

52 Meditations to Grow in Self-Esteem

# SEE YOURSELF THROUGH GOD'S EYES

Marie Paul Curley, FSP

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*To the Sisters of my community,  
the Daughters of St. Paul—  
for the ways you share  
the love of Christ with me  
and with the world.*



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# Introduction

Recently, I met a young pastor whom I have come to admire. In just a couple of years, he has revitalized his parish. His parishioners love him, both for his dynamic preaching and, more importantly, for the way he witnesses to God's love for us. Yet, he confided to me, "I am surer that God has called me to be a priest than I am of God's personal love for me."

His honesty saddened and comforted me. I was saddened for what he suffers, but I was comforted because he reminded me that I am not the only one to have devastating doubts harass my joy and peace. All of us at times share in this struggle to believe that God loves us. It becomes particularly urgent or painful when we experience personal tragedy, attempt to cope with loss, or confront our inner darkness and sinfulness. And for some of us, this kind of doubt about our own lovability is not occasional, but a painful way of life.

This little book grew out of my own struggles to accept God's love for me and develop a positive self-esteem. Discovering God's love has taken me on an amaz-

ing journey from self-hate to a positive self-acceptance. I wish I'd had a resource like this at the beginning of my journey, something that could have helped me cling to the seemingly impossible reality of God's love for me.

Like many people, I have struggled with low self-esteem for much of my life. For years, I naively thought that others did not have this struggle. I just knew that, ever since I could remember, I felt inadequate to life's challenges, ashamed of revealing anything about myself because others would find out how shallow and unworthy of being loved I really was. The simple challenges of everyday life were enough to cue taunting voices of self-doubt or even self-hate. I was rarely at ease with myself. Trying something new was incredibly anxiety-provoking. By the time I was a teenager, low self-esteem had become a distorted mirror that prevented me from being able to see myself honestly, despite the love of my family and friends, my good grades at school, and the volunteer work I enjoyed.

Although I could not clearly recognize my gifts, I did allow them to lead me to my vocation, and I eventually entered religious life. But in my preparation to become a Daughter of Saint Paul, I continued to doubt that I was lovable. My doubts ran so deep that, despite how important to me my relationship with God was becoming, I still didn't believe God could love me.

I needed to experience being loved unconditionally by Someone who could not be wrong about me, Someone whose judgment was unquestionable and whose fidelity I could cling to. As I continued to deepen my relationship

with God, guided by the wisdom and gentleness of my spiritual director, I realized that the only way I could indisputably challenge my relentless self-doubt was to discover who I was in God's eyes.

With help from the classes and personal guidance I received, I gradually came to identify the root of my lack of self-confidence as poor self-esteem. I also became aware of how low self-esteem prevented me from being at peace with myself and caused me to live in a state of high anxiety.

My first big breakthrough was a powerful and intimate prayer experience in which I gazed into the eyes of Jesus and discovered how cherished I was. The Lord's no-conditions-asked, immensely personal love for me was powerfully healing and transforming. Little by little, I found my shame and self-hatred diminishing. I began to experience the world with less fear and more joy.

I also realized that while I could come to the truth about myself within my relationship with God, I needed to accompany my meditation on God's love with some necessary personal inner work. Low self-esteem had warped my perceptions not only of myself, but also of God and others. Small events of daily life could trigger a disproportionate emotional response in me. I realized that I needed help to come to terms with my past. I began counseling to address my psychological needs.

My journey of inner healing needed my faith to give it purpose, meaning, and hope. Focusing on God's love for me gave me the security to continue on the journey, daring to begin to love myself and to hope that the darkness

on the journey would not last forever. Counseling opened me up to a deeper and more positive relationship with myself and the Lord.

Today, I still need to work daily to strengthen my conviction that God loves me, but I find myself increasingly open to his love. I'm able to respond to the challenges in my life rather than run away from them, and this reinforces my self-respect and healthy self-esteem. Joy seeps in unexpectedly, filling the corners and pockets of my life in countless ways. God's love for me has become the bedrock of my identity, my spiritual life, and a healthier self-esteem.

One of the biggest helps on this journey of learning to love and value myself as God does was praying with the Word of God. The Scripture passages and meditations included in *See Yourself Through God's Eyes* are some of the lifelines that have helped me to trust in God's love.

I've divided this book into three parts:

The meditations in Part 1, "The God Who Loves Me," focus on how God expresses his love for us through the Scriptures and encourage us to trust in that love.

Part 2, "Shaping My Identity in Christ," helps us to see who we are in the light of God's unconditional love and in the daily events that shape our lives, such as friendships, disappointments, successes, and failures.

The meditations in Part 3, "God's Beloved in the World," highlight the consequences of our being loved unconditionally and encourage us to live this conviction of God's love for us in the world.

The 52 meditations can be used daily, weekly, or from time to time—whenever we need a reminder of God’s love for us. Each meditation is broken down into four steps, or moments:

1. A story or example from ordinary life situations that can reveal negative or false patterns of thinking about ourselves or God. Some stories are from my own life; many are stories others have shared with me. I begin with everyday experiences because that’s where God is present, even though we often misinterpret our experiences or miss God altogether.

In the stories, I have changed significant details and circumstances to protect others’ privacy, but the truth or insight as it was experienced is faithfully preserved.

2. *From God’s Heart to Yours*: A passage from the Scriptures in which God speaks heart to heart with us and sheds light on the situation, assumptions, or feelings that the first part raises. Though it’s short, this second part is the heart of the meditation because as Christians we know that the inspired Word of God has the power to transform us.

3. *Hidden in the Darkness*: A reflection that allows the Scripture passage to challenge or speak directly to the false assumptions under which we tend to interpret our daily experience. The title and approach to this part are inspired by a passage from Isaiah: “I will go before you and level the mountains.... I will give you the treasures of darkness” (Isa 45:2–3). God delights in using the very issues and situations that challenge us most as opportunities to

help us grow. The darkness where God seems absent is a sacred place where we can discover the hidden treasure of God's loving and faithful presence. We simply need to allow the light of the Scriptures to illumine the darkness.

4. *Through the Day*: A short prayer to reconnect us throughout the day to God's love and fidelity.

For those who would like to delve deeper into praying with the Scriptures, I've provided some additional suggestions in Appendix A, "Suggestions for Praying with Sacred Scripture."

My hope and prayer for you is that this little book will enable you to grow in healthy self-esteem and, above all, to recognize how tremendously God loves and cherishes you. As God's love heals our deepest wounds, we are released from our shame and self-hatred. We no longer need to focus on fear or protecting ourselves. Free and joyful, we radiate the love God has shared with us. As a stone thrown into a pond creates ever-widening ripples, God's unconditional love radiates from us and through us, touching others' lives. May these ripples of God's love continue to widen so they touch, surround, and transform the entire world.

PART 1

THE GOD  
WHO LOVES ME



# 1 God loves me for who I am.

*“I wish I had more self-confidence.”*

My heart is pounding, my palms sweaty, my fingers cold as ice, and I cannot quite take in a full breath of air. I am standing in general assembly on my first day of first grade, waiting with hundreds of kids to be divided into our various classes, and I am terrified.

I’m not just afraid of the usual things, like talking to the teacher, or meeting my new classmates, or the school-work. What I am truly terrified of is that I will do something unforgivably horrible or stupid that will definitively prove to the world that I am worthless.

I am sure that everyone remembers being scared and nervous as a child, but I suspect not every child is as haunted as I was by such a strong sense of inadequacy. Some of us struggle more than others with feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and self-doubt throughout our lives. My journal still includes occasional confessions like: “I don’t know what I’m doing.” “I feel so stupid.” “It’s all my fault.” “I know I’m going to fail.”

It took me a long time to realize that my feelings of inadequacy are simply feelings. They can’t show me the full truth about myself—who I am in God’s eyes. The Scriptures repeatedly remind me of the truth that no matter what I think of myself, God always loves me.

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## From God's Heart to Yours

*"[Y]ou are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you" (Isa 43:4).*



### Hidden in the Darkness

This passage from Isaiah reveals the Lord's startling attitude to the Chosen People *and* to each of us: the almighty Creator of heaven and earth doesn't take us for granted but cherishes us and delights in who we are. God sets no conditions for loving us. God doesn't need us to have a good opinion of ourselves in order to love us. Even in the darkness of low self-esteem, God loves us.

Our self-image reflects one, or maybe several, aspects of our identity, as a pencil sketch gives an impression of a mountainside. But God doesn't need a sketch. God walks on the mountainside and sees it from every angle, in all its glorious colors and majesty, from every point in time. God knows us better than we could ever know ourselves. God sees us as we truly are: our inner essence, our entire history, our longings, our gifts, our potential, and our woundedness. And God finds us beautiful. The language used in Isaiah—even in such a short statement—is tenderly extravagant.

The Word of God can powerfully transform us if we let it in, past our inner defenses.

How can we allow God's love into the picture we have of ourselves?

We can start now by taking a moment to simply stay with these words from Isaiah, hearing God speak them to us in the depths of our hearts...

If that is too difficult, we can take a moment to think of someone who is dear to us, perhaps remembering our last conversation, or the ways that person has enriched our life.

Now, we imagine God bringing us to mind in the same way.

We can take joy today that God sees into the very core of who we are, and cherishes us.

## Through the Day

Lord, I rejoice in your love for me.



## 2 God is faithful.

*"I can't trust anybody."*

My friend is uncharacteristically late in meeting me for a leisurely cup of tea. Tara is a beautiful and talented young woman who is energetically pursuing her dream to become an artist. When she finally arrives, I see that her fine features are troubled—her face does not reflect her

usual serenity. She blurts out, "I've moved out of my mom's house."

Surprised by her sudden decision, I ask, "Why?" Hesitantly, Tara reveals that her mother has been physically abusive toward her for years. Finally, her mother hit her one too many times, and Tara realized it was time to move out.

She looks at me, waiting for my reaction. I take her hand and squeeze it. "I'm so sorry, but I'm glad you moved out so you can start to feel safe."

The opaqueness in her eyes fades and, for a moment, I glimpse her pain and sense of loss. She adds the heart-piercing question, "If everyone else thinks I'm okay, then why doesn't my mother like me?"

Tara's question expresses the need we all have to be loved by our parents. But Tara doesn't deserve the kind of self-doubt buried within that question. She seems to suspect everyone else is wrong; it is her mother who is right.

Being hurt by someone we love is a risk in every relationship, because we are imperfect. But even when someone we trust seems to reject us, God *never* could.

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### From God's Heart to Yours

*"Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation! / If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up" (Ps 27:9-10).*

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## Hidden in the Darkness

The psalmist recognizes that human love is imperfect, and rarely unconditional. The love of a parent for a child might be the closest human love comes to being divine, but even when it is not flawed, it always has limits. Deep down, we know this as children; we fear to be rejected by those we love. Yet, there is an all-faithful One who deserves all our trust.

It's natural to base our ideas of God's love on the love we received from our parents. But as we mature, we realize that the reverse is true: our triune God's love is the model for all human love. Human love is a small likeness of God's astonishingly faithful and completely unconditional love. God gives himself in love to us in myriad ways: from the gift of our very existence to the beautiful world we live in, from the countless little joys threading through an ordinary day to the unsurpassable gift of God's self-revelation throughout salvation history.

God wants to be united with us so urgently that the Son of God took on and shares our humanity. Jesus' entire life, but especially his passion, death, and resurrection, is a mystery to ponder over and over again, a constant proof that our faithful God could never abandon us.

When we feel the pain of rejection or abuse, or the limitations of another person's love for us, we can remind ourselves that in Jesus, we have proof that God will never reject us, that God always understands us, that God is tenderly faithful and always on our side.

## Through the Day

Jesus, Image of the Father's faithful love, I trust in you.



### 3 God loves me unconditionally in my weakness.

*"I shouldn't make mistakes!"*

Miriam is a young mother with two little ones: mischievous Peter, who is three, and strong-willed Katherine, who is five. As for many mothers with toddlers, Miriam's greatest struggle is with patience.

One afternoon the house keys disappear. Miriam gently asks Peter if he played with the keys. Sensing trouble, Peter shakes his head. Katherine confides, "I saw Peter playing with them, but I think he forgot." Miriam resigns herself to searching Peter's favorite hiding places, but she can't find them anywhere. After an hour or two of searching, Miriam stops stifling all her sighs and grunts. An hour later, Miriam slams a few drawers and a closet door. Finally, after four interminable hours, she notices that the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet is cracked open, and she rescues the keys from a file folder. Katherine, greatly impressed, brings her mother a lollipop and tells her, "Good job!" At that, Miriam almost bursts into tears.

Miriam has succeeded in not losing her temper. But she feels she failed because her children were able to tell

she was upset. How many times we think one mistake outweighs everything else we do. Sometimes, making a mistake can trigger the familiar but devastating conviction that we *are* the mistake. But this is not what the Scriptures tell us.



### From God's Heart to Yours

*“For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, / but my steadfast love shall not depart from you.... O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted” (Isa 54:10–11).*



### Hidden in the Darkness

In these moving words, God sympathizes with the Chosen People who have, once again, been unfaithful in following God's way. They have messed up—and this is God's surprising response. These words aren't the condemnation of a judge, but the tender sympathy of a Lover for his beloved.

Our image of the infinite God is always limited and inadequate. For example, how do we comprehend the seemingly contradictory statements that God is all-just and all-loving? From our human perspective, these are opposites. But in God, they are united: God's justice is an expression of his love for us, and God's love is reflected in his justice. The point of God's justice is to “make things right” for us, his beloved ones.

God is not, as some of us imagine, like a judge in an Olympic competition. God does not give marks for our performance, scrutinizing our mistakes and replaying them from every angle. Instead, God is always gazing lovingly into our hearts. Because God—the only One who doesn't make mistakes—is our Creator, we could never, ever *be* a mistake. At the deepest core of our being, God loves us unconditionally.

Mistakes are not a problem to God. They are only problematic for us. But they don't need to be. We could begin to see our mistakes more positively: as reminders that God loves us no matter what. Our mistakes, instead of leading us to mentally tear ourselves down, can become opportunities to learn and to lean on God.

Can we picture God saying to us, “My steadfast love will always be with you”? Do we trust that God really understands our chagrin over a failing? God understands us better than we understand ourselves, including our weaknesses and mistakes. God isn't speaking here to impossibly perfect people. It is to those of us who are struggling, the “storm-tossed,” that God promises steadfast love.

## Through the Day

Lord, I trust your steadfast love to cradle me through any storm.

