

*Dedicated to Nicole Edmond who, with
Jesus, helped to refine and restore my
heart and soul.*

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FOREWORD

As a writer, I have come to believe that one of the most important gifts we can give our readers is this: an honest account of how it all unfolded. Truth-telling is a rare and needed offering in an over-filtered world. We all say we want authenticity, but then we hide the most painful, ugly parts of our lives.

It's always an act of bravery to tell your story. Braver still: to strip away every filter before you start sharing it.

In my own books, when it comes to personal revelation, I've always wanted to figure out where the line of personal comfort is drawn. And then, if I am brave enough, I take a giant leap over it.

I value authenticity, and I know you do too.

Here's the good news: that's what you get in this book. That's what you get in this author. My dear friend Rachel Swanson is inviting you to take a giant leap over your own

line of personal comfort, to find Jesus waiting to catch you on the other side.

Know this: your guide is trustworthy. Rachel is a daring, courageous woman with a love for God's Word and for His daughters. She has reached deep inside herself to walk through the process of refinement and restoration.

Her conversion story is nothing short of miraculous, but like most of us, her story doesn't end with her salvation. That was just the beginning.

Oswald Chambers once wrote, "Spiritual maturity is not reached by the passing of the years, but by obedience to the will of God."

Simply put, we don't mature in faith by existing. It takes real work, real focus, real obedience, and as Rachel shows us, real honesty.

In a quick-fix culture, we subscribe to the defective notion that this soul-shaping work ought to come with ease and rapidity. But if you've ever seen an old piece of furniture that has been restored and refined, you know that the process is lengthy. Old paint or varnish is stripped away from the beat-up furniture. Then it is sanded with an abrasive before it can be brought to its polished state of luster—*before it can truly shine*.

Our personal restoration is not so different. For us to truly shine, there are things that God must strip away and sand down. My old friend Pastor Dave used to tell me that sandpaper is, strangely perhaps, the way that the grace of God works sometimes. We want to think that grace is always soft and billowy like cotton. But without the grit of the

sandpaper, we'll never truly change. Grace, in this way, can feel uncomfortable and abrasive, but it always produces the desired result of a life restored and refined.

When we rub against “grace like sandpaper,” might we be made new too?

Rachel knows this kind of grace. She had to walk a long road through refinement as rough edges were smoothed.

It's her story to tell, but I can promise you that Rachel has arrived at a place where—like an old piece of furniture or an antique tractor—she was restored. And in the midst of this, she has found her calling, not only in women's ministry, but also right in her own home.

What does all of this mean for you?

Rachel is about to lead you on a four-part journey that will revive, refine, restore, and release you. She leaves no stone unturned. Reading this book, you will confront your relationship with finances, friendships, failures, food. You will be challenged to ask yourself hard questions about unhealthy habits, such as gossiping and self-loathing.

Yes, Rachel is inviting you into a journey of *her* heart, but she's also inviting you into a journey of your *own*.

Let “grace like sandpaper” do its work in you.

As Rachel's friend, it's been my joy to watch the incredible and beautiful transformation that has come when Rachel obediently took this journey. There's a boldness to her that I find so refreshing, mostly because I'm someone with a long history of wanting the approval of others. I asked her about that boldness recently. And this is what she told me:

“I am more comfortable in my skin, and I understand my identity even deeper than ever before. I can be vulnerable, because I don’t tie my identity to what others think of me. My life is based on my identity in God, and in my relationship with Him. That is why I am able to step out confidently—or even not so confidently—into these unknown places with Him.”

But Rachel and I don’t want you to settle for just feeling good about yourself. We want you to step out too. We want you to partner with God in ways you never thought possible.

Suit up, new friend. Report for duty. God is calling you to an exciting new way of living.

—Jennifer Dukes Lee
author of *It’s All Under Control*

Refine
&
Restore

Section 1

REVIVE

You who have shown me many troubles
and distresses

Will revive me again,

And will bring me up again from the
depths of the earth.

Psalm 71:20, NASB

PROLOGUE

The Not-So-Perfect Christian Life

There's a thought hovering in your mind you don't dare utter out loud, because to utter it would be to claim something's wrong. And nothing is wrong, right? You're fine. I'm fine! We're all just fine.

At least, that's how we pretend to be.

However, the thought nags at you: *Why does this Christian life feel so . . . empty?*

Like many important things begging for your attention, you ignore it. Like an annoying health bill that always pops up again out of nowhere demanding for more money, even though you thought it was fully paid. You continue to ignore it, because really, it's not that urgent, right? There will be a better time to figure it out later and a grace period before it heads to collections. And maybe it will just go away on its own if you ignore the thought long enough.

But instead of fading, the feeling gets stronger. Slowly,

like a thorny vine inside you. A pain-numbing, unsettled feeling that you can't quite place.

It feels silly, though, right? Ignoring this thought seems better, safer. Everyone else seems to be so happy, fulfilled, confident.

I thought this until I began to ask around and discovered there are more of us struggling with this than I once thought. It's time to bring it out into the light.

CHAPTER 1

Lacking Abundance

I needed air.

Feeling suffocated under the weight of my emotions, I coaxed my barely walking seventeen-month-old twin boys out onto our warm patio. The autumn Santa Ana breeze was working its way through the afternoon sky, rustling the fallen leaves. Awkwardly, I tried to find a comfortable sitting position for my much-too-big-for-me belly growing “Wannabe Twin 3,” due to make her arrival just before Christmas.

But it was no use. I was still uncomfortable, still unsettled, much like my mind and soul. *What happened to the once-abundant life I experienced with Jesus when I first met Him, the real Him, all those years ago? Why do I feel so distant from Him right now?*

Squeals jolted my attention back to the present. I glanced over at my boys cheerfully prodding a pill bug (or what I call a “roly-poly”), which curled into a ball, trying to protect itself from the tiny but mighty-for-a-pill-bug-sized

hands. Unfortunately for our new friend, the term “gentle,” although in their vocabulary of understood words, hadn’t quite reached through to my twins’ nervous systems yet.

Poor roly-poly will probably get stuck staying curled up for a while, if he even survives.

Sometimes, I wish I could curl up into a ball and forget about life for a while.

I sighed, my thoughts trailing yet again from one moment wishing for a more fulfilling life to the next feeling utterly guilty for even thinking such a thought. I had so much. More than I deserved. I was grateful. But true contentment felt out of my reach.

I still felt like something was missing.

Church these days felt more like a country club where I must dress to impress, instead of meeting with the bled and broken-for-us Jesus. Passion and zest for my job as a dental hygienist was waning, even though I excelled in it and loved many aspects of it. *Perhaps I should go into ministry to experience more of Him?* Motherhood—although expected to be hard, especially my first experience with not one, but two babies at the same time—left me wondering more and more every day, *Who is this Rachel girl? Is she still even here under the piles of diapers and bottles?* Joy—definitely lacking. And don’t tell me I need more faith like many well-meaning Christians say; I still had faith.

I remembered back to when Jesus felt so vividly present when I first became a believer eleven years earlier, in October 2002. How intimately He met me when I said that first soul-changing prayer to Him. How He showed up

that night in supernatural ways most people have a hard time believing—which is silly, because isn't God supernatural? And yet, somewhere along the way, I think I stopped believing in the supernatural power of our Creator too.

I had the spiritual high everyone talks about when they first become a “Christian” or “accept Jesus into their heart.” I experienced the radical change from Mormon to Christian—or as I like to define it: having a personal relationship with Jesus. The total void I'd felt my entire life up to this point was finally filled with a fullness I lack enough words to describe. But I'll try. Think of a massive ocean wave drenching you on a blistering hot day, compelling you from shore to dive straight in as you fully immerse yourself in the refreshing swirl of intoxicating blue. This is what Jesus does to you when He gets into you.

God was near and dear to me then. He was alive and very much active. The aching void was gone. He was real and present. Why can't I say that with confidence now? What changed?

A few years into my walk and journey with God, I began to think God had forgotten all about me. I questioned whether or not I was “saved.” Perhaps I had too much junk from my past preventing full restoration. Perhaps His grace wasn't as sufficient for me as it was for everyone else. Perhaps being “good enough” isn't good enough to have the fully vibrant relationship I deeply wanted to experience with Jesus.

Maybe I'm not experiencing the fullness of what can be experienced in life with God because I'm missing something vitally important. But what? Really, I have everything.

In the practical sense, it wasn't like I was going through any major life crisis. Things were fairly stable. We had enough money to pay our bills and have a little fun too. Our church community was strong. I loved my career as a dental hygienist, especially the flexibility it gave me to be a mom and nurture my family. Things were . . . good!

Here's the kicker: I loved Jesus. At least I thought I did. I mean, I read my Bible . . . okay, *tried* to read my Bible. Maybe I wasn't feeling so motivated in this season to read it, as sleep always seemed to be a priority, especially as a mom of twins and then being hugely pregnant again. When I did read the Word, it felt dry. So why try?

I started to think maybe I could try praying in this season. So I tried. Honestly, some days I really did try. But most days no words would come. Anytime I tried, it felt like a hard, bitter ball rammed down my throat with painful emotions threatening to exude past my "I'm fine" control point. Or I felt so empty of emotion that I was merely chanting empty words.

I kept up the charade of the masked Christian life I was supposed to play out. I kept pretending life was great because, to the external eye, it was! I had everything. And really, if life was falling apart externally, would things be different internally than they currently felt?

I've encountered hundreds of people who have next to nothing, and yet their faith sustains them. Shoot, not only does it sustain them, but they are also thriving with confidence, fully content, and are some of the most joyful people I've ever met.

No matter how much I struggled, questioning my faith altogether was, quite frankly, out of the question. I knew neither going back to my Mormon roots nor running away from God altogether (as I had done in my teenage years) was a good option. God had miraculously met me those many years ago. This unforgettable memory reminds me of the truth when my trust begins to falter. The old has gone, the new has come (2 Cor. 5:17). I'm not who I was. I'm not filled to the deepest depths of empty like I was before. And I'm never going back to that previous state.

So why now, eleven years later in my journey with the Abundant Life Giver, does the Christian life seem to lack its luster? Where did I go wrong?

Maybe we all need to go back two thousand years and live in the actual presence of Jesus—performing miracles, raising the dead, turning water to wine, and healing the sick with one touch of His robe—to remember the depth of His life-giving presence. Right now, I could use a touch of that robe.

Lord, is this the way the Christian life is supposed to be? So fake, so dull, so boring, so... lifeless? I thought you were, and are, the Abundant Life Giver?

If you're anything like me, this is what you've been too scared to utter out loud. Because everyone knows Jesus means life. And to say the truth of what you're feeling—that living a Christian life lacks meaning—is to say that a life with Jesus is dull and boring. But that's just wrong. Right?

It has to be wrong. Jesus even said Himself, "I came that [you] may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

Sure, the verse is talking in part about experiencing the gift of salvation—a fancy name for life in heaven to those who believe in Him. This *is* an abundant gift. I want this. I need this. I mean, who doesn't?

But, friend, aren't we still missing something? What about experiencing an abundant life now? Is this possible? And if so, how? The cliché answer is: Jesus.

It's always Jesus, right?

Okay, but I do have faith in Jesus and believe in Him. Why then do I feel so disillusioned with this so-called abundant Christian life?

Suddenly, I noticed the roly-poly making his break back to the dirt. He survived! A few feet away, my twins found another friend to interrogate—Mr. Grasshopper.

Hmm, perhaps I will make it too?

I hobbled over to get closer to my twins (and got ready to teach them again about the word “gentle”), when I felt their baby sister in my belly prodding me with her elbow. It was almost as if God was elbowing me too, trying to nudge me into believing in His pursuit of me, regardless of how I felt.

Then another unuttered question began to simmer: *Perhaps this Abundant Life Giver isn't really all He's cracked up to be?*

BREAKING POINT

“Don't be mad at me . . .,” he said.

I collapsed into tears. I mean, I was definitely hormonal—pregnancy will do that to you. But it was so much more than that.

Tears of *Oh crap, I really do need this right now* fell as I realized my husband had signed me up for a four-day women's retreat without consulting me first. I tried to wrap my mind around being forced to leave with two babies in diapers toddling around and a complicated pregnancy.

My husband consoled me as I tried to dry sobbing tears that just wouldn't stop. The sobs didn't come from a place of hurt but from a place of acknowledgment. Someone else was validating the pain they saw me living in and the embarrassment of knowing I needed help.

He was right. I would have never signed up on my own. Not in the current state I was in, even though I knew I needed this. Thankfully (for his sake), I was more shocked than mad at him for doing it.

I wouldn't know a single person at this retreat; ironically, that was the good part. Less pressure to mingle and expose this less than slightly side of myself I'd been fighting so hard to keep hidden. Fewer moments of uncontrollable, exploding emotions in front of others, especially since I didn't understand these emotions myself.

Even though I appreciated Jeff acknowledging my stagnant heart, I *was* mad—just not at him. I was mad to be in this position where I needed help. Mad to be feeling so lost, so void, so lifeless, when I knew my heart should feel so full.

Mad at God for quenching me of His abundant love, putting me in this situation.

It was Him, not me. His fault, not mine. My stagnant state was due to Him leaving me high and dry. At least that's what I wanted to believe.

I felt empty of His love, but I knew deep down in my bones I wasn't truly as far away from Him as I felt. He was still there, the Life Giver was still there, somewhere, perhaps sustaining me in ways I will never know in this life.

But here's the thing I've come to realize now: emotions, while healthy to acknowledge, aren't always derived from truth.

While my heart felt empty, my head knew I wasn't completely void of His love. While my heart felt angry, my head knew I was running from the True Intimacy that could be had. While my heart felt confused, my head knew where I could go to find Truth.

You know what I'm talking about, right? Maybe you're already feeling uncomfortable with this acknowledgment that something inside of you is off. But this is where we have to start: by getting honest with ourselves and facing those hard, refining questions. I want you to go from stagnant faith to walking on water with Jesus. To follow Him on an exhilarating ride and journey to places you never even dreamed of walking with Him. To go from barely surviving to thriving. Living in ways God has clearly spelled out for us to live by through His Bible. Obeying Jesus, not out of duty but out of love for Him, and experiencing the fullness of life in the process.

The reason you need to take this step is because I believe your heart is yearning for this kind of revival. To revive your heart, we need to refine and restore your soul to what is true.

Trust me as someone who has lived through it and survived to tell you how.

You need to ask yourself honestly, “Am I ready to go through the soul work to experience the abundant life?” I hope the answer is yes.

The way I see it, you have two options. You can either close this book and continue living a lackluster life with a sense of emptiness. Or you can keep reading to discover, as I did, what went missing in the equation and begin to experience the full, exhilarating, abundant life you and I are meant live right now.

I hope you will decide the latter, because your soul and lifelong joy depend on it.

A DIVINE ENCOUNTER

I had no choice but to face the truth of my emotions with the One who held me captive that day. I had no cell phone service at the women’s retreat, so texting a friend was out. Numbing myself with Facebook was definitely out. So there I sat, by myself, on the upstairs patio of a quaint little barn-house looking over the vast green grass, honey-colored fields, and the multitude of roses blooming down below. All the women were scattered around the property, connecting with Jesus in their thoughts and prayers.

Why does this have to be so hard? I sighed and sat back in the rocking chair, rubbing my belly, trying to calm my daughter’s flipping motions. Or perhaps it was my own stomach

flipping and turning in knots as I thought about this forced time to connect with Jesus when it had been too long. Or maybe I was having contractions!

Calm down, Rachel. Stop overreacting.

But the nerves were there. An anticipation for something . . . I didn't even know what exactly. Perhaps the fear of what I would face during this time alone. Well, not quite alone . . .

I reached for my Bible and attempted to open it. Stopping short, I pulled back and decided just talking it out with Him would probably be better. Less Bible stuff to fill my mind and think about because that could be too distracting, right?

Gazing out at the horizon with the sun directly over me but the patio awning protecting me, I felt the honest questions start to trickle forth with sudden clarity:

Why, God, do I feel so empty when my life is so full?

Why does this Christian walk have to be so dang hard?

Why don't we have a relationship anymore like we used to?

What is Your purpose for me?

I felt the burn of emotions rising. I listened, but no answers came. Stinging tears of frustration pierced my eyes as I felt alone once again. Honestly, I didn't need any of His Christian responses to my questions anyway.

Before too long, I found myself sobbing and screaming (as mutedly as I could so no one would hear me), "All of this is Your fault, God! Why don't You answer me? Do You even

love me? Who am I, really? Who *are* You? Please just take all these dark and depressed thoughts and emotions away from me!”

I kept unloading the weight of my burdens, everything I was holding on to. All the hardships I was facing in motherhood and with my difficult pregnancy. All the fears I had about quitting my job and the career I had worked so hard for to stay home with my babies. The desire for deeper intimacy with my husband. The string of rejections from so-called friends over the years. The black-sheep status I had in my family because I turned my back on their faith, the faith I was raised to believe. Fears, failures, faults—all on the table for Him to see how bad life was . . . how bad I *really* was.

After what felt like hours of unleashing my wrath, confusion, sorrow, and anger against God, I was sure He would never speak to me again.

What happened next nearly knocked me flat. I felt . . .

Nearness.

His nearness.

Loving nearness . . . toward me.

An undeniable holy presence.

Broken and trembling, I felt the warmth of His invisible arms enfolding me. Wrapping around me. And this broke me even more . . . but in a beautiful way.

Through this unveiled brokenness, light was beginning to shine through the cracks of my soul. Healing Light. Life-giving Light. The Light I'd been longing to feel again for far too long.

Peace entered next. A healing peace. A surrendered peace as I gave Him the rightful throne over my heart, head, and mind once again.

The bell gonged, signaling the next session. Disoriented and a bit confused about what had just happened, I wiped my tears and took a deep breath. Walking down the stairs, across the lawn to the next session, I knew this was the beginning of something new once again.

*Borrow This Reviving Prayer
When Words Are Few*

Dear Father in heaven, give me the courage to openly and honestly share with You my heart—where I'm struggling, what I'm questioning, how I'm wrestling with my emotions. I know this is the start to deeper intimacy with You when I share my whole heart, and I know I will receive Your grace and love even though I'm scared to open up with You. I'm ready to receive whatever You will have me receive and believe in the truth of who You really are once again. In Jesus's name, amen.

CHAPTER 2

Truth Revealed

He told me after a week of dating, on the night of our first kiss, that we were going to get married. This didn't completely shock me. Mormon boys tend to go hard and fast, not in the worldly way, but in the let's-get-married-so-we-can-start-having-babies way. I'm not sure why this is, but I have my assumptions.

He stroked my straightened hair as I looked into his hopeful eyes. Such innocence lived there. Innocence I was lacking.

You see, he didn't know the real me. He knew only that I was from a strong Mormon background with a lifetime of Mormon roots. And apparently, he had had some sort of dream that told him he would marry a girl named Rachel. But the real me, hiding behind the veil of outward appearances and Mormon pretenses, was a girl who was very broken and torn by her current beliefs.

He didn't know about the multiple men and sinful

relationships of my past. He didn't know about my party-girl drinking episodes over the past freshman year of college. He didn't know the wrestling going on in my mind because I'd recently hit rock bottom and was finally searching for truth about this whole God and religion business.

And I didn't know how to tell him, for fear of losing something good. I didn't want to ruin this chance of love with a guy whom I had idolized in high school. He was the homecoming king my sophomore year—his senior year—and although we had known each other during that time, sparks weren't officially flying yet. There were perhaps a few moments I had noticed our mutual affection.

But it wasn't until now, after recently coming back from his two-year stint as a missionary (normal and expected for Mormon boys), that a noticeable interest was formed—rather quickly. He was tall, dark (tan), and handsome. Popular. Great family. Liked by every girl. He was wicked smart and would likely have a distinguished career in the future. My family more than approved of him and approved of us dating (especially due to my not-so-great recent relationships). And here he was saying he was going to marry me . . .

It was every girl's dream.

Any Mormon girl in their right mind would say yes . . . and, yet, I honestly didn't know what to say.

The problem was that I was heavily debating this whole religion thing. Especially Mormonism. And the more I researched it, the more and more I wrestled with the question of "Why isn't this all lining up?"

At this point, I would have called myself agnostic. I believed there was a God or higher being but wasn't sure about this whole Jesus figure and the Bible. Anytime I pictured God I always had a sense He was disappointed in me and that I would never measure up to His standards. I would never make it to the celestial Kingdom that all Mormons strive for.

But living my life the way I wanted wasn't fulfilling either. In fact, it was leaving a giant, gaping hole of hollowness and emptiness, destroying my soul.

No amount of attention, love, alcohol, food (or lack thereof), shopping, or popularity was filling that depth. It was fathomless. Which is why I started to believe, "There's got to be more to life than this . . ."

* * *

I had the most boring job that summer, but it was that job that enabled me to find truth.

I worked at a booth on the marina ten minutes from my parents' house, accepting tickets from people taking their boats down to the dock of giant Lake Oroville. It's the same lake I enjoyed boating, wakeboarding, and fishing on with my family when I was younger. I still remember the one island we would boat to, to eat our lunch: tuna fish sandwiches, nacho cheese Doritos (because those are the best), and bags of watermelon slices. My feet would get sucked into the muddy shore as I gazed above at the mile-high pine trees surrounding me within the steep canyon walls racing to the water's edge.

Initially, I was excited to be working at the lake I grew up at, awash with so many fond memories. But as I took money from customers, giving them tickets to enter and watching them go have a blast, sitting by myself for the next six to eight hours with only old VCR movies to watch (no internet) brought a wave of boredom.

It was 2002, so this was pre-social media craze. I bought my first cell phone eight months prior, which was just a flip phone you get for free these days. So I would check out the old VCR movies from the marina and watch them during work hours to pass the time. But soon those old movies got, well, old. And the growing ache to understand the rooted truths of the Bible gnawed at me to the point that I decided to start the process of deeper discovery.

So in June 2002 I took my giant Mormon Bible—a compilation of other books Mormons believe, making it twice the size of the Bible—and started reading through the first book, Genesis. The first few chapters weren't anything new. I already knew how the Bible explained the creation of the world and the first people of this earth, Adam and Eve. I knew about Noah and the ark, the flood and how the animals came in pairs to board the ship. I'd heard about Cain and Abel but didn't really know the full context of that story until I read through it. As I read on, I became more aware of how much I didn't know or hadn't really read on my own before.

When I flipped over to the New Testament, which starts with Matthew, another familiar story popped into view—the story of Jesus's birth. Again, this was familiar, because

the Christmas story of Jesus's birth is told in so many ways in our culture. But when I came to Jesus the adult, and read through the stories telling of the miracles he performed, his teachings, and even parts of his death and resurrection, it all came alive and touched me in ways I hadn't felt before. I read through most of Matthew, but eventually found myself in James and Philipians, which is where my wheels really started to turn.

In these books of the Bible, it says that by faith you are saved, not by actions or good deeds (James 2:14–20, Phil. 3:9). This was different from what I was raised to believe. I still remember attending early-morning Mormon classes before school and one lesson in particular giving me a hopeless feeling about God. The teacher proceeded to draw a diagram of a ladder on the whiteboard with certain elements between each rung that were required for us to reach the highest Kingdom of heaven (again, another aspect of Mormon theology). He put in baptism, temple endowments, and a host of other elements that created a works-based theology. The teacher talked about how tithing, being “clean” (meaning no lying, cursing, drinking caffeine, etc.), and a temple marriage were all required. This teaching made me see God as someone who was a high and mighty being waiting for me to mess up so that He could crush me and punish me for not doing the right things.

But that summer, I continued to read in the Bible about a God who is loving, kind, gentle, and compassionate toward those who love Him. He is full of grace and sees our

iniquities “as white as snow” (Isaiah 1:8). I continued to pore through Scripture, reading passages that connected God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit as one, not as three separate beings. I couldn’t find anything that had to do with the three Kingdoms of heaven, in which the Mormon faith believed. The only passage I could find was one that states, “There are also celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory” (1 Cor. 15:40–41, NKJV). Other translations say, “There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another” (1 Cor. 15:40–41). Paul, the author of First Corinthians, is explaining how we have a body here on earth, but we hold a spirit body as well. Each one holds its own importance. This says nothing about heaven being split into three heavens—celestial, telestial, and terrestrial—as Mormons believe. And if that was such a key piece of understanding, don’t you think it would be cited multiple times in Scripture?

God tends to repeat key truths in the Bible to illustrate levels of importance in what He wants us to learn and understand. There are some things that are talked about sparingly, and we do our best to understand what God means by them. But as a whole, God is not trying to make this understanding of faith difficult for us. He is truly keeping it simple; yet it’s harder to apply the truths to our heart, mind, and soul.

When I was home that summer working in that little marina booth, I continued searching for more answers to my questions about God. I would take what I read in the Bible in that booth and search for more information online. Again, this was 2002, when the available material about religions and faith wasn't anything like it is today. I actually had a hard time finding information from others who had left the Mormon Church or Biblical citations that backed up their teaching (that's not an issue today). Much of what I read referred to the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, or the Pearl of Great Price, additional books that were added to the Bible, written by Joseph Smith in the 1800s, when this religion was born. I read articles from prophets who claimed new theology had been revealed to them and they would add this to their teaching.

But I wanted to know where this was in the Bible—a sound work of words more than two thousand years old, which has stood the test of time. It's backed by multiple scholars, historians, and theologians attesting to the truth and accuracy of what is now bound as the Holy Book—still the number one book sold in the world. Researching other religions and their books, their accuracy and theology, just didn't compare to the scientific accuracy of the actual Bible. Therefore, I quickly realized there had to be something to this whole Christianity thing in relation to this ancient text.

Months went by as I researched, read, and relentlessly pursued truth. My brain became more and more rattled with this new way of thinking. I could feel the foundation

my entire life had been built on—all of the “truths” my parents had poured into me—breaking up underneath me.

Inevitably, summer came to an end, and back to college I went for my sophomore year. I continued my questions with a few of my close Christian friends. One in particular—Karen, my best friend, whom I met in the dorms—became a key friendship, which eventually ignited my faith.

We lived in a small house near campus, cheap rent and perfect for the simple college-life atmosphere. Fond memories well up in me of multiple evenings when I would knock on the door to her room and ask if we could chat about God. I always sensed her hesitancy, because she used to be a different faith as well, and she was still working through changes of her own about her belief in God. However, I thought it was perfect as we wrestled together. She pointed out various key points through what she was learning at the Bible study she attended.

One day, I found myself on campus at the U—a big open plaza area on the Cal Poly (California Polytechnic), San Luis Obispo, campus—sitting at an outdoor table where people congregated or were walking to class. We were with Karen’s Bible study leader and had an hour break before our next class. I used the next hour asking her leader a few questions I was confused by within the Christian faith. “Tell me about this grace part of what you believe. So there’s no list of things you must do to get to heaven? You don’t have to be baptized, tithe, go to the temple, and do all these things to achieve God’s favor to enter heaven someday?”

Her name was Amy. She had the brightest smile and one of the most tender hearts toward God I've ever known. And her deep understanding of the Bible didn't go unnoticed either.

"Have you read the book of James yet?" she replied.

"Sort of." *Wasn't that the one about faith and not works?*

She grinned. "Well, let's look at it now."

Opening her Bible without even a hint of timidity (whereas I felt uncomfortable sitting in public where my non-Christian friends—like my sorority sisters—might see me), she went straight to the chapter. Truth be told, opening the Bible in public didn't feel cool. It could ruin my popularity streak. But my persistence to find truth defeated my trepidation.

"Let's read this together..." She scooted over to me so that I could read it with her. She read James 2:14–26 out loud, then asked me what I thought it was saying.

"Well..." I hated pop quizzes. "It sounds like it says that works—like baptism, tithing, etc.—aren't what saves you. It's by faith. Although I'm confused. Don't you need works and faith together? It seems like this is still somewhat important."

"Yes, works are still important. But this is from the outflow of your faith and belief in Jesus. If you believe in Jesus, Who saves us from eternal death and separation from God, receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit in your life through your belief in Him, then you will enter God's Kingdom after you die. You also experience His presence in your life now, which will bring peace, joy, and purpose to your steps

regardless of what you face. There's a fullness in your heart that's hard to describe. But through faith in Him, this *fullness* enters in, and our actions will then precede our faith. Does this make sense?"

To be honest, it was a lot to digest and took more years from that moment on to understand what she had shared. But what I gained in that conversation was enough for me to begin feeling the weight of a works-based theology fall off my shoulders.

I didn't have to be perfect to be accepted by God.

I didn't have to do all the things I felt like I needed to do in order to experience God's love in my life.

I didn't have to do anything but love and accept Jesus into my heart to receive the love and grace He freely extends back to me.

In fact, He already extends that love and grace freely, but it's up to me to receive it and believe it's true.

I still wasn't ready to make any life-changing decisions in this public place where others might see me. But it did initiate the next step: attending the Campus Crusade for Christ fall retreat the following month.

* * *

People raised their hands in the air, dancing to the beat of the music being played onstage, music that worked in step with words full of holy passion. However, I still felt uncomfortable. In the church where I was raised, I was used to sitting in reverence while the organist played quiet hymns.

We never raised our hands or danced to the beat of what was playing. I never experienced joy or real worship.

And yet, the joy here at the Campus Crusade retreat was palpable.

Could I really dance and sing to Jesus in a way that was holy and honors Him? The Bible talks about praising God through dancing and singing to Him. “Let them praise His name with dancing; Let them sing praises to Him,” the Psalms declare (Psalm 149:3, NASB). It was all new to me, and I loved it. My heart was infatuated with this way of expressing praise and worship to God.

The beat infiltrated my ears as my heart leaped spontaneously. Silent tears crept from my eyes down my cheeks. I wiped them away in the dark room before anyone could see me. However, glancing around me, I noticed I wasn’t the only one being affected in this way.

As the weekend retreat went on, I found myself in a small group where we discussed what we were learning about God, and we shared our personal stories. Honestly, I don’t remember much about those small groups, but I do remember feeling moved by every message the pastor preached onstage. It was like everything he was sharing was finally making sense to me. All the Bible reading I’d been doing over the past several months—dissecting religions, detangling the truth from the lies—was finally coming to a head. It was all clicking. One piece after the other. Like a puzzle where all the pieces are finally forming into a complete image. I was thrilled, and also terrified, by my predicament.

My heart ached to say yes at the altar call. But I couldn’t...

My family would disown me.

My sorority girls would reject me.

My life was a messy reality.

I was broken beyond repair and knew I needed this. In fact, deep down I wanted this.

But what if this isn't really true?

Heading home that evening, I knew I had to decide. I was on the fence of faith. No longer could I deny God. No longer could I deny the truth about Jesus.

But . . . which faith was the *real* truth?

I was drawn to the message of how it's about a relationship, not about religion. That religion is man-made but a personal relationship with God—through Jesus, who is God in human form, perfect and blameless, sacrificing Himself for us, who paid the penalty of our sins—was compelling and hard to believe at the same time. It's like being sentenced to life in prison, but one day you get the message that someone else took your place to set you free. They paid the debt you owed, even though you deserved it.

Because the truth is none of us deserve this gift. You and I are a hot mess most of the time. We lie to our kids. We covet stuff. We gossip with our friends. We often idolize and worship other things more than God. We may be secretly fantasizing about another man (or woman, for that matter) in lustful ways that are inappropriate at best. We curse too much, drink too much, and pretend like it's all just fine. But we're not. You know it. I know it. Which is why we need someone to save us from ourselves.

I need Jesus. You need Jesus. He is the missing piece in this longing for something more.

Arriving home, I locked myself in my bedroom. I needed to be alone, in the dark. I was ready to know without a doubt the truth of all this faith business once and for all.

I was wracked with emotions: fear, confusion, sorrow, and exhaustion piled on top of me. Mostly the fear element—fear of getting this wrong, fear of what others would think if I decided to pursue this faith, fear of rejection by my family and current non-Christian friends.

But a deeper fear lay restless in my soul: fear of living my life any longer feeling void of God's love.

I lay on top of my cheetah-print bedspread, exhausted by the weekend. Staring at the ceiling, I imagined the likely scenarios before me if I decided on this path. I closed my eyes and prayed harder than I've ever prayed in my life. Hours went by, my thoughts vacillating from determined belief to defiant rejection of what I knew in my heart to be true.

There was no going back at this point. I couldn't revert to the life I was living—so worldly, void of purpose and contentment. A bleeding, broken heart had resulted in my rebellion. I had done enough damage, especially through the string of unhealthy relationships I had given way too much of myself for.

I couldn't deny the realness of God anymore. But I was still processing this new image of Jesus and the truth about Him, this Jesus figure who performed miracles and taught about mind-boggling grace, unconditional love, and unde-

servicing forgiveness. He showed up to five thousand people after he was resurrected—which is a fancy way of saying “brought back to life”—demonstrating the ability for us to have life after death if we believe in Him. He was ready to take the weight of all my mistakes if I simply believed and trusted in Him. This is the simplicity of the gospel.

Why is this decision so hard for me to make? I lay there, wondering.

I wanted to know without a shadow of a doubt whether or not the Christian way of living was true. Or was the Mormon way of believing really the truth? There was truth on both sides. I could see that now. But which was right?

After what felt like hours of praying and lots of tears, I knelt on the hardwood floor in a fetal position, crying out these words: “God, I need You. I need to know the truth. I need You to show up powerfully for me, so I can know without a doubt which faith is true. I need to know the truth about who You are . . .”

My muscles ached with tension, my eyes burned from the overwhelming pressure of tears that just wouldn’t stop. I was tired but motivated to keep pressing into this until I had a clear answer from Him.

After more praying, I finally spoke with the determination of a racehorse but also in holy submission, knowing Who I was speaking to. “God—” I wrestled with what I was about to say. “Is the Mormon faith, their prophet and leader that started it all—Joseph Smith—and all the teachings of the Mormon faith, true?”

What happened is surreal at best. Instantly the room

grew cold. I felt a dark, oppressive weight on me and shivered with chills all over my body. I heard a resounding “*NO!*” in my mind that felt unearthly and omniscient—God Himself speaking to me. There was a knowing in my soul that it was Him, and it was unlike anything else I’ve ever experienced.

Overwhelmed by this answer, almost paralyzed with fear, I finally asked the other pressing question rattling my mind: “God, is this Christian faith, or more specifically having a personal relationship with You and all the words of the Bible about Jesus, true?”

Quickly the weight lifted. An indescribable peace fell on top of me, filling me with a joy that is literally indescribable. My eyes were closed, but I promise you I saw through my eyelids white light shining just beyond them. But I was too terrified to open them. I heard a resounding “*YES!*” and could almost feel the embrace of God’s arms around me there in that dark room.

I knew the truth. I knew without a shadow of a doubt. I received Jesus into my heart and never looked back.

Let me address the question you might be asking after reading my story: I don’t know why some people experience tangible and miraculous evidence of God and others don’t. Some people are miraculously healed while others are not. Some experience supernatural manifestations of His presence while others are left trusting in the truth of God’s Word without outward expressions of His presence.

But I do know God is real, active, and supernatural in nature.

You may have a tough time believing my story. I've often hid this story from others because it's one of those experiences that defies logic, science, and is definitely supernatural. It's also personal and cannot be confirmed. But I experienced it. Felt it. Believe it. And to the best of my ability, I'm telling you all of it because perhaps you can borrow my testimony if you're still wrestling with this truth-about-God talk as well.

The question I want to nudge you with is this: if you do believe in a supernatural God, why is it so hard to believe in His power to do supernatural things? Many of us don't question the supernatural stories of the Bible. We believe them to be true, and yet those stories seem ancient, right? Therefore, those types of supernatural events don't happen anymore, right?

Or do they?

I've often wondered why God showed up for me the way He did when others may never experience God in this way. The only thing I can conclude is that God knew I would need something tangible to hold on to because the next several years of my life would be a wild roller coaster of difficulty as I clung to this newfound faith I believed in. It would be an easier choice to go back to my Mormon upbringing, because my family would be happier, I would be able to marry that nice Mormon boy who was infatuated with me, and it would still be a healthier alternative than the current life I was living.

But still, I would have forever felt that void and separation from a true, intimate relationship with God.

* * *

The next few years were anything but easy. As I tried to change my lifestyle from the unhealthy patterns I had been living, certain friends grew distant. Being in the sorority was difficult because I was surrounded by things that didn't help me cultivate a Christian lifestyle. I didn't have the external willpower to control my drinking, which led me to wake up to the worst outcomes. I would say, "Okay, just two drinks," and then find myself passed out drunk in my bed again the next morning with a horrible hangover, unable to remember the events of the night. It's like inviting a recovering alcoholic to a bar—it never ends well.

So I started to get more involved with the campus Christian ministry called Campus Crusade for Christ (now called CRU). I developed new friends who shared similar values about what I was trying to cultivate in my life. As I worked to connect with these Christian girls, I still always felt like an outsider due to my history and the stories of being the classic sorority girl.

Karen was the only Christian friend who seemed to understand me, looking past my past, loving me through my mistakes as I kept messing up here and there.

One day my parents started prodding me: "So, are you going to church?"

"Yes." I hesitated to share more with them. "I started going to this Christian church in the area and I really like it," I finally said.

There was a pause. “Oh!” Then another pause from my mom, before she said, “Well, I’m glad you’re exploring a bit...but I encourage you to attend the Mormon church too. I hear there’s a good one in that area!”

Really, at this time, they were simply happy I was pursuing church again, since it was no secret to them that I had been pursuing a damaging, unhealthy lifestyle. But as time went on, they continued to ask me, “So, have you checked out the Mormon church yet?”

“Well, no.” I couldn’t tell them I never planned on going back. Not yet.

“Okay, well, when we visit, we would like to go to that one with you.”

Only when my parents visited did I go, out of respect for them.

But I knew I wouldn’t be going back to that faith. I knew the truth. A soul-ripping fire ignited my soul as I finally understood why many believers are compelled to raise their hands in worship to Him. My heart grew wild with excitement for Jesus, and I too finally gained the courage one day to raise my palms and sway to the percussion, allowing the truthful words to captivate my soul, while I sang in honor of Him. I didn’t care anymore. Unafraid of this beautiful expression of love and devotion toward Him, I praised Him like I was the only one in the room adoring this God I loved with my whole being.

*Borrow This Restoring Prayer
When Words Are Few*

LORD, I'm ready to believe in Your supernatural ability to speak to my heart, mind, and soul. I'm ready for Your truths to be revealed and ask for courage to take the next step with You when so much fear seeks to hold me back. I want to believe. LORD, help me with my unbelief. Draw me nearer to Your Word—the Bible—a living, vivid reminder of who You really are. Give me eyes to see and ears to hear what it is You want me to know and experience with You. I'm ready to love You wholeheartedly. In Jesus's name, amen.

CHAPTER 3

Spiritual High to Stagnant Waters

I would have walked through fire if God told me to. This was the state of my faith for the next several years after I was “saved.”

This fire led me to attend a Summer Project—a Christian summer retreat through CRU. I was placed at the South Lake Tahoe location, where I was surrounded by evergreen pines and emerald-blue waters. I bunked in the smallest one-bedroom cabin I’ve ever seen in my life. Sharing it with two other roommates, even by freshman dorm standards it was tight. The old cabin’s wood floors were splintered and worn and collected piles of pebbles and dust from living the camp life. With no dresser or closet to put my clothes into, I lived out of a suitcase for three months.

And yet, it became home to some of my fondest memories. It’s where I learned about serving God wholeheartedly despite my circumstances. It’s where I grew in my

understanding of the Bible. It's where I saw glimpses of my calling to mentor women. It's where I built on my limited understanding of the Bible as I pored through Scripture and enjoyed my discipleship time with other women. I discovered long-lasting friendships—Kate, Kim, and Kristin—yes, my name was the odd one out. We're still friends fourteen years later.

We were all required to get jobs for the summer. This enabled us to positively impact the community through our faith at work. Fortunately, I became one of the assistant managers at Round Table Pizza (a prime summer job for the area), but unfortunately the free pizza every day made me go in search of new clothes by the end of summer.

Small-group time helped me cultivate deeper understanding of God and stoked the fire in me as I sensed His Spirit at work in my life. I grew radically, soaking it all in, almost like being intoxicated with the fervor of God. I didn't crave what I used to crave anymore. I wasn't seeking the approval of men. I was fueled by a different passion and desire, full of excitement and purpose.

The following summer, after graduating from college with my bachelor's degree, I found myself serving again, this time at Hume Lake Christian Camps. My position there enabled me to float around, filling in different positional needs each week. However, most of the time I filled in gaps for churches or organizations as a camp counselor for girls attending that week. Depending on the week, I would find myself at Wagon Train (fifth and sixth graders), Meadow Ranch (seventh and eighth graders), or

Ponderosa (high schoolers), where my job was to continue spiritual discussion and, of course, keep the girls out of mischief. Trust me, Christian girls can be just as mischievous (and naughty) as non-Christian girls.

These weeks were emotionally and physically exhausting. There were only short breaks on Saturdays after the buses left to take the Jesus-filled campers back home; early dawn the next day would bring in a squirrely group of new, fresh campers as it started all over again.

This was one of the starting points for me in understanding a unique part of my character. In fact, I don't even think I realized it until now: how much I was created for this role—stewarding the hearts of women and teaching them to love God and see His love for them.

Do you know the role or roles you've been created to fulfill? Are you pursuing work that is related to the unique characteristics purposely placed in you by God? This isn't always easy to see. In fact, it often takes a lot of soul searching and intentional redirecting to get us to a place where we are fulfilling our unique purpose in the ways God has called us to play them out.

And sometimes, being the hands and feet of Jesus in ways He asks us to serve isn't glorious or exciting.

On one particular week, I found myself in the camp kitchen, scrubbing thousands of dishes, cups, and pots and pans from the pounds of food campers were eating each week. My hands had never been so chapped. I gained a greater appreciation and respect for the kitchen staff who were assigned that role the entire summer. While scrub-

bing pots, they would sing worship songs together to pass the time or make up games to keep things fun. I promise you they will get multiple crowns in heaven for their hard, thankless work!

Maybe you find yourself serving God in ways that are also demanding, thankless, and make you wish you had a different role from the season you're in. Maybe the work you've been assigned to isn't in line with your natural bent. But sometimes God calls us to work outside our gifting to learn something new about ourselves or others.

I've learned I'm not naturally a hospitable person. I love to host parties in order to socialize with others, but I don't love all the work that goes into the food prep or cleaning up. I also discovered I need a bit of variety in my routine every day instead of doing the same thing.

I loved the various roles I got to play at that camp and how I learned something about myself (and God) in each one. Some weekly roles I filled proved to be extremely hard for me and definitely weren't in my natural skill set. One week I was put on the maintenance crew and tasked with chopping down trees. Not easy, especially when you're one of the smallest girls on the crew. Some of the roles didn't fulfill me in ways mentoring as a camp counselor did. But I still saw so much purpose in each task, each role. No matter the role, we had to work together as the body of Christ to facilitate His Kingdom's work.

I also learned a lot about humility—working for God in ways that went unseen by others but were seen by God. It taught me to put others before myself and appreciate the

work that goes on behind the scenes. It helped me to realize that there are seasons when God will call you to do something outside your comfort zone or outside your natural gifts, which probably won't be glamorous work! But it all serves a purpose.

It also taught me that taking advantage of the free soft-serve ice cream provided for staff members will make your pants burst by the end of the summer!

The cultivating and pruning God did in my heart those first two summers prepared me for another cultivating of the heart the following summer.

* * *

I've never felt worthy of Jeff. Even when we first started dating, I remember my new Christian girlfriends were in awe that this solid Christian guy wanted to date a post-wild sorority party girl turned Christian. He was the homecoming king of his high school, a favorite of many. I was intimidated by his deep knowledge of the Bible (and my lack thereof) and in awe of the fact that in two years of dating, he actually wanted to marry me—someone who was still growing in her faith with a scarlet past. He assured me my past iniquities were as white as snow to him. If Jesus forgave me, he could forgive me as well and look past the damage I had done to myself. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17, ESV). I was a new creation.

I know, I know. You're probably wondering how to get a guy like this. Honestly, I don't know. In fact, I pushed him away a few times in our relationship and messed up many times when we were together. I thought for sure he wouldn't stick around with this mess of a girl. But he continued to pursue me. Kind of like the story of Hosea and Gomer. Do you know that story? You need to, so stay with me.

It's a rather miraculous story. God told a man named Hosea to marry a promiscuous woman, a prostitute, named Gomer. This wasn't just any sort of promiscuous woman. She was a woman with absolutely no hope or chance of marrying a decent guy. Think about it: a godly man marrying a prostitute. This would make national headlines and for sure produce a reality TV show next to *The Hills*. Regardless of her past and current predicament, Hosea pursued her and married her. I'm sure Gomer was in shock and awe that this amazing guy wanted her. You would think it would stop her bad habits, but it didn't. Gomer continued to run away, pursuing the life she knew before, likely to the brothels where she once was, leaving Hosea over and over again.

If you were Hosea, what would you do? Give up? Plaster the news on Facebook and try to wreck her life? Move on to someone else with a better pedigree? This would be a more normal reaction to this kind of thing. That's what the world expects us to do.

But the miraculous part of this story? Hosea kept going after Gomer. God told him to keep bringing her back, so he did.

Can you imagine? I mean this is like the epitome of a modern-day soap opera.

The most radical part was that Hosea extended forgiveness toward Gomer. Not just once. Not just twice. But multiple times. It was a totally uncharacteristic action for any person to do in this type of situation. It demonstrates an unconditional love that can come only from knowing the love and forgiveness of Jesus. I can only imagine how Gomer felt about all of this—torn between the extravagant love by this man, her husband, who loved her unconditionally, and the earth-shattering guilt of feeling unworthy of this great love.

Putting myself in her shoes, I would run away too with how loud my own self-condemning thoughts would be, feeling completely undeserving of this kind of love or relationship.

In some ways, I identified with Gomer. I felt Jeff deserved better. I believed the lie that I was too broken, too damaged, and not worthy of him. But Jeff wouldn't have it. He stuck with me until he made me his.

And Hosea wouldn't have it either. He loved Gomer, despite her disobedience and sinful past and present mistakes.

Friend, I don't know your story or your present situation. But you aren't too broken or too messed up to be worthy of love. And while the deep love of another person is truly incredible to experience, it is nothing, and I mean nothing, in comparison with the fathomless love and grace of God. Your Heavenly Father is never going to give up on you. He

will never stop pursuing you and will never stop loving you, even when you feel like all is lost.

Along with the love high I experienced when I got engaged, I was still on a “spiritual high” with God three years into my new faith. Just as I thought my feelings for the man I was going to marry would never change, I thought this spiritual high with God would never end.

But as marriage, careers, and babies came along, I felt my heart grow cold. My excitement for Jesus and His love waned. Worship felt like empty words. Church was okay, and I did all the things I was “supposed to do” as a Christian, but I wondered if this was really all there was to God. Where did the extravagant beauty and wonder of God go? Where was the thrill of experiencing His Spirit moving in me? Did I miss something?

Ultimately, I asked the question, *Why doesn't this spiritual high last?*

* * *

If you've been a Christian for a few years, you know what I'm talking about. We've all experienced this at some point. There's a reason for it that took some exploring to discover.

I was twenty-nine when I noticed that my soul had grown cold and stagnant, despite God so powerfully showing up in that college bedroom of mine ten years earlier. My nineteen-month-old twins in diapers toddled around me while my giant belly prepared for their baby sister to arrive at any moment. Signs of Christmas were sprinkled

about our home as we waited for her debut (very much a sprinkle, not a downpour due to this season of twin exhaustion). Although signs of joy were all around me, I wondered where the joy inside me had gone.

But something stirred in me in the fall of 2013. At the women's retreat, I felt a stirring in my heart that Jesus was and is still alive within me, despite how I felt. There I met my spiritual and licensed counselor. She was a godsend—a wealth of knowledge and Biblical wisdom and a heart for the Lord that was palpable. She began the process of thawing my heart, breaking open the ice fortress that had slowly encased it over the years. It took some chiseling. The ice pack had grown so thick over my heart it would take more than a few sessions to break it all down.

The layers had to do with the lies I believed about God, views that were not quite right, which filtered into how I viewed the world and myself. It clouded my lens, making everything look heavier, darker, and unfulfilling. I allowed certain unhealthy issues to creep into my daily life, things I didn't think were a big deal that were actually preventing me from experiencing deeper intimacy with God. I became despondent about the Christian faith, and although I still believed in God, I often wondered, *What happened to that fire I used to have for Him? What really is the purpose to my life? Is life just about having babies, decorating my home with stuff, and going to church every Sunday? What happened to the relationship I used to have with Him?*

It seemed like God was a flame that had slowly burned out, like a match, only good for a brief while until real life

settled in—without any kindling to keep the fire going. And maybe that is just the way the Christian life was meant to be...

Friend, what I didn't realize is that a certain kind of kindling is required to keep the flame in your heart growing. Sustainable wood is necessary to bring a steady, warm burn. And if you want a long-lasting fire, add some coal to the embers, and it will last throughout the night, long enough for you to stoke the flame the next morning to bring it to a roar again. Everyone knows a real fire is hotter and lasts longer than the strike of a single match.

I didn't keep stoking that fire in my heart. I kept lighting spiritual matches—enjoying a great sermon but failing to apply it to my daily life. Attending various churches without regularity because I was always frustrated with something, unable to find the perfect church (hint: there is no perfect church). Reading the Bible but failing to stay consistent.

I needed to not just believe in God but live out my faith like He is for real.

In 2013, a few months into my new soul-searching, I read a passage that fundamentally changed my view. It's about how we grow spiritually and why this spiritual high isn't meant to last forever: "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it" (1 Cor. 3:2, ESV).

Picture this image: an adult nursing off their adult mother's breast. Sorry for the imagery. It's not a pleasant sight to think about, right? Nobody would do this. But that's the point! Have you seen a grown adult live off milk

alone? Do they just whip out a bottle of milk for every meal or ask their mom for more from their breast and feel satisfied? I sure hope not! And yet I believe this is the current spiritual state of many—unable or unwilling to cross over to eat solid food.

I nursed three babies (two at the same time, mind you) and saw their growth through something as simple but deeply nourishing as the milk from my breast. However, as they reached the six-month stage, it was clear they were ready to be introduced to pureed and soft solid foods. Their teeth grew, allowing harder foods to be introduced, which was suitable for their growing bodies. Even now, at their six-year-old state, I still cut up their meat to help them digest it better, because they can't physically cut it themselves yet.

This complementary verse encourages this concept about how we are meant to grow spiritually: “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Peter 2:2–3, ESV).

In the beginning, I was like a baby in my faith. God abundantly poured into me spiritual milk that my heart and soul absolutely needed and longed for in that season. A milk-induced high continued and sustained me for many years as I soaked in all the new things I was learning about Jesus. I finally tasted and saw that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8). I experienced a rich relationship as I fully depended on Him like an infant would. God nurtured me with tangible expressions of His love through Spirit-infused worship, increased my awe of Him with every passage I read, and

nurtured my heart through tangible Spirit-infused circumstances.

But time passes, you reach another milestone, and things start to shift, right? Worship loses a bit of its luster. Sermons don't pack a punch like they used to. The newness of it all begins to fade and the realities of some hard truths start to challenge you in ways you hadn't anticipated. Friends move away and loneliness returns. Marriage gets hard. You become stretched too thin by unpaid bills piling up, and the diagnosis doesn't go away no matter how hard you've prayed. You forget to read the Word because it starts to feel boring to you. Or it pierces your pride in ways that hurt. I don't like pain either. You don't understand God's will. And there are so many qualified theologians who fall on completely opposite sides of the spectrum in what they claim is true that it becomes overwhelming to try to figure it all out. You'd rather not dig into it anymore or share your faith because it divides your family, causes tension on Facebook, and being the peacemaker that you are, you'd rather just quietly float through life. It seems easier to become numb to the American Christian machine rather than letting God see where your faith is lacking, where your heart is hurting, and allowing Him to revive your heart again.

The problem is, you are not meant to live off mother's milk forever. When you do, your faith weakens, and spiritual maturity is lost.

The spiritual high isn't meant to last, friend. God in His mercy isn't going to spoon-feed us forever. Wouldn't that be silly if you were still being spoon-fed and trying to get

all of your nourishment from milk alone? He is weaning us from this spiritual milk for a reason. He wants us to move over to solid spiritual foods, cultivating deeper awareness of Him, which will promote an exhilarating, intoxicating, revitalizing faith in the things we believe. We don't let our own children continue drinking mother's milk forever; we help broaden their palate and prepare their growing bodies for the nourishment they need to sustain themselves.

In the same way we encourage certain foods, we limit certain foods as well. Not everything is encouraged or allowed into our bodies. Some things have now been found to promote cancer, increase toxins in your liver, and a host of other unwanted things. In the same way, God puts boundaries on certain things we might want to include in our life because He knows they will cause more harm than good. This is something to keep in mind as you ponder what you're allowing in your life and whether it is healthy or unhealthy for you.

Is it possible that you are feeling stuck because you haven't moved over to the deeper, more sustainable spiritual nourishment you need to revive your heart and release your purpose? Have you cut out or refined what's holding you back from deeper restored intimacy with God? Are you restoring your heart and mind with solid, healthy spiritual nourishment for your soul? Are you wanting a deeper, more intimate relationship with God but you're unwilling to discipline yourself to reach a spiritual maturity that makes you more alive, because what used to sustain you won't anymore? The spiritual high *isn't* meant to last forever. It's time now that you feast on solid foods.

* * *

I could see the instructor's lips moving, but no sound could be heard above the drone of the engine and the howling wind from the open hatch. However, I was pretty sure, reading his lips, he said, "Are you ready?"

I felt him yank on the straps to double-check. These straps held my back tightly against his chest, which I didn't mind, because he was the one with the parachute who would save me from this fall, a fall I was initiating.

Staring through the open hatch at fifteen thousand feet of open air below, I readied myself for the plunge. Skydiving isn't for the faint of heart. The scariest part is always the leap, right? I mean, who in their right mind willingly jumps out of an airplane fifteen thousand feet above the ground? Even with a parachute, there's always that off chance that it won't open, initiating your own death.

After a few seconds, I hit terminal velocity, which basically feels like you are floating on air. Everything moved slowly even though I was speeding 120 miles per hour toward the ground. It was almost peaceful in some ways. The drone of the wind ripping past my ears was like a sound machine lulling me to sleep. Except there was no way I would sleep through this moment—indescribable and worth the death-defying experience! My instructor literally had my back. I trusted and believed he would get us both safely to the ground. Because if not, he would crash and die along with me, right? What good would that do for either of us?

So much of our spiritual walk is like this. We like to play it safe by staying on the ground, even though Jesus is beckoning us to an indescribable adventure with Him. God is inviting us into things with Him, but often we aren't willing to join Him. Or maybe we've said yes to Him, but when it comes to taking that leap, we chicken out and don't trust He really has our back. Perhaps we've actually leaped, and the parachute didn't open, leaving us crashing to the ground in pieces. What then?

I have answers to these scenarios. But it takes some time to unpack it all. So stay with me to the end to see what I've discovered through my own crash-and-burn experiences with God.

First, let's look at Peter, a man I think we should give a little more credit to. Peter was a disciple who walked with the living, breathing Jesus. One night he was in a boat with a bunch of his other disciple buddies making their way to the next location on their journey of faith. It became incredibly windy on the sea, winds whipping the water into whitecaps. Likely they hunkered down in safety on the little boat, unable to do much except wait it out until it ceased, praying they wouldn't sink. Darkness was upon them as they tossed and turned on the stormy sea.

At one point, I imagine Peter decided they should check things out above deck. We don't know the exact details, but based on his character, it would seem to fit. Peter may have worked to build up the courage to peek above the cabin of the ship, perhaps to check the ropes and sails to see if they were still intact. Or maybe he was checking to see if

they could locate land yet. Bracing himself in the wind and rain, I imagine he popped open the ship hatch only to see he needed help on deck. His buddies came up with him, checking to make sure all was secure while they were getting tossed and sprayed by the wind-churned sea. Suddenly they noticed something on the water moving toward them. It was hard to tell what it was. At first, they thought it was a ghost floating on the water. (That makes sense, because what human walks on water?) But as the figure came closer, this “ghost,” noticing their fear, spoke: “Take courage, it is I! Don’t be afraid” (Matthew 14:27).

Jesus. Jesus’s voice broke through the crackling storm. A voice of power, peace, and purpose beyond the normal voice of any man. But even with the sound of Jesus’s voice, the disciples were still afraid and unsure. Peter finally had the courage to ask this figure on the water something, one of the boldest moves ever recorded in Scripture. He asked, “Lord, if it’s you . . . tell me to come to you on the water” (Matthew 14:28).

Seriously? Who in their right mind would think of something like this? Not only was Peter willing to speak up and talk to Jesus amid the wind and storm, but he also had the guts to take a huge leap of faith, asking Jesus to do the impossible through him by enabling him to walk on water. And maybe, just maybe, Peter sensed that this was what He was supposed to do.

Regardless, the impossible was made possible as Peter experienced walking on water toward Jesus. And not on a sea as flat as glass. Ripping and roaring waves and wind

lurched at him to drag him down into the depths below. This moment was likely the most incredible moment of Peter's life. I can almost see the look on the other disciples' faces, their mouths hanging open, watching in awe from the safety of their boat.

Peter was willing to leave the safety of the boat to walk through the rolling waves, strong wind, and darkness toward a man who claimed he was Jesus. He was ready to do something completely terrifying and exhilarating, not to mention impossible without Jesus's help, because He's the one who makes the impossible possible (Matthew 19:26).

Here's the thing: I think God wants all of us to experience this with Him. But I wonder if we are too comfortable in our self-made boats.

* * *

I don't know how to say this next part without sounding insensitive or negative, but it needs to be stated. There's a certain cruise-ship Christianity that has poisoned our church culture in the United States and some other countries as well. I think it looks a lot like building a fleet of shiny cruise ships because it's a lot safer and more comfortable staying in those giant party ships than accepting God's invitation to venture toward uncomfortable places.

To be honest, cruise-ship Christianity has its perks. But it misses the boat to create soul-stirring faith.

While I believed in Jesus and accepted his gift of salvation, I was still playing it safe when it came to actively

living out my faith. I attended church, listened to the sermons, sometimes shared a little about Jesus with others, but my life was pretty similar to the lives of my friends down the street who had no faith in God.

We like to fit in, don't we? We enjoy comfortable. Often, we hear a need presented by someone at church and say, "Oh, no! But that's someone else's responsibility" or "I can't do that because I'm a mom of young kids."

I used to make these excuses too to explain why I couldn't serve, even though I felt a tug in my heart.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, there are some of us doing too much and burning out for Jesus. You may be one of them, exhausted by your commitments to serve and overwhelmed by the amount of responsibility you have. You say yes to anything, pouring your heart into everything, leaving no room for soul-filling because you're pouring out faster than you're pouring in. Serving for Jesus may be breaking you instead of fulfilling you; you may be carrying more weight than God has called you to carry. Is it possible God is asking you to just *be* instead of *do* at this time?

I've experienced this. However, I believe most of us stay in the safety of our little boat, forgoing the thrilling adventure God is inviting us to embark on with Him. As Christians, we are too busy playing Candy Crush with our Christian friends, content in our little Christian bubble, taking no notice of those who are encountering Jesus in a different way. Or maybe you've glanced up from time to time and caught a glimpse of this wonder, a water-walking

moment of awe for the girl walking on water with Him. You think, *Wow, how cool! I could never do that, though...*

But you can. You need to. Whatever God is calling you to do, you need to do that. Or whatever you're supposed to say no to, say no because this allows you to say yes to the best and most important yeses you are meant to pursue. Lysa TerKeurst says it well: "Whenever you say yes to something, there is less of you for something else. Make sure your yes is worth the less."¹

When you're saying, "I could never do that..." what you're doing right now is drinking that bottle of milk, putting your ship on cruise control, allowing your heart and mind to grow stagnant. The nourishing of your faith is lacking. Denying His invitations, you allow complacency to destroy the vibrant relationship you are meant to taste with Him. You allow subtle issues to separate you from Him.

But what are those subtle issues? If they're so subtle and seemingly minor, does it really matter? Can't you just shrug them off?

You can. You have been. But you shouldn't anymore. To get to where you want to be—reviving your heart to release your purpose—this is where you need to go, friend, to revive your heart with confidence, passion, and zest for God as you refine away the lies that are holding you back.

*Borrow This Reviving Prayer
When Words Are Few*

God, I know You love me. Help me see that. Help me believe that You have a path and plan for me. Help me start pursuing You with my whole heart, not just half a heart in the safety of my boat. I want to want You more. Revive my heart to pursue You more deeply, intentionally, and openly. I want to experience the depth of Your love. I want to notice where I'm lacking so that I can draw nearer to You.

In Jesus's name, amen.