

Anne Le Tissier



The Mirror that SPEAKS BACK

Looking at, listening to and reflecting your worth in Jesus

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 635 8

First published 2018

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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Introduction

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

JOHN 10:10

I came that they may have *and* enjoy life, and have it in abundance [to the full, till it overflows].

JOHN 10:10 (AMP)

My story

My husband and I were walking a stretch of the beautiful Cotswold Way when we spotted it: a lamb squirming in a desperate fight to free its trapped head, stuck between entwined branches which hung low to the ground from an ancient, twisted tree.

Its mother stood nearby, bleating comfort but unable to help.

With gentle voices and slow steps, we drew alongside two terrified, bulging brown eyes. I placed my arms around its neck, still speaking in soft tones, and as my husband forced two branches apart, I guided the lamb backwards out of its snare.

‘I think we should stop for a cuppa,’ I suggested with a grin, pulling a flask from my rucksack, as the lamb skittered away with its mum.

I was once like that lamb: alive, yes, but unable to live life as God intended.

This was when my self-image plummeted during my late teens and early 20s. I was driven to please significant others, failing exams I should never have sat, and despairing at the impossible pressure to clone the 'ideal' body shape idolised in adverts and the media. I was cheated on repeatedly by one boyfriend, endured an abusive relationship with another, and by the time I did get engaged I was still overcoming an eating disorder.

I believed in my head in God's love, but low self-image held me back from experiencing its fullness at the core of my inner being. I was discontent with who I was and lacked confidence to pursue everything that God had made me to be.

Jesus promised 'life... to the full' (John 10:10), but I knew I wasn't receiving it in the way the Bible suggested. And if not for being offered a choice to engage with the power of God's word, I would still be like that lamb – alive but held back from living out the promise for myself.

What this book is *not* intended to be

This book is not just intended for women with eating disorders. The consequences of low self-image are many and varied. But whatever their nature, their presence suggests we are not experiencing God's love to the full measure and will likely struggle to pursue and fulfil our God-given potential.

Nor is this book competing with authoritative, educational books on self-image. I am not trained to write such a book – nor was I asked to! – but I am qualified to draw on my personal experience with self-esteem, self-worth and body-image issues, alongside my knowledge of God's love and the life-transforming healing effect of proactively engaging with his word.

This book is more of a living, breathing, instructive story of how God shifted the axis of my life from a negative self-image to a healthy identity and understanding of my worth in him; and how he can change your life too.

But here I must include a word of caution, for those of you whose low self-image has already contributed to mental or physical health problems.

God has healed, and continues to heal, many individuals of sickness, sometimes by a powerful encounter with the Holy Spirit and sometimes in conjunction with medication. This book is not intended to replace professional treatment; I am not a qualified medic or certified counsellor. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)¹, counselling and/or prescribed medication may be required if your health and life are already at risk (through clinical depression, alcohol or drug addiction, self-harm or eating disorders).

If you think you fall into that category then do still read this book, but be encouraged, right now, to seek the medical help you need as well.

We do not live in a perfect world – that still waits for us in heaven – and it is often through the God-given expertise of professionals that we are helped to live meaningful lives, even within our broken environment.

Why The Mirror That Speaks Back?

When a girl doesn't feel good about herself, she isn't reaching her full potential.

Dove Self-Esteem Project²

Modern Western culture conveys, usually through images in the media, a message of happiness, contentment and fulfilment that all

too often depends on having the ‘ideal’ face or body shape, wearing the latest fashion or achieving certain benchmarks of success, including top exam grades, an exciting gap-year experience, a high-flying career, promotion, marriage and giving birth.

These are the alternative ‘mirrors’ which society offers to measure worth, but when we look at and listen to them we begin to hear a repeated message: I’m not good enough; I’m not attractive enough; I don’t have enough.

In short, we’re just never *enough*.

If we start to believe, even subconsciously, that these distortions are the ideals we should conform or aspire to, they have the power to undermine our self-image and the potential to harm our physical, mental or spiritual health.

And Christian women are not immune to the problem.

Many Christian women have shared with me that while they believe their faith should protect them from feeling unloved, insecure, inadequate or ugly, in reality their self-image can be as low as that of their non-Christian friends. They believe God’s word is true, but they struggle to let it transform their response to peer and cultural pressure. So negative messages or demanding expectations undermine their pursuit and experience of the contented, fulfilling and influential life God intends for them.

Ellen (not her real name) suffers from bulimia, an eating disorder that has grown out of her negative body image. She writes:

I feel so disappointed in myself for feeling so close to God, but still letting this issue bother me. It seems that, no matter how much I know, the ‘switch just isn’t flicking’. The Bible verses are encouraging but no matter how much information goes in, I just don’t feel it.

I know from experience that merely being handed scripture is unlikely to provide a miraculous cure for anxiety, self-hatred, feeling unworthy or any other debilitating lack of well-being. That is why I will share my own story of how God inspired me to root myself deeper into his love and proactively engage with his word; that is, to trust it and walk it out, rather than just to be familiar with it. For this was the powerful remedy for my low self-image, as well as a protective barrier against further onslaught.

In the same way that I approached that lamb, and used the strength of my husband's arms to help it find freedom, I believe that God wants me to come alongside you, place an arm around your shoulders and help you to engage with the power of his truth that sets you free – to release you from the snares that stop you living in and experiencing the fullness of life that he intended.

I am going to quote, pray and dig into scripture, but I hope you will allow me to walk *with* you and speak *with* you – to journey with you through this part of your life – and not just spurt out truth at you from a distance.

I will also encourage you to talk with God and, in turn, I trust that his living power will do his work of healing in and through you.

The apostle Paul had 'learned' to be content in all circumstances (Philippians 4:12). If we can learn how to be content, we can today experience Christ's promise of an abundant life, instead of it being diluted or distorted by self-image issues. We can learn to be content with ourselves, today, rather than suffering years – even decades – of needless anxiety, unfulfilled potential, problematic relationships or chasing meaningless goals, and can avoid the downward spiral into dangerous health problems.

Life will still be tough at times. Christ's promise of life to the full and the contentment in God that Paul writes about do not mean immunity from problems. But they do speak of God's empowering to

overcome whatever undermines our inward security and limits our experience of his love.

So I pray that, by the time you close this book, you too will be well on the way to learning contentment – with how you look, with what you can do (as well as what you can't), with your relationships, with your health and, most of all, with God.

Your story

As part of my research for this book I devised a questionnaire. Many young women (aged 16–28) responded by email, via post or through group discussions, and I am extremely grateful for their honesty and vulnerability. The culture has changed since I was their age, and while some of the negative pressures are similar, many are new or different. Here are two short examples from Amelia (not her real name):

What makes you feel inadequate, a failure, unlovable or ugly?

When someone makes negative comments about my weight or appearance.

Every generation has its 'giants to slay'. What are yours?

My worries for getting a job in the future, and body-image concerns.

I thank these women again, for without exception every respondent offered invaluable authenticity to this book. You will read their responses as quotes under pseudonyms,³ but you will also have the opportunity to answer some of the questions yourself, along with others included just for this book.

Pause to respond to God

The Mirror That Speaks Back is divided into three parts:

- 1 Introducing the problem and how to deal with it.
- 2 A look at some cultural 'mirrors' that can undermine self-image, and how to overcome them.
- 3 Some concluding warnings and tips to help you move on.

Every chapter, however, encourages you to pause before turning the page, to pray through or worship God with your response to what you are learning.

I have offered suggestions to help you, but do give time for the Holy Spirit to breathe life into your heart, then respond in whatever way he leads you. For now, I'd love to pray for you myself:

Jesus, please empower your truth in this young woman's heart. Release her from whatever is restricting her experience of the fullness of life you promised. May she turn the final page at peace with who she is in you and inspired to pursue all that you created her to be. Amen

Role models who inspire for reasons other than their appearance

With the exception of two chapters with footnotes, each chapter concludes with a response from my final research question:

Is there an older woman (Christian or not) who inspires you, but NOT because of her looks? Who is she, and what is it about her that influences you for the good?

Here is the first:

My role models are women who inspire me to nurture and grow the qualities I see in their lives, like patience.

Yasmin

I wonder who inspires you to nurture such qualities.

i

What's it
all about?

Addressing
the problem

1

*Mirror messages**Why the need for this book?*

**You weren't born thinking, 'I'm not good enough.'
Someone or something made you feel that way, perhaps a
long time ago.**

Chris Williams⁴

My story

Home for me while growing up was mum, dad, elder sister and brother, plus various cats, hamsters, fish, rabbits and budgerigars, arriving and departing over the years. It was a loving, generous and supportive place of nurture and growth.

My sister could be rebellious at times; I'd bury my head under pillows to muffle the yelling and banging of doors. Perhaps that is why I am still disturbed by loud noise or raised voices. But she and I have always been close. She never failed to look out for me and I always looked up to her. I was proud of her (and still am). She was my big sis: fun, intelligent and an excellent swimmer, diver and trampolinist. She was also my idol – she seemed to know what life was all about and could answer my girlish questions.

I only grew close to my brother, however, through my teens and adulthood. During childhood, he would bully me, threaten me and shoot his rubber-tipped arrows or pellet gun at me. Although these were no different from other sibling pranks, the childhood fears they created fed into my anxious nature.

Apart from that, it was not until my mid-to-late teens that certain negative messages undermined my well-being:

- Cloakroom jokes about pancakes and bra size became all too shaming – I was a late developer and have always been petite.
- The disappointment in my father's face when I failed my A levels – having foolishly studied subjects I was weaker at to please him – then applied for a job in a merchant bank rather than to study at university.
- The message that I wasn't good enough each time my first boyfriend was unfaithful.
- The mental, verbal, emotional and occasional physical abuse that I endured in the next relationship.

So around the time I was your age (if you still call yourself a young woman), my sense of self-worth and self-esteem, not least in terms of my body image, was reeling from failure and inadequacy.

That said, it certainly wasn't all doom and gloom:

- Mum has been a constant refuge and support.
- I came to faith when I was 15, despite my unchurched upbringing.
- My dad's disappointment was soon overcome when I sped up the ranks of promotion.
- I developed new and positive relationships.
- Timid me took off alone on a round-the-world ticket, including a stint with Youth with a Mission (YWAM) New Zealand.⁵
- I married the best man God could have chosen for me, and cherish the gift of my daughter.

I would like to say these positives brought healing to my low self-image. In many ways they played a part, but they were never enough. Ultimately, I still had to choose to hear God speaking to me and to hold on to his messages, digest them and infuse my battered inner life with wholeness – unconditional acceptance, intimate understanding, contentment, purpose and peace. I had to stop conforming to cultural pressures and expectations, and allow my priorities to be transformed by God.

Mirror messages

*I hate looking in mirrors, and have them covered up at home.
Looking in a mirror physically makes me feel sick. I hate my body.
I hate everything about me.*

Amy

This upsetting quote reminds us of why we look into mirrors, which is, of course, to see the image reflected back – to check our hair, make-up or outfit or to search for that lost thigh gap!

But here is the problem.

Amy's hatred of glass mirrors stems from the alternative 'mirrors' society offers to gauge how well she matches up to its ideal. And she's certainly not alone.

Daily, if not hourly, we are assailed, inundated and at times overwhelmed by hundreds of mirror images and messages, reflections that try to imprint their own pattern on our thinking – their blueprint of what is necessary to feel good about life. Other people's opinions, professional photo shoots, social media, exam-grade benchmarks and the fashion, beauty and diet industries: these are just a few of the mirrors that reflect back how they think we should look or be or do or behave, and how far we fall short. They

are mirrors that convey and communicate who and what we are in *society's* opinion.

But no mirror is perfect. Flaws in manufactured glass mirrors distort reflections: warped glass ripples the image (as in the hall of mirrors at a 'funfair'), while any irregularities in the coating applied to the back can make us appear fatter, thinner, brighter or duller than we actually are.

Society's mirrors are just as flawed. These mirrors misrepresent God's truth, so when we prioritise time, effort or money in trying to conform to their distorted ideals, they sow seeds of discontent in our souls. That's why advertising is a multibillion-dollar industry, because repeated messages affect what we think and feel, and consequently what we do. One moment, we are lounging on the sofa feeling content. Then an advert appears and suddenly we feel hungry, dowdy or old – we raid the fridge, arrange a shopping trip or make a Botox appointment. Repetitive messages have the power to cut deep into our self-image and well-being.

Only Jesus offers a mirror that reflects a faultless image of who we were made to be. For Jesus himself is the 'radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being' (Hebrews 1:3), and we have been predestined to be conformed into that image, to grow into his likeness, just as God originally created us to be (Romans 8:29; Genesis 1:26).

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

ROMANS 12:2

This is something we will learn to do in practical and meaningful ways throughout this book, inviting the imprint of God's image and truth to transform our thoughts and renew our identity in Jesus.

Your story

Self-criticism, or thinking about what people think, can be a mind battle. When you focus on it you get beaten up! But it helps to come back to the value Jesus has for you.

Natalie

You might like to grab a notebook to journal your responses; it could prove useful to recall them as you keep working through this book.

Consider the following words:

Inadequate
Failure
Unlovable
Imposter
Shallow
Silly
Foolish
Ugly

- Can you relate to any of them?
- What other labels do you pin to yourself?
- Who or what makes you feel that way?

Who or what makes you feel under pressure to do something or to conform to an ideal? If nothing comes to mind, consider these examples:

- friends' comments
- lack of care or encouragement from family
- your body
- your weight
- pressure to conform to fashion or make-up ideals
- lack of money to buy the clothes or make-up you feel expected to wear

- images in magazines, on the internet or on TV
- your Christian beliefs
- your level of intellect or general knowledge
- your capability, skills or talents
- social media

How do any negative feelings:

- affect your mental and physical health, or your focus on Jesus?
- stop you doing or saying something?
- put pressure on you to do or say something?
- hinder you from living the life you believe God intended for you?

Taking it further

Remember that the key to the discipline of study is not reading many books but experiencing what we do read.

Richard J. Foster⁶

I am going to share some of my story throughout this book, because I want to be real with you; I want to open my heart to you, so that you can feel safe to open your heart to God. As we journey together, I will take your chin in my hand, as it were, and turn your face away from the world's Vegas-like mirrors, to gaze into the mirror of Jesus – to see, and grow to love and yearn for, the image and likeness our Father longs for each of us to aspire to.

But I need your help, as I can't do all of this for you!

Be honest with yourself and with God. *Really* honest. This means you will probably need time to pause in each chapter, in order to reflect on the teaching and questions, rather than hastily turning the page, and mull over what Jesus is saying to *you* through the messages from his word that we will unpack together; time to think practically how you might 'take further action' with the ideas proposed.

Pause to respond to God

Pause for a while, to love and be loved in worship and prayer by your creator, Father and very best friend – your only true source of complete contentment and well-being.

If you are struggling to believe Jesus can truly bring freedom from the pressures on you to conform to the world, then talk to him about it now. Be open about any doubts you have that he wants to heal your low self-esteem or body image.

Talk to him about your responses to the questions above. Be honest, and just talk to him. This prayer (inspired by Mark 9:24b) might help you to start:

Jesus, I do believe in my head. I believe you are all-powerful to free me from the world's mirror images and messages. But I also fear how that will fit with my family's expectations, my friends' opinions, and my relationship and employment prospects. Help me to believe in my heart and not just my head that you really are my true source of contentment and self-worth, and hold my hand as we walk this journey together to full healing and release.

Role models who inspire for reasons other than their appearance

I am inspired by a close friend who is only my senior by about two months! She's become a bit of a feminist and she challenges a lot of the stereotypical body-image standards for women. For example, why is it that girls' legs are seen as better looking and more attractive when they are shaved? It's stuff that I would never have thought about, and then she goes further and acts on her beliefs, and isn't afraid to make a statement or talk about her opinions.

Molly

Footnote: some definitions

My will to continue writing this book almost drowned in a tidal wave of definitions and explanations. Copious research offered shifting opinions over what these terms mean, but eventually I re-emerged, clutching at repeated core themes.

So do read these descriptions, but please don't get bogged down in them. The terms in daily life are often used synonymously, so I feel sure we can continue with a simple overview.

Self-esteem – Confidence in and respect for our personality, abilities and appearance; an assurance that we have a positive and meaningful contribution to make to life and relationships.

Low self-esteem may involve feelings or beliefs of being inadequate, incompetent, incapable, worthless, unworthy, insignificant, unimportant, a failure, low in confidence, unlovable and unlikeable. It can drive self-hate, guilt, fear and/or perfectionism. It can stop us from fulfilling our God-given potential or from living the life God created for us to live. It can trigger addictions and mental disorders and undermine our relationships with others, not least with God.

Body image – How we perceive our physical body, and how we assume others perceive it; the level of satisfaction and confidence we have with our body; the disparity between our perception of what the ideal body should look like and what our body actually looks like.

The outcomes of a low body image dovetail with those above for low self-esteem, and also include depression, eating disorders, risky behaviour (such as unsafe sex), self-harming and cosmetic surgery. It can also lead to withdrawal from social activities, playing sports or intimacy with our partner; reluctance to wear certain clothing; and fear of being the centre of attention, performing with music and drama, or fulfilling an upfront leadership or presenter role.

Self-worth – Our sense of personal value or worth; a belief that we deserve a place in the world.

A healthy self-worth accepts our inherent value, but if we measure our worth by comparing ourselves to others, there will always be ‘others’ who seem to do ‘it’ better than us.

Lack of or low self-worth can damage our relationships and our mental, emotional, physical and spiritual well-being. It undermines our dreams and accomplishments and, in turn, causes us to doubt we can give any significant value to life.

Self-image – Includes a number of impressions that we build up about ourselves over time. Some say it is synonymous with self-esteem or self-worth; others disagree. But it does involve how we perceive ourselves, which is often influenced by how we think others perceive us, what we had hoped to do or feel compared to what actually happened, or both.

An unrealistic positive self-image can encourage apathy or arrogance; a realistic one will build contentment and confidence. An unrealistic negative self-image can cause us to suffer the many consequences already described above, but a realistic one will inspire change or motivate a harder work ethic.

Self-acceptance – The realistic but unconditional attitude we adopt about ourselves at any particular moment, regardless of how well we are fulfilling expectations, dreams or goals. We may ‘fail’ to reach that goal or expectation, but accept that this is who we are today, with potential for growth or change.

A lack of self-acceptance, however, may in turn affect our self-esteem, self-worth or body image.



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