

an unnatural
beauty
Rediscovering the beauty of holiness

M. ESTHER LOVEJOY



ST JOSEPH, MISSOURI USA

An Unnatural Beauty
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Dedication

To four of my greatest blessings:
Debbie, Dan, Bridgette, and Steven

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Foreword

*Y*ou're beautiful!" As a father of two girls, I have said these words in my home many times. Each and every time I have meant them with all of my heart. Sometimes they're said on a special occasion, like when my oldest daughter came out of her room dressed for her first formal. Her beauty took my breath away and immediately had me questioning why I would ever let her out of our house into a world that included teenage boys!

Other times they're spoken as a result of something I see in their character. My youngest daughter's beauty was on full display as she lovingly and carefully crafted a card for a friend who had just lost her grandmother. Often times, however, those words are not spoken because of any event or because of any action but simply because they are true! My girls are beautiful and, as a father, I want to make sure they hear that truth on a daily basis.

I also want them to know this beauty is not tied to the way they look or the way they act. They are beautiful simply because of the way God made each of them. I want them to perceive and fully embrace the reality that true beauty can only be found as a reflection of the beauty of the One who lovingly and perfectly created them.

Why is this so important to me? Because this truth challenges the persuasive message of the world that values appearance

above character. Genuine beauty is when our hearts respond to the loving call of God the Father to mirror His holiness in our lives. This is the message of *An Unnatural Beauty*, a message that is desperately needed in a world that is obsessed with the pursuit of beauty at all costs. A world caught up in the outer trappings and temporary fixes we have mistakenly convinced ourselves will make us beautiful. Oftentimes, this comes at the expense of what God defines as truly beautiful.

As a father to girls, I love this message. However, this is not a book whose topic is limited in any way to the development of a healthy view of beauty in a young girl's mind. This is a message sorely needed across every available teaching platform in our churches. Men and women, young and old are invited by God to be holy as He is holy.

As a pastor I have watched the people I serve struggle with this call to holiness. I have seen those who get so caught up in striving for holiness in their own strength that their life becomes a joyless series of rights and wrongs to be balanced against each other. It seems that at the end of the day the final tally always leans the wrong way. I've seen others who simply write off the call to holiness as an impossible command God didn't really mean as they choose to hold up the grace of God as an excuse to live the way they want. The vast majority fall somewhere in the middle, genuinely desiring to be a better reflection of God's holiness but not really understanding what that entails. This is a book for everyone!

Esther has perfectly captured the intricacies of holy living as a response to the invitation of God in our lives. She masterfully introduces and develops the idea of holiness, not as a series of actions, but as a worshipful response to the love of the Father in our lives. We are invited, as a part of God's family, to join Him in holiness. We are not left to our own devices to figure out what that may look like or how we can achieve this, but with God's call

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comes His provision and enabling to fully display His holiness, His beauty to the world around us.

Drawing from her own personal experiences as well as God's covenant relationship with Israel in the Old Testament, Esther paints a picture of personal holiness that is not an unattainable standard but rather a natural outcome of a life passionately devoted to our relationship with God. Esther weaves stories throughout the book that make tough concepts understandable by connecting them to our everyday lives.

Finally, I have a vantage point that few others have that lends to the credibility of what is written within the pages of this book. Esther is my mother. I have had a front row seat to many of the lessons she has learned in her life and reflects on here. My mother is not perfect. Our life growing up was not perfect. But I have watched my mother gaze unswervingly into the eyes of Jesus, I have watched her reflect His character in the ways she interacts with people, and I have watched her trust Him to bring about good in things that were clearly intended for evil. She has not just written this book; she has lived it. She is not simply the author of *An Unnatural Beauty*; she is the picture of it as well. I pray God uses this book to speak to your life as much as my mother's life has spoken to mine.

Rev. Daniel J. Richter
Pastor, Durham Evangelical Church

Introduction

“How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing...it is irresistible.” ~C. S. Lewis

*B*eauty is big business. Pick up any women’s magazine and immediately you are confronted with ads offering products to get rid of wrinkles, cover gray, and smooth skin tone. There are articles that instruct us how to tighten our tummies, what clothes to wear, what clothes not to wear, what shade of lipstick is now in vogue, and the newest, guaranteed way to take off those extra pounds (do any of these really work?).

God is also serious about beauty and it is “advertised” throughout all of Scripture. In contrast to the beauty advertised in magazines and on television, the beauty of holiness is timeless and unfading, not hindered by age or wrinkles. Sadly, this beauty is considered by many to be an unrealistic and unattainable goal. I want to encourage you that the beauty of holiness is not only real, but possible. The “unnatural beauty” God offers is not a vague Christian ideal, but a wonderful and practical invitation from a holy God.

God loves beauty. Creation is a dramatic display of His ability to speak into existence things of great beauty. His detailed design for the tabernacle also demonstrates His desire for beauty. And He

has assured us even our imaginations can't envision the beauty He has prepared for us eternally.

But with all the beauty that has its origins in God, none can compare or equal the beauty of His holiness. It is declared in triplicate by those who worship around His throne. It is the truest and purest essence of who He is, and it is this that He offers to share with us. We are invited to be a display for the beauty of God's holiness—a beauty that has no other source but that of a holy, holy, holy God.

Holiness is a word that has many negative associations. It conjures up images of out-of-date clothes, no makeup, and an endless list of “thou shalt nots.” Over the years, we have turned holiness into a *what*—and usually a rather rigid, negative *what* rather than a glorious *Who*.

Sadly, the concept of holiness is often seen as an outdated term no longer relevant to today's Christian culture. The purpose of *An Unnatural Beauty* is to bring scriptural holiness out into the light where it can again be seen as the joyous privilege God offers to His children.

We need to rediscover the scriptural understanding of holiness. We need to find again the joy, freedom, and genuine beauty that come from sharing in God's divine and holy nature. This is not a book of dos and don'ts. Rather, it seeks to challenge us with God's call to holiness and to encourage us with God's enabling to make this real and practical in our lives. I have known women with this unnatural beauty and long to share this exciting possibility with you.

In the pages ahead, we will look at the scriptural call to holiness and what is involved in our response to this call. We will examine the cost of holiness and see that refining and cleansing, though often unpleasant, are simply a means to the end—and the end is worth the cost. We will discover what holiness is by first looking at what it isn't as we examine some traditional views. We will consider

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the rewards of pursuing the beauty of holiness, and God's means of accomplishing it in our lives. And throughout all the chapters of this book, we will find the One who is the source of all holiness.

We live in a society where the truth of Christianity is often being drowned out by the messages of our culture or simply ignored. To a large degree, people don't want to hear what we have to say. Against that backdrop it becomes imperative that Christ be seen. It's hard to argue against the genuine beauty of holiness when it is seen in the life of a godly woman. This "unnatural beauty" is what needs to be seen in our homes, in the workplace, and in our churches.

The title of this book bears witness to the truth that this beauty can't be achieved through natural means—it can't be achieved through our own efforts or applied for special occasions. It is the supernatural work of a holy God, an inward work that is evidenced outwardly and truly results in an unnatural beauty. Natural beauty fades, despite all the marketing propaganda to the contrary. God offers us an unnatural but very real beauty that is unhindered by time—the beauty of His own holiness.

Chapter One

Call or Command?

“We are called to be holy simply because we’re designed to be holy.” ~Gerard Reed

*L*isa became part of our family at the age of fourteen. Her background did nothing to prepare her for life in a parsonage, or for that matter, life in any normal family environment. Lisa’s mother was a drug addict and an alcoholic. She had four children—all by different men, none of whom she was married to at the time. Lisa was given the last name O’Brien because all her mother could remember about the man who fathered her was that he was Irish.

Being the oldest put much of the responsibility for the younger children on Lisa’s young shoulders. Seldom did they eat a proper meal, and never did they sit down at a table together. Some of Lisa’s first words to us were, “I don’t ever want to eat another hot dog!”

We had invited Lisa to live with us while her mother was in rehab. When the time of rehab was over, Lisa didn’t want to go home, and her mother made it clear she didn’t really want her

back, so she continued to live with us as a welcomed and loved part of our family.

While our home life was far from perfect, it was still entirely different from anything Lisa had experienced. We had three young children, all had the same last name, and all shared the same father—my husband. We ate meals together, usually at about the same time each day, and while we did have hot dogs occasionally, we didn't have them every night.

Somehow, we needed to find a way to ease Lisa into our family with its structure and rules. Everything was new and different for her, and even though those differences were good, they were still foreign to anything she had known before.

I sensed instantly that to *command* Lisa to live our way—abide by our rules, live by our standards—would prove frustrating for all of us and lead to repeated conflict. To force our way of life on her could hinder our attempt to build a loving and nurturing relationship. So, what should we do? Our approach was to call her to our way of life—to invite her to join in the lifestyle of our family.

For example, I didn't share Lisa's love for heavy metal rock music. In fact, I was strongly opposed to exposing my young children to that style of music. We were still listening to "Itsy, Bitsy Spider"—a far cry from Metallica. To forbid her to listen to her preference in music guaranteed a battle. My solution was to allow her to listen to her music in the privacy of her room, but at a volume that did not impact the rest of the home. Lisa had a tremendous desire to please us, and so it wasn't long before she chose not to listen to heavy metal rock. (I also suspect heavy metal rock on low volume lost a lot of its appeal.)

Our lifestyle is even further removed from God's than Lisa's was from ours. In ourselves, we have nothing in common with God. As Adam's relatives we have inherited a nature contrary to God's that leaves us incapable of participating in His lifestyle. We can be *good*

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on our own (for a while), but never holy. C. S. Lewis said, “No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good.”¹ It is equally true no one knows how unholy they are until they have tried very hard to be holy.

Just as we *called* Lisa to join in our family, to participate in being one with us, God calls us to holiness. He invites us to share in His own divine nature as He lovingly adopts us into His family.

First Peter 1:15–16 state, “as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written, ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’” Many see this verse as a command. Personally, I see it as a wonderful invitation—a call to reflect the nature and character of the One who has chosen us to be His. He called us to be His children, and now He calls us to live in a way that reflects His family and His lifestyle.

How sad so many Christians see this as a heavy burden God has placed on us. They see it as an impossible demand that leaves them frustrated and continually aware of their own failures. They see it as rules and requirements that can never be achieved. Sadly, they miss the privilege of a holy God inviting us, as part of His family, to join in His holy lifestyle.

We know very little about God before He created the world. We know little about what He thought or did or said. However, Ephesians 1:4 offers us a rare and wonderful peek into God’s heart prior to creation. Paul, through the Holy Spirit, makes it clear that even then, back before time, God was thinking about us, and those thoughts are of tremendous significance. Listen as Paul shares the heart of God: “even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.”

These words make us realize how deeply important it is to God that we display the beauty of holiness. This was His plan—this has always been His plan. He has anticipated this since before creation, and all of creation was to be the backdrop for this glorious display.

The importance of something is often in direct proportion to the length of time we've anticipated it. And the length of time we anticipate something can also impact the degree of disappointment we experience if it doesn't come to fruition.

It was on my honeymoon that I first had a great idea for something special for our twenty-fifth anniversary celebration. When you're a new bride, the idea of your twenty-fifth anniversary seems hard to imagine, but nevertheless, I tucked my wonderful idea away for the far-distant anniversary.

But much more quickly than I imagined, our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary arrived. I had thought of my plan off and on during the years, but as it drew closer to the actual day, my anticipation grew. What a wonderful surprise this was going to be for my husband.

Finally, the day arrived. We had doled our children out to various family and friends and had driven to a cute little cottage located on Lake Erie. Everything was perfect...and then the phone rang. Our daughter Debbie had food poisoning and was terribly sick. Being that sick is horrible—being that sick at someone else's house is even worse. We had no choice but to get in the car and bring our daughter back with us.

My plans for our anniversary had not included caring for a daughter who was sick to her stomach. And so, I began to cry—no, I began to sob! My poor husband was stunned by what he saw as an untypical overreaction to the situation. I was usually a very nurturing mother, and so he was baffled by my response to Debbie's need. He couldn't know my disappointment was directly connected to the longevity of my plans for the evening—twenty-five years of anticipating this time together.

It's important to understand if I had just come up with this idea the night before, or even the week before, the disappointment would not have been nearly so great, but I had planned this for

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twenty-five years!

God has planned for us to be holy since “before the creation of the world.” Imagine how important this is to His heart. Imagine His disappointment when we fail to respond to His call to participate in His life—to share in His eternally glorious and beautiful holiness.

We have been invited by God to be part of His family, but with that invitation comes the call to live according to His own nature—and His nature is holy. Peter makes it clear God’s own holiness is not only to be our standard, but it’s to be our motivation. “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:14–16).

Many of the blunders Lisa committed when she first came to live with us were made out of ignorance. She was still living based on her old lifestyle. I remember one day when she came bouncing down the stairs ready to go to youth group. We had to gently, but firmly, explain to her that a T-shirt advertising a certain brand of beer, no matter how cute it looked on her, was not appropriate for her to wear to church. This was a reminder that she now represented our family, and we felt it probably wasn’t wise for a PK (preacher’s kid) to wear that particular shirt to church. She had picked it out of ignorance and readily changed when we explained. Her obedience came from a sincere desire to please us.

That same desire is to be our motivation. Peter begins this verse by saying, “As obedient children.” Every illustration God uses to help us understand our relationship to Him is one of love, but perhaps the greatest is that of a father and his children. He wants our desire for holiness to be born out of a love for Him and a desire to please Him.

I have a friend who is presently living a very deliberate life of disobedience to God. She tries to defend her choice by saying she

still loves the things of the Lord—she loves to read Christian books and talk with me about spiritual things. What I have tried to gently point out to her is that God measures her love for Him in her obedience. The expression of love is validated by a desire to obey.

God is holy, and we're not. It's that simple. God calls us to a lifestyle unfamiliar to us. He calls us to a lifestyle that can only be learned and lived out in His presence. We never would have expected Lisa to learn the rules and standards of our home apart from living with us. We didn't say, "This is how we live, and when you get it right, then we'll claim you as ours." However, the longer she lived with us, the more she became like us. The more she identified with our family, the more she reflected our standards. But most importantly, the more she understood our love for her, the greater her desire to please us and become one with us.

The parallel is obvious. We are called to be holy. It has been God's desire for us since before the creation of the world. The more time we spend in God's presence, the more we desire to be like Him and to reflect His own holy life. Our desire for Lisa was that she reflect our home and our lifestyle. God's desire for us is that we show through our lives that we are the children of a holy God.

God's call to holiness echoes throughout the pages of Scripture. It was His call to Abram. It was His call to the nation of Israel. It was His call to the fledgling church. And it is His call to us today. He invites us, as part of His family, to display a beauty that is not natural to us—the beauty of holiness.



Personal Reflection and Prayer

How does Ephesians 1:4 impact our view of the call to holiness? Note the words *in Him*. What encouragement do these words offer?

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Dear Father,

Scripture so clearly reveals Your heart and desire for us as Your children. This has been Your plan since before the creation of the world. This continues to be Your call to us as Your children. And yet, our own efforts fall so short of this. Thank You that Your call includes Your provision. Thank You for the comfort and encouragement of the words *in Him*. Amen.