

YOUNG ADULTS

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# Rethinking Beauty

A Gospel Perspective  
on Body Image



**By Hannah DeTavis**

When I was in college, my roommates and I would sit in our hallway at night and talk about everything, from treacherous exams to comedic first dates. One night, we landed on the topic of body image.

One of my roommates showed us her social media feed filled with endless pictures of “perfect” girls with “perfect” lives. “I’m sick of not being skinny enough! Maybe I shouldn’t eat breakfast tomorrow,” she said, a fake sob in her voice.

We all laughed at her melodrama, but we all knew that she was only partly kidding. Slowly, we all opened up about the various ways we’d chased media standards of beauty. Some of us had flitted from one fad diet to the next, some of us had spent too much time comparing our bodies to others’, and some of us had even considered plastic surgery. We felt sheepish talking about our concerns, but we each acknowledged that while it’s important to maintain a put-together appearance, at one point or other we had each

developed an unhealthy fixation on our bodies.

There was a somber lull in the conversation. I looked over at the mirror across from us to see four beautiful girls who struggled to see past the filtered images in the media to recognize their own divine value. Our warped perceptions of our bodies seemed small compared to the struggles of others with more severe body-image problems, but I couldn’t help but wonder: Where did we fit into the conversation about body image?

I later realized that I had been part of the conversation about body image since I first sang “I Am a Child of God.”<sup>1</sup> Heavenly Father has revealed doctrine relating to body image, and He’s done so through scriptures and prophetic counsel. But sometimes, when we hear gospel truths repeated often, we may overlook their actual meaning. As I reexamined the meaning of key doctrinal scriptures and phrases—this time with spiritual eyes—Heavenly Father taught me how He defines beauty.

When I stopped overlooking simple gospel truths about the body, the Savior healed my broken perceptions.



### **“I am a child of God”**

Our nurturing Heavenly Father has two eyes, two hands, two feet, and one heart—just like us. We are made after the image of God, even if details of our shape, size, and color may differ. We should celebrate those details! We may never feel as though we fit societal ideals of beauty, but what is more beautiful than the self-assurance that comes from this simple truth: “I am a child of God”?<sup>2</sup> Shifting our body image is less about how often we exercise at the gym and more about how often we exercise faith and remember in whose image we were created.

### **“Living in mortality with a physical body”**

*Preach My Gospel* explains that “we lived as spirit children of our Father in Heaven before we were born on this earth. We were not, however, like our Heavenly Father, nor could we ever become like Him and enjoy all the blessings that He enjoys without the experience of living in mortality with a physical body.”<sup>3</sup> From this, we learn that our bodies are truly one of God’s greatest gifts because they allow us to eventually enjoy “all that [the] Father hath” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:38). Sometimes, because of our limited perspective, we take for granted the blessing of a spirit and a body joined together in mortality—we don’t remember our pre-earth life when we didn’t have bodies, and we haven’t experienced the spirit world without bodies. Even so, as we study God’s plan of salvation, we can better appreciate the role of our bodies in that plan.

### **“Your body is [a] temple”**

We often hear, “Your body is [a] temple,” (1 Corinthians 6:19)—so frequently, in fact, that we may lose sight of what this truth actually means. One summer, I toured dozens of cathedrals and churches in Europe. Many of these buildings were large and ornate, and others were small and quaint. Regardless of the details of each building, all were revered as beautiful, sacred spaces. Why do we readily praise the unique beauty of literal tabernacles but turn around and criticize the most sacred tabernacles of all—our bodies? Much like Michelangelo,



who painted thousands of details on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, our Heavenly Father has embedded innumerable, divine details in our DNA that compose a stunning picture of who we really are. With the Savior's help, we can learn to cherish the little details that God has included as part of our "tabernacle[s] of clay" (Moroni 9:6).

### "Glorify God in your body"

The Apostle Paul taught, "For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:20). God doesn't ask us to glorify ourselves by posting flawless photos on Instagram. He asks us to glorify Him by keeping our bodies pure and healthy. Satan has never had a body and never will. Because he is bitter about his eternal state, he tries to plant lies into the minds of those who do have bodies. When we look at another person's body with jealousy, lust, or unrighteous comparison, we need to stop and recognize that those feelings aren't from Heavenly Father. No matter how damaged our body image may be, the Savior can teach us to love our physical bodies and treat them with respect.

### "All things unto me are spiritual"

The Lord never intended for us to be more concerned about our bodies than we are for our spirits. In Doctrine and Covenants 29:34, He explains that "all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal." Here the Lord

teaches that all commandments—even the ones like the Word of Wisdom that seem temporal—are given to us for spiritual purposes. President Russell M. Nelson has taught, "How you use your body affects your spirit."<sup>4</sup> If we are constantly loathing our outward appearance, we may interrupt our inward connection to heaven. When we follow the counsel of prophets to care for and love our bodies, we open ourselves to more spiritual nourishment.

### "There [was] no beauty that [they] should desire him"

After the dismal hallway chat with my roommates, I knelt beside my bed and told my Heavenly Father how tired I was—tired of keeping up with unrealistic ideals of "pretty" and tired of beating myself up when I didn't meet them. I needed His help to heal my broken perception of what beauty really is. As I crawled into bed, I looked up at a picture of the resurrected Christ on my wall. It occurred to me that just a few days prior to His Resurrection, He had not looked as glorious. I closed my eyes and envisioned Him carrying a cross as heavy as the world up to Golgotha, His feet caked in dirt, His back lacerated, and His hair matted with blood. Certainly, to the Roman soldiers who mocked Him, "there [was] no beauty that [they] should desire Him" (see Isaiah 53:2). But to me, there was nothing more moving than the image of my Savior's "bruised, broken, [and] torn" body.<sup>5</sup> He was willing to sink to the

lowliest of spiritual and physical states to exalt me to the highest of spiritual and physical states. Because Jesus Christ conquered all of the ugliness and pain in the world, life is beautiful. I am beautiful.

We can't ever afford to think of the precious truths of the gospel as clichés, especially as they relate to our self-worth. As Bonnie L. Oscarson, former Young Women General President, taught, "We need to get the gospel [truths] from our heads into our hearts!"<sup>6</sup> Today, when I hear, "I am a child of God" or "Your body is a temple," I don't zone out because I've heard it all before; I tune in because knowing these truths gives me a valuable voice in the conversation about body image. They teach me that I don't have to starve myself or go to extreme lengths physically to feel worthwhile. More importantly, they teach me that as I feed myself spiritually, I can feel the best kind of beauty—beauty that is divinely given, beauty that lasts. ■



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#### NOTES

1. "I Am a Child of God," *Hymns*, no. 301.
2. *Hymns*, no. 301.
3. *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (2018), 48.
4. Russell M. Nelson, "Decisions for Eternity," *Ensign*, Nov. 2013, 107.
5. "Jesus of Nazareth, Savior and King," *Hymns*, no. 181.
6. Bonnie L. Oscarson, "Do I Believe?" *Ensign*, May 2016, 88.