

Untangled

Let God Loosen
the Knots of Insecurity
in Your Life

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This book is dedicated to my husband, Wayne—my cheerleader, my encourager, my constant. You gave me courage to walk this journey. You helped me trust again. You reminded me that I mattered. Thank you for seeing the real me through the tangles of my life. I love you.

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Introduction

While I accepted Jesus as my Savior at a very young age, my faith has been a series of fits and starts. I often wondered if I really needed a savior, because life had shown me that nobody could protect me better than I could. If I couldn't trust men, how could I trust God? Where was he when evil came my way? What kind of God would let such things happen to a child? I began to see him as mean and uncaring, too busy with other more important matters than protecting me.

Youth groups were fun, but they weren't a place I'd meet God. Something might inspire me to recommit my life to him one weekend, but that "feeling" would fade come Monday morning. I'd wake up feeling just as worthless as the day before. Had he even heard my heart's cry for help? I began to think that God saved his time and energy for more worthy causes. And when people reminded me of his promise in Romans 10:13 to save those who called on God's name, I had trouble believing it. No one had ever saved me.

My college years and my twenties were experiments in pushing boundaries. All of them. Sweet mother. While I did have some rich seasons with God, most of the time I ran in the other direction.

I knew God existed, but I decided that if he didn't have time for me then I didn't have time for him. I'd spent years asking him to save me—to show me my worth—but nothing had changed. By then, so much shame and guilt covered me that I was certain I was just too messy.

But in my midthirties God's voice became louder than my brokenness. I started seeing just how relentless he had been in pursuing my healing. Sometimes it's easier to understand life looking backward. Hindsight is so very often 20/20. God had been there all the time. I just hadn't been willing to believe him.

I finally chose to believe that God's plan for me was better than the one I was walking out—quite a feat for a self-professed control freak with epic trust issues like me. But I was at the end of my rope, hopeless and joyless and bitter. Something needed to change.

God has been faithful to untangle those broken places in me ever since. For the past several years, those *not good enough* knots have loosened. I've been a tangled mess, but he is patient and gentle. My eyes have been opened and I have learned so much. I can see the part I've played through my bad choices, and I can also see how the Enemy has used guilt and shame to keep me tangled. And comparison has been one of his best tools.

I've been keenly aware of the successes and failures of those around me all my life. For a long time comparison was a measuring stick for how I was doing, and it was always very black and white. In my mind, I was either loved or unloved, approved or rejected, good enough or worthless. There has never been a middle ground. I might be easy to talk to and have a fun personality, a compassionate heart, great hair, and a good complexion, but I struggled with my weight—and that negated all good factors. With my fuzzy math, I was worthless no matter how I sliced it.

And while my husband still desperately tries to understand me when my crazy starts to show, but fails to get it, something tells me you understand perfectly. Because, girl, sometimes your crazy shows

too. We all have that one particular tangle that knots us up, don't we? It could be weight, age, finances, parenting, marriage, health, friendship, the corporate ladder, or one of a million other things.

We see how easy and effortless that one thing is for *her*, and we come undone. The tangle tightens as we feel inferior, worthless, and incompetent. We may be rock stars in every other part of life, but that one pesky *not good enough* tangle totally knots us up. It has a way of overshadowing the truth of who we are, and whispers, *You'll never be worth anything.*

I've believed those words for years. So saying yes to God and writing this book about my story—my tangles—has been a very crunchy process. It's scary to be *that* transparent when you've spent most of your life as a chronic approval junkie. But with each word I write, the tangle seems to loosen just enough to encourage the next word.

Even getting this book published has been an untangling of sorts. Every rejection letter felt personal, like it was disapproval of *me*. But God used each no to help untie my knot of insecurity by teaching me to draw my sense of worth from him—not the world. Something I've never been able to do in my own strength.

These days, I don't need the world to love me like before. I've made peace with the knowledge that some may never approve of me, and I don't need their acceptance to feel like I matter. I'm okay with not being enough in their eyes, because I wasn't created to impress the world. I don't need the world to validate my message. God already has. And I'm at peace with not measuring up to the standards and expectations of others. Some are unreachable and others are just plain unsustainable.

But I'll be honest: I'm glad you're holding this book in your hands. I'm grateful you took interest in my story, and perhaps something stirred your tangled heart as you read the title. Maybe you can relate to the black and blue heart on the cover because it's how yours feels right now. Well, consider this your invitation

from God to take a journey—one where he will restore your heart and untangle your self-worth so you can be who he created you to be. This book is God’s reminder that he is in relentless pursuit of your healing too.

Jeremiah 29:11 tells us that his plans are for us to thrive. I didn’t always see this promise daily, but I do now. And even when I cannot understand the *whys* and *not agains* that threaten to discourage and devalue me, I hold on to this verse. It offers me hope and reminds me that while the world is careless with my heart, God never is.

This book is my story—a story of restoration. God has taken me on a journey to untangle my knotted self-worth. He has opened my eyes to the lies that have kept me mangled in shame and guilt. He has straightened out my distorted self-image. He has been tender with my heart so bruised by the world. And God has revealed the truth of who I am because of Jesus: loved, accepted, clean, beautiful, approved of, and powerful. I’m beginning to understand that I’m an intentional creation, made on purpose and for a purpose.

And most of the time, I believe him.

This book is for anyone who thinks she isn’t good enough. It’s for the one who feels worthless and unimportant. I hope it will connect to the heart of any woman who is searching for significance, certain she won’t ever measure up. My message is simple: you matter.

The world will look for ways to knock you down. The Enemy will always try to defeat you. And often your own thought life will keep you in bondage. But God is ready to untangle it all. Are you ready too?

I’m done giving Satan freedom to wreak havoc on my self-esteem. I’m done feeling like I will never be good enough. I’m done giving power to the people he used to hurt me, done with the situations meant to destroy me, done with all the evil he’s unleashed in my life. Done. Done. Done!

It's taken me forty-three years to get to this point in my life, but I'm here now. For too long I have measured my value and worth by the world's scales. I've looked for affirmation and approval in the wrong places. I have spent my life striving to be good enough in the eyes of others. I've compared my worst with another's best.

The Enemy has had a heyday *with* me, but now it's a new day *for* me. Maybe for you too.

Chances are he's been using these same tactics in your life. And until we understand his plan to make us feel worthless, we'll find ourselves in a battle to keep our self-esteem from becoming a tangled mess.

Let me share what those knots have looked like in my life.



My Tangled Mess

Forty-three years after the abuse, I penned this letter:

To the man who molested me,

You've been a part of my memory for most of my life. The things you said—the things you did—have tainted my ability to truly love myself.

That day forever changed me.

While I didn't understand what was happening, I unconsciously made an agreement with you about who I was, and who I should become. And since I've never been able to be that woman, I've struggled to be comfortable in my own skin. I've hated you for that. As I think back to that day, it's as clear in my mind this moment as it was forty-three years ago.

It started out like any other day. I woke up happy. The world was good. Adults were safe. And evil didn't exist. And as I jumped on my tricycle, I had no idea I was peddling away from life as I knew it.

When I let my mind wander back, I can hear the sounds coming from the tools of the construction crew you worked with. I remember you taking my hand in the midst of the busyness and leading me into that apartment . . . closing the door behind us.

*I can feel the confusion and fear stir in my stomach now as I recall how you made me look at the images of naked women in a magazine. **And I remember your anger when I tried to look away.***

I remember how you escorted me from one room to another, closing yet another door to my innocence. When I shut my eyes, I can see you lifting me onto the ironing board. It seemed so out of place.

*I can conjure up the rush of emotions I felt in that room . . . **the ones telling me this was wrong.** And while I cannot bring your face into focus, I've never been able to blur out the way you touched me or the way you asked me to touch you.*

I remember how I screamed for help only to realize my voice never made it past my lips. But your voice did. I can recall, with great clarity, the words you spoke to me.

“This is your fault. If you tell anybody, you will be in trouble. You are bad and dirty and will never be worth . . . anything.”

Who says such a thing to a four-year-old? Who does such a thing to a four-year-old? And as you turned and walked out of my life forever, your words sank into me, took root, and became part of my DNA.

*For most of my life, they've held such power over me. **I have wholeheartedly believed them.** I've struggled to feel beautiful—valuable. The words you spoke over me have been heavy weights of guilt and shame, dragging me deeper and deeper into a pit of worthlessness.*

I've hated you for that.

Sometimes I wonder if you remember me—if you recall what happened. Does it haunt you? Or have you buried it deep, distancing yourself from it? Was I the first of many . . . or the only one? While our encounter may never cross your mind, it's forever etched in mine. But God has been unknotting the effects of that day.

He is removing those words of hate you spewed all over me, and replacing them with the truth of who I really am.

He is untangling my self-esteem from the places you tied it, and anchoring it in him instead.

He is healing my little four-year-old heart, showing me that I am good enough.

He has saved me from living a life of defeat and destruction.

And while this process has been painful, and scary, and lonely, and long . . . it's working. Psalm 34:18 [CEB] says "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he saves those whose spirits are crushed." I'm living proof of that.

So I'm writing to tell you that you no longer have power over me. Your words and actions are only a part of my past, not my future. So no matter what shame or guilt has been attached to that day, God has removed it. It wasn't mine to carry, anyway.

Today I know I am beautiful. I know I hold great value in the eyes of my Daddy. I believe I'm more than good enough—I am powerful. And I'm greatly loved by the One who created me.

Because of those truths, what you meant for harm has been divinely trumped. And as a result, I no longer hate you. Even more, I forgive you.

But rest assured, there will come a day when you will answer to my heavenly Father for the things you did to me. And justice will be served.

Carey

While I didn't have a name or address to send the letter to, putting my feelings to paper was cathartic. I had no idea that abuse had tangled me up like it had. It was my ground zero, the place where everything in my self-worth changed. And for most of my life, I never made the connection.

For eight long years after it happened, I quietly carried the events of that day alone. When my perpetrator told me I'd get in trouble because it was my fault, I believed him. It was the perfect set-up by the Enemy. I kept silent, the feelings of worthlessness took root, and no one knew my self-worth was dying inside. By the time I shared it with my mom, those toxic beliefs ran deep and undetected. But looking back, it's easy to see how their effects manifested in different ways in every area of my life.

One of the biggest ways was in my ability to love and be loved. This has been a gaping wound for most of my life. I've struggled to trust that anyone could genuinely care for someone like me. After all, I was damaged goods—worthless. With all the girls in the world to choose from, why would any good man want me? I was always quick to remind myself that I wasn't pretty enough or thin enough. And so I settled for men who weren't a good match, sure I couldn't attract better.

I didn't trust the motives of men, either. In my opinion, they would say the right words to get what they wanted. When they proclaimed their love or complimented my outfit, it was all part of their evil plan. I was always just waiting for them to hurt me again, because that's what men did. At least that's what they seemed to always do to *me*. That mindset became a self-fulfilling prophecy—a tangle I wove myself.

But my insecurity wasn't restricted only to interactions with men. It also affected how I felt about myself, even around those closest to me.

When I was growing up, my family always spent Christmas with our relatives, who were scattered all over Texas. We'd take turns,

one year at our house in Arlington, the next in San Angelo or Fort Worth or Houston. I loved visiting family at Christmastime. My cousins and I had a great time together. But I especially enjoyed our trips to Houston, where my favorite girl cousin lived. She was only a little older than me, and cooler than me by a mile.

Her bedroom was colorful, her closet bursting with the newest styles. The whole house was decorated to the nines—beautiful decor, classic furniture, plush carpet. It was a two-story home, something I'd always wanted. I envied her having a bedroom upstairs, away from the busyness of the family. Their cars were always nicer than ours, newer models with comfy leather seats. I would stare at the big homes in their neighborhood as we drove through the maze of streets toward their house. Wide-eyed, I'd notice how much fancier their community was than the one my family lived in.

Funny—I never thought we didn't have as much as they did until we visited them, and then it would become obvious to me. Painfully.

The hustle and bustle around the holidays was always fun in Houston. Looking at lights, playing dress up, baking cookies, eating the yummy fried pies my grandmother made, and going to the Christmas Eve service at a big church were always highlights. I loved those parts of our visit. But then came Christmas morning, and everything changed.

As the family gathered around the tree and distributed the gifts, my eyes would roam from the presents I had to the pile next to my cousin. She always had more than I did, or at least it seemed that way to me. I would keep tabs on each present as it was opened, noticing she got bigger and nicer things. I would feel the excitement of the holiday being crushed out of me under the weight of those comparisons. I was so jealous that she always had more.

One Christmas, her parents gave her a beautiful fur coat. Now I know it's not politically correct to like fur coats, nor is there a great need for that kind of warmth in Houston, Texas, but this one was gorgeous. I sat in envy as I watched her lift it from the

shredded ruins of wrapping paper and try it on. She twirled, everybody cooed with admiration, and my green-eyed little self was stuck in the trap of comparison. I felt worthless. Again. It didn't matter how great my gifts were, it seemed hers were always better. Good feeling gone.

In my mind, the number of presents under the tree was a visual representation of how much I was loved. And because the number was always (at least in my memory) smaller than my cousin's, it spoke volumes to me. While I was too young to know how much things cost, I knew there was a difference. The little bow-shaped earrings I got—which had topped my Christmas list—were cute, but they didn't hold a candle to that coat. When the last gifts had been unwrapped, my cousin stood there cloaked in luxury while I was wrapped in jealousy and the certainty that, like my gifts, I wasn't worth as much as she was. A tangle.

I knew in my little heart I was loved. My parents met my needs and we had a very comfortable life. We had fun as a family. We took vacations and spent quality time together. They went to all my sporting events and helped me with homework and school projects. I got sound relationship advice when I was struggling. They supported me and encouraged me to be my best. But the seed of *worthlessness* had already been planted, so the quantity and quality of presents under the Christmas tree were fertile soil for it to sink its roots into.

The *not good enough* belief ran deep. So much so that it flooded every area of my life, leaving me drowning in my craving to feel like I measured up to everyone else. And the waters of comparison continued to rise.

In high school I was an excellent athlete, and secretly wanted to be number one on the tennis team. I had the physical talent but lacked the belief that I had what it took to achieve that lofty aspiration. And no amount of encouragement from my parents or my coach could convince me otherwise. I tried out for the cheerleading

squad—*more than once*—and never made it. But my friends did. I'd sit in the bleachers burning with jealousy, wondering what was wrong with *my* herkie jump. Or maybe my classmates didn't like me enough to vote me onto the squad. Regardless, it was another knot in a growing tangle.

When my college entrance exam score came back low, I never shared my disappointment. Instead I laughed it off, saying I preferred a party school over one that was academically tough. But if I had been honest, I would've admitted to being afraid of putting in the time and effort necessary to make a good grade. What if I did and still scored low? It would have proved I really wasn't smart enough, and I tried to avoid any situation that might confirm my fears. As my friends packed their bags for the bigger, more prestigious schools, I smiled and waved on the outside while hemorrhaging feelings of inferiority on the inside.

I came to realize that I always did just enough to get by, because being in the middle of the road was safe. Better to blend in with the pack than to try and fail. I didn't need another reminder—another validation—that I wasn't good enough. If I gave my best and fell short, the message of worthlessness couldn't have burned more if I had been branded with it. *You are bad and dirty, and will never be worth anything.*

I haven't lived a life completely devoid of hope. I wanted more out of life, and at times almost believed I was worthy of the dreams I had that would never quite die. But inevitably, every time I started to rise up and feel good about myself, my self-esteem would suffer another blow. The Enemy would whisper in my ear, reminding me of all the things I was supposed to be—but wasn't. *You will never be worth anything.*

For most of my life I've believed it—hook, line, and sinker. That message has run deep and wide inside me, undetected. And it's only been through this untangling season that I've seen just how damaging that belief has been. I've been trying to protect my

little four-year-old heart every day since the abuse, trying in vain to convince myself that I was worthy. And it has cost me.

How many opportunities in life, how many chances at love, did I miss because I believed the words my abuser spoke over me? Looking back at a life that could have been lived better is sobering. But in helping me to do so, God has been unveiling where the Enemy has strategically tangled my self-esteem. And it's beginning to make sense.

I see why I'm easily triggered by the numbers flashing on the digital scale or those on the little labels sewn into my clothes. I understand why social media stats can ruin my day. I'm learning that these struggles don't measure the size of my heart, the complexity of my character, or the depth of God's love for me. When I see the age spots on my hands or the wrinkles on my face, I know why they sometimes upset me. I'm aware of the knots friendships cause, and how they've snared me more than a few times. But they don't define my value as a woman. I'm grateful for these "aha" moments, because they've helped loosen the knots of insecurity.

To be fair, sometimes seeking the world's approval has worked in my favor. There have been moments when I've received approval instead of rejection, value instead of worthlessness. There have even been instances where the world's stamp of approval has given me joy and excitement. I've seen God build my ministry from the ground up and shine his favor on it. I've been able to partner with different ministries, increasing my reach online. God has blessed me with good friends, filling my life with community. I have an awesome husband who has loved me enough to stick with me through very hard times. God has given us two beautiful children, even when medical experts promised we couldn't have any. Evil doesn't always win. But unfortunately, it's been a huge factor in tangling my self-worth and feeding my insecurities for years.

And not the only one. The tangles in my life have played out in many ways.

In My Finances

We're the poor folk of the family. Don't get me wrong; my husband and I make a good living, own a comfortable home, take vacations, and can stop at Starbucks regularly. But our financial resources pale in comparison to those of my parents and my sister and her husband. And although we're content with what we have, the reality is we can't keep up with them.

When we get together for dinners, holidays, or vacations, money is always on my mind. No one ever says or does anything to make us feel inferior; they are tremendously gracious and generous. I've got an amazing family. But because we can't write checks as big as they can, the lie I hear is that my husband and I are *less than* the others. We're the charity cases of the family. And even though I'm the oldest child, sometimes I struggle to feel like a grown-up. I often wonder if we're a burden, if they resent helping, or if the size of our bank account prevents the entire family from gathering more often.

I know their hearts and their genuine desire to bless us. I'm so grateful for them. When they say we repay them in other ways, I believe they mean it. And when they compensate for my family, they do so out of sincere love. I know this all to be true! But because I feel like a hindrance at times, accepting their help can be crunchy for me.

God recently showed me my underlying issue is shame, because at the core I don't feel like a success. I'm the one who works in the low-paying nonprofit sector and has a little ministry on the side. And because of it, I struggle with feelings of inferiority when I'm around my family. When the check arrives at the table and I know we cannot offer to pick up the tab for everyone's dinner, I'm embarrassed. And when one of them covers it all, I feel indebted.

In My Ministry

I do most of my ministry online because it allows me to reach across the world with what God has laid on my heart. I can interact with people from places I've never visited while sitting in my favorite chair. For this reason, I love technology.

After the last presidential election, I wrote a bipartisan blog post about our need, as Christ followers, to have a bolder presence in the world. So many laws and amendments had passed that directly opposed how God has asked us to live. My heart was heavy. But rather than complain about it, I encouraged my readers to be a louder voice for God. Not a voice of condemnation. Not one of anger or hatred. I challenged them to shine the light of Jesus in the world rather than sitting in silence, pointing others to God. It's what God tells us to do in Matthew 5:14–16.

“Regardless of who won,” I wrote, “our purpose here on earth hasn't changed.” That day I lost a noticeable amount of subscribers. Had I said something wrong? Frantically, I read and reread the day's blog post, searching for the offensive phrase. I couldn't find one. It wasn't disrespectful or unprofessional. My goal was to be encouraging, reminding that our job description as Christ-followers doesn't change based on who sits in the White House. Losing those subscribers hurt! Knowing they had opted out, the lie I heard was *What you think doesn't matter*.

Immediately I began to question my relevancy. Was I a good writer? Did I even have any business writing for God? I felt completely rejected by those people, strangers who had no idea they'd sent me into an emotional downward spiral. (Okay, so sometimes I'm a bit dramatic.)

My husband listened to me as I cried big tears of rejection. I hate when people don't like me. In my hurt, I wanted to throw in the towel and delete my blog. It just wasn't worth the heartache and rejection. Over the next few weeks, the loss of subscribers

went from an annoying frustration to a battle with confidence. Who did I think I was anyway?

It changed how I wrote for a season. Rather than sharing authentically from my heart, I started writing “safe” posts no one could argue with. I felt guilty for writing that challenge, and shame for thinking I could.

In My Friendships

A few years ago, God clearly called my family to leave our church home of ten years. I fought it. This church was where my husband came to know Jesus. It was there that one of the pastors counseled our marriage back from the brink of divorce—more than once. This was the only church my kids knew, and they’d been to every summer camp it offered. My ministry was born there. It was where I first shared my story in front of an audience. My mentor worked at that church. My husband and I were deeply involved in volunteering, going on mission trips, participating in various ministry teams and committees, and so forth. I led women’s Bible studies and we were both involved in individual and couples small groups. We were deeply invested.

So when God made it clear we were to leave, it wasn’t something we did quickly or easily. We prayed about it at length. And even when we were certain God was telling us to move, we held on. We kept asking for more confirmation, and he kept giving it. God was so patient with us. But in the end, we reluctantly stepped out of the church. What came next completely floored us.

Our decision to do what God was asking angered some of my friends. I honestly never saw that coming. Weren’t we taught to not only listen to God but also obey him? It never dawned on me that leaving the church would affect my friendships. So when several of my church friends distanced themselves or fell away completely, I felt so rejected.

Was I only worth their time if we worshiped under the same roof? I'd known these people for years. They were like family. We had walked many hard roads together, helped each other out in difficult situations. Our kids grew up together. These women knew my secrets. I had shared my heart with them. And when the friendship grew cold, it deeply hurt me. It was a very painful tangle because it reinforced those *not good enough* feelings that ran so deep.

I closed my heart off as protection. Rather than fight for the friendships, I decided to let it be. What if I fought and they still rejected me? It would reinforce how I already felt—worthless.

The lie I heard was that my value as a friend was conditional, that where I worshiped was more important than anything I had to offer as a friend. Ouch.

In My Marriage

From day one my husband was a big scorekeeper, God love 'em. If I went out with friends one week, it was his turn the next. If he changed a diaper, I was expected to handle the next one. When he made dinner, I was responsible for washing the dishes. He calculated everything, making sure we were even in both responsibilities and playtime. It was exhausting trying to keep up with whose turn it was and make everything fair. Nothing in life is 50/50.

I knew he kept track of the points in his mind and could remember whose turn it was at any given moment. It was suffocating, especially since I'd never been good at math. It left me feeling like a bad wife because he would get frustrated when the score tipped out of balance. How do you make marriage . . . fair?

Eventually his marital scoreboard made me angry, so I tried to keep score too. But I only succeeded in holding grudges and spewing my anger all over him. For those first several years, we camped out on divorce's doorstep. I lived in fear he would walk out on me at any

moment. What kind of a wife couldn't make her husband happy? It reinforced my abuser's words. *You'll never be worth anything.*

My heart grieved because the *not good enough* messages were loud and proud. Why wasn't I worth fighting for? I longed to be cherished and loved and appreciated, but was scared to hope for those things. Based on my bad choices and shaky track record with relationships, I decided I was reaping what I sowed.

We've been married for fifteen years now, and thankfully, we threw away the scorecard long ago. We are better people now. A lot better. And I realize that God used our struggles to untangle some knots. We both had so many.

Today we have a rock-solid marriage, but every once in a while I feel the knot tighten. Isn't that life, though? My husband is an amazing leader and dotes on me and the kids like nobody's business. We've reached a level of trust in our relationship I've never known before—proof that God has untangled some very old knots. These days when Wayne tells me I'm beautiful, I actually believe him. Well, most of the time, anyway.

And as you'll see, the insecurities attached to the word *beautiful* are tangles deeply embedded inside me.

In My Femininity

In this area, life has been especially cruel. It's where my heart has been bruised the most. Comparison, jealousy, shame, guilt, rejection, and the message of *not good enough* have waged an epic battle against my self-esteem. This has been the hardest area for me to overcome. And to be honest, I am still working at it.

At one point during my time in the apartment, my abuser pulled a pornographic magazine from its hidden place and forced me to look at the pictures of naked women. I was only four years old, so my little mind couldn't process it all. But I realize the images on

those pages have affected me more than I ever imagined. While I can't recall the pictures themselves, not in any great detail anyway, I knew these women were special somehow. They were important. And because my abuser had the magazine, I assumed men thought they were beautiful.

I was confused by all the thoughts and emotions swirling inside, and felt certain I could never be as valuable as the women who stared back at me. My abuser's words told me as much.

Those minutes were defining, because they formed my understanding of what the perfect woman should look like. I grew up believing I'd only be valuable if my curves were just so. If my stomach was flat and my chest wasn't, I would be adored. I had to be firm in the right places and bouncy in others. Beauty meant a small waist, big lips, and bigger hair. And on the inside, I had to be possessed with an insatiable need for sex. Um . . . right.

Here's the problem, though: I've never had the right combination of those things. None of us do, actually. Not even the women in the magazines, thanks to computer programs that nip and tuck to create the "perfect" woman. And because I lacked those qualities—in my mind those *prerequisites*—I've struggled with body image since childhood. I've never felt beautiful. Never. The scale, the tape measure, and the image in the mirror that didn't match up to the magazine images in my mind all conspired to make me feel downright ugly.

My mom has always said, "Aging ain't for sissies." Her Texas twang makes the words more believable, somehow, and her advice is spot-on. We live in a world that glorifies the young, the perky, the beautiful, and the skinny. And when we're not any of those things, or when we're not the perfect combination of all of them, the world quickly reminds us of it.

These days, I can't help but notice the number of wrinkles that have taken up residence on my face. My hair—one of the few physical qualities I've managed to feel good about my whole life—isn't as full as it used to be. My eyebrows are faint at best. I'm saggy,

I'm jiggly, and I'm noticing age spots on my face and hands. And as someone who struggles with all kinds of ideals associated with being a woman, my self-esteem can quickly tangle with insecurities.

In this area, I'm an easy target for the Enemy. He doesn't have to remind me of the women on the pages of that trashy magazine to make me believe the lie that I'm not desirable as a woman—I can just look at who and what the world worships.

When I get tangled up in these things, I hide. Literally. I put on the baggiest clothes I can find in my closet, usually a good pair of sweats. I don't reach out to my friends because I'm sure they'll notice a difference in me and want to talk about it. Rather than cry out to God for help, I will find ways to manage my own pain such as curl up in bed, find a good chick flick, and cry my eyes out. Alone. Sometimes it just feels too vulnerable to share those deep struggles with others. And when people reach out and ask if I am okay, I say I'm fine—keeping my broken heart in hiding too.

The *not good enough* tangles in womanhood have been my constant companions. They've made me doubt my worth, wondering if I have anything good to offer anyone. Those powerful messages have told me I'll never be as beautiful as the world says I should be. Sometimes I'm self-conscious about how I look and what I wear. The effects of aging can make me uncomfortable, and I wonder if they're as noticeable as they feel. And as much as I've tried to be content with how God made me, it's not always that easy. I've strived for approval and acceptance most of my life.



I've believed in God since I was a child. Jesus has been a part of my life as far back as I can remember—although sometimes I wanted nothing to do with him. I know and hear the Holy Spirit's voice. There are strong believers on both sides of my family, and many still attend church regularly. A few of my uncles were even pastors. I went to youth groups and summer camps, although

mainly because of cute boys. My family prayed before meals and at bedtime. We even did family devotionals together. I grew up learning about my faith and how to walk it out.

I knew that God created me and Jesus died for me. I memorized verses that reminded me I was a new creation, a treasured possession. I knew with certainty that because of the cross, my sins were forgiven and my eternity secured in heaven. But this knowledge struggled to make the journey from my mind to the deep places in my heart.

Truth is, I never really believed I was important to God. How could I have been? If I really mattered, he would have saved me from that man—and the others that followed. God would have sheltered me from all the hurt and pain. He would have corrected the messages of worthlessness before they began wrapping around my self-worth and choking my confidence. Because, for heaven's sake, I was only *four*—an innocent child who did nothing to bring such evil her way.

Jeremiah 29:11 says, “I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope” (CEB). In his sovereignty, God knew evil would find me that day. And while he could've stopped the Enemy's plan, he didn't. That's been a hard reality to accept. I've been furious at him, screamed and cried at him, and turned my back on him, all the while wondering why he sat idle and did nothing. Weren't his plans for my life supposed to be filled with hope?

It's that kind of question that makes many people doubt the very existence of God. But not me. I have never doubted that my heavenly Father is real. But I have so many questions—the *whys*, the *hows*, the *why not's*. On this side of heaven I may never completely understand why God permitted the abuse. And when I get to heaven it really won't matter. But maybe—just maybe—he allowed it to happen because his plans were to also give me . . . *a voice*.