

BODY IMAGE

Valuing God's Good Gift

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31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR TEENAGERS

A Series

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Anxiety: Finding the Better Story, by Liz Edrington
Body Image: Valuing God's Good Gift, by Andrea Lee
Identity: Discovering Who You Are in Christ, by Lindsey Carlson

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INTRODUCTION

You've probably picked up this book because you have painful thoughts about your body. You might feel like your body doesn't express who you really are. You might be frustrated because your best efforts to make your body fit your ideal aren't working. You may be baffled by why you think about your body all the time and why you feel so much shame about it. You may feel isolated as you wrestle with the challenges of a disability that the people around you don't understand. You may be constantly comparing yourself to others, always coming up short.

Struggles over body image can bring deep anguish and crushing hopelessness. I've known the pain of thinking that my body isn't good enough, pretty enough, or thin enough. When I was younger, I wanted my body to change so desperately that I pushed myself through long workouts and ate as little as possible. Eventually, my body couldn't function properly: I couldn't stay warm. I couldn't sleep. I had little energy. I lost my period. Even my bones weakened. Deeply concerned, my loved ones gave me a choice: I could either start eating more and exercising less, or I could go to the hospital so doctors could monitor my body and give me the nutrition I needed.

Although these physical problems were painful and even dangerous, the struggle inside was worse. The journals from my teen years reveal the daily battle in my mind: *I hate myself. Why is my body so hard to control? If I was godly, I would have more discipline. I'll never look as pretty as she does. I overeat all the time—what is wrong with me?!* I thought the visible part of me, my body, needed to change in order for the pain in my soul to get better.

But my focus slowly changed as I embraced what God's Word told me: *Our souls can't be healed by changing our bodies.* As I came

to believe this truth, I came to see that God, not my body, is the only source of hope and joy.

Because God is the author behind everything you read in the Bible, it is filled with powerful messages for you today. It has the wisdom you need to navigate your struggles with your body and to experience peace in your soul. You can experience a transformation that has nothing to do with losing weight, toning your muscles, clearing your skin, or having cosmetic surgery.

Let me give you an example of how God's Word can help you. A long time ago, some teachers were telling Christians that, if they wanted to really be close to God and to gain others' approval, they needed to be harsh with their bodies. These teachers insisted that Christians needed to follow a lot of food rules and strictly regulate their bodies because these practices would earn them God's favor (Colossians 2:18–23). But they were wrong. A wise pastor named Paul wrote a letter in the Bible to set believers free from these harmful ideas. He wrote, "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition . . . and not according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8). God's favor is lavished on us through Jesus Christ. It isn't earned by how we treat our bodies or by what our bodies look like. Because of Jesus's perfect life, sacrificial death, and astounding resurrection, we can receive God's grace and be reconciled to our heavenly Father when we repent of our sins and believe in him.

So how do we avoid being taken captive by bad ideas about our bodies? Like a thief, our thoughts about how we look steal our attention. They roam through our minds and snatch our focus when we could be enjoying time with family, learning a new skill, or thinking of ways to serve others. God gives us all the tools we need to resist this thief and to experience peace, hope, and freedom.

God has good purposes for our bodies. He sent Jesus to earth in a physical body as our Savior. And as our Redeemer, Jesus strengthens us to fight this battle—and he actually fights for us. We must participate in the battle, but the power and wisdom to fight come

from our gracious God. He loves us and is eager to help us walk a new path.

So let's imagine the future that God holds out to you. What would it be like to have a conversation with a friend and not be worried about how your stomach looks? To take a picture without lamenting over your pose? To go to the beach and be more focused on the beauty of the ocean than on how you look in a swimsuit? To meet someone new and not plunge into despair because she is thinner, prettier, or more stylish than you? To refuse to use your body as a way to get approval, acceptance, or praise? I want you to imagine this because it's possible. It's possible because counsel from your loving heavenly Father can change your perspective on your body. When your perspective changes, you will be able to appreciate the good gift of your body while focusing more intently on your greatest treasure, the Lord Jesus.

MADE BY GOD

Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made. (Isaiah 43:6–7)

It's time to walk a new path in our struggle with body image—keeping our steps steady with God's truth. We start with the stunning reminder that we are created *by* God and *for* God. He lovingly made us, and he has designed us to reflect the beauty of who he is.

When you pause to think that God made you, you'll notice several things. First, God designed you to have a body. Your body's complexity and intricacy came from God's mind. He created you with care and purpose. It's possible to look at your body with awe while you appreciate God as your Creator.

Not only has God created you, but, if you have trusted in Jesus, he has called you by his own name. All those who are called by God's name are part of his family. We identify with him and he with us. We represent him. When we become followers of Jesus, we have a new ability to make our desires and actions more like his. That means we treat our bodies in ways that show that we belong to God. We use our bodies to love and serve others. We steward our bodies to show that they are a gift from God. We enjoy the ways we experience God's goodness through our bodies.

Being called by God's name points us to the very reason we exist. God created us as his image bearers so that we would bring him glory. God made us so that when others see how we treat our bodies and how we use them, they see true and lovely things about God. They see women who appreciate their bodies as good gifts, use their bodies to bless others, and proclaim with their voices the good news of God's salvation.

Knowing we are *made by God* is the start of it all.

Day 1

POUR OUT YOUR HEART TO GOD

Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. (Psalm 62:8)

Have your feelings ever put so much pressure on you that you thought you might explode? Your chest burns, your stomach aches, your head pounds. In your struggle with body image, you may have experienced anxiety, distress, a sense of inadequacy, and even despair. These emotions are hard to know how to handle. If we tell others about our struggle, we may feel misunderstood or ashamed. If we keep our feelings to ourselves, our suffering is heavier because we feel alone.

But God invites us to speak with him. In fact, he tells us to pour out everything that's inside us and promises that he will hear us with tenderness and mercy. He wants to hear what's going on in our hearts. Even if our words sound messy and frantic, he made us to communicate with him.

God welcomes our honesty when we're in pain. He is our refuge (Psalm 46:1–2): the safe place where we can wrestle with our desires and thoughts and feelings about our bodies. Through all our changing emotions, God is unchanging. He is stable and trustworthy. He always has the time and energy to help us. We can pour out our hearts to him any time without fearing his indifference or irritation.

Being honest with God about our thoughts and feelings is how he designed us to process difficult emotions. It's also the first step toward finding comfort and hope when we are desperate. During the worst of my body-image struggles, I opened my heart to the Lord through journaling. Writing helped me to slow down, to take one thought at a time, and to discover connections between my pain and God's character. Here are a few of the ways I cried out to God: *Why can't I change how I feel about my body? God, why*

did you make me like this? I'm worthless. Nothing about me is lovable or attractive.

In the midst of my pain, God's promises became more precious to me. God reminded me that he is committed to changing me in every way that's needed (Philippians 1:6), including making me able to appreciate my body and steward it well. He promises to renew my mind with truth so that my thoughts and emotions reflect his wisdom and peace (Isaiah 26:3). He encourages me that my body is designed to accomplish every purpose he has for me (John 9:3).

Are you willing to pour out your heart to God? It takes energy and courage. But your loving Father waits to hear everything you share. You are safe when you express your heart to him.

Here are some ways you can get started. You might want to journal, writing down each thought as it comes. You might read a psalm and turn it into your own prayer, letting the verses shape how you talk to God. You can speak to God out loud in prayer, pushing yourself to keep talking until you've fully expressed your turmoil. It may feel awkward at first, but, as you continue, you'll treasure being able to share your heart with your loving heavenly Father.

Pray: Lord, thank you for inviting me to trust you. Please help me pour out my heart to you and seek you as my refuge, especially when I'm unhappy with my body.

Reflect: What keeps you from talking to God about your body? Have you tried, but it didn't help or nothing changed? Share these struggles with God. Then share them with a godly woman who is older than you and ask her to pray with you.

Day 2

CREATED IN GOD'S IMAGE

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

Sometimes we are afraid to trust what God says and to obey what he commands because we think he doesn't care about physical beauty. We might think, *If I listen to God, I'll be fat and dumpy. What if I can't achieve my ideal body and follow God?* The truth is that God cares about your body and about beauty more than you can imagine. As the Creator of everything beautiful, he knows what true beauty is. His definition extends beyond a flawless complexion or a skinny waist. He created you to possess a beauty that transcends culture, time, and the changing opinions of others.

God cares about beauty so much that he created you to “image” him: to represent, reflect, and display what he is like.

God designed our physical bodies to communicate spiritual realities. Since he is the most beautiful being in the universe, and since we have been made in his image and redeemed by Jesus, we can be confident that we are destined for beauty.¹ We can be tiny pictures that show something about who God is. Every person shares the opportunity to show who God is. It's why God created us in the first place. Not only can we experience God's goodness through our physical senses, we can also extend God's goodness to others by using our hands to serve, our mouths to encourage, our ears to listen, our eyes to acknowledge, and our legs to take us where we are needed.

Sadly, we don't think about our bodies this way. We have turned away from God and rejected him, and our bodies and souls show the effects of that choice. We define beauty according to our own standards and then try to meet those standards with our own effort. We mistakenly imagine that we need to work hard to make ourselves acceptable to God and others. In this process, we ignore

God's words to us. When God announces that we bear his image, he offers us the relief of shifting our focus away from ourselves and our performance.

The best way to redirect our attention is to look at Jesus. He is the perfect image of God because he *is* God (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus shows us what it looks like for us to perfectly fulfill our purpose as image bearers. But we need more than a good example. We also need Jesus to be our Savior, to make us spiritually alive and able to follow him—and he does. He calls us to a far greater beauty than what the world praises, and he gives us the means to achieve it by his Holy Spirit (Romans 8:29–30).

We can be honest with God and acknowledge that we often think external attractiveness is better than the beauty of being an image bearer. As God helps us see the beauty of bearing his image, we won't be dominated by a pursuit of physical beauty. We will experience the wonder of using our bodies in a way that reflects who God is.

Pray: Dear Father, I'm amazed that I have the privilege of being made to bear your image. Thank you for the Lord Jesus, who saved me and enables me to grow in the beauty that you intend.

Act: God sees your body-image struggles, and he cares about you. He has compassion for you and wants to give you hope. When you cling to God and his purposes, he assures you that you will always be able to display his brand of beauty. Read John 9:1–41. Meditate on verse 3.

Day 3

A GOOD GIFT

The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. (Genesis 2:7)

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. (Genesis 1:31)

A bulging tummy. Big thighs. A flat chest. Limp hair. Acne scars. *Too tall, too short, too much here, not enough there.* When you stand in front of the mirror, do you pinch and poke yourself, disgusted by what you see and vowing to make drastic changes? Most people who struggle with body image have a list of the things they wish they could change. What's on your list? I used to want to change almost everything about my body. I viewed my body not as a gift but as an enemy. But God invites us to see our bodies differently.

When God created human beings, he gave us bodies as an act of his power and creativity. He crafted every part of our bodies—our arms, legs, brains, eyes—with loving care. Your body is a good gift that he designed to fulfill many important purposes.

That might be hard for you to believe if you've heard cruel comments about your appearance from family members or people at school. Our bodies don't seem good when they don't cooperate with us or when we can't conform them to our ideal of beauty. Many voices in our lives tell us our bodies are good only if they look a certain way, and we think we have value only if our bodies meet certain standards. But God *designed* you to have a body, and he says your body is good even if you feel disappointed with it.

As we see in our reading today, when God finished creating Adam and Eve, he proclaimed them "very good." The Bible doesn't tell us the sizes, measurements, or shapes of their bodies. They were good because they were God's.

God is pleased that you exist as an embodied being—not because you are sinless or perfect but because he designed you with physical capacities to help you know and worship him. He has given you a body with which to experience him and the world he created and with which to love and serve others. It might be hard to agree with God’s description of your body if you think “good” means flawless. But God’s declaration of the goodness of creation extends to you. Even when people around us—or our own thoughts—make it hard for us to believe God’s Word, God’s Spirit will help us to trust his voice more than what others say.

Pray: Lord, thank you for the body you’ve given to me. Help me see it as a gift from you so I can worship you more fully.

Reflect: Read John 1:14. Jesus, the Word of God, became a human being with a physical body. How might thinking about the fact that Jesus has a body help you embrace God’s physical design for you?