

LOVE TO EAT, HATE TO EAT

ELYSE FITZPATRICK



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PART ONE



A Renewed Focus



1

From Heartache to a Sense of Purpose

*Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do,
do all to the glory of God.*

—1 CORINTHIANS 10:31

I want you to know who I am and why I am so interested in this topic. I want you to understand my journey—I’ll bet we’re really not very different. Struggling with eating, dieting, and even bingeing and purging has been an abiding part of my whole life. The truth is that I have struggled with my weight for as long as I can remember. Even as a child, I remember the embarrassment of having to buy “chubby” clothes at the department store; of never being able to dress or look like the other girls (“That’s not a style that would look good on you, dear,” the saleswoman would say); of being the brunt of fat jokes (like the time my uncle asked me if I was going to subdivide and build because I had so much acreage); and the humiliation of knowing that others were always looking at how much I was eating. To add to all this, I grew up near the beach in Southern California—and all of my friends wore bikinis during the summer. I remember saving my money and buying one in ninth grade, thinking that I was going to lose weight so that I could wear it in the summer. I never did.

I know the heartache and devastation of being chronically overweight. This isn't something that just happened to me as a child. Even after I became a Christian as an adult, I would pray night after night that God would help me to lose weight. I would imagine how wonderful my life would be if I could just wake up thin the next morning. I read ads about liposuction and dreamt of the day when I could get a shot or take a pill and be instantaneously "normal." I would diet and diet and do well for a time only to find myself entrapped again. After I had my three children, the problem seemed to get worse and worse. How could I weigh so much? How could I ever change? I would get depressed and—you guessed it—go eat to try to give myself some pleasure.

It wasn't until I began to understand that God had something more important in mind than merely my looking good or delivering me from the tyranny of food that I started to change and be thankful. God has taken this struggle of mine and turned it into a blessing. He's used it to get at strongholds of self-righteousness, self-indulgence, worry, fear, and pride in my own heart, and He's produced fruit from it that comforts and encourages others. Because I now have this perspective, I'm able to rejoice over God's goodness even though I have to admit that I still struggle—sometimes more than others.

I'm writing this book because I know the despair of hopelessness. I know what it's like to start a diet and to get derailed from it, sometimes only making it a day or two. I know the shame of jealously looking at other women who wear a size 8. But I also know the joy of fighting this problem, with both successful and unsuccessful days. I know the joy of knowing that through it all, He is with me in the fight.

What we have to understand is that this fight is for the long haul, and it's a fight for our good and His glory. Our goal isn't to finally

arrive at the place where we're completely free from any struggles, though I am positive that's what we'd prefer—it sure is what I would have liked. We would all like to simply read a book or find an app that would instantaneously transform us into the people we'd like to be. But that's not God's goal for us. If it were, He would have provided it. No, His goal for us is to learn to trust Him *in our struggle*. It's learning to trust that His word about us and His love for us remain the same, no matter how we do in the struggle from day to day. It is learning to trust His love for us even when we can't approve of ourselves: how we look, what we've eaten, how much we have exercised. His goal is in our learning that His disposition toward us doesn't depend on us at all. And it is only there, in the knowledge of His unconditional love, that we can be free from the hopelessness and self-condemnation driving our slavery to food and body image. He doesn't love me because I'm finally a size ____, or because I have eaten "clean" all day, or made it to my CrossFit class. And the same is true for you. And the struggle is in believing that His love is all that matters. It matters more than anything. We'll talk more about this later.

I know you may be thinking, *Yeah, but I'm different, I'll never believe that I can be different, and even if I did, I would never change.* I have felt that way. Part of my lifelong identity has been being an overweight woman. I've never thought of myself as looking normal or being able to eat "normally" without concern, like some of my friends do. I've needed a new identity, one that would transform the way I think about who I am, and though I am seeing it, it's something I still have to fight to remember every day. This fight of faith doesn't rest primarily on what I look like or what I have or haven't eaten. There are days when I believe I've really changed, and other days when I can't see any change at all. No, this struggle, this fight, is really about believing in what Jesus has already done for me and

how He thinks of me now, today—not at some future date when I can finally approve of myself. This fight is for a new identity, one that He's declared over me. He has said who I am and how He sees me: I am His beloved one, and it is by His work and word that I am and will be transformed. He is working to convince me that change is possible, because He is that loving, that good, and that powerful. And, if you've come to Jesus in faith, that's what is true about you too.

What is this change we're pursuing? Is it learning to eat in a disciplined way? Well, yes and no. First of all, it's believing that everything we need has already been given to us in Christ. That means my desire to think well of myself or be free from self-condemnation has already been overcome in the gospel. God thinks well of me already, *no matter what*, because of the work Jesus has done. And then, surprisingly, believing that I don't need to eat perfectly in order to please Him will free me from many of the hidden motivations that drive me to overeat, overexercise, starve myself, or binge and purge. We will talk more about this later, but I wanted you to know where we're going. We're headed up Calvary and then down to the empty tomb. That's where all the answers are—hidden in plain sight.

My confidence in telling you that you can finally find freedom and change is not because I think I have all the answers. It's just that I know Someone who does. As you read through this book, you'll meet other women who have struggles just like you and you'll see there is a God who really is faithful to free us and change us. You *can* have hope because of Him!

Marsha's Story

Marsha had practiced habits of bulimia since she was in high school. She had been troubled by her gradual weight gain in the ninth and tenth grades, and although she tried to diet, she just

couldn't seem to resist her favorite foods. She didn't want to leave her friends when they went out for french fries after class, but she knew she couldn't resist the food, either. So, she began to force herself to vomit whenever she ate something she thought she shouldn't eat. As the years passed, Marsha continued to use vomiting (along with laxatives and diuretics) to try to control her weight. Because she knew she could always "get rid of it," Marsha would sometimes go on a binge and eat a lot of food in a short period of time.

The youngest of three sisters, Marsha's motivation was to stay as thin as her siblings, so even after marriage and childbirth, she continued her practices. At first she thought these behaviors were "no big deal," but eventually her body started to show the effects of her habits. Her salivary glands were swollen from the constant irritation of vomiting and her teeth were eroding from exposure to her stomach acids. As a Christian she sensed that what she was doing was wrong, but she didn't know how to stop. She had tried to quit scores of times, only to find herself once more standing over the kitchen sink in shame and helplessness, hoping that no one would discover what she had done. She, too, felt the despair of hopelessness. It seemed that her life was spinning out of control. Why couldn't she stop? She was disgusted with her behavior. Every time she threw up, she was filled with shame and anger. Why couldn't she just get over this? Where was God?

Angela's Story

Angela had always been a compliant daughter and an above-average student. Although she fought from time to time with her mother, she was not rebellious. She seemed to love and respect her dad, who was the pastor of a large evangelical church. From all outer appearances, they seemed to be the perfect family.

One day, however, when Angela's mother happened to pass by

Angela's room, she noticed Angelica's emaciated body, which apparently had been hidden by the clothes she wore. Terrified by the sight, her mother made an appointment with the family physician. "Anorexia? How could she be anorexic?" her mother and father asked when the physician diagnosed the problem. It was then that Angela admitted to an intricate scheme of secrecy and dishonesty. When she had requested privacy, which included eating most of her meals in her room, it was to help hide her anorexic practices. Her parents had just chalked it up to adolescent behavior. They were aware that she was overly concerned about what everyone was eating and she spent an enormous amount of time at the gym, but they had never imagined that their little girl was struggling with such a terrifying behavior. Why was she enslaved to this so-called desire for "perfection"? As the family talked, Angela admitted that she knew what she was doing was wrong, but she couldn't get herself to stop. Why couldn't she be like the other girls? Where had she gone wrong?

Different Yet Similar

The stories of Marsha, Angela, and me seem different, don't they? Each one of us had what seems to be very different problems. Each of us were at different levels of natural and spiritual maturity. I was a Christian, yet I had a lifetime of habitually eating too much. Marsha, too, loved the Lord, but was enslaved to times of bingeing followed by purging and utter despair. Angela's commitment to Christ had always been part of what it meant to be her father's child, but now she struggled with an unquenchable desire to avoid any hint of weight gain. She had to be in control of every morsel of food and every ounce of weight. So in terms of our eating habits we differed, yet all of us were totally consumed by the tyranny of food and eating.

If you struggle with any of the problems I just mentioned, then you know what I mean when I refer to "the tyranny of food and

eating.” *Tyranny* is exactly the right word to use when it comes to the way many of us think about food, dieting, and our weight. Tyranny is oppression. It is enslavement. It means we’re dominated by thoughts and habits that torment and overpower. “What will I eat next?” “How much do I weigh today?” “What do others think of me?” “Why can’t I get free of this?” “Why can’t I be like others?” The same questions fill our thoughts over and over as we agonize day after day, looking for answers. Sometimes we try again; other times we just give up in frustration and discouragement. What’s more, we feel constant confusion because we’re unsure of how our eating habits relate to our Christian faith, if at all. We wonder about God’s role in our lives and our response to Him. Where is He? What are His answers? It seems as though He should be able to help, but why isn’t He answering our prayers? Why do we still struggle so? Does He still love us?

Over the last few decades, I have agonized over these questions myself. I have also listened to many other women who were laboring to find answers to the same questions. As I have sought to minister to these women, I’ve learned that the Lord offers wonderful solutions to all of our eating problems. I’ve written this book to share with you what I’ve learned on my journey from tyranny to freedom and food in and through Christ. It’s my hope that you will find it helpful.

In this book we will look at the themes that are similar in each of these behaviors, and we’ll discover practical guidelines for growth in godliness in our eating.

A Necessary Step

Before you begin to apply the principles in this book, you should visit your physician for a complete checkup so you can be certain that the problems you are facing are not physiological in origin.

Sometimes problems with eating and weight gain or loss are physical in origin. These problems may require medical attention. Don't assume your problem is just an emotional or spiritual one. Prior to choosing any diet or exercise plan, you should have your doctor's consent. Also, if you are presently suffering from physical maladies because of obesity, bulimia, or anorexia, you will need to seek and follow your physician's advice. This book is not meant to take the place of any medical care that may be needed, but rather to augment it with spiritual and practical guidance.

A Sense of Purpose

Marsha began to grow in her relationship with God when she tried to answer the questions, "What am I doing here? What is the purpose of my life anyway?" She somehow sensed that her bouts of overeating and throwing up weren't part of what life was supposed to be about.

What about you? Do you believe there is some purposeful design and meaning to your life, or do you feel you are just an evolved combination of molecules spinning aimlessly through a chaotic universe? For instance, is it just a coincidence that you happen to be here, now, reading this book? If you are a Christian, you *can* know that God does have a purpose for your life—and you can also be sure that His purpose is good. (If you aren't sure whether you're really a Christian or not, please take time now to read over "How to Know You Are a Christian" at the end of this book.)

Marsha's questions aren't anything new. In fact, in the seventeenth century a group of Christians in England who were writing about their faith began by asking the question, "What is the chief end of man?" That was their way of asking, "What is our main purpose in life? Why are we here?" They answered by writing, "The chief end of man is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever."¹ Stop and

reread that statement. Think about it. It's one of the most important truths you will ever know. They believed that the primary purpose of life was twofold: First, they believed you and I were put here principally to *bring glory* to God. I know that's kind of an astonishing thought—but, actually, that is the purpose of all of God's creation, isn't it? The mountains, the stars...why, the Bible says even the trees “clap their hands” in giving glory to God. You can read about that in the Old Testament, in Isaiah 55:12. In the New Testament the apostle Paul puts the same thought this way: “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Okay, you may be thinking, everything is supposed to glorify God. But just what does that mean? What that means is that everything we do—whether we're eating, drinking, reading a newspaper, driving our car, *whatever* we're doing—is to be done with the attitude and in such a way as to cause others around us to say, “Isn't God great! Isn't He wonderful! Isn't it great to know Him through His Son?”

Isn't that an astonishing thought? By His grace and condescension, you and I can bring glory to God. It's not as though God needs us to let others know how great He is; it's because of His abounding grace and mercy that He has allowed us to be involved in this great plan and purpose.

Marsha was surprised to learn that God wanted to use her life—yes, even her eating habits—to show others that He was real, that He loved and welcomed people who were weak, and that He could change people. Every time you declare His love and forgiveness, every time you proclaim His ability to transform your heart, He is glorified.

The first step in learning to live a life that glorifies God is to realize that *every* part of our lives is lived *before Him*. You might think God wants us to glorify Him only in those parts of our lives that we

might call “religious,” such as going to church or praying or reading His Word. Or, it may seem that glorifying God is only for really spiritual people, like Billy Graham, or perhaps church leaders or pastors. But it’s not just strong Christians who can glorify Him, nor is glorifying God limited to the spiritual realm. Yes, even people who struggle to believe and to change glorify Him. The Bible says we can look at *all* of our life as belonging to Him and as an avenue through which we can bless Him.

Remember, Paul said we can glorify God whether we eat or drink or in *whatever* we do. What that meant to Marsha was that she could start thinking about ways to please God and point others to Him in every part of her life. Does God really care about how much we eat? Does He really care about whether or not we make ourselves throw up? Yes, God really cares. He cares because He loves you and me, and He cares because He created us to sparkle and shine with His light for others. His grace and mercy are that great!

Let’s return to the question, *Why are we here?* The Christians in England gave a two-part answer. They realized we exist not only to glorify God, but also “to enjoy Him forever.” God’s plan is for you to *enjoy* Him! The same God who is the creator of the entire universe, who holds everything in its place by His power, who isn’t bound by either time or space, also wants you to have such a close relationship with Him that you can say, “I really enjoy God. I’m learning how He satisfies my heart.” The psalmist put it this way: “Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:25-26). When you begin to get a picture of the sweetness, purity, and loveliness of the Lord, you will realize all that the world has to offer is insignificant in comparison to Him. No matter how many people tell you that you look great

or how many times you look at yourself with approval, nothing can overshadow the great welcome and blessing of being His.

Do you think about God in this way? Do you love worshipping Him? Spending time with Him? Thinking about Him? Do you want your entire life to be a song of worship and praise to Him? Do you find that He is your source of joy?

Angela had never thought of God as someone to enjoy. She knew that she should obey Him, but she didn't know anything of the delightfulness of His nature. To her, God was just a bunch of rules and regulations; she assumed that He didn't approve of her, so she didn't want to be around Him. In fact, she cringed before Him. She had missed the great wonder of His love and the sheer joy of spending time with Him. After all, who wants to spend time with someone who doesn't like you? As she began to incorporate into her life the truths that she could glorify God and enjoy Him because He already loved and befriended her, she found that her tyrannical concern about how she looked began to fade in importance. Imagine being face to face with a Jesus who loved like no one ever loved before. Imagine His kind voice, which always speaks the truth because He loves you more than anyone can imagine. Imagine facing someone who really loved you and really didn't judge you by how you looked or what you ate. Imagine that love. Indeed, God loves His children, and you can have everlasting joy and peace because of it.

Today, God invites you to glorify and enjoy Him. He really is altogether lovely, isn't He? My hope is that what I've shared helps you begin to understand what God is really like. He wants to use your life to glorify Himself because He loves proving how strong He is by using those who are weak. And He wants to bring you great joy. That is possible even for you. I know that because I've come to see

that it is possible for every one of His children, including me, Marsha, and Angela.

Sit down. Kick off your shoes. Say, “Whew. God loves me. I am His and no matter how I do today, nothing will change that!” Won’t you join me in receiving those truths in your heart... today?

~ **Questions for Discussion and Reflection** ~

1. In what ways are your eating patterns similar to either Marsha’s, Angela’s, or mine? How long have you struggled with such eating patterns?
2. Would you say that you are a person who both loves and hates to eat? Have you experienced the “tyranny of food”? In what ways? Why have you decided to work on your problem now?
3. What do you think God’s purpose is in your life? Would you agree that your purpose is to glorify and enjoy Him? Why or why not?
4. What does the word *glorify* mean? What would it mean to you *personally* to glorify God? How would glorifying God in your eating habits change the way that you normally think about food?
5. Do you think about God as someone you can enjoy? List five characteristics of God that you most enjoy:
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.
 - e.

6. Summarize in three or four sentences what you have learned in this chapter.

Write a prayer of praise and commitment. Start with the above list of the five characteristics that you most enjoy about God. Also include in it both your fears and your desires to glorify God through your eating.