

Introduction

An Imprint for Your Heart

“*B*eauty is on the inside.” I’ve believed this for as long as I can remember, but it wasn’t until recently that I began to grasp the magnificent, powerful, gut-wrenching depth of what it means.

In December 2011, I was in an accident. I was hit in the head, the hand, and the shoulder by the spinning propeller of a small plane. That accident changed how I look. It literally dug into my looks: denting the top of my skull, cutting off my left hand, and slicing down the front of my face, eventually leaving me without one of my eyes. I have scars and prostheses now. I needed hair extensions for a while.

I’m not going to waste your time or mine pretending those physical changes were easy to handle. They weren’t. After my accident, it took a while before I could look at myself in a full-length mirror. When I finally did, I sobbed.

Maybe you would’ve sobbed too, and maybe for some of the same reasons I did. One reason I was so upset is that sometimes I have a warped and messed-up understanding of beauty. Maybe sometimes your understanding of beauty is warped and messed-up too.

Every day, you and I are bombarded from multiple directions by a giant beauty lie. This false message often

comes at us from Hollywood's movie reels and New York's editorial pages, sure—but it wouldn't be fair to blame the entertainment industry alone. We hear the lie being spoken from the mouths of our friends, our peers, and sometimes even our parents. And we hear it whispered from the quiet and secret places in our own individual hearts too.

Here is the lie:

A certain kind of physical appearance equals beauty.

The word *equals* in that sentence isn't an accident. In many ways our world has turned beauty into a basic math equation, where figuring out how beautiful you are is as simple as adding up a column of numbers. The "right" physical features are like positive numbers, and the "wrong" physical features are like negatives. All you have to do is tally up your personal positives and subtract your negatives, and you'll know how beautiful (or not beautiful) you are.

We don't have to look very long or very hard to see this kind of beauty-math at work all around us. It's a painfully familiar system. In fact, I bet you can identify our world's beauty standards just as easily as I can. Take a look at the list below—isn't this how it goes?

Face? Symmetrical.

Lips? Plump.

Nose? Straight and narrow.

Teeth? Straight and white.

Skin? Smooth and clear.

Eyes? Big, with long, thick lashes.

Cheekbones? High.

Hair? Full and face-framing.

Jawline? Feminine.



Waistline? Small.
Physique? Toned and lean.
Hips? Not too big.
Rear? Same.
Chest? Perky and large.
Wardrobe? Flattering and in fashion.
Style? Unique, but not *too* unique.
Bonus points for great shoes.

Those are the positives we see in our beauty-math. That is the beauty we seek.

Think of how destroyed you felt when a person made fun of some part of your appearance. Or think of how hopeless things seemed when you last compared your looks to that girl's from across the hall at school. You know, *that* girl. Or—think about how much money you spent the last time you went clothes shopping, or how much time you expend every day putting on makeup or styling your hair or working out, because you feel so much pressure to look *right*. Think about how you rushed to the nearest bathroom, mortified and desperately hunting for concealer, when you felt that latest zit coming on.

It's all so familiar, isn't it?

A certain kind of physical appearance equals beauty. You and I both know that our friends, our peers, and even we ourselves buy into this lie sometimes. Maybe we even buy into it a lot. We believe that looking a particular way is the true key to being beautiful. We chase after this standard for beauty, even though it is narrow and shallow. Even though it is judgmental and hurtful and impossible.

A certain kind of physical appearance—no. We couldn't be more wrong in believing all that.



A person could have every single physical feature on our world's beauty wish list—and still think she's a zero. She could fit our culture's definition of beautiful to a tee, yet feel worthless to the core. Underneath her supposedly attractive exterior, she could be dissatisfied, disappointed, insecure, lost, even desperate. In a word: empty.

It's no secret that having a model's appearance will open some doors in a young woman's life. I'm sure I don't have to point out that people who look a certain way are often rewarded with praise, attention, money, popularity, and all kinds of other things. But if we were to shine a light into the lives of these same young women, it wouldn't take long to find many who are absolutely miserable.

Yes, that girl who is so physically attractive and whose life is supposedly so fabulous as a result—maybe she feels cheap because people only ever notice her looks. Or she's sad, longing to be appreciated for something other than her outer shell. Or she gets desperate about maintaining her appearance, worried that if it fades, all the perks will go away too.

Not only that, but if you talk with enough young women, you'll see that anyone can look in the mirror and wish she saw something different there. No matter how pretty others say a woman is, in her own skin she might feel utterly unbeautiful. There's a simple explanation why: Physical appearance doesn't fill a person. It never will. It can't.

But there is something that can, does, and will forever. That something is real beauty.

Real beauty comes from the richest, fullest, most meaningful place that exists. It encompasses the most striking, appealing, and inviting qualities that could ever be.



It flows out of someone who—when we come to know and understand him for who he is—outshines anything else that we could ever think of as beautiful.

Real beauty is alive. It is life. There is nothing shallow about it, nothing temporary, nothing that can cause it to fade. Nothing—not disapproval from others, not the passage of time, not unwanted changes, not even a traumatic accident—can subtract from it. And everything about it is absolutely true.

*Here is the truth:
God's love in your heart is your beauty.*

God's love. It's as simple as that. This book is about how God's love makes a person breathtaking.

Every word and every sentence in these pages is here to show you how the Maker of all creation can remake you with his love. He does it by giving you the most remarkable gift in all of history, which is available to you this instant. Yes, all the fullness of beauty can be yours, right now.

How do you get it? As the chapters here will show, the process is less about you getting it and more about God giving it to you. It's a two-step deal, and both of the steps are directed by him.

First God gives you himself.

Then his love makes you more like himself.

He grips your heart, and he changes it. Each of these steps is marked with beauty: The fact that God gives you himself proves that he finds you beautiful. When his love begins to transform your heart, that beauty renews you from the inside out.

This process is not about you working hard to become



the kind of person God might accept. It's about God choosing to accept you, in spite of the ways you don't measure up to his standards. Through his Son, God does everything required to make you acceptable. More than acceptable: loved.

It's a jolt to the system, being pursued like this. The gift of God's love washes over you and makes you different. It puts God's imprint on your heart, so much that you begin to take on aspects of who he is. His love becomes alive in you: rich, abundant, and meaningful. Striking, appealing, inviting. It is undeniable beauty. It shines.

But how, really, does it happen?

When you dive into this book, you'll find that the chapters are divided into six sections. The first two sections (*Your Seeking Heart* and *Your Changed Heart*) focus on the first part of the beauty process: God giving himself to us. In these chapters, we'll look at why we need God, why we can trust him, how he gives himself to us, and what that means in general. The remaining four sections of the book look at specific areas of life where God's love transforms our hearts: through obedience (*Your Obedient Heart*), in our relationships (*Your Heart for Others*), in how we view ourselves (*Your Distinctive Heart*), and in how we approach the future (*Your Heart Looking Forward*).

Breaking things down a little further, in each of the chapters of this book you'll find

- **A story.** Every chapter begins with a personal story from my life or from the life of another young woman, told to illustrate either a common question young women have or a common problem young women face.¹

¹ While the stories in this book are true, many names and some details have been changed to conceal identities. Any changes to detail have been kept as minimal as possible to best preserve the integrity of the story and its meaning.



- **A lesson from the Bible.** Our main focus in this book will always be the Bible and what it has to say, both about God and about us. That's far more important than anything I could ever tell you—so I hope that by connecting God's Word with stories from today, you'll see how relevant, important, and meaningful the Bible is to a young woman's everyday questions and concerns. I hope you'll see, more and more, how knowing God through his Word makes your heart beautiful!
- **A summary sentence.** These are here to keep the overall message of this book simple and easy to remember and share. When a specific chapter connects with your heart, write the sentence down and keep it where you'll see it on a regular basis. Or share your favorite summaries with your friends, whether in person, on social media, in an encouraging note, or in some other creative way. Help yourself remember what real beauty is about, and help others discover real beauty along with you.
- **Discussion starters.** These questions are designed to help you apply the principles you've just read about in each chapter. They're there to help you take the content of this book further, prodding you to think about specific ways that God wants to impact *your* heart and *your* life. Please don't skip the discussion starters! No chapter of this book is complete without them.

There's something about honest conversation that cements important ideas in us, and it's always great to have relationships where you can share what's on your heart,



offering support and having a place to go when you need support. That's why the discussion starters at the end of each chapter are so important. This book will bring up ideas that you'll want cemented in your heart, and it will bring up ideas that might be tough to tackle. For that reason I recommend that you start a small group or grab a few friends who can read through this book with you, talking and praying together about what it's teaching you. It would be great if you had at least one mature Christian woman participating along with you to bring added experience and wisdom to your discussions. Grab your mom or your youth leader and ask her to read along. (Moms and youth leaders love invitations like that!)

As you read and discuss, take time especially to look at what God's Word can teach you and then let those truths sink in deeply. Pray about them. Learn from them. Work to obey them. Enjoy seeing them come alive in your life and in the lives of others—you'll never experience a more stunning ride.

Nothing can begin to compare with the love God gives. So come with me, won't you? Let's discover more and more what real beauty can be. Let's focus on how it can take hold of us and change us. Let's be awed by the One who makes it all possible.

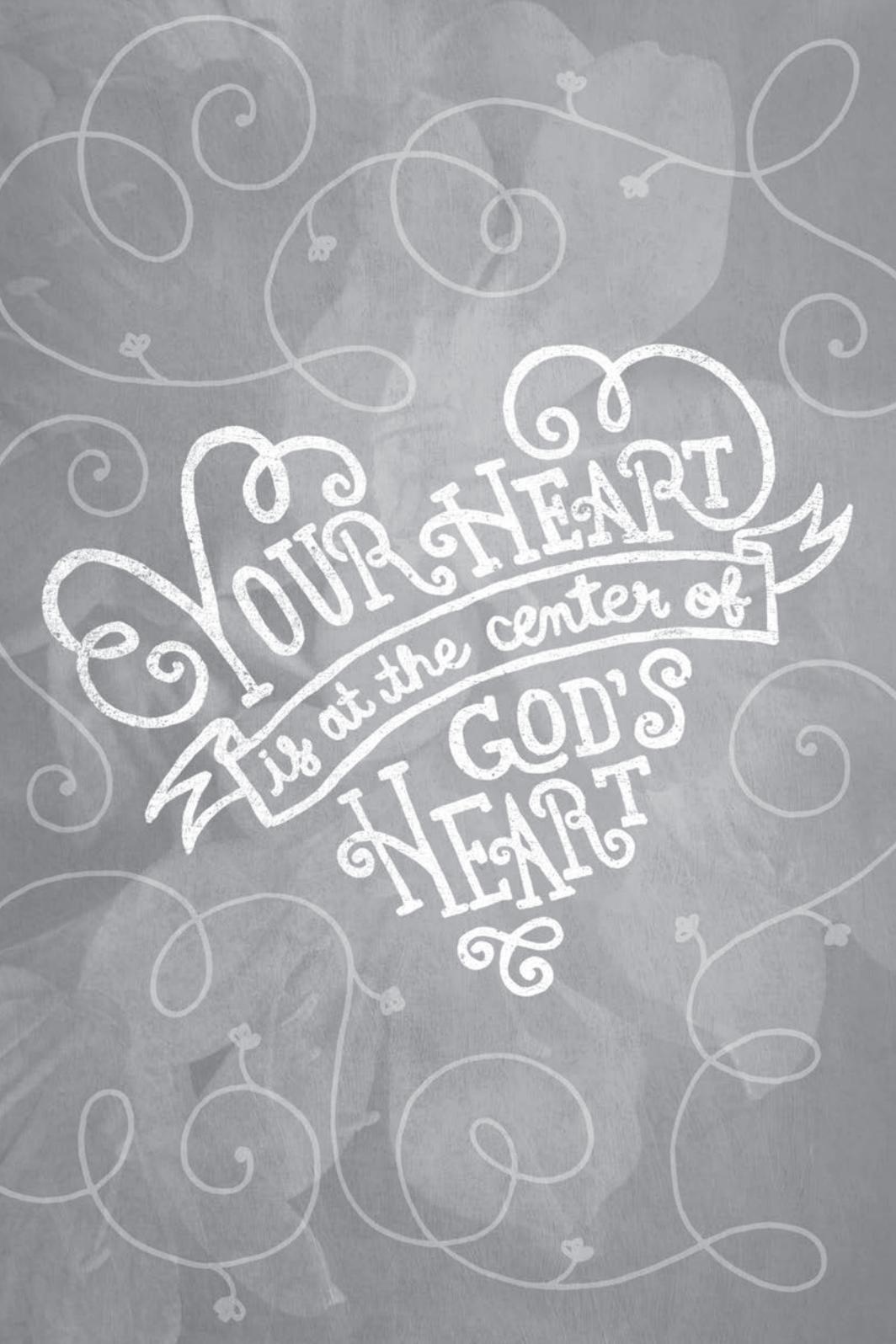
And finally, let's choose to receive God's beauty and watch it overwhelm our hearts and radiate from within.



Part One

Your Seeking Heart 





YOUR HEART
is at the center of
HIS GOD'S
HEART

A *Heart* at the Center

Warehouses and
Wardrobe Closets:
A *Gossip Girl* Story



There were no shiny hotels, mansions, or skyscrapers around—instead you saw only old warehouses, water towers, fire escapes, and a giant smokestack. The area looked more like a run-down shipping quarter than a luxurious backdrop for filming. But the set of *Gossip Girl* was located in this gritty New York City neighborhood.

For two months in my early twenties, I interned in the *Gossip Girl* wardrobe closet, and I can tell you that the show's closet was just as unfancy as the studio's location. It looked nothing like the fashion hub that people might've expected it to be. It looked like a dry-cleaning business.

Picture a big room with plain beige walls, a bare cement floor, and industrial fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling. Racks of clothes were stacked two-high, with so many different pieces of clothing smashed onto them—any

and every pattern, style, texture, and color—that nothing seemed to match or coordinate at all. Boxes that held designer shoes were piled haphazardly. Signature gowns could go completely unnoticed. Most of the clothes you couldn't even see; everything seemed lost among endless wire hangers and cheap plastic garment bags.

There is a reason why none of this ever made it to the TV screen.

If you know anything about *Gossip Girl*, you probably know it told stories of a group of young socialites from New York City's (very wealthy, very fancy) Upper East Side. The characters on the show lived lives that were spilling over with posh parties, expensive fashion, jet-setting travel, and ritzy gifts. Week after week, lavishness and glamour played out on-screen.

So it shouldn't be surprising that bland warehouses and unassuming wardrobe closets weren't what people saw when they tuned in to *Gossip Girl*. Even though the warehouse and the wardrobe were important parts of what made the show work, they weren't what the show was about. The people who ran the show had decided what it was about, and that was Manhattan fantasy. Shimmering sets. Opulence. Fifth Avenue glam.

In making that decision, whether they realized it or not, the people in charge had also made another decision. That's because deciding what a show is about means also deciding what the show *isn't* about. If your story centers on New York glitz, then you're not going to be filming back lots and badly lit closets and streets in Queens. That's why the less-than-glamorous side of *Gossip Girl* never showed up on a TV screen. Most of it wasn't ever filmed at all.



This principle—the warehouses and wardrobe closets principle—is also true when we look at the Bible.

The Bible tells a story. It's one big story made up of lots of smaller stories, much like how a TV show is one big series made up of smaller episodes. All the stories in the Bible are about something. They're about the big story. In the next chapter, we're going to take a good look at what that big story is and what it means. Before we do that, though, we're going to take a good look at what the big story of the Bible *isn't*.

What it *doesn't* center on.

What it spends extremely little time mentioning.

These things that *aren't* the Bible's big story can often be clues for us, if we pay attention to them. That's because the Bible is the most important message ever. And the most important message ever wouldn't be missing something so vital. So if an issue gets barely any page space in the Bible, that's saying something about how unimportant the issue probably is.

We can take this logic one step further: If an issue almost never shows up in the Bible, yet in our lives we treat that issue as if it's supremely important, we're probably *really* missing the point of things.

For example, the Bible has almost nothing to say about physical appearance.

Looking into the Looks Void

If you're familiar with the Bible, think about some of the most well-known stories in it, and think of the people in the stories. What did those people look like?

- Abraham—was he tall or short?
- David—did he have freckles, or didn't he?



- Deborah—was her hair curly or straight or some kind of wavy in-between?
- Mary, Jesus' mother—were her eyes widely or narrowly set, almond-shaped or round, dark or light in color?

For us, any attempt to answer questions like these would be just a guess. We don't have the information because the details aren't included in the Bible anywhere. In fact, if we were to read the Bible from beginning to end, looking for specifics about people's physical attributes, we wouldn't find much.

Among the thousands of people mentioned in the Bible's pages, there's an extremely small number of them whose looks get any page space at all. We know limited details like: Esau was red and hairy, and his brother, Jacob, wasn't. Leah had dull eyes, and her sister Rachel was beautiful. Saul was tall. David was handsome. Eglon was overweight. Zacchaeus was short.

It's not a lot. But even when a few particulars about appearance *do* show up in the Bible, they're typically just tiny pieces in a story that's really about something else. Esau's hairiness is worth mentioning because when Jacob pretended to be Esau, he had to wear animal skins on his arms. Leah and Rachel's physical differences played into their competitive, jealous relationship. Saul's height made him a desirable king for Israel. David's handsomeness was just one more thing that made Saul hate him. Eglon's weight is mentioned in the story of his assassination—the dagger that killed him had sunk into his belly fat. Zacchaeus was too short to see Jesus over the crowds, so he climbed a tree to obtain a better view.



And even Jesus, the pivotal person in the whole Bible, is never described in terms of his appearance. The book of Isaiah includes a well-known prophecy that looks ahead to Jesus, mentioning a few details—

*There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance,
nothing to attract us to him. . . .
We turned our backs on him and looked the other way.*¹

—but other than that, nothing. No hair color, no eye color, no height, no weight, no skin tone, no body mass, no facial structure. Zero. This is the Son of God, the turning point of the universe and certainly the Bible’s main character, and we’re not even given a basic mental picture.

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is essentially void of any commentary on looks. If we’re paying attention to that, we learn something crucial. Because what a thing is *not* tells us a lot.

Let’s put it this way: If you wanted to read about a new weight-lifting technique, you’d find a fitness magazine. If you wanted to figure out recipes and dinner ingredients, you’d get a cookbook. If you wanted to remodel your bathroom, you’d check out a home improvement show. If you wanted to landscape your yard, you’d visit a gardening blog. If you wanted to focus on your looks, you’d go to a salon. A boutique. A shoe store.

You wouldn’t go to the Bible for any of these things because the Bible is barely concerned with them, if it’s concerned about them at all.

How about we state the obvious for a moment? When God set out to write down his message for humanity, that message wasn’t anything like *Dress for Your Body Type!* or *30 Days to Killer Abs!* or *Shape Your Brows Now!* For that



matter, God's message wasn't *Grow the Best Begonias!* or *50 Vegan Appetizers!* or *Perfect Your Push-up!* either.

One of the most difficult and most amazing things about reading the Bible is that its message is drastically different from anything else we will ever encounter. Unlike our culture and unlike ourselves, the Bible doesn't waste time on shallow points or empty entertainment. It doesn't get caught up in distractions or fillers. What the Bible *does* is cut straight through to the center of everything. That's why God's Word includes what it includes, and that's why it doesn't include what it doesn't.

We can't read God's Word in the same way that we'd read a fashion magazine. We can't approach it in the same way that we'd approach a workout lesson. We shouldn't expect it to behave like a self-help book or a collection of wise thoughts to ponder either. We have to read it for what it is, not for what it isn't. And when we read God's Word for what it is, what we find is an epic love story.

Yes, *epic*. We should be blown away by what this book does to our hearts.

Read the Bible, and what you'll find—over and over, from Genesis to Revelation—is that your heart is at the center of God's heart. That is his message to you. Of everything he could've chosen to say, that is what he wanted you to know.

But wait. In case you're somehow not awestruck already, let me make sure I'm expressing the situation adequately:

*The God who flung the stars into the sky
and hand-formed every universe
is obsessed with your heart.*



Yes, *obsessed*. That's what his Book is about, and it's a direct reflection of what he himself is about.

The God we meet in the Bible is consumed with the process that turns human hearts from being hardened and sinful to tender and beautiful. This God will do anything—in fact, he *has* done *everything*—to bring true beauty into your life and to make it radiate from the inside out.

Don't believe me? Keep reading.

*A beautiful heart understands that
God's focus isn't on looks.*

Discussion Starters

1. Look up 1 Samuel 16, especially verse 7. What is happening in this story? What does verse 7 tell us about God's perspective?
2. In what ways does our world center on looks? What should it tell us when our world's focus is so different from what we find in God's Word?
3. "God is obsessed with your heart." Do you believe this? Why or why not?