

HOW THE BIBLE
SHAPES YOUR
VIEW OF APPEARANCE,
FOOD, AND FITNESS



*Beautiful
Freedom*

STACY REAOCH

“To be a modern woman is to struggle with how we look. We’re confronted with images of beauty, ideas about what to eat, and our own internal struggles with our bodies. In *Beautiful Freedom*, Stacy Reaoch diagnoses and gives the solution to our ever-compounding struggles with body image. If you think you’re immune to this, Stacy shows how it impacts everyone. But even more helpfully, she points to the path towards freedom—where we see everything we have as a gift from God to be stewarded for his glory.”

COURTNEY REISSIG, Author, *Teach Me to Feel*

“Many today are turning new attention to our bodies and the very practical issues of exercise, aging, and what we eat and how much—but few provide deeply Christian counsel. Stacy Reaoch knows the perils of our pendulum swings between apathy and obsession, but even more, she wants to help readers to find not just ‘balance’ but deep and enduring joy in Jesus, with genuine love for others. She sees these important issues in light of our ultimate reality, which enables her to meet our pressing need for wisdom, rather than scratch the itch for quick and easy answers.”

DAVID MATHIS, Executive Editor, desiringGod.org

“I felt like Stacy was writing directly to me. I see myself in the stories she shares about herself and other women trying to balance attitudes and actions around food, exercise, and aging. Discipled by the world, I find myself falling into deep snares in each of these areas. But Stacy’s wisdom, shaped by the word of God, provides a clarion call back to what’s genuinely good, beautiful, and true. This is a book I will be sharing with my friends at the gym and at church, and my own four daughters. How I long for us all to view our bodies rightly! *Beautiful Freedom* will help us get there.”

JEN OSHMAN, Author, *Cultural Counterfeits and It's Good to Be a Girl*

“A heartening and fundamental guide for anyone battling the relentless pressures of modern beauty and health ideals. *Beautiful Freedom* is bursting with Bible-centered wisdom and highlights Christ’s love for us. More than insightful information, this book is a soothing balm, offering real hope and freedom that is only found in Jesus Christ. I pray that God will use this book to remind the church that true beauty and freedom are ultimately found in him and not the fleeting standards of the world.”

PORTIA COLLINS, Host, *Grounded* Podcast

“Christian women are not exempt from cultural pressures around aging, appearance, and beauty. Stacy Reaoch offers biblical wisdom, truth, and encouragement that soothes the soul of any woman who is stressed out over how she looks, how she should exercise, or what she should eat. This book offers sweet relief and poignant reminders that the most beautiful things about us are not external but eternal.”

**HEATHER CREEKMORE,
Host, *Compared to Who?* Podcast**

“Young or old, thick or thin, mostly satisfied or perpetually frustrated by what you see when you look in the mirror: whoever you are, you need an embodied theology, a grid for thinking about your body and beauty that is more than skin-deep. In her thought-provoking book, *Beautiful Freedom*, Stacy Reaoch will help you see yourself through the lens of God’s unchanging word. In seeing his heart rightly, you’ll finally be able to see yourself and your body choices with hope and freedom. You’ll want to share this book with every woman you know.”

ERIN DAVIS, Author, *Fasting and Feasting*

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Beautiful
Freedom

STACY REA OCH

the goodbook
COMPANY

To my daughters, Milaina and Annalyse.

May you walk in freedom all your days, enjoying the good gifts God has given and trusting that you are most beautiful when you're most like Christ.

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” —Galatians 5:1

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Introduction

Lose the weight for good by following these simple food hacks!”

“Look 10 years younger with this amazing new serum!”

“Avoid these 7 foods and add years to your life!”

“Be strong and sexy in just 15 minutes of exercise per day!”

It’s no secret that society is obsessed with our outward appearance. People spend thousands of dollars on beauty treatments with the hope of looking a few years younger. Whether it’s Botox injections, kale shakes, or a slew of cosmetics, the desire and hope remain the same. The lies of our society tell us that if we can just lose a few pounds, smooth out our wrinkles, or achieve a toned and healthy body, then we’ll be happy.

It’s hard not to be swept up in the idea that a more attractive and fit physical body will solve our problems in life—whether they have to do with romantic relationships, self-confidence, or sickness. The overwhelming amount of advice about our bodies can leave us worrying about the choices we make—

whether the food we bought is nutritious enough, whether our aging joints will still be able to do all that we want them to. Or, on the other side of the coin, whether the weight we gained from indulging in our favorite foods will keep us from achieving the things we're longing for.

What promises freedom and happiness leaves us trapped in a downward spiral of discontentment. And ultimately, if we're honest, we know that physical beauty will fade and leave us disappointed. We're racing the clock and will inevitably lose.

Yet God is clear that his intention is not for us to worry about our bodies but to trust him (Matthew 6:25-34). The one who cares for the birds in the sky and the flowers in the field cares even more for us. Jesus came to set us free from the power of sin and death. He came to free us from enslavement to all our fears and failures, whatever they are. Jesus gives us hope that we can walk in the freedom, peace, and joy that only he can provide—if we are willing to let him teach us.

"YOU'RE NOT BAD LOOKING"

My own struggle with body image began in the tumultuous teenage years. Even though I had a voracious appetite, the calories couldn't keep up with my growing body. Every time I put on my pom-pom cheerleading uniform, I was embarrassed by my chicken skinny legs. I was always secretly hoping the weather would be cool enough to warrant wearing sweatpants under my skirt or a turtleneck under the sleeveless top. Anything to hide myself a little more.

One particular day stands out to me. As I walked to my desk in school, the eyes of the boy who sat next to me

scanned me over from head to toe. “You know, you’re not bad looking if you weren’t so damn skinny,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

It’s funny how some 30 years later I still remember that remark. I remember how my face flushed with embarrassment as I sank into my seat. I remember wishing my body was more filled out. Thinking that for sure I would land a boyfriend and a date to Homecoming if I just had a few more curves.

As I moved into adulthood and began having children, my struggle swung in the other direction. Even though I never considered myself a “dieter,” I occasionally jumped on board with new food rules that were supposed to help keep the weight off. Yet none of these new eating methods actually stuck—likely because they took all the fun out of food and weren’t realistic ways to eat with a family.

I’ve definitely swung on the pendulum—from zealously reading food labels to binging on my kids’ Halloween candy. Perhaps this is why as a mom in my mid-forties, when it seems like everything that touches my lips adds to the width of my hips, the body-image battle can still rear its ugly head. Aging is not an easy thing in a culture obsessed with youthful beauty.

But I’ve also grown in my struggle. I’m learning what it means to age with grace, to find my identity in who Christ says I am versus the reflection in the mirror. To remember that what matters most isn’t whether I’ve gained or lost five pounds, but that I’m living my life for the glory of God.

More than my own story, though, what really led me to write this book was the experience of walking with a number of friends and family members as they battled

their own body-image issues—from the everyday grind of living in a culture of comparison, to food addictions and fitness obsessions, to full-blown eating disorders. Some of these women were kind enough to let me interview them as I wrote the book, sharing their stories in hopes of shedding light on the issues at hand and helping others to find the freedom they need.

A RESHAPED PERSPECTIVE

Maybe you can identify with some of the struggles I just outlined. You've jumped from the Keto diet to a vegan diet to throwing out every ounce of sugar in your kitchen. You've lost a few pounds and gained them back, only to find yourself at the start of the vicious cycle again. You've joined the gym, invested way too much in home exercise equipment, and logged every step you take. You eagerly try the latest skincare products in hopes of turning back the hands of time. But still the body you crave seems like an impossible dream. The picture-perfect woman on your exercise app is unattainable.

As Christians, how are we to view all of this? Is the pursuit of physical beauty a legitimate concern? Does God care how I eat? Or if I exercise? How much is too much in terms of the amount of money and time we spend on our bodies? Maybe it's a surprise to you to even start thinking about these things in light of our relationship with God. Yet the truth is that we *can* actively honor him with our bodies.

The Bible doesn't give us black-and-white answers to what we should eat or how much exercise we should do. There are no tips for a great skincare regime in its pages! So you won't find diet formulas or exercise plans in this book. But the kindness of God doesn't leave us without help. The

Bible does give us wisdom and guidance in all of these areas. And with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can trust God to lead us to embrace an eternal perspective that can bring us freedom from our worries and uncertainties.

Our bodies matter to God. He made us intentionally in his image and he knows every hair on our heads (Luke 12:7). He came to dwell among us in his own earthly body in the person of Jesus—redeeming us, body and soul. He lives within our bodies now by his Spirit, if we are trusting in Christ. And one day these broken vessels will be fully restored, without pain or limitations as we worship our God in heaven.

As we explore those amazing truths and more, we start to find ourselves with a new perspective on our bodies and how we treat them. We'll be equipped to really examine our motivations— why do we eat the way we do? Why do we exercise, or not exercise? Why are we inclined to go to great lengths to look a few years younger? Why do we have this tendency or that tendency? And crucially, where is God calling us into something better? In what ways is he inviting us into freedom?

My prayer for you, as you read this book, is that God will grant you new eyes to see your body the way he sees it—as a gift to enjoy and to steward for his glory. I hope that you will start to find freedom from the fears and concerns that weigh you down, and confidence in his sovereign work that knitted you together. And I pray that you will be inspired to love God more. Our Creator is the true source of beauty—fixing our hope on him will never disappoint!



1. A Beautiful Life

What do you think of when you hear the word “beauty”? Do you automatically think of that famous actress with the seemingly never-aging body and flawless skin? The woman on your exercise app who exhibits Hulk-like strength and fortitude? Maybe it’s the makeup stashed in your bathroom drawer that promises to erase wrinkles and create a beautiful face. Or maybe you’re thinking of some majestic mountains you hiked through on vacation.

I guess all of us want to live what we might call “a beautiful life.” You know, the kind of life you see on social media or in magazines. We want to look good and feel good—in our bodies, in our minds, in what we eat and how we dress. But to find *true* beauty, we need to look first at God.

Right now, the change of seasons surrounds me. We are officially in fall, but the temperature still feels like summer. The trees are draped in colorful leaves, billowy clouds float in the blue sky, and the squirrels are chasing each other in my backyard. All of these magnificent scenes

are created by our good and sovereign God. He is the one who paints the moon in the sky each night and causes the bright morning sun to rise. He puts the stars in the heavens and knows every hair on every person's head. And he is himself beautiful.

In the book of Psalms, we see David reminding himself of the beauty of God in an unlikely situation: when he is being attacked and pursued by King Saul.

“One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.” (Psalm 27:4)

Even in the midst of danger, David doesn't say, *One thing I ask: that I may be safe!* None of the worries of David's life seem to matter in comparison with having a relationship with God. And none of the good things in his life do either. Being made king is nothing compared to the steadfast companionship of the Lord. Impressing others with worldly success doesn't light a candle to being consumed with an infinitely perfect God—because it's not about David, it's about God.

Is that how you and I feel? Not always! And particularly when it comes to issues around our bodies. It's completely natural to want to look good and feel good, but very often that leads us into worry and fear. We worry about our attractiveness, we worry about weight, we worry that our bodies can't do what they used to be able to do, we worry about how healthy we are or aren't. It's easy to become consumed with issues related to our bodies.

Imagine being like David—so taken with God that you can't take your eyes off him, and all those other struggles seem like nothing! Let me ask you: do you think it's possible? Can you be free from body-image issues or counting calories or fearing that you won't be able to fit into the dress in time for the wedding? Can you be free from the fear of aging, of adding a few pounds around your middle, or of going without your favorite food or drink?

The aim of this book is to lead you down a path of freedom. We can learn to put off those things that enslave us and put on the Lord Jesus—so that we too start to merely glance at our worries but gaze and gaze at the Lord. Not only can we grow in a sense of bodily freedom but, in the process, we can learn to love God more.

Are you ready for that?

AN EARLY BATTLE

For some of us, a fixation with our bodies starts early in life. My friend Jill shared her story with me. “My first memory of being concerned about my body image was from when I was just five or six years old. My dad looked at my chubby limbs and said, ‘You know, if you want to lose weight, you're really going to have to work at it. Our genes are working against us.’”

Starting in elementary school, Jill began doing workouts and comparing herself to other girls. By eighth grade she was reading food labels and counting calories, scrupulously watching her diet, and enjoying the attention she was getting for her looks. It seemed that the harder she worked at it, the more praise she got. The attention and compliments fueled her desire to lose weight. Jill's battle with

perfectionism led her to plastic surgery in her early twenties and a full-blown eating disorder a few years later.

Although she'd been raised in a Christian family, the all-consuming battle for beauty kept Jill's eyes focused on self rather than on God. "Beauty is power," she told me. "It was exhilarating to know I was turning heads each time I walked into the gym." Dating a well-known bodybuilder and entering the world of competitions only added fuel to the fire.

As the praise of others fed her motivation, Jill kept moving down more and more dangerous paths to achieve her goals. A friend who worked in a pharmacy began illegally selling her Adderall, an addictive stimulant that kept her moving at a fast pace, feeling little need for sleep or food. But soon Jill's body began to crash and she realized just how far she'd fallen—all in the name of health and fitness.

I also think about my friend Amy, who grew up with a mom obsessed with dieting. Amy's mom never walked by a mirror without stopping to notice her reflection and make a self-deprecating comment: "I look so old!" or "I look bigger each time I look in the mirror!" Watching her mom jump from diet to diet and be consumed with her body image contributed to Amy having a distorted view of her own body. It seemed like the goal of life was to be thin, young, and beautiful. Wasn't that why her mom was always talking about diets, calories, and weight?

There are so many causes of our struggles with body image. Maybe we're like Jill: someone close to us once said a hurtful comment about the way we look. Maybe we fear not being loved for who we are. Maybe we worry about not being healthy or strong enough. Or we've

spent too much time online, looking at filtered images of fitness gurus that make us feel like we're not up to snuff. Our struggles might be embedded in low self-esteem or compounded by mental illness.

For Jill, these struggles took a relatively extreme form; for many of us it's much more subtle. Maybe you never feel like your body is good enough. Or your time at the gym is spent comparing your body to the woman's next to yours who seems perfectly fit. Or you feel out of control with the food around you. You may not be ready to get plastic surgery or forgo your favorite foods, but there is a constant grating in your mind over what's wrong with your body.

Our culture is quick to point out solutions to our problems. The beauty industry bombards us with advertisements for the latest and greatest serums or injections which promise to turn back time. The fitness industry offers every workout we can imagine—from hot yoga to Zumba to HIIT, available at any time or place that fits your schedule. Diet and wellness culture assures us that we'll lose our extra pounds and add years to our lives as long as we adhere to their rules and cut out carbs, sugar, or processed foods. All of these quick-fix solutions offer supposedly easy answers to our worries about our bodies.

But as Christians, our approach to fitness, health, and beauty needs to be different. I don't mean that hot yoga is out the window or that you should stop paying attention to your appearance: what I mean is that we need to take stock of our baseline assumptions about our bodies. We need to start by thinking about what the Bible says—and when we do, we'll find that God has different ideas about what really, truly constitutes “a beautiful life.”