. Removing that lens helps us to see her as a faithful, rebellious, and not-so-passive young woman. Cinderella refused to limit herself to the forced housekeeper role because she believed a woman could embody more than domesticity. She never dreamed about a prince (that was Snow White) but sang about the power of her faith in A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes. Cinderella was practical, and she didn't care if she wore her mother's old dress to go out for a night of dancing on her own. What woman does that! Her boldness to break the script of remaining a household servant with no hope of reward for herself, just because a woman should not go out at night alone, was her faithful act that allowed her to see and accept the help she needed to change her life. Cinderella wasn't looking to become a princess; she was looking to find justice and freedom. She had already escaped her prison before meeting the prince because she was willing to take power of her situation on her own, so to say she was rescued by a prince is debatable. She didn't need all the bling and the castle; she just
needed her own life. Cinderella’s humility to recognize her need for help and accept it—both the supernatural and natural kind—was also key to finding her freedom. (And in case you’re wondering, there’s nothing wrong with a woman accepting help from a well-mannered guy; it’s even better if he happens to be a hot prince!) Cinderella’s equation outside of princess theology is summarized more accurately this way:

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\text{Faith + risk-taking + accepting help = freedom}
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This Cinderella equation is also a Christian one. Without actions, faith is useless.

By itself, it’s as good as dead. (James 2:17, The Voice).

Finding the power to create justice and freedom all starts with a dream worthy enough to believe in, worthy enough to take a risk for. It’s scary for me to risk asking for what I want because I fear rejection. It’s interesting to note that Jael invited her prey into her tent before taking him. Cinderella asked for a night off and a dress. The sting of being told no moved her to act and take a risk. When we are willing to take risks, we demonstrate our belief in the dream. And, since no one succeeds alone, accept some help along the way; but make sure it’s the kind of help that’s in your best interest. Help comes from the most unexpected places sometimes, such as a foreign woman who is willing to risk her marriage or a supernatural force. So remember:

\[\text{If you keep on believing}\]

\[\text{(that means taking a risk with James 2:17 action)}\]
Princess Theology Needs a Makeover: Here’s A Better Cinderella Equation for Christian Girls and Women

The dream that you wish will come true— Cinderella