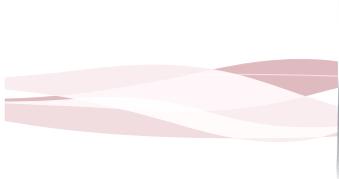


CAPTIVATING

UNVEILING THE MYSTERY OF A WOMAN'S SOUL

UPDATED EDITION



STUDY GUIDE | SIX SESSIONS



*JOHN & STASI
ELDREDGE*

WITH ALLEN ARNOLD



NELSON
BOOKS

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Captivating Study Guide (Updated Edition)

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INTRODUCTION

I have always wanted to read a novel or enjoy a movie where the heroine was a normal, average-looking woman with an ordinary life who was not a concert pianist, brain surgeon, underwear model, or superhero in her spare time. I want to read about a woman like me. A woman like you. And I want to learn from her. In choosing to do this study—by yourself, or better still, with a group of women—you are getting that opportunity! You will learn from the stories of women like yourself, and women not so like you. If you are doing this in a group, covenant together to make this a place of safety and confidentiality, a place where each woman is quick to listen and slow to offer advice. (Receiving advice often feels like people trying to fix us . . . when all we really long for is to be understood.) But whether you are working through this in a group or alone, take your time! Journal through the questions. After all, this is for you.

We women share so much. We have much more in common than most of us realize. It's true. For one thing, we live with the mystery of hormones. Often, just when it seems we begin to get them figured out, they change on us. Most of us love to shop and all of us love a bargain. We don't so much like our hair, and we really don't like our annual appointment. (You know the one.) We love a good story and we love certain smells, and we love to go to the bathroom in groups.

INTRODUCTION

And then there's the other side to us . . . the deeper side. There are times when we wake in the middle of the night to sorrow, loneliness, and an ache for something more that largely goes unexplained. We stop at red lights and while we wait, the ache rises to the surface again—ignoring our efforts to shame ourselves into wanting less. We are women. We think no one really understands. We tend to believe there is something deeply wrong with us. We think that if we were better somehow, then life wouldn't be so hard, painful, lonely, fill in the blank.

But what if the ache is a gift?

What if God is calling to us through the cry of our hearts that urges us to reach for that “something more” we all long for? What if the truest thing about us is that we are magnificent and meant to be the heroine of the story? Really.

Let's risk taking a look at the “what if.” Come, journey with me into a realm of wonder and possibility, beauty, and hope . . . into the very heart of a woman.



SESSION ONE

THE HEART OF A WOMAN

GROUP STUDY

“Sometimes it’s hard to be a woman.”

—Tammy Wynette

Welcome!

Welcome to Session One of *Captivating*. If this is your first time together as a group or there are new members in your group, take a moment to introduce yourselves to one another before watching the video. We suggest you simply share your name, some brief details about your life, and what has moved you to join this study. Then, let’s get started!

Core Scripture

Look up Proverbs 4:23 and write it in the space below.

Invite several women to read various translations of the passage aloud. Listen for fresh insights and share any thoughts about this verse with the group.

VIDEO

Watch the video segment for Session One. This summary is provided for your benefit as well as space to take additional notes.

Summary

This is a study of discovery. A journey, really. For you to discover who God meant when he meant you.

What does it mean to be a woman? What is my calling in life? What does God value? What does He want from me? What do I want? And is that okay?

We are not carbon copies of each other. Not at all. God loves diversity and he has fashioned each one of us uniquely and well. But it is a very good thing to know that we are not alone on this journey of life; we have much more in common with each other—simply because we are women—than we don't. We share more than most of us realize.

For instance, we have a feminine heart. We have to start there, because as the Scriptures tell us, the heart is the center of it all.

Think about it: God created you as a woman. “God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Whatever it means to bear God's image, you do so as a woman. Female. That's how and where you bear his image. And not in your body. The Trinity does not have a body. No, you bear God's image in your heart.

Your feminine heart has been created with the greatest of all possible dignities—as a reflection of God’s own heart. You are a woman to your soul, to the very core of your being. And so the journey to discover what God meant when he created woman in his image—when he created you as his woman—that journey begins with your heart. Another way of saying this is that the journey begins with desire.

The stories we love reveal much of the secret desires of our deep hearts. If you take a close look, talk with the women in your life, you’ll find that we share themes in our core desires. They are not all that we want and they play out differently in our lives, but in her heart of hearts, every woman longs to be romanced, to play an irreplaceable role in a heroic adventure and to unveil beauty.

It is right that we do, for it is in these desires that we bear the image of our God.

NOTES

GROUP DISCUSSION

Choose the questions that work best for your group.

1. Could you relate to the stories and struggles the women shared with each other? Why or why not?
2. What was evoked for you during this session? Did it surprise you? Share your initial thoughts briefly with one another.
3. Stasi says that your heart is the most important thing about you. Is this a new thought to you? What is your response to that statement?
4. How has your heart been valued in your life? Have you valued it as the treasure it is?
5. Which of the three core longings of a woman's heart do you struggle with most? What is it about that one that you push against?

6. Name one of your favorite movies or stories below. How does it highlight the core longings of a woman's heart?

7. In what area do you feel you've most lost heart? Do you feel it is possible to get it back? Why or why not?

Closing Prayer

Leader or volunteer, close your group time in prayer:

*Dearest Father,
I consecrate this book and this study to your Kingdom and Your purposes in my life. I want my whole heart back, Jesus. I want to be a woman who loves You with all of it. I give you permission to come for me in the places I need you to. Reveal to me more of who you really are and who I really am to you. I want to know you more deeply and love you more truly. Come for me. Instruct me. Guide me. Awaken me. Thank you, God. Thank you. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

Recommended Reading

Before your group gathers for the next session, read Chapter 2 (*Created Eve / Fallen Eve*) in the book *Captivating*. Use the space provided to write any key points or questions you want to bring to the next group meeting.

BETWEEN-SESSIONS

PERSONAL STUDY

In this section, you're invited to further explore the material we've covered this week from *Captivating*. Each day offers a short reading from Chapter 1 of John and Stasi's book—along with reflection questions designed to take you deeper into the themes of this week's study.

Journal or just jot a few thoughts after each question. At the start of the next session, there will be a few minutes to share any insights . . . but the primary goal of these questions is for your personal growth and private reflection.

DAY 1

UNSEEN, UNSOUGHT, AND UNCERTAIN

I know I am not alone in this nagging sense of failing to measure up, a feeling of not being good enough as *a woman*. Every woman I've ever met feels it—something deeper than just the sense of failing at what she does. An underlying, gut feeling of failing at who she is. *I am not enough*, and *I am too much* at the same time. Not pretty enough, not thin enough, not kind enough, not gracious enough, not disciplined enough. But too emotional, too needy, too sensitive, too strong, too opinionated, too messy. The result is *shame*, the universal companion of women. It haunts us, nipping at our heels, feeding on our deepest fear that we will end up abandoned and alone.

After all, if we were better women—whatever *that* means—life wouldn't be so hard. Right? We wouldn't have so many struggles; there would be less sorrow in our hearts. Why is it so hard to create meaningful friendships and sustain them? Why do our days seem so unimportant, filled not with romance and adventure but with duties and demands? We feel *unseen*, even by those who are closest to us. We

feel *unsought*—that no one has the passion or the courage to pursue us, to get past our messiness to find the woman deep inside. And we feel uncertain—*uncertain* what it even means to be a woman; uncertain what it truly means to be feminine; uncertain if we are or ever will be.

Aware of our deep failings, we pour contempt on our own hearts for wanting more. Oh, we long for intimacy and for adventure; we long to be the Beauty of some great story. But the desires set deep in our hearts seem like a luxury, granted only to those women who get their acts together. The message to the rest of us—whether from a driven culture or a driven church—is “try harder.” (*Captivating* pages 6–7)

In what areas of your life do you feel you aren't coming through or failing to measure up?

- Have you realized that other women feel this same way? Does this change your view that you're the only one missing the mark?

- Does it feel like the message of “try harder” is coming from God? What do you *honestly* believe God thinks about you right now, right in the middle of the messiness of your life?

DAY 2

A LOSS OF HEART

In all the exhortations we have missed the most important thing of all. We have missed the *heart* of a woman.

And that is not a wise thing to do, for as the Scriptures tell us, the heart is central. “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (Prov. 4:23). Above all else. Why? Because God knows that our heart is core to who we are. It is the source of all our creativity, our courage, and our convictions. It is the fountainhead of our faith, our hope, and of course, our love. This “wellspring of life” within us is the very essence of our existence, the center of our being. Your heart as a woman is the most important thing about you.

Think about it: God created you *as a woman*. “God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Whatever it means to bear God’s image, you do so as a woman. Female. That’s how and where you bear his image. Your feminine heart has been created with the greatest of all possible dignities—as a reflection of God’s own heart. You are a woman to your soul, to the very core of your being. And so the journey to discover what God meant when he created woman in his image—when he created you as his woman—that journey begins with your heart. Another way of saying this is that the journey begins with *desire*. The desires that God has placed into our hearts are clues as to who we really are and the role that we are meant to play. Many of us have come to despise our desires or at least try to bury them. They have become a source of pain or shame. We are embarrassed of them. But we don’t need to be. The desires of our heart bear a great glory because, as we will detail further in the next chapter, they are precisely where we bear the image of God. We long for certain things because *he* does! (*Captivating* pages 7–8)

- Based on your life experiences, do you agree that your heart as a woman is the most important thing about you (Proverbs 4:23)? Why or why not?

- How do you handle your heart when your core desires aren't being met? Why?

- What do you think it means to bear God's image as a woman?

DAY **3**

TO BE ROMANCED

Look at the games that little girls play, and if you can, remember what you dreamed of as a little girl. Look at the movies women love. Listen to your own heart and the hearts of the women you know. What is it that a woman wants? What does she dream of? Think again of women like Tamar, Ruth, Rahab—not very “churchy” women, but women held up for esteem in the Bible. We think you’ll find that every woman in her heart of hearts longs for three things: to be romanced, to play an irreplaceable role in a great adventure, and to unveil beauty. That’s what makes a woman come alive.

One of my favorite games growing up was “kidnapped and rescued.” I know many little girls who played this—or wished they had. To be the beauty, abducted by the bad guys, fought for and rescued by a hero—some version of this had a place in all our dreams. Like Sleeping Beauty, like Cinderella, like Maid Marian, or like Cora in *The Last of the Mohicans*, I wanted to be the heroine and have my hero come for me. Why am I embarrassed to tell you this? I simply loved feeling wanted and fought for. This desire is set deep in the heart of every little girl—and every woman. Yet most of us are ashamed of it. We downplay it. We pretend that it is less than it is. We are women of the twenty-first century after all—strong, independent, and capable, thank you very much. Uh-huh . . . and who is buying all those romance novels?

Think about the movies you once loved and the movies you love now. It is only recently that there are movies for little girls that don’t have a handsome prince coming to rescue his beloved. Yet, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and stories like them all speak to a little girl’s longing for romance. She wants to be seen and desired, to be sought after and fought for. So the Beast must win Beauty’s heart in *Beauty and the Beast*. So Mr. Darcy must walk across the field at dawn to proclaim his love to Miss Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*. And we sigh.

Isn’t something stirred in you when Matthew finally asks Mary to marry him as the snow begins to fall outside Downton Abbey or when Edward, *finally*, returns at the end of *Sense and Sensibility* to proclaim his love for Elinor? “Then . . . you’re not . . . not married?” she asks, nearly holding her breath. “No,” he says. “My heart is . . . and always will be . . . yours.” Or how about when Jackson sings Shallows with Ally in *A Star is Born*? Or the sunset scene at the bow of the *Titanic*?

When we are young, we want to be precious to someone—especially Daddy. As we grow older, the desire matures into a longing to be pursued, desired, wanted as a woman. “Why am I so embarrassed by the depth of my desire for this?” asked a young friend just the other day. We were talking about her life as a single woman, and how she loves her work but would also like to be married. “I don’t want to hang my life on it, but still, I yearn.” Of course. You’re a woman. You are made for relationship.

DAY 4

AN IRREPLACEABLE ROLE IN A GREAT ADVENTURE

When I was a little girl, I used to love World War II movies. I imagined myself being in them. I dreamed of growing up, braiding my hair, and then tucking it up under my helmet. I planned to disguise my gender so that I could join in. Back in those days, women were not allowed to fight, I sensed that the men in these movies were part of something heroic, valiant, and worthy. I longed to be a part of it too. In the depths of my soul, I longed to be a part of something large and good; something that required all of me; something dangerous and worth dying for.

There is something fierce in the heart of a woman. Simply insult her man, or her best friend and you'll get a taste of it. Insult her children at your own peril. A woman is a warrior too. But she is meant to be a warrior in a uniquely feminine way. Sometime before the sorrows of life did their best to kill it in us, most young women wanted to be a part of something grand, something important. Before doubt and accusation take hold, most little girls sense that they have a vital role to play; they want to believe there is something in them that is needed and needed desperately.

Think of Sarah from *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. A man and his young children need her; their world is not right until she becomes a part of it. She brings her courage and her creativity to the West and helps to tame it. We are awed by the nurses in *Pearl Harbor*, how in the midst of a horrifying assault they bring their courage and strength to rescue the lives of hundreds of men. The women in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy are valiant and beautiful—women like Arwen, Galadriel, and Éowyn change the fate of Middle Earth. And what about women like Esther, Deborah, Mary and Ruth? They were biblical characters who had irreplaceable roles in a Great Story. Not “safe” and “nice” women, not merely “sweet,” but passionate and powerful women who were beautiful *as* warriors.

Why do I love remembering the story of canoeing in the dark beauty of the Tetons so much? Because I was needed. I was needed. Not only was I needed, but like Arwen, I was irreplaceable. No one else in that canoe could have done what I did.

Women love adventures of all sorts. Whether it be the adventure of horses (most girls go through a horse stage) or white-water rafting, going to a foreign country, performing onstage, climbing mountains, having children, starting a business, or diving ever more deeply into the heart of God, we were made to be a part of a great adventure. An adventure that is *shared*. We do not want the adventure merely for adventure's sake but for what it requires of us *for* others. We don't want to be alone in it; we want to be in it *with* others.

Sometimes the idea of living as a hermit appeals to all of us. No demands, no needs, no pain, no disappointments. But that is because we have been hurt, are worn out. In our heart of hearts, that place where we are most *ourselves*, we don't want to run away for very long. Our lives were meant to be lived with others. As echoes of the Trinity, we remember something. Made in the image of a perfect relationship, we are relational to the core of our beings and filled with a desire for transcendent purpose. We long to be an irreplaceable part of a shared adventure. (*Captivating* pages 11–12)

- What were your dreams for your life when you were a little girl? What did you want to be or do?

- Allow yourself to dream a little bit here. If you could do or be anything you wanted now, what would it be . . . and why?

- How would your living that life impact others? How is the life you are living now impacting others?

DAY 5

BEAUTY TO UNVEIL

Lovely little six-year-old Lacey was visiting our ministry outpost the other day, going from office to office, swinging on the doorframe, and asking with a smile, “Would you like to hear my song?” Her face kissed by the sun with charming freckles, two front teeth missing, and eyes dancing with merriment, who could refuse her? She didn’t really care if she was an interruption. I doubt the thought crossed her mind. She sang her newly made-up song about puppies and kitties, fully expecting to be delighted in, then skipped down the hall to grace the occupant of the next office. She was like a ray of summer sun or, better, a garden fairy, flitting from office to office. She was a little girl in her glory, unashamed in her desire to delight and be delighted in.

This desire to be beautiful is an ageless longing. My friend Lilly is in her mid-eighties. As she descended the stairs of her home one Christmas season, I was captured by her beauty. She was wearing a green corduroy jumper with a white turtleneck that had little candy canes all over it. I said, “Lilly, you look lovely!” Her face lit up, wrinkles and age spots disappearing as she put her hands out at her sides like a ballerina and did a delightful little twirl. She was no longer eighty—she was ageless. God has set eternity in our hearts. The longing to be beautiful is set there as well.

Now, we know that the desire to be beautiful has caused many women untold grief (how many diets have you been on?). Countless tears have been shed and hearts

broken in its pursuit. Beauty has been extolled and worshiped and kept just out of reach for most of us. (Do you like having your picture taken? Do you like *seeing* those pictures later? How do you feel when people ask you your age? This issue of beauty runs deep!) For others, beauty has been shamed, used, and abused. Some of you have learned that possessing beauty can be dangerous. And yet—and this is just astounding—in *spite of* all the pain and distress that beauty has caused us as women, the desire remains.

During the midst of a talk I gave on the heart of a woman, one of the women in the audience leaned over to a friend and said, “I don’t know what this whole thing is about—twirling skirts and all.” The words had barely left her mouth when she burst into tears and had to leave the room. Little did she know how deep the desire ran, and how much pain it had caused. Many of us have hardened our hearts to this desire, the desire to be the Beauty. We, too, have been hurt so deeply in this area that we no longer identify with, perhaps even resent, the longing. But it’s there.

And here is the important part - it’s *not* just the desire for an outward beauty, but more—a desire to be captivating in the depths of *who you are*. An external beauty without a depth of character is not true beauty at all. As the Proverb says, “Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion” (11:22). Cinderella is beautiful, yes, but she is also good. Her outward beauty would be hollow were it not for the beauty of her heart. That’s why we love her. In *The Sound of Music*, the countess has Maria beat in the looks department, and they both know it. But Maria has a rare and beautiful depth of spirit. She has the capacity to love snowflakes on kittens and mean-spirited children. She sees the handiwork of God in music and laughter and climbing trees. Her soul is *Alive*. And we are drawn to her. (*Captivating* pages 13, 15–17)

- Who is beautiful to you . . . and why?

- What do you think it means to be beautiful on the inside? Is that of greater or lesser importance to you than being what the world defines as beautiful on the outside?

- What does the desire for a beauty to unveil look like for you?

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Well done, you. These were not easy questions to consider but I promise you it was time well spent. It was time spent honoring your own heart and life. This study is for you—for your heart—and for the goodness that God has for you by walking with him into the deeper regions hidden there. There are treasures to be found. Sometimes finding treasure is an easy affair and sometimes it requires a diligent search. In the days ahead, ask God to walk with you and guide you to discover every treasure that he has for you to possess. Though some chapters ahead may be stretching or perhaps even difficult, stay with it. The recovery of your heart is worth it. It's going to be good.