

graceful
(for young women)

LETTING GO OF YOUR
TRY-HARD LIFE

emily p. freeman



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Freeman, Emily P., 1977–

Graceful (for young women) : letting go of your try-hard life / Emily P. Freeman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8007-1983-8 (pbk.)

1. Young women—Religious life. 2. Self-perception—Religious aspects—

Christianity. I. Title.

BV4551.3.F74 2012

248.8'33—dc23

2012015190

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12 13 14 15 16 17 18 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Emily P. Freeman, *Graceful*
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For the quiet girl who sits in the back, the loud girl who thinks she should be different, the girl who couldn't do it as well as her sister. For the daughter who just wants to please her parents, for the student who wants to do it right, for the friend who is always the smiling sidekick.

For the good test takers and the strict rule makers. For the athlete succeeding and competing, for the star. For the dancer and the painter and the daydream maker. For the worried and the hurried and the sweet smile fakers.

For the prom queen who cries in the bathroom, the artist who ignores the canvas, and the poet who never speaks up. For the girl who feels both too much and not enough.

For the girl who is tired of trying and the Christian who doesn't know Jesus. For the girls who win and the ones afraid to fail. For the pretty one, wondering if she's enough. For the smart one, worried on the inside. And for those who say *I'll be fine* and *I'm not lonely*—for the liars.

For the girl who knows everything and nothing.

For the rule followers, the fear wallowers, the messy, and the misunderstood. For the self-critic and the silent judge, and for those who feel invisible.

For the wanna-be leaders, the gonna-be women, the someday mamas, the soon-to-be world changers, and the present-day idea makers.

These words are for you.

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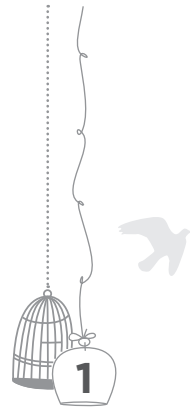
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the beginning

Your ears will hear a word behind you, “This is the way, walk in it,” whenever you turn to the right or to the left.

—*Isaiah 30:21*

The little white house on Gladstone Avenue had a driveway that ran the length of it on the right side. The gravel popped and crackled under the weight of any car coming through, sending up gray billows of dust. So we had some warning when Dad pulled his white Datsun up beside the house at the end of the day. It was the automatic *on your mark, get set* signal to my sister and me. We needed to get into position for a round of hide-and-seek.

Our house was small, and there were exactly three good hiding spots: behind the overstuffed recliner in the corner, behind the long curtains in the living room, or under the kitchen table. But anyone who hid under the table was nearly always found first, so maybe there were really only two good spots.

I still remember through seven-year-old-girl eyes: he walks through the back door near the laundry room, and Mom hollers out a mom-ish

“I have no idea where the girls are” comment as she stands over the stove, stirring the chili. The pursuit begins. I have an overwhelming urge to laugh and wet my pants, and I hold myself into a ball and shake with excitement, both hoping he finds me and hoping he doesn’t.

Dad knows all the good spots, but he plays along and looks everywhere else first, letting us girls win at our game. And if we hear his voice close to the place we are hidden, we wiggle and squirm and retreat deeper into our hiding. We get giggly, and the play goes on a little longer.

As I grew up, I stopped playing hide-and-seek for fun. Instead, I played for survival. When you’re a kid, it’s a game. As you get older, hide-and-seek can become a way of life, and you don’t even realize you’re playing it.

I’ve done a lot of hiding in my life, but not the kind of hiding you might think. I’m not a fugitive hiding from the law or a run-away hiding from my troubles. I didn’t spend high school hiding boyfriends from my parents or pot under my pillow. I’ve never been suspended from school, stolen the answer key to a math test, or been drunk, high, or arrested.

My hiding was so clever that I had everyone fooled, including myself. The ways I chose to hide were not obviously offensive. I was nice. I was lovely and bubbly and likable. I was a good girl. But I hid myself behind my good girl image.

Like in my living room all those years ago, there are really only a few good hiding spots in the world, and we all compete for position behind them:

We hide behind our intellect.

We hide behind our sweet personalities.

We hide behind our rules.

We hide behind our comfort zones.

We take on different identities, often without realizing it. It’s as if there are voices in our heads telling us who we are:

I'm the responsible one.

I'm the nice one.

I'm the smart one.

I'm the shy one.

I'm the worried one.

I'm the good one.

I'm the boring one.

We listen to these voices, and they drive us deeper into our hiding places. It may sound weird to call these hiding spots—*I'm not hiding*, you may say. *I'm just living. And I'm trying to do a good job of it. What's wrong with that?*

Well, nothing. Maybe. But it could be possible that you are a little bit like me—you're living life well; you're making smart, safe choices. But there is pressure, and because people seem to have high expectations of you and because your parents are so proud of you and because you want to do well so badly, success means everything. Failure is devastating. Weakness is unacceptable. Rather than letting people see your doubts, you hide behind a firm smile. Rather than risking rejection, you choose to keep your fears to yourself by pretending not to care. Rather than admitting you don't know what to do next, you fake it in public and feel lost when you're alone.

When you are a good girl, you move through life like a well-trained cheerleader, elbows and knees locked, smile on your face, standing on the sidelines. With your shoulders tense and your teeth clenched tight, you brace for tests and right answers and are ready for anything. You have a great respect for your obligations.

In a world where everyone's motives drip heavy with expectation, you wonder if anyone knows who you really are behind all that good. *Do they care? Do they see me over here, trying my best to do things right? Working hard to please them? Struggling to keep it all together?*

These outward identities we build for ourselves are not all that we are. A person is made of so many layers. Skin is just the top layer. It's the part you can see, so when you walk into a room, others won't run into you. It's the brown-hair, brown-eyes layer; the you-look-good-in-green layer.

Your outside is important because God made that part. He made you on purpose, uniquely beautiful. But you can't stop there, because that's your body, your skin, your outside. Dead people have all that stuff too. There's something else that makes you alive.

And so you keep digging and you see a little more. Maybe you laugh like your mama, talk with a hint of a lisp, enjoy country music, or put fries on your hamburger. Maybe you stay up too late at night and regret it in the morning. Something about a large moon in the night sky is comforting to you. You think about the future. A lot. You panic in the spotlight but crave it at the same time. You make friends easily, and you worry what they think.

Before you know it, you've gone deeper. You're starting to uncover what motivates you—the things you fear might come true, and worse, the things you fear might not. You have a longing to be understood, but still feel the need to protect yourself. You are happy, sad, scared, joyful, loved, unloved, rejected, and accepted all at the same time. And though you feel alone, so many of us feel the exact same way.

Your layers run deep. Most of life, we function on the top layers, the ones that show up in the mirror. The ones others can see. People like us or don't like us based on those top layers. They make judgment calls—and so do we, by the way, even though we want to be seen and known for who we really are. But who are we really?

This is a book about that.

This is also a book about God, about what it means—and what it doesn't mean—to believe. It might challenge some of the things you have come to accept as normal. Sometimes it might seem as if the words are written just for you, and they are. Other times it

might seem as if you can't relate at all, and that's okay too, because that part may be for another girl—maybe even for a friend of yours. I simply ask that for the time we have here together, you would be willing to receive. I don't know what God might have for you exactly. But if he has something, wouldn't it be awful to miss it?

Consider the ways you might be hiding out, the things you are looking to for security and for safety. Perhaps we think we want to remain hidden, to keep to ourselves, to maintain our safety with our own hands. We have grown so comfortable in our girl-made hiding places that we forget the most important part of hide-and-seek: *the best part of hiding is being found*. If no one is looking for you, what's the point of hiding? Don't we all really want to be known, to be loved, to be accepted, to be searched for, to be found?

An invitation has been offered, but only the desperate can hear it. Dare to lift your eyes up from your books and achievements. Tilt your head toward the gentle whispers of a God who says, *What is it you truly seek?*

There are lots of answers to that question. Love. Money. Fame. Success. Beauty. Peace. Safety. Knowledge. Fun. Freedom. Perfection.

But all of these are secondary things. Because we were made in the secret, mysterious heart of God and anything less than God himself will always leave us wanting more. Some girls look to fill the emptiness with their rebellious ways and get into trouble. Other girls try hard to fill the emptiness with good things and get praise. But both girls are reaching for something we'll never find outside of God.

There is a different way to live, a way that is full of grace and mystery, a way that cannot be outlined or studied for or figured out.

Life isn't about trying hard to be good, it's about trusting God to be *graceful* in us.

When you hear that word *graceful*, maybe you think of something that moves in a beautiful or elegant way. Maybe you imagine a dancer on a stage or a bird in the sky. Lovely. Beautiful. Smooth.

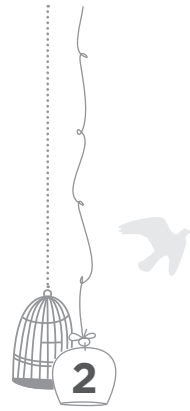
graceful (for young women)

In Christ, being graceful simply means *you are specially marked by God's divine grace*. In a very real way, this kind of graceful is also lovely and beautiful. His grace is a gift you don't deserve and can't earn. Because we are loved and known by a graceful God, we are free to relax our shoulders, unclench our fists, and open our hands to receive all he has to offer. And the best thing he has to offer is, quite simply, *himself*.

I know that's hard to imagine, in a way. Maybe you're wondering what it actually means to live a graceful life. We've got many chapters ahead to figure out what that might look like for you.

As we get started, there are two things you need to know about me. First, most days I still feel seventeen inside. I look around and wonder when the grown-ups are going to show up and take care of things, and then I remember I am one. We are not so very different, you and I.

The second thing is, I am emotionally allergic to small talk. I want to cut straight to the heart. I love to have fun and laugh way too loud, but my true passion is to listen to what is really going on behind those eyes. So when you read this book, know that I've done my best to cut out polite small talk. This is your invitation to be authentic. Take it or leave it, but don't talk about the weather.



the girl who wears a paper face

I'm too much but not enough all at the same time.

—Anna, a good girl, age 17

She didn't want to cry. As Kayla sat on the bed across from me at midnight, her tears were ready to fall right out, but she was fighting hard to keep them in. Our last session of the overnight youth retreat was finished, and I noticed her lingering in the background. Something was clearly on her mind. Rather than join the other girls, who by now were loud, silly, and sprawled out on pillows, she caught up with me. I could tell she was desperate for an answer but had a hard time articulating the question.

Finally, out it came. "I just want to make sure my relationship with God is right before I go to college," she said with a hint of urgency.

“Really?” I asked her, eager to find out what she meant. “What do you think you have to do to get it right?”

Kayla was the last girl in the world who should be worried about doing things right. She was a straight-A student, loyal to her friends, a generally sweet and sensible girl. Kayla knew what was right. Still, she answered with a sigh.

“I don’t know!” Her frustration was evident.

I tried a different approach. “How will you know when it *is* right?”

She paused, considering the question. She didn’t have an answer, but I didn’t need one. The look on her face was familiar to me. In high school, I had often been overwhelmed with the feeling that perhaps I was missing a vital part of the Christian life. The question I constantly asked myself was this: *What am I supposed to do?*

How do I know I’m in God’s will? What college should I go to? What should I major in? Who is it okay to date? What is it okay to do when we’re dating? What is the right thing to say in this situation? Am I allowed to be angry/hurt/sad/annoyed?

What am I supposed to do?

If someone would have just made that clear, then I would have done it. I just wanted to know I was on the right track, and I didn’t want to make any mistakes.

Maybe you want to know you’re on the right track too. You may have accepted Jesus when you were five, been baptized at ten, gone to every Vacation Bible School possible, and brought twenty-five of your friends to church every week. Or maybe you accepted Jesus and then proceeded to walk in the opposite direction. Most likely, you find yourself somewhere in between those two extremes, somewhere in the middle. That’s where most good girls live.

I’ve been a good girl all my life. And by that, I mean exactly what you think. I grew up going to church, Vacation Bible School, youth group, handbell choir, youth mission trips, a little bit of Young Life,

and was even a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, though the only time I met with them was for the yearbook picture.

I even had a good girl name, and I never liked it growing up: Emily Morland. It didn't roll off the tongue like other girls' names, like Sarah or Jessica or Ann. Mine felt more like peanut butter. During roll call, the M's fell right in the middle of the alphabet, blending in just like me. I had brown hair, too straight to be called curly but too curly to lay straight. I've never dyed it or permed it because I've heard it causes irreparable damage. So I've settled for brown. Mousey brown.

I have exactly one piercing in each ear. And only my ears. I don't have any tattoos. Needles.

I didn't sneak into R-rated movies, I didn't skip class except on senior skip day, and even though I did cheat on a few tests in biology, I felt super guilty about it. I didn't drink in high school because it was illegal and because I watched people throw up when they drank too much. And the only thing I hated more than breaking the rules was throwing up. But I liked having friends too much to skip the parties altogether, so I was the designated driver for my girlfriends. That got real old really fast.

I wasn't always a model good girl though. The first time I cussed for real was in gym class in the sixth grade. For all of fifth grade, Jenny and I were best friends. And then we got to middle school and she became friends with Natalie who, from what I can remember, wore glasses and scarves and seemed to have something against me. And so I did what seemed the natural thing at the time. I entered into the drama.

As I walked laps with a friend in gym class, I talked bad about Jenny, using some of those bad words that would have had my mom in tears. Just before we passed under the basketball goal, my tongue felt fat and clumsy as I said *the word*. I spoke it a little too loudly and my cheeks warmed at the sound of my own voice. I may or may not have begun to sweat profusely at the sound, but

I felt powerful. I felt big and believed in that moment that I was going to change my reputation. I didn't want to be such a good girl anymore. I wanted people to fear messing with me. I'm sure that was convincing with my mousey brown hair and my smaller-than-average frame, but I wanted to be intimidating. At least that's how I acted. The truth is, what I really wanted more than anything was to be liked. As much as I talked bad about those girls, I would have given anything for them to like me.

A few weeks later, something happened that I can't remember, but we talked. And we laughed. And before I knew it, Jenny and Natalie and I were sitting together at the lunch table as the best of friends. I was so relieved.

Wanting to Be Her

When I was in sixth grade, I wanted to be tough and untouchable, but really I was squishy and sensitive. In high school, I wanted to be unflappable and calm, but really I was easily hurt and just as easily excitable. I also wanted to be a perfectly disciplined student, but in reality I was plagued with an uncanny knack for procrastination and a tendency to cry under pressure. And if you turned on the interrogation light and gave me a truth serum to make me talk, I would tell you that I actually wanted to be perfect in every situation. I know it's impossible to actually be perfect, and I would never want *you* to be perfect. That's no fun, to have perfect friends. I want *you* to be imperfect and limited and relatable. But me?

I want to know what to do. I want to know how to do it right. And I want to do it. All. By. My. Big. Self.

Not only do I want to do everything perfectly, I want to look perfect while I do it. I want to act perfect and sing perfect and have perfect teeth. I want to speak perfectly and laugh perfectly and be clean and on time. Every time. It's ridiculous and embarrassing,

but it's true and you don't even have to give me a truth serum for me to tell you that.

In the past, my solution to the giant gap between the girl I wish I were and the girl I actually am has been to somehow make my life look the way I want. I work hard to do the right thing. I stay strong when I feel weak, and I fake happy when I want to cry. My ideal image of myself has everything to do with put together and nothing to do with falling apart.

My friend Amber, a senior in high school, says it this way: "I am trying to work my way to my own happiness by trying to control the perception that others have of me. I feel like when I'm in control of it, then everything is okay."

Like Amber, I desperately want to manage your opinion of me. Nearly everything I do is to convince you I am good. If I sense that maybe you don't believe that about me, then I will do anything to change your mind. I want you to like me, and I will hide my real self so you can see what I consider to be my best self.

But you're a Christian! you might say. *Aren't you being kind of a hypocrite? Saying you trust God, but then acting so wimpy when people don't like you?* Honest answer? Probably. I'm not telling you this because it's a good way to be. I'm just telling you the way it has been for me.

This fear of rejection drives me hard, eating away at my courage. And so my love is cautious. My faith is timid. My story is small. I long to be seen, but I feel safe when I'm invisible.

So I stay a good girl.

And I hide.

I hide behind my good performance and my respectable reputation. I hide behind my sweet personality and my good intentions. For a long time, I even hid behind my parents' faith, believing it was mine. It kind of was, but it kind of wasn't. I was too scared to admit that. Overall, I hide behind busy and comfortable, and I work hard to manage everyone's expectations.

The energy it takes to live for you is killing me—to see me through your eyes, to search for myself in your face, to be sure you are pleased with me. I want you to always be pleased with me.

And then there is God.

I know God is big enough to save the unruly, the rejected, and the addict. I know about the God who reaches way down into the pit and the one who has love that stretches all the way up to heaven. But what about me, the good girl in the middle? Maybe he can't see me because my story is so boring. I lack intrigue, drama, and interest. Can he see ordinary, unspectacular me?

I'm not sure, so I vow to do everything right just in case that might help: to be a good girl, a good Christian, a good student, a good friend. I believe God will be more pleased with me, the girl who does it right, than he would be if I didn't. I try hard to measure up to what I think he expects, and I imagine him standing blurry in the distance, watching. It feels like God is far away, and so I practice the presence of fear and refuse the presence of Jesus.

I lived this way for many years. Sometimes even now when I forget the truth. Fear pushes and shoves me around. But what is the opposite of fear?

Courage?

Bravery?

Boldness?

Those all seem right. But God's economy suggests something different.

God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us. (Eph. 3:20 Message)

Fear pushes us around. But what God does in this verse—doing more than we could guess, working deeply and gently within us—to me it sounds a lot like love.

Things Most Girls Have in Common

While I've been working on this book, I've struggled with using the term *good girl* because there is a risk that as you read, you will get the wrong impression. You may tune out early because you're thinking in your head, *Well, I'm definitely not a good girl because of this bad thing I've done*. You may not relate to these words, but don't let that be because you've made mistakes.

For the purposes of this book, being a good girl is more about what you believe on the inside than how you behave on the outside. That means even if your story is very different from mine or from the other stories I will share, you may still struggle with this good girl in your head. If you have managed to live your life so far without getting into much trouble, the good girl in your head challenges you to work hard to keep it up. Or if you have made some wrong choices or messed up in small or even big ways, the good girl in your head will try to scold you and tell you that the answer is to get your act together, straighten up, be good.

Either way, the result is you depending on yourself to do life right. Either way, God isn't even in the room.

We all have at least some things in common: we feel the weight of holding it all together; of longings not yet met; of worry, anxiety, and fear about the future. And sometimes, if we are really honest, we wonder why we try so hard to follow the rules if all it gets us is more worry and anxiety.

When you are a believer in Jesus but you don't know what a difference he makes, then the natural thing to do is depend on the things you do know. To get you thinking about whether or not you struggle with this good girl identity, take a minute to put a check

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beside the statements you agree with. And if you are such a good girl that you can't bring yourself to write in a book, you can just answer these in your head.

- I know how to be a friend and listen with interest.
- I know how to get good grades in school.
- I know how to get people to like me without doing anything wrong.
- I know how to avoid conflict.
- I know how to be a positive person.
- I know how to fake nice when I feel angry or upset.
- I know how to tell people what they want to hear.

We tend to put a lot of confidence in the things that are awesome about ourselves and try to hide the things that aren't. If Jesus fits in there somewhere, great. If not, oh well. But we will always run into problems living life that way, because when we put all our confidence in the things we know how to do, what happens when we encounter things we *don't* know how to do? Worse, what happens when the things we know how to do don't work? Put a check mark next to those statements that are true about you in the list below.

- Sometimes I don't know what to say to my friends when they have problems.
- I have cried about the pressure of school or homework.
- I am devastated when someone doesn't like me.
- I hate conflict.
- I don't pray enough.
- I don't really read the Bible, mainly because I don't understand it.
- I don't think I measure up.
- I judge people.

- ___ I compare myself to other girls.
- ___ I feel moody and irritable for no reason.
- ___ I snap at people.

If you are like me, you were able to check most if not all statements on both lists. How can it be possible that I know how to get people to like me and at the same time feel devastated when they don't? It's because even though I can be successful in my efforts some of the time, there is no way I can be successful all of the time. So where does that leave us?

It leaves us needy. I want to encourage you today: needy is a beautiful place to be. When we recognize our need, we will finally look around for something (or someone) to fill it.

For a long time, I have listened to the good girl voice in my head rather than the voice of God. In moments of brutal truth, I wondered if being a Christian was all about simply trying to be good. At times I knew that wasn't the case, but I couldn't figure out why my experience walking with Jesus seemed so hard.

I don't want to tell you what to do. Instead, I want to walk with you as you learn what God has already done. And I want to dare you to believe him.

Where the Hiding Began

There's a good reason why we hide. There's a reason why we long for perfection, why we want to have it all and be it all and experience life to the fullest. We were made for paradise. Truly. I'm not just making this stuff up.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Imagine the heavens and the earth without death, litter, pollution, poverty, power lines, exhaust pipes, nuclear plants, oil spills, parking lots, heart attacks, hurricanes, or graffiti. Imagine only deep blue skies, trees green and lush, every kind of flower you

could dream up, and more. Imagine tigers walking tamely among sheep. Imagine a man and a woman existing together without argument, fear, insecurity, embarrassment, shame, or divorce.

God made this earth with his holy hands, and he made it perfect. And in the middle of it all, there was Adam and there was Eve, free and complete and unashamed. They were so beautiful. They were perfect. They were marked by God's grace. His favor rested upon them. Their lives were naturally graceful.

Everything God made was available to them. Everything, that is, except one tree. Just one. It was called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and they were told not to eat from it or they would die.

I'm sure you know the story, how a snake slithered through the branches of that tree while Eve stood close by. And he whispered doubt into her mind: *Has God really said you shouldn't eat from any tree in the garden?*

The truth is, God didn't say that at all. Twice he gave Adam and Eve guidance and instruction on what was theirs. First he said this: "I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you" (Gen. 1:29).

And then he said again, more specifically this time, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17).

Do you see the subtle twist? We have an enemy, a real one, who takes what is true and twists it two clicks to the left so that *every tree but one becomes no tree at all*.

Like when I was a senior in high school and my parents gave me an 11:30 p.m. curfew and I would come home at 11:45 and they would be upset. And I was all, *It's not fair! It's only fifteen minutes!* And they would be all, *You've been out since five. What's fifteen minutes?* Instead of being thankful for the six and a half hours of fun I just had, I was mad about the fifteen minutes I didn't have.

Discontentment shows up when we focus on what we can't have rather than what we do have.

We have an enemy who takes a gigantic highlighter to the story of our lives and highlights those areas to remind us. Again and again. That's what he did with Eve in the Garden. There were thousands of fruit trees to eat from. Every tree was theirs. Except that *one*. The serpent wanted her to feel as though she was missing out, and he tempted her with something that was beautiful.

Fruit. It wasn't even dipped in chocolate or caramel. It was healthy. It was good for her. It was a good-girl-worthy temptation.

Sin didn't enter the world because Eve cheated on Adam with another man. It wasn't because she smoked pot behind the bushes. It wasn't because she and Adam had a fight or because she cussed out God.

Sin entered the world because Eve believed a lie about a piece of fruit. But it wasn't the fruit itself that caused the fall of man. It was what eating it meant. "The serpent said to the woman, 'You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'" (Gen. 3:4-5).

I imagine in that moment, Eve began to feel anxiety, uncertainty, suspicion, and anger. *Perhaps God isn't so good after all. He is keeping something from us.* And so the serpent lied, the woman believed him, and she ate because she thought it would make her like God.

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. (Gen. 3:6)

Did you notice that Adam was with her? He wasn't across the Garden. He was standing right there beside her, and he did nothing. Eve didn't do this thing alone.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (Gen. 3:7 NIV)

They made coverings for themselves.

And there it is. They believed a voice other than God's, and they hid.

Satan attempts to recreate that scene every day of our lives. If sin entered this perfect world because a girl heard a lying voice and believed it, then no one can ever say that what we believe isn't important. What we believe is the most important, because what we do flows out of what we believe. Eve is the first girl to prove it, and we've been proving it ever since.

When we believe voices other than God's, we hide too. Adam and Eve started it, but we keep it going.

They hid because they were afraid.

They hid because they were embarrassed.

They hid because they were ashamed.

And so are we.

So there they were, sideways and upside down, the voice of their only enemy still echoing in their minds, and they got busy doing the only thing that felt safe at the time: hiding. The first hiding place was made out of fig leaves sewn together in fear and chaos with trembling hands and a mounting sense of urgency.

“They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’” (Gen. 3:8–9). He asked, not because he didn't know, but because he knew the only way for them to truly experience life was to come out, to show up, to run to their Father and find their safety in him.

I'm tempted to think, *Well, they did the one thing God told them not to do. They deserved whatever punishment they got.* And it's

easy to think that as long as I keep myself separate from the story. But another part of me recognizes myself in this woman. I am given the chance to believe God on a daily basis, and I continue to forget what I long to remember. And when I do, I hide too.

When we talk about this word *hiding*, it simply means this: anything I turn to in order to get my needs met. When I want people to think I'm smart, capable, and put together, I hide behind my performance. When I fear you will see what a mess I am, I hide behind my positive emotions. I hide behind my good reputation rather than risk trusting an unpredictable Jesus. I hide behind my list of rules so I can check off each one, as if I'm another step closer to God because I've followed them. I hide behind my strengths because I'm ashamed of my weaknesses. What started at the very beginning hasn't stopped yet.



As I sat on my bed with Kayla late that night, listening to the muffled laughs of the girls in the next room, the silence between us held an air of expectancy. I knew I should say something, and I was sure if I did, she would remember it. A question came to mind, and I knew it wouldn't have an easy answer. I asked it anyway.

“What if I told you the work is done? What if Jesus dying and then coming back to life was actually enough? What if you don't have to do anything but receive him, say thank you, and then live like it is true?”

The words lingered in the air between us. I watched as the tear that had been welling up finally made its way down Kayla's cheek. “That sounds good,” she said, smiling shyly. I don't think she really believed me, but it seemed to be the best news she had heard in a long time.

In the following pages, I want to begin to change the conversations you are having in your head. Like me, you may want to know, *What am I supposed to do?* I want to introduce you to a different,

better question: *What am I going to believe?* Every decision you make flows out of what you believe. I won't tell you what to do. I will tell you who to trust.

Each of the following chapters describes a different voice, and each voice takes on a sort of personality. To help you visualize the motives behind these voices, I've included a chart, "From Good to Graceful," in the back of the book that outlines each of these good girl voices—what she says, fears, and hides behind. Because you may not identify with every single good girl identity in the following chapters, this chart might help you sort out some ways you may uniquely struggle. It's tempting to believe these voices, to take them on and wear them around. But they are in opposition to the voice of God's Spirit within us. They do not define us, but they will direct us if we let them. And so we have some important choices to make. Every day, a direction. Every minute, a decision about what we will believe. Are you going to keep trying hard to be good on your own? Or will you dare to believe that you are graceful in Christ, marked forever by his divine favor?