

*grace*  
for the  
GOOD  
GIRL

*letting go of the try-hard life*

emily p. freeman

  
Revell

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–

Grace for the good girl : letting go of the try-hard life / Emily P. Freeman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ).

ISBN 978-0-8007-1984-5 (pbk.)

1. Christian women—Religious life. 2. Grace (Theology). I. Title.

BV4527.F74 2011

248.843—dc23

2011017321

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11 12 13 14 15 16 17 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## the hiding

The first time I heard Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical adaptation of *The Phantom of the Opera*, I was fourteen years old. My sister was in the marching band, and they chose to play a compilation from the musical at competition that year. It was, of course, instrumental only. The music needed no lyrics to captivate me. And so, when my English class traveled by train from Detroit to Toronto to see the musical live, you can imagine my excitement. I sat in that darkened theatre and was moved to tears more than once: the richness of the voices, the surprising melodies, and the emotional performances. It was breathtaking.

One of my favorite scenes was when the actors entered the masquerade ball. The colorful costumes, synchronized dancing, and powerful music painted an electric, imaginative scene. And those masks! Feathers and colorful fabrics covered faces disguised beyond recognition. Hiding never looked more beautiful.

While I've been writing this book for the better part of a year, this masquerade scene has often come to mind. In the

musical, the hiding is regal and elegant. And there is an element of fun in that sort of hiding.

A few weeks ago, I left my three children with a babysitter while I went to run errands. When I arrived home, the babysitter flashed a playful smile and proclaimed she had no idea where the kids were. With a knowing glance, we loudly launched a conversation about what may have happened to them. Perhaps they left home to explore the world, fly to the moon, or join the circus. As we talked, we moved around the living room, lifting the obligatory pillow as if searching for them. We could hear their muffled giggles from behind the curtains. I knew they were about to burst.

I flung the heavy fabric aside and shouted in mock surprise, "There you are!" They proceeded to jump with glee and excitement, wondering if I really thought they had left home for clowns and rocket ships.

Such is the joy of hide-and-go-seek: the best part of hiding is being found.

That is something we know as kids, but we tend to forget it when we grow up. I've done a lot of hiding in my life, but maybe not the kind of hiding you might think. I'm not a fugitive hiding from the law or a runaway hiding from my troubles. I didn't spend high school hiding boyfriends from my parents or pot under my pillow. I've never had a secret abortion, an affair with a married man, or been drunk, high, or put in jail.

My hiding was so clever that I had everyone fooled, including myself. The masks I chose to hide behind were not obviously offensive. In so many ways, the life of this good girl mirrors that of the party guests at a masquerade ball. My masks were nice. They were lovely. They were bubbly and likeable and attractive. They were the masks of a good girl. Yet, I hid behind them.

We live and breathe and move on this terrestrial masquerade ball, longing to display the prettied up, exaggerated version of ourselves to everyone else. Behind my pretty masks, I was a worried, anxious wreck of a girl. I carried the weight

of the world on my shoulders, as well as that of Mars, the moon, and half of Jupiter. Although I had accepted Jesus at age seven, I didn't know what it meant to walk with him. I spent most of my time stumbling behind him, just trying to catch up. Though my relationship with Jesus was very real and full of true faith, it was often too structured and boxed in. I really trusted him. I really prayed and knew he was with me. I was a genuine believer. I struggled in my faith, but I didn't have a compartment for that. I glazed over verses that didn't make sense and highlighted the ones that felt good. God didn't seem big enough to handle contradictions, neither the ones I saw in the world nor the ones I felt in my heart. I thought life with Jesus meant trying to become who he wanted me to be, but it always felt like something was missing.

I felt as if an invisible good girl was following me around wherever I went, showing up without permission to shame and blame and scold. She was omnipresent, like a pretty little goddess in a pink, shadowy corner. She embodied the good girl version of my current life stage and shamed me accordingly: good student, good leader, good wife, and good mom. She represented the girl I wanted to be but could never live up to. I constantly worried that my imperfect status would be discovered. I often experienced guilt but didn't know why. I felt the heavy weight of impossible expectations and had the insatiable desire to explain every mistake. My battle with shame was constant and hovering.

Instead of recognizing my own inadequacy as an opportunity to trust God, I hid those parts and adopted a bootstrap religion. I focused on the things I could handle, the things I excelled in, my disciplined life, and my unshakeable good mood.

These masks became so natural to me that I didn't even know they were masks. I thought they were just part of my face. I moved through life hiding behind the good and lived out the mess in secret. I taught people around me that I had no needs and then was secretly angry with them for believing me.

Somewhere along the way, I got the message that salvation is by faith alone but anything after that is faith plus my hard work and sweet disposition. I lived most of my life under a system I designed for myself and I labeled it The Gospel. As a good girl, every choice I made was dictated by a theology of self-sufficiency. Life was up to me, and I was prepared to get it right.

And then Jesus.

There isn't any other way to say it. Jesus makes it safe to walk out from under that system. We have a God who sees and cares and notices. He will not come undone. He remains un-overwhelmable.

The words in this book will paint the portrait of a good girl in hiding. Perhaps you will recognize your own masks, the ones you have worked on for years to carefully craft and design and perfect. Rest assured that paper face is not really yours. Behind the mask, you are just a woman who longs to believe that Jesus makes a difference, but you have had difficulty collecting the evidence of it in your own life. The true gospel really is good news. For you. Right now.

The cross gives us permission to sit down on the inside because we have a God who knows what he's doing. Allow him to look beyond the girl-made hiding places you have so carefully constructed. I know it goes against all the words the world says are admirable: self-reliant, capable, strong, and resilient. But I am in desperate need of a source outside of myself all the time. And so are you.

I believe women need to talk about the ways we hide, the longing to be known, the fear in the knowing. Beyond that, I believe in the life-giving power of story, in the beauty of vulnerability, and in the strength that is found in weakness. In order to explore the truth, we have to put words and images on those ingrained beliefs we have about God and what he expects of us. We have to expose the invisible expectations and desires we know are there but may not have words for yet. Let me give you the words. Let me offer my stories and the stories of women close to me. Perhaps they are your stories as well.

# 1

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## are you a good girl in hiding?

God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another.

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Most of my Halloweens were spent in dark back rooms with the shades pulled, vaguely lit by the blue glow of the TV. We didn't trick-or-treat and we didn't hand out candy. We didn't celebrate Halloween. Instead, we hid.

But there was that one glorious Halloween when the rules were mysteriously lifted and Mom allowed us to dress up and trick-or-treat. I didn't know why that year was different, but I knew better than to ask questions. My sister and I were giddy with glee, and we bundled up against the October wind and headed out as Barbies.

I had a mask with holes for eyes and nose and a tiny tease of a slit at the mouth, just big enough to stick your tongue through but not big enough to get it back out again. I had to alternate between seeing and breathing because the

one-size-fits-no-one mask was too big. My sister tells me we fought over my mask that day, I think because the painted plastic hair was better on mine. I won the fight, but I'm not sure how. I probably cried.

I loved wearing that mask. It had a sparkly crown painted on top of long, wavy, bright yellow hair. It was lovely. But behind the mask, it was hot. And uncomfortable. And stinky. As much as I wanted to be Barbie, the truth was that I couldn't wait to take the mask off so I could breathe again.

Life behind a mask may feel right and may even be fun for a short time. After a while, though, recycled air becomes stale and the effort it takes to continue trying to be someone you aren't becomes a burden rather than a game. Only in returning home, taking off the mask, and being you again will you find relief.

Chances are, if you are a good girl like me, you can relate to the hiding. You may be hiding from something, hiding behind something, or simply *hiding something*. The concept of hiding isn't new. It started way back in the beginning, with an apple, a snake, a lie, and a fig leaf. The hiding has kept me silent in relationships when I could have spoken out. It has kept me paralyzed with fear and anxiety when I could have danced in freedom. And this prison of self-protection has kept me from receiving the boundless, unfathomable, gracious love of God.

### Wanting to Be Her

My idea of who I should be is at war with who I am. I want to be perfect in every situation. I just do. 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 parent perfectly, to wife perfectly, and to have a clean house. All the time.

My solution to the disconnect between my perfect, imaginary self and my real-life self is to force life to look the way I want. Somehow. Anyhow. And so I work and I labor and I do the right thing. I stay strong when I feel weak and I fake happy when I want to cry because my ideal image has everything to do with put together and nothing to do with falling apart.

Because I care so much what you think, my hiding has everything to do with you. I desperately want to manage your opinion of me. Nearly everything I do is to convince you I am good. If I sense any hint of disbelief on your part that I am good, if it seems your opinion is other than what I wish it to be, it becomes my job to change your mind.

If you wonder what gives you the authority to define me, I will say it is *because you exist*. I must have worth, and it is up to you to give it to me. It doesn't matter who you are; I want you to like me and I will hide my real self—with all of my real problems and issues and fears—so you can see what I consider to be my best.

When you mix this disorder of mine with the fact that I am a believer in Jesus, things can get very confusing. We tend to call the unbelievers lost. But this Jesus believer is in hiding. Is my experience of life any better than theirs? Freedom and victory are tossed-around concepts that I say I believe. And in front of you I know how to renounce the fear. But when I'm alone, I drink it down in gulps and gasps, like a hopeless addict returning to her vice.

If my story were a planet, then your rejection of me would be my nuclear holocaust. This fear of rejection drives me hard, eating away at my courage. And so I am cautious in my love. I am timid in my faith. My life tells a small story. 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 smile and my laid-back personality. I hide behind *fine* and *good*. I hide behind strong and responsible. I hide behind busy and comfortable and working hard toward

your expectations. And if I do not meet your expectations, I hide behind indifferent. And though the purpose of my mask is to fool you, don't be fooled.

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 as it regards me. I want you to always regard me.

Please, by all means, *regard me*. I beg you to see me, to notice my goodness, to ignore my failure, to be inspired by my beauty, to be captivated by my essence. I want my loveliness to overwhelm you such that you cannot catch your breath.

And then there is God.

I know God is big enough to redeem the unruly, the rejected, and the addict. I know about the God who reaches way down into the pit and the One whose love stretches to the heavens. But I fear he misses the details. What about the girl in the middle? I fear I fall through the cracks because my story draws no attention. I lack intrigue, drama, and interest. Can he see ordinary, unspectacular me?

I'm not sure, so I vow to do everything right: to be a good girl, a good Christian, a good wife, a good mom. I believe he will be more pleased with me, a girl who does it right, than he would be if I didn't. I try hard to measure up to what I believe are his expectations of me, and I imagine him standing blurry in the distance, watching.

I want to let go, rest, and believe, so that he can hold, refresh, and redeem. But what if I do and he doesn't? To read between the lines of faith is to see Jesus. But reading between the lines takes work and invisible trust and the disregard of feeling.

I *feel* fear. It washes over me with its lies and half-truths. The lies aren't blatant. They marry themselves with a little bit of truth so the distinction is blurry at best. And so I practice the presence of fear and refuse the presence of Jesus.

When you reject me, be it real or perceived, I ponder and defend inside my head. And the fear wins a little more of my heart until I discover I am stuck by it, unable to move beyond

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it. My fear becomes my truth, and if you try to convince me otherwise, I am convinced you just don't know. You are naïve and I am a realist. You are too simple and I am complicated. You are wrong and I am right.

I lived this toxic way for many years before I understood about The Rescue. I live it still, when I forget that I've been found. Even for those to whom truth has been revealed, fear can be a loud and abusive motivator.

Fear drives.

*But Love leads.*

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)

That invisible good girl pushes me around. Fear drives, pushing and shoving. Love leads, working deeply and gently within. As I risk exposure to receive this Love, I catch a glimpse of his goodness, I am inspired by his beauty, I am captivated by his essence. His loveliness overwhelms me such that I cannot catch my breath. And before I realize it, there has been a holy shift. My insatiable need to prove my own goodness to God and the world fades into the background, and instead I receive truth and offer worship to the only One deserving of it.

## Your Brand of Good Girl

It may sound extreme, but this has been my ugly, people-pleasing truth. If any of it resonates with you, then I would say you are a good girl too. Perhaps you grew up in the church with a good reputation and a perfect attendance at Bible school. You never experienced a period of rebellion, at least not one that is worthy to be told as a life-changing testimony. Maybe you are an optimist, someone who seems to see the

good in everything and everyone. You are the first to volunteer, graduated top of your class, and are constantly the dependable friend for others to lean on.

Or maybe you accepted Jesus as an adult, and though your past may be sordid, your present is predictable. Perhaps you envy the girls who seemed to get it right the first time around. You didn't grow up a good girl, and so you're doing everything you can to make up for it. At least now you are finally living life the right way—going to church, volunteering, being good—but there is still something missing that you didn't expect this side of making all the right choices.

No matter which class of good girl you find yourself in, as day fades to dusk, you begin to feel the familiar fog of anxiety, the weight and pressure of holding it together, of longing left unmet, of unexplained emptiness even in the midst of great blessing and perceived success.

For me, life was pretty well put together. I did life right. I went to church regularly. I got married and had babies in the appropriate order. I never got arrested. I recycled. I loved Jesus. But sometimes in quiet stillness, I felt an aching that wouldn't go away, a longing to *taste and see*, to live authentically free. My instinctive impulse was to find my worth in the response of the people around me, and as a result, people became measuring sticks for my goodness rather than unique expressions of God. True victory and rest were short-lived at best, and when God's truth didn't feel true, my "sometimes truth" took over.

### My Sometimes Truth

- I would rather read *People* magazine than the Bible.
- I judge people who would rather read *People* magazine than the Bible.
- I am more insecure than I would ever admit.
- The weight of expectation is heavy and often unbearable.
- Comparison is a constant companion.

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- I have unexplained anxiety.
- I am not the mom I thought I would be.
- I don't quite measure up.
- I cry in the shower.

When you are a believer in Jesus but you don't know what difference he makes, you are forced to depend on that which you do know. What did I know?

- I knew how to be a friend and listen with interest.
- In school, I knew how to be an A/B student.
- I knew how to get people to like me.
- I knew how to avoid conflict.
- I knew how to perform for acceptance.
- I knew how to be positive.
- I knew how to fake it when I felt negative.

And so I put all my confidence in the things that were awesome about myself and tried to hide the things that weren't. If Jesus fit in there somewhere, well then that was nice. But if he didn't, I was doing okay on my own anyway. That is, until I wasn't.

## Where Are You?

Is there something you are hiding from? If you answer this question honestly, it will reveal what it is you fear. Maybe you are hiding from remembering your past, from facing regret, from what may happen in your future. Maybe you don't want to be known because you fear people might find out you are stupid or wrong or that you don't know so much after all. Maybe you are hiding from your dreams because to face them would mean admitting they are there. And to admit that they are there would mean you aren't living them after all.

Is there something you are hiding behind? When I answer this question, I discover those places where I put my trust. A hiding place is a place where we feel safe, emphasis on *feel*. I think it is a safe place to hide from the things I fear, so that is why I stay there. Maybe you hide behind your sweet personality, because to be anything other than nice would be offensive or bad or wrong. Maybe you hide behind your list of rules because you think following them is the way to be accepted by God. I hid behind all of these masks and other ones, too.

It is important to know the answers to these questions because only in identifying the lies that trigger certain reactions will we be able to receive the truth we need to replace them. For a long time, I believed I was searching for God and thought I had found him, this God who is order and control, distant and passive. I knew he so loved the world, but I didn't know his love for me. As I gazed off into the foggy distance, hoping for a glimpse of the outline of his presence, I missed the One who stood beside me, casting his shadow over me as he showered me with his love. While I thought I was searching for him, he graciously, miraculously, and intentionally found me.

There is someone you want to be, and she isn't a hiding, mask-wearing, fear-filled woman. Worry is a thief, Fear is a liar, and Anxiety is their trembling, furrow-browed baby. I have lived with this dysfunctional family for the better part of my life. Sometimes I live with them still. Worry robs me of the peace I know is available. Fear lies and says there is no peace at all. And their immature, screaming baby Anxiety keeps me up at night with her unrelenting cries of *what if?* and *what now?* and *what will they think?*

In my efforts to appease this family, I have tried hard to become the only person I believe can keep them quiet: a good person. To want to be good isn't bad. In fact, the first time we see the word "good" in the Bible is right there in Genesis: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness" (Gen. 1:3–4). The Hebrew word

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translated “good” in this creation series of verses is *towb*, meaning “good” or “beautiful.”<sup>1</sup> God was well pleased with his creation. So much so that on the sixth day of creation, the day he created the man and woman in his image, he added another word to *towb*. The word was *meod*, meaning “diligently, muchness, force, or abundance.” (Do you love that word *muchness* as much as I do?)

The Bible says this: “God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good.” What we read as “very good,” seems to mean “an abundance of beautiful” in the original Hebrew.<sup>2</sup> God labeled his creation diligently beautiful, or beautiful in a persistent way and in great supply. There is a place for “good” in the Bible, but it is much better than my twisted, limited, try-hard perspective of it.

I was made to be distinctly *someone*, and so were you. In the mind of God, in his vision for the world, in his idea for the universe, he made you to go in it. He had in mind a particular you. A true you. An authentic, accurate expression of himself. A woman who is more than just a watered-down version of good.

Do you know her? Or do you know only her mask? This good girl has plenty of masks to tell you about. Unlike my oversized Barbie mask, these masks feel risky to take off.

## BEHIND THE MASK

Can you identify your brand of good girl? In what areas have you been tempted to depend on yourself?

What does life look like for you when you are being driven by fear? What is your “sometimes truth” that challenges Love’s lead in your life?

Do you agree that the best part of hiding is being found? Why or why not?