

# **“DOES THIS DRESS MAKE ME LOOK FAT?”**

**A MAN'S GUIDE**  
TO THE LOADED QUESTIONS WOMEN ASK



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.  
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*"Does This Dress Make Me Look Fat?" A Man's Guide to the Loaded Questions Women Ask*

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## INTRODUCTION

**WHEN I (STEPHEN)** was a kid, Friday night was often a night when my mom, dad, sister, and I would pile into the car and go out to eat. Some Fridays, we would get pizza; other times, we would pick up burgers; but most often we would enact a crazy merry-go-round-like ritual that I have since dubbed *The Search*.

On those nights, my sister and I would listen from the back seat as my parents volleyed suggestions about where we were going to dine. It usually started with my father throwing out an idea or two (or three, or four, or fifty) and my mother deflecting, rejecting, negotiating, or ignoring his proposals. Periodically, either my sister or I would blurt out an option to help keep up the momentum. It went something like this:

**Dad:** Where would you like to eat tonight?

**Mom:** What were *you* thinking?

**Dad:** Anywhere, really. I don't care.

**Mom:** It doesn't really matter to me. What do you kids want?

**Kids:** What about pizza?

**Dad:** Well, I'll be happy wherever we go.

Depending on the time, my father’s appetite, and my mother’s mood, this part of the conversation—let’s call it The Warm Up—could last a few exchanges or extend to several minutes; but, inevitably, my father would start the ball rolling by suggesting several possibilities.

**Dad:** How about Mexican?

He didn’t always lead off with Mexican. Sometimes, it would be Italian, or Chinese, or on a rare occasion German, but he usually started by proposing some sort of ethnic cuisine.

**Mom:** I don’t know. That sounds awfully spicy . . .

. . . or heavy, or salty, or whatever, depending on the perceived shortcomings of the food Dad had suggested. After a few circles of the culinary world, Dad would typically shift tactics and go with some regional options.

**Dad:** Catfish would be good. How about that?

**Mom:** Too fried and greasy.

**Dad:** What about barbecue?

**Mom:** We had that last week.

**Dad:** What about Tex-Mex?

**Mom:** I said I didn’t want Mexican.

At this point, the tension began to build between them. Remember, this all took place *while* we were driving around . . . and around . . . and around, passing restaurant after restaurant after restaurant, and my sister and I were growing hungrier and hun-

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grier and hungrier. Then, my dad started listing restaurants by how often we ate there.

**Dad:** How about we go to Ruby Tuesday's? That's always good.

**Mom:** I feel like we eat there all the time.

**Dad:** Then how about we go to that new place out by the mall?

**Mom:** I heard it wasn't so good.

**Dad:** How about Cracker Barrel then? We haven't been there in a while.

**Mom:** It takes too long.

**Dad:** Well, what about Chili's?

**Mom:** How many times do I have to tell you, I don't want Mexican?

On and on this would go, mile after mile, until—predictably—we would arrive at the same two sentences . . .

**Dad:** Well, where *do* you want to eat?

**Mom:** How about somewhere with a salad bar?

Now, I knew what my dad was thinking, because my sister and I were thinking the same thing: *Why didn't you just say salad bar from the beginning?*

**Dad:** You can get a salad anywhere!

**Mom:** But not everywhere has a *good* salad.

So, we would pull into one of the few places that had a “good” salad, but by that late hour the wait to get a table was so long that we would—as you might expect—grab a pizza or some burgers and go home.

## SOMETHING SO SIMPLE . . . NOT!

I never thought much about what I had witnessed from the back seat until one weekend when I was on a date with Heather before we got married, and we reenacted the same scene. I asked her what I thought was a straightforward question: “Where do you want to eat?”

Before I knew it—wham, bam, thank you ma’am—we were tangled up in conflict. When it was over, I was confused, angry, and still hungry, though eventually we did find someplace to eat. (I don’t remember where.)

When I got home that night, after dropping Heather off, I started thinking: *Where did I go wrong? What did I say? What didn’t I say? What could I have said? Why are women the way they are? What do they really want? Why do they do the things they do?*

What man or woman can’t share a similar story where the guy thought things were pretty clear and direct, and the woman was coming from an entirely different perspective? You see, what is at play is far more complex than where to go for dinner. What drives the conversation is two people with vastly different agendas. The man wants a decision made and a plan in place. The woman, on the other hand, wants conversation and dialogue and a union of opinion. It is here, at the convergence of these two positions, that men and women often find themselves wanting different things from the same moment.

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At some point, every man has walked through the minefield of a woman's questions. He can usually smell the danger, but he often underestimates the explosive potential of a wrong answer. Many a man knows all too well the folly of blindly answering his girlfriend's or wife's questions. But few men (or women, for that matter) ever stop to think about what is really being asked. At its core, this book is about those questions, questions like these:

- “Does this dress make me look fat?”
- “Do you notice anything different about the house?”
- “Do you think that woman is pretty?”
- “What are you thinking about?”
- “Am I like my mother?”
- “Are you as happy as I am?”
- “Is there anything you don't like about me?”

### IF YOU REALLY LISTEN . . .

Here is the thing about questions: They expose more about the asker than they do about the one being asked. If you pay attention, you will see that a woman's questions point directly to some of her deepest longings. They also reveal some of what she desires most from a man. Just as we set out to decode *manspeak* in the companion volume to this book (“*Yup.*” “*Nope.*” “*Maybe.*”), here we're attempting to unveil the authentic heart of women by shedding some light on the “loaded” questions they ask men. We hope that men and women can move beyond the question, *Why are women the way they are?* to see the authentic female heart. When men and women are more aware, two things can happen: (1) Men can give better answers, and (2) women can ask better questions. This



book, as honestly as possible, examines and explains the themes behind the questions and what the questions reveal about the women who ask them and the men who are confused by them.

As therapists with thousands of combined hours counseling men, women, and couples about the dynamics of relationship, and as husbands each with more than a decade of marriage to draw upon, we want to offer insight as to why women and men do what they do. For sure, men and women share a lot in common. Chemically and elementally, we are identical. Physiologically and biologically, our bodies function similarly. Spiritually, we both are created to reflect the image of God, and we simultaneously struggle with our lack of virtue. On an emotional level, men and women feel, need, desire, long, and hope. And though we are very alike, it's the differences that often make life most interesting, fulfilling, and frustrating and give us the most insight into who we are and who we are made to be. As relational beings, much of the tension, joy, and ambiguity of life is tied to our sexuality, and that's what this book is about: exploring the differences between women and men, entering the mysterious space that separates the sexes, and highlighting how God marks us for glory through our gender.

Perhaps a good picture that underlines the differences between men and women and how they relate occurred some time ago when I (Stephen) was having coffee with a friend. This guy is quite a bit older and has been married for more than thirty years. We were discussing the complexity of marriage and how women and men seem to be so different at times.

I asked my friend, “You've been married a long time. Surely you know why men and women are so apt for conflict.” He re-

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clined back in his chair and thought for a long moment, staring at the ceiling. Then he slowly leaned forward with his eyes narrowed to almost slits, dramatically glanced around as if to make sure no one was listening, and then in a low voice said, “When four or more men get together, they talk about sports. When four or more women get together, they talk about men. If you understand that, you understand everything.”

That about says it.

# “DOES THIS DRESS MAKE ME LOOK FAT?”



**YOU COULDN'T TELL** in a million years by how I (Stephen) dress now, but back in the day, I was stylish. Whatever the latest fashion, I was sure to be in vogue. To vandalize a classic country-and-western song, I was Metro when Metro wasn't cool. Or to put it more bluntly: I was a shallow, self-absorbed pretty boy.

To support my clothes habit, at various times I worked at an assortment of clothing stores: Eddie Bauer, Britches, Abercrombie & Fitch (before it catered to teen porn-star-wannabes), a couple different department stores, and even a local boutique. Most of the stores were trendy, and almost all carried women's and men's items.

Throughout the three or four years that I hawked clothes, I got to meet a variety of people: rich and poor; tall and short; thin

and fat; urban and suburban; young and old. All kinds of people crossed my path. It was my job to assist them in finding whatever they needed in order to look however they wanted.

I distinctly remember a time right before Christmas. It was a weekend and the store was really crowded, full of holiday shoppers who were scrambling to find the presents they still needed. That day, I was working the registers beside a coworker. The line was long, and despite our best efforts, things were moving rather slowly. One customer in particular caught my attention. She was a thirtysomething professional who seemed rather anxious that the line was taking so long. I saw her head bobbing back and forth, her toe tapping, as she huffed and puffed and exhaled loudly enough for me to hear her above the commotion of the store from her position in line.

As she gradually made her way up in line, I noticed that she was pregnant. Not a little pregnant, but swallowed-a-beach-ball pregnant. But what was even more noticeable than her extra-large, I'm-about-to-give-birth belly was that she was extremely angry. I made eye contact with her and offered a conciliatory smile in an effort to communicate that I understood that this was taking longer than it should, and if she could just wait another moment or two, I'd be able to help her. My grin had zero effect on her. In response she rolled her eyes so dramatically that I thought for a second she might be having some kind of labor-related convulsion.

That's when the register ran out of tape. My heart raced, knowing that this would slow the line down all the more. I scrambled around the counter for another roll of tape and fumbled to install it into the register. At this point, Psycho Pregnant Lady could not contain herself. She let loose a rant of curse words that

would make a Mafia crime boss go red in the face. I didn't know that there were that many ways to defame the name of God. I even remember her slandering the Republican party somewhere in there. It's as if she was going for some kind of Guinness record for cursing. One mother awkwardly scurried to cover her three children's ears but did not have enough hands to get the job done. Next to her in line was a massive bodybuilder guy (he must have been 6'5", 280 pounds), who slowly backed away from the scene and just dropped the clothes he was planning to purchase.

To say that it was a scene would be an understatement. It was embarrassing for everyone around. People turned and looked at her with shock and fear. Passersby in the mall slowed and gawked—like people driving past a traffic accident. It was indeed an implausible prospect: this professional, attractive, pregnant woman cursing like an R-rated movie.

As Psycho Pregnant Lady began to slow her verbal assault on the store, on me, and on all things holy, I began to realize that everyone else in the vicinity directed their gaze toward me, the lowly, well-groomed cashier. They were wondering, like I was, how in the world I was going to respond. Shell-shocked, I just stood openmouthed for a few seconds, searching for something to say. The only thing that came to my mind was, “You seem really angry.” Now even more enraged, Psycho Pregnant Lady stormed out of the store, vowing never to return.

Not every encounter was this violent, but some were even more bizarre. There was the time that a short, slender, polyester-wearing gentleman came to buy some socks, but insisted on measuring each sock before he tried them on. Then there was the lady who came in almost every Friday and purchased several

new outfits, only to return them all on Sunday afternoon. Like I said, I got to meet a lot of different kinds of people.

## SKINNY-DIPPING

It wasn't long into my run as a retail sales associate that I noticed a rather obvious difference in how men and women shop for clothes. The men tended to move directly and single-mindedly toward the section of the store where they needed to go, whether they were shopping for pants or shoes or shirts.

The women, on the other hand, meandered around the store, touching and examining various articles: holding one up; sizing it in their mind; maybe holding it up again in front of the mirror; then putting it down and moving along to the next rack, or back to the last rack, or to a rack on the other side of the store. Women also had multiple options in multiple cuts, shapes, and sizes that pushed this way, pulled that way, fit here, tugged there.

One area where I saw a real difference was when it came to looking for a new bathing suit. For example, guys (if they even opted for actual swim trunks and not just an old pair of shorts), might riffle through a rack of trunks for a few minutes, pick out a style they like, find their size, and purchase it. We're talking fifteen minutes max. Women, on the other hand, entered this moment with much more angst. As my mother-in-law said the other day, if a woman wants to get depressed, all she has to do is go shopping for bathing suits.

Women typically begin preparing for this event a few days in advance. They'll do things like cut back on calories and make an extra trip to the gym. It's rare to see a woman shop for a bathing suit alone. Usually, she'll bring along a girlfriend or two for

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moral support. And, unlike men, women try on multiple suits in front of multiple full-length mirrors—the kind that show every body part from multiple angles. Now, for sure, there are some women who could enter this scene without self-contempt, but many more women find the ordeal of shopping for a new bathing suit a dreadful experience.

## BIG MONEY AND BIG RESPONSIBILITY

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, approximately 50 million Americans will go on diets in the coming year, spending “an estimated \$30 billion a year on all types of diet programs and products, including diet foods and drinks.”<sup>1</sup> The weight-loss industry is an entity in itself.

Why would 50 million people spend \$30 billion dollars on trying to lose weight? The money we spend on weight loss in this country could eliminate famine in several third-world countries. The money we spend on trying *not* to eat could put food on the table for millions of starving people across the world. So why do we do it? We do it for a number of different reasons. One of those reasons, at least for women, is that they want to be beautiful. In our culture, being thin equates to being beautiful. Women are bombarded every day with this perception.

## IS BEAUTY REALLY ONLY SKIN DEEP?

*Does this dress make me look fat?* Every woman will speak those words at one time or another, either aloud or in her own head. And there will be a hundred moments throughout her life that will define how she experiences that question and what she believes to be true about herself.

Angela Thomas in her excellent and engaging book *Do You Think I'm Beautiful?*<sup>2</sup> writes extensively about this theme and what is at the core of femininity. She says, “Every woman longs to know from the deepest place of her heart, ‘Oh, God, do you think I’m beautiful?’”<sup>2</sup> Sadly, these women often find themselves in lives filled with duty, difficulty, and demands. What’s even more unfortunate is that many Christian women are struggling under the weight of the pressure to be the perfectly patient mother and perfectly submissive wife.

The women who are meant to be living the most free, the Christians, are often the most bound and ashamed. Too many women have lost their sense of personal beauty (a beauty that is both inward and outward). But it goes deeper than a sense of personal beauty. Perhaps a better term would be *loveliness*.

## GLASS SLIPPER, ANYONE?

So what’s all this about? It all has to do with Julia Roberts—kind of. One of the most popular films of the early '90s was *Pretty Woman*, starring Julia Roberts and Richard Gere. Box office receipts for *Pretty Woman* exceeded \$175 million, making it one of the most successful romantic comedies of all time.<sup>3</sup> On the surface, this story is about a prostitute who finds true love with one of her johns. At its core, however, it’s about so much more. Why was *Pretty Woman* such a popular movie? What about the movie stirred the hearts of women? For the answer, we only have to listen to the main character, Vivian Ward (played by Roberts), who says it well: “I want the fairy tale.”

*Pretty Woman* is essentially a retelling of Cinderella—one of the most recognized stories around the world. The earliest



recorded version of the tale comes from China, and was written in the middle of the tenth century. Literary scholars think that there are as many as 1,500 versions of the Cinderella tale, if you include all the picture books, musicals, and theatrical interpretations. While being dubbed “sexist” and “demeaning” by many feminist critics, Cinderella obviously has elements that rouse the feminine soul.

Our school-age daughters love the story of Cinderella. My (Stephen’s) daughter has Cinderella toothbrushes, books, and movies. From an early age, she was captivated by the classic Disney version. She would watch the movie over and over and over. It got to the point where as parents we would have to limit the number of times she could watch the movie in a month. There were times when she would insist that I pretend to be the prince and she would be Cinderella so we could reenact the royal ball in our living room.

This past weekend, our daughters performed in their first real dance recital. They’ve been taking ballet together for a couple of years, and in past years they’ve had “observations.” An observation is where all the moms and dads show up with video cameras, the teacher turns on some soft music, and all these little preschool girls start twirling around in circles, bumping into each other and leaping from spot to spot. Some of the girls just stand there and stare. Some tug at tight leotards. While all this twirling, colliding, tugging, and staring is taking place, the adults clap and smile and take a thousand pictures. The girls do their thing, the adults do theirs, and we all call it ballet.

Well, this year was the real deal. Four-hour dress rehearsal, fifty-dollar costumes, hair in a tight bun—the whole nine yards.

They even sent home an instruction page illustrating how to twist the girls' hair into the proper bun.

So, we all filed in and found our seats in the massive auditorium. All the dads were holding bouquets of flowers to give their daughters following the performance; the little brothers of the performers looked bored and restless, and the show hadn't even started yet; there were video cameras mounted on tripods up and down every aisle; and grandparents had traveled from all ends of the country to witness maybe sixty-three seconds of magic.

My (David's) five-year-old daughter had been talking about her performance for about a month prior to this night. Periodically, she talked about the dance, but it was mostly about the costume. Suffice to say, she was extremely excited about the little pale blue tutu she got to wear. I had yet to see the infamous tutu because it's so sacred (and so expensive) that you can't take it home until *after* the performance. (I assumed it stayed encased in glass in the dance school vault until recital day.) At breakfast the morning of the recital, my daughter asked, “Did you know I get to bring my tutu home tonight?”

“Is tonight the night?” I asked with great excitement, playing dumb for a moment.

“Yes, and did you remember that it's blue and matches the sequined leotard?” she said, just to make certain I'd been paying attention the other *fifty-two* times we'd discussed it.

“Of course I remember. And you can sleep in it tonight if you want to. You know you get to keep it forever,” I reminded her.

“Yeah,” she said, with an enormous grin of deep satisfaction on her face (the way I always look after the first bite of Ben Jerry's). She glazed over for a moment.

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“Sweetheart, I can hardly wait to watch you dance today. Do you know how much I love to watch you doing something that you love that much?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said again. “And tonight I’ll be dancing in my real tutu.” (She stared into the sky and I could just see the little white cloud above her head with a vision of herself in it.)

A few hours later, she left for the recital with my wife to put on the sacred costume, apply her little stage makeup, and have her picture taken while doing some plié or pirouette. I packed up her brothers and her grandfather, who was visiting from Florida, and off we went.

Within a few minutes after we arrived, the lights dimmed, the director introduced the evening, and then class by class, the dancers took the stage. The preteen girls did hip-hop, because I guess ballet is so not cool when you’re twelve, but I think it becomes in vogue again when you turn seventeen (and return to being a normal person). The preteens wore baggy cargo pants and tight shirts and did all these in-your-face moves to loud rap music. The rapper kept yelling, “Yeah boy. Yeah boy.” I felt a little violated after their performance (like I needed to smoke a cigarette or pick a fight or something). I was so thankful my daughter is only five and still excited about big fluffy tutus. I’m not quite ready to share my home with weird, moody, sullen, irritable, angry preteens or adolescents. (I need a couple more years to build up to all that fun.)

Once the rapping tweens strutted off the stage, soft music began to play, and we all relaxed again as a parade of blue tutus emerged. They all reached the stage, and it looked like a cotton candy machine had just overheated and blew up. I’ve never seen so much fluffy blue.

Third in line was my little girl in her magical costume, and she was beaming from ear to ear. Her hair was in a little bun on the top of her head. She took her spot on the front row and began her ballerina moves. Her delicate little frame moved across the stage as she smiled and twirled, lifting her arms, with her tiny hands taking different forms. From time to time, she froze in these little positions with her arms pointing upward and then from side to side. And I started to weep. Then I began to sob uncontrollably.

I wasn't prepared for this moment. The moment when my little girl, whom I love with all of my being, took the stage in all her innocent beauty and danced with such delight. I couldn't stop weeping. Tears just poured down my face. My wife looked at me staring at this little person, who just five years ago was growing inside her womb. She just held my hand, and we tried to take it all in.

I jumped ahead twenty years in my mind and imagined repeating this same kind of moment. I open a door and there stands my little girl in a long, white dress, a veil over her face and flowers in her hand. I'm handing her over to some numbskull, who claims he'll love her for the rest of her life. (My daughter is an artist. She loves to paint and draw. So she'll probably fall in love with some stinkin' musician, who'll be broke for most of his life. They'll live in a run-down apartment with two large, mixed breed dogs, and she'll have to wait tables at night while he plays gigs. *Help!*) On their wedding day, I'll watch her dance in his arms at the close of the evening. She'll smile and twirl, her arms and hands intertwined in his. I am certain I'll just weep. I will probably weep uncontrollably again. And I'll remember when she was this delicate little five-year-old ballerina.

After the performance ended, my wife and I slipped out of the auditorium and through the side door to see the dancers as they exited the building, heading back to their dressing room. I saw Lily from a distance, and she was beaming. She had no idea I was watching her. She looked so full of delight and pleasure. She and her classmates were all giggling and skipping, some of them holding hands. As she neared the sidewalk where we were standing, she saw me, jumped out of line, and came running toward me. She leapt into my arms, and I teared up all over again. I spun her around and kissed her and gave her the big bouquet of pink tulips. She smiled, thanked me, and then I asked her, “Sweetheart, do you know why daddy is crying?” She just stared at my face. “I’m crying because you’re so beautiful and it overwhelms me.” She continued to just look at me.

“And I’m so happy when I watch you dance, because you love it so much, don’t you?” She smiled, nodded, and looked overwhelmed by my tears and my words.

“I couldn’t take my eyes off you tonight,” I said, and she stayed frozen for that moment.

I was unaware at the time, but my wife was taking pictures of the two of us as this exchange played out, and I have a snapshot that I treasure. I believe my daughter was frozen in that moment by my words, because they are the words that her little heart just longed to hear. They are the words that every woman, from the earliest moments of her life, hungers for and craves from the deepest part of her being. It begins with a little girl’s desire to hear her dad acknowledge and affirm her beauty—to speak of who she is and how she is made—to speak to the beauty of her design.

At the recital, our daughters got to be Cinderella. The

Cinderella concept tells us a lot about the nature of women. Perhaps one of the clearest scenes about what is happening in the heart of a woman comes with the fairy godmother. It's a familiar scene. The wicked stepmother and stepsisters have left for the ball, and a brokenhearted Cinderella stands alone weeping. From nowhere appears her fairy godmother. With a wave of the wand, Cinderella's tattered old dress is transformed into a beautiful gown. Cinderella is breathtaking. Her beauty is revealed and enhanced. She makes it to the ball and overwhelms Prince Charming with her beauty. She captivates the entire room. There is a night of dancing, a hurried farewell, a desperate search for love, a glass slipper, and a happy ending.

## BEAUTY TARNISHED

Do women want to look pretty? Do women care if their butts look big in dresses? Yes, but there is something far deeper stirring in the soul of a woman than the appearance of her derriere. What every woman most struggles with is a sense of shame that exposes that she is broken or ugly on the inside. On some level, every woman wrestles with the question, Am I lovely? Every woman wants to believe she is lovely. That's the real question behind, Do I look fat? Loveliness has beauty in it but goes far past reflecting physical attractiveness. Loveliness speaks of character. Loveliness implies charm, compassion, invitation, tenderness, and allure. Loveliness is the reflection of God's image that is stamped into the heart of every woman. You see, women are designed for more than the drudgery of life. Every woman is marked with the nature of beauty. Women are designed by God to reveal beauty.

Most women grow up with a longing to feel lovely, but deep

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in their souls suspect they are not. That is because, tragically, at some point, something happened that attached shame to their femininity. Every woman has experienced shame in terms of her sexuality. Being a woman has caused her to feel powerless, abandoned, or abused. This can come from something as simple as boys getting called on in class far more frequently, or as mischievous as getting their bra straps popped in middle school. But far too often it's much more severe. Here are some of the most heartbreaking statistics:

- Girls are sexually abused about three times more often than boys.<sup>4</sup>
- Approximately one in six American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape.<sup>5</sup>
- About 44 percent of rape victims are minors, and 80 percent are under age thirty.<sup>6</sup>

A few years ago, I (Stephen) counseled a professional model. She came to see me because she was growing increasingly depressed and hopeless. This woman was distractingly beautiful. Both men and women noticed her when she walked into a room.

During one of the early counseling sessions, she and I were talking about what might be at the root of her depression. I asked her what she thought about how people see her: “Are you aware of how beautiful other people find you?” She looked at me with anger in her eyes.

“If I hear that I am beautiful one more time . . . !” she threatened.

“One more time what? What might happen?” I asked.

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“I don’t know. I just feel so ugly on the inside. And so alone.” Her anger melted and she began to cry.

“Who told you that you were beautiful?” I gently asked.

As we continued our conversation over the next several appointments, she began to tell me about how her swim coach “touched” her in middle school, how her high school boyfriend “went too far,” and how her mother was always critical of her weight. Far too many women have experienced similar events. If a woman is to live without toxic shame, she must come to terms with this heartache and reconcile her identity.

### REDEEMING BEAUTY: THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

It’s Saturday night. A guy shows up at his girlfriend’s house to pick her up for a romantic night out. He is right on time, but she is running a few minutes late and is still in jeans and a T-shirt. “I can’t decide which dress to wear. Can you help me out? Wait right here. I’ll be right back.” Before he can even answer, she disappears into the bedroom to change. Moments later she reemerges from the bedroom. “Does this dress make me look fat?”

Is this a loaded question? You bet it is. No matter how he answers it, he will immediately find himself trapped. How does this work? It has as much to do with the nature of the question as it does anything else. Like lawyers, women are experts at posing questions that seem to have no right answer. What’s a guy to do?

There’s an old joke. You can decide for yourself if it’s funny or not. It goes something like this: A woman comes into the room and asks her husband, who is watching television, “Does this dress



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make me look fat?” The husband pauses for a moment, and then he responds, “No, the dress is fine. It’s the pint of ice cream you eat every night that makes you look fat.”

Not a great answer. Here are some other incredibly wrong ways to answer the question, Does this dress make me look fat?

- “I guess not. A few extra pounds look good on you.”
- “Fat? Compared to whom?”
- “Well, you’ve been fatter.”
- “I don’t know. What do you think?”
- “It doesn’t matter to me.”

The guy doesn’t even have to say anything to miss the mark. Hesitating, stuttering, or pausing before answering is equally as tragic. And pretending not to hear the question isn’t any better: “I’m sorry, honey. Did you say something?”

Remember, beneath the question, Does this dress make me look fat? a woman is really asking, Am I lovely? What she is looking for is a man who will do three things:

- tell her the truth
- confront her shame
- confirm her loveliness

Any woman who asks this question already has a pretty good idea of the right answer, so if a guy lies, she knows it. Does she look fat? On the surface, this is a yes or no question, and this part of the question must be addressed if the man is to have integrity and authenticity.

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And though her butt may look as big as a Clydesdale pony's, it's her shame that the guy is actually dealing with. The question of her heart is, Are you with me for how I look, or do you see something else that keeps you here?

When she asks, “Do I look fat in this dress?” one of two things can happen: Her shame will be exposed or it will be diminished.

He can answer, “No, you look great, and I really like the way the dress shows off your \_\_\_\_\_.” (Fill in what you really notice. The blank could be anything as long as it's honest. It could be eyes, skin tone, hair, or another attractive body part.) Keep in mind that, even though he says she looks great, she may not like his answer. If she rejects it, her shame will be exposed, and she will change dresses anyway. If she accepts the answer, her self-contempt will be diminished, and she will be humbled—as long as the guy is telling the truth.

This is where a man can really bless a woman. This is the moment when he can help her grow in maturity, wisdom, and love. This is a moment when he can help her see herself as God sees her. She asks, “Do I look fat in this dress?” He answers, “No, and I really like the way the dress shows off your eyes. Do you want to know what I like more than that?” . . . *Dramatic pause* . . . “How you are so generous with your friends. You care for them so well.” This would surprise her. It would speak to her character. She would know that he really notices her.

What if he answers, “Yes, it does make you look fat”? What should a guy do? Duck behind the couch? Run for cover? Get an extra blanket for the doghouse? Quite honestly, there's not a whole lot a man can say after yes that will really matter. She already knows she looks fat and he just confirmed it, and now the

shame she felt is out in the open and exposed. But for the heck of it, let's finish the sentence.

So he says, “Yes.” There is blessing to be given here too. “Yes, you do look fat in that dress, and I wonder if you already thought that. If you really want my opinion, I like the blue dress you wore last week. You look great in that dress. But you know what I really see when you ask me that?” . . . *Dramatic pause* . . . “I see a woman who hates her body, and it breaks my heart for you. I wish you could see yourself the way God sees you.” It takes a good deal of courage to do this. It also takes equal measures of strength and tenderness. And any man that stops at a simple yes (or no for that matter) is not courageous but cruel.

Any guy who can candidly tell a woman she looks fat with gentleness has credibility. He's a man that tells the truth. When a question is answered honestly and the woman is confirmed for who she is by a man who cares for her deeply, it creates a sense of security and wholeness (even if it's an answer she doesn't like hearing). It creates a sense of being known and understood. When a man is committed to telling the truth, confronting shame, and confirming the loveliness of character in a woman, he is doing the work of God. When he dodges the question, he is being a childish coward.

The hope is that the woman, regardless of how she looks, can begin to live more deeply out of her identity in Christ. Her sense of femininity is rooted in being loved, honored, valued, and cherished by another for who she *is*, not for how she looks.

Women are made to reveal beauty. Men are made to view it. This is how beauty can be redeemed. Men are made to delight in the beauty of a woman. But if men only look at the skin, they

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will miss the depth of loveliness that a woman has to offer. And if women look to men for their definition, they will always be disappointed. True beauty is about a woman's character—about her story—and it always refers to what God has done in her.

Though men don't define a woman's loveliness (God does that), they do have the power to confirm it or tarnish it. So when a woman asks a man, “Do I look fat in this dress?” what she is asking is for confirmation of who she is. Whatever the man's answer, he must address her character, her nature, who she is in God's image, if his answer is to be truthful.

### HERE'S THE POINT

The real question behind Do I look fat? is, Am I lovely? Based on what we just told you, here are three high-payoff things you can do that will bless the woman you love and keep you out of hot water.

1. Tell the truth. Didn't your momma always say to tell the truth? And keep in mind that she already knows the answer before she asks the question. She's asking for confirmation rather than information.
2. Confront her shame. Your words carry tremendous power, which is why you can't answer the question with just a yes or a no.
3. Confirm her loveliness. Remember the question really isn't just about the dress or her weight. There is something bigger at play.

But just in case you forget these three things, remember this: “We'll Leave the Light on for You!” at Motel 6.

## “DOES THIS DRESS MAKE ME LOOK FAT?”

### CONVERSATION STARTERS

We've all experienced the frustration and friction that can occur between men and women when they try to have a meaningful conversation (or even just make plans for dinner). God made men and women quite different, but in spite of these design differences, God's plan is that men and women will relate to each other in ways that reveal his glory.

If you are like us, you might be wondering, *Can this ever really happen?* Men and women will never bridge the relational/conversational chasm unless we are able to grasp a deeper level of understanding about what is stirring in the hearts of the other sex.

This part of the book is designed to help you in that quest. Whether you explore these questions on your own, with your significant other, or in a small group, these conversation starters will open the door for you to more deeply examine the themes from this book and help you move past the frustration of feeling hampered by your limitations to a place of more authentic relationship.

## BEFORE WE BEGIN

1. What are some reasons you want to read this book?
2. What are you hoping to gain from this book?

## GETTING STARTED

1. What confuses you the most about the opposite sex?
2. Men: If you could change one thing about women, what would it be? If you could change one thing about men, what would it be?
3. Women: If you could change one thing about men, what would it be? If you could change one thing about women, what would it be?

## CHAPTER 1

1. If you could be any character from a fairy tale, who would you be? Why?
2. Describe your last shopping experience for clothes. How might it have been different if you were accompanied by someone of the same sex? What about someone from the opposite sex?
3. What do you say when asked, “Does this dress make me look fat?” Do you lie, skirt the issue (pun intended), or tell the truth?
4. Men and women both use clothes to define themselves. How does what you wore today define you? What do your clothes say about you? How do you think others read your appearance? Do you even care?

## CONVERSATION STARTERS

5. How might men and women define *lovely* differently?
6. In what ways can a man call forth a woman's beauty (both inward and outward)?
7. How much has your father or mother influenced the way you feel about the opposite sex?

### CHAPTER 2

1. This book addresses several loaded questions that women ask men. Make a list of as many of your own loaded questions as you can.
2. Men are sometimes oblivious (or just pretend to be) to the fact that things they say hurt women's feelings. Let's turn the tables. What could a woman say to a man that would wound or assault his masculinity?
3. Read chapter 2 of the book of Ruth. Notice the way Ruth and Boaz interact. Can you find any similarities between the way Ruth acts and what the authors say about women wanting their actions to be noticed?
4. In your experience, how do men and women create and relate differently?
5. When do you see your wife/girlfriend being creative and revealing beauty? When was the last time you told her or encouraged her?
6. Describe a time when you have been burned by a loaded question. What was the question? How did you respond? What happened?

## NOTES

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### **CHAPTER 2: “DO YOU NOTICE ANYTHING DIFFERENT ABOUT THE HOUSE?”**

1. Genesis 2:18, NIV
2. Genesis 1:27, NIV

### **CHAPTER 3: “DO YOU THINK THAT WOMAN IS PRETTY?”**

1. “Pots of Promise,” *The Economist*, May 22, 2003.
2. Matters of Scale, January/February 1999 Spending Priorities



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**STEPHEN JAMES AND DAVID THOMAS** are coauthors of the companion books *“Does This Dress Make Me Look Fat?”* and *“Yup.” “Nope.” “Maybe.”* (Tyndale), as well as *Becoming a Dad: A Spiritual, Emotional and Practical Guide* (Relevant). Stephen and David are regularly featured on radio and television, including ABC Family Channel’s *Living the Life*, and in numerous publications, including *Discipleship Journal* and *Relevant* magazine.

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