

TRADING CULTURE'S LIES FOR
CHRIST-CENTERED EMPOWERMENT

she
believed
HE
could,
so she
did

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Part 1:

**She Believed
HE Could . . .**

*Trading Culture's Lies
for Christ-Centered
Empowerment*

Chapter 1

~~YOU ARE ENOUGH~~ YOU'RE NOT ENOUGH, AND THAT'S THE GOOD NEWS

"I'll never be enough for you!" I yelled as I slammed our bedroom door.

In reality, I never felt like I was enough for anyone, let alone my husband. We were about a decade into our marriage and our relationship was accelerating toward the threshold of separation. As someone who struggled with pleasing people her whole life, feeling like I could not do enough to save our marriage or help my husband heal from trauma was gut-wrenching.

I wanted to fix things. I wanted to paint myself as a perfect wife. I wanted to forgive and move forward, but bitterness had planted its fatal root and I was ashamed for letting it happen. Blame bled into the deepest part of my heart, leaving me knee-deep in guilt. Day after day, *I could barely handle the pain*. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get out of this pit to bandage my own wounds.

Until recently, when I would fight with my husband, I'd roam around our bedroom and turn the pictures of us face down on the tables. Yes, I was usually angry. And yes, I'd leave them that way so he could see it. Not my finest hours, but my hurt feelings were often doing the leading. What I didn't realize was that every time I hid a photo from his sight and mine, I allowed myself to be swallowed by shame. I couldn't look at those pictures because I saw how my husband was caring for me, and how could anyone love me when I acted foolishly or said those awful words? How could my flaws be covered when my failure seemed too great?

People know me as an encourager. And yet, the same tongue that speaks life also whispers death, and it can be potent when someone is hurting, especially for the ones we love.

We all have ugly parts of our lives we don't want others to see or know.

Well, now you know one of mine . . . and I'm glad. A little squeamish, but glad. And here's why. Telling our full story (ugly bits and all) ushers in the gift of authenticity, but it also creates needed space where others can see God's redemption.

How Can My Lack Lead to Something Good?

“Has the LORD redeemed you? Then speak out!

Tell others he has redeemed you from your enemies.”

(Ps. 107:2)

In the moments when darkness hovers thickly, we need to remember two important things:

(1) Nobody is too far gone from the redemptive hand of God.

(2) We have an enemy who fights against all that is good.

The word *gospel* comes from the Anglo-Saxon term *god-spell*, meaning “good story.” It's a translation of the Latin word *evangelium* and the

Greek word *euangelion*, meaning “good news” or “good telling.”¹ At its core, the gospel is the ultimate story of God’s redemption, taking all that the enemy meant for evil and turning it around for good. But what does this mean for us when we feel weak or powerless?

It means everything.

We worship a God who chose us from before the foundation of the world, knowing who we were, what we would do, and where we would go. And yet, the love He has for His children outweighs the heaviest of costs, even the death of His Son on a cross. The gospel is good not because of what we have or haven’t done—rather, the gospel is good because the Maker of heaven and earth has done everything *for* us.

This *good story* points toward our desperate need for God and highlights His extravagant act of deliverance. It shows how we cannot depend on ourselves, we cannot save ourselves, we cannot dig our way out of the muck and the mire. We are in too deep. And so, our Father “reached down from heaven and rescued [us]; he drew [us] out of deep waters” (Ps. 18:16). When we are drowning or wish the raging waves would still, God becomes our rescue. He is both our salvation and our continual lifesaver.

Power is present as we share our honest stories, when we let others know we are *not* enough, and we never want to be—not when there is One who is more than enough for all. With every declaration of God’s ability to redeem our struggles, we offer up our lives as a glorious retelling of the good news.

We get to show others how absence in our life ushers in His abundance. How our failings give God the opportunity to fill. How our lessening on earth means we experience the kingdom’s gain.

Today when I say I’m not enough, I feel a sense of release. I’ve been liberated from the pressure to please or the drive to earn my own worth. *I can’t be enough for my husband* because that is Christ’s role alone to fill. *My husband can’t be enough for me* because only Christ can be my all.

Jesus is the single source of sufficiency and security that can satisfy the empty parts of every human soul. There are no exceptions, no matter what society may tell us.

Only the cross can wash away our sins, and only in our weaknesses can we be made new and whole—not by our efforts or hard-won grit, but by the gracious love of the Father who promises to make us complete in the fullness of Himself.

Can you say this sentence with me? And please, say it with audacity and boldness.

I am not enough, but the Great I AM is enough for me.

And repeat.

This is the key to walking empowered. And it's the truth Satan has tried to steal.

Why'd You Have to Be So Cruel? The Targeted Assault on Eve

We will be going back to the garden of Eden a few more times in this book, but have you ever wondered why Satan went after Eve first?

To be clear, we can't actually know. But it's a question I've thought about often. In Stasi Eldredge's book *Captivating*, she talks about a "special hatred" Satan has for women, which made him choose Eve before Adam.

The message of our wounds nearly always is, "This is because of you. This is what you deserve." It changes things to realize that, no, it is because you are *glorious* that these things happened. It is because you are powerful. It is because you are a major threat to the kingdom of darkness. Because you uniquely carry the glory of God to the world.

You are hated *because* of your beauty and power.²

Two things are happening here. It's possible Satan despised Eve because he was tremendously jealous of her God-given beauty, both physically and spiritually. He hated the way she represented the heart of God. Some believe Satan used to be the most glorious of all God's creation before he fell into pride and sin. But now . . . he's *not*. Humanity will always take the cake.

Moreover, Satan was terrified of her potential to destroy his plans. Earlier in the chapter, Eldredge says:

Eve is his greatest human threat, for she brings life. She is a life-saver and a life giver. Eve means "life" or "life producer." . . . Put those two things together—that Eve incarnates the Beauty of God and she gives life to the world. Satan's bitter heart cannot bear it. He assaults her with a special hatred.³

Women were too much of a threat for the prince of darkness. Clearly, Eve had to go. And what's the first thing Satan tried to do?

He made her forget who she already was.

After placing a seed of doubt regarding God's kind character, the crafty serpent went in for the literal kill, lying about the consequences of Eve's actions, but he also added something more malignant. He said, "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, *and you will be like God*, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5 ESV).

Satan makes it plain as day. He tells Eve she is lacking—*she is not enough, so she must do something else to make herself more*. He wants Eve to believe God is withholding because then she would decide to reach for something extra in order to attain what she already had. Satan wants Eve to take matters into her own hands and independently make herself like God, not just His beautiful image bearer. This is the same lethal lie our current culture has adopted. It's the same hidden poison attacking the Father's hurting daughters today.

The enemy wanted Eve to feel like she was incomplete and imperfect *because* she was already complete and perfect in God. But after she took the first bite, she experienced a separation between her spirit and the fullness of her Creator, and the falsehood whispered in her ear became a fixed reality. It was a cruel and harsh self-fulfilling prophecy. She didn't believe she was enough, but she only stepped into lacking when she chose to separate herself from God. Eve chose an inferior form of empowerment.

Listen closely, sister. *The enemy's greatest strategy is to keep women from going back to their Maker and walking in the care and capacity of Christ.* Eve needs to remember God is enough, which means as she walks in His sufficiency, she will always be enough in Him.

But the forces of hell are scared we will find out. When Christian women know *whose* they are and *who* fills their entire being, they become a threat so powerful, the devil's knees begin to shake.

Enough with Enough

I've experienced pushback from Christians as I've communicated the fact that we aren't enough over the years. Many say there's biblical backing for claiming we are enough. So I ask for the verses they are talking about, because if I have missed something, I really do want to know. And guess what?

Not one person can find the phrase in the Bible.

Instead, they give verses declaring our worth in Jesus and how deeply we are loved. They talk about being fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God and how we are called "good" in the garden. They mention feeling seen and known by the Father when others dismiss them. Or they point toward the grace and gentleness of Christ, not His condemnation, as conduits for transformation. And to all of this I say YES! I agree with every one of these biblical truths. But where in

Scripture does it say the specific phrase *we are enough*?

It doesn't, because being *enough* implies something else completely.

Here are two definitions for the word *enough*: (1) "As much as is necessary; in the amount or to the degree needed."⁴ (2) "Occurring in such quantity, quality, or scope as to fully meet demands, needs, or expectations."⁵ Fully meeting the list of demands? Satisfying every need and expectation? Proclaiming my "enoughness" as the measure of what is necessary in order to tackle all situations, for all people? Do I really think I am enough, therefore changing anything or accepting help is unwarranted because I can fulfill the entirety of my needs? Am I really okay on my own?

In short, saying we are enough is equivalent to saying we don't need anything else, including a Savior.

This may not be our intention or what we really mean, but when we use this phrase we are falling into the same trap Satan set for Eve. We are letting God know we are enough on our own and we don't need any assistance from Him. We are trying to be adequate apart from Jesus, taking the bait to empower ourselves by being like God. The enemy wants us to think we are enough because then we are less likely to reach out for the Father's hand and will choose the fruit instead.

I find it interesting that we can communicate our feelings and scripturally sound beliefs like the ones mentioned above without saying we are enough. We can say "I am loved" or "I am valuable" or "I am accepted in Christ." We can say these simple and true statements, but we don't because talking ourselves into believing and saying we are enough implies more and unknowingly adds lies into the mix.

Declaring ourselves as enough only reiterates culture's narrative that everything is dependent on you and about you. Thankfully, because of God's grace and kindness, it's not! Circumstances and your identity are dependent on Christ because He will be more than enough for you and me, which makes us more than enough in Him. It's time we say *enough* to being enough.

Be the Real Eve

I want to end this chapter by looking at the one word this book will continue to come back to: *empowerment*.

According to *Merriam-Webster*, the definition of empowerment is as follows: “The act or action of empowering someone or something: the granting of the power, right, or authority to perform various acts or duties.”⁶

A granting of power.

A giving of rights.

An imparting of authority.

All of which are bestowed upon someone from on high.

Transferred from the top down.

Here on earth as it is in heaven.

The garden was God’s original plan played out on earth. Authority and power were the birthrights of His beloved children as they walked by His side in love. And yet, Adam and Eve chose to believe a cunning creature over their Creator God. They chose to believe in themselves over the faithfulness of the One who formed them by hand.

But we have a choice too. We can choose to veer away from Adam and Eve’s fallen footsteps and follow the path back to a restored identity in Christ. We can choose to believe God’s Word and trade the enemy’s lies for the Father’s irreversible promises.

Will we still encounter sin? Of course. Will we still see the ripple effects of the fall, including the vicious assault on women? Unfortunately, yes.

But clinging to falsehood will not help women grow or overcome. The “you are enough” ideology is not the answer to empowering women. It’s society’s attempt to counter the lies of Satan and make right what went wrong in Eden. When we continually try to be enough for

everyone, including ourselves, we will eventually realize we can't be our own Messiah. And that's okay because there's good news. *Only Jesus can do what we can't.*

Only Jesus can take our condemnation and cover us with His grace.

Only Jesus can take our lack and make it a holy gain.

Only Jesus can use our weakness as an outlet for His strength.

Only Jesus can free our hearts from the pressure of perfection.

Only Jesus can make us enough, because we are united in Him.

Without the restorative, healing work of Christ in our lives, we will end up trying to earn our worth through an unending cycle of defeat. We will wear our bones dry trying to prove our self-sufficiency through the power of our own hands. We can work. We can volunteer. We can be moms. We can be wives. We can run the schedule. We can create the perfect home. We can pursue the dream. We can be the good neighbor, churchgoer, daughter, sister, and friend. But when we mess up or can't get past the struggle or can't keep our head above the sand, we can expect another spiritual assault from the enemy.

Satan will tell you it's your fault and pack on loads of shame. *He will do everything he can to make you forget the position you've been given.* But don't let him fool you. Don't let him make you feel inferior when in Christ your identity stands.

The truth is, we are worthy of being cherished and accepted simply because we are His. We can receive the Father's compassion exactly where we are, and it's not because of what we do or who we try to be. Our value has already been determined by the good story of the gospel. Our position has been sealed and our inheritance guaranteed.

God made up His mind about us long ago, and the verdict is eternally in.

He wants to be with us. He wants to show His faithfulness. He wants to walk in paradise with those He calls His friends. We don't need to reach for anything else that extends beyond God.

And so, dear reader, may I leave you with one of the most empowering and encouraging passages in Scripture?

I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources *he will empower you* with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with *all the fullness of life and power that comes from God*. (Eph. 3:16–19)

In Christ, we lack nothing. We are made whole and complete by the extravagance of His love. In Jesus, we are empowered, filled to the fullness of life and power that comes from the throne room of God. We aren't enough on our own, and that's okay. It's actually a relief. We can say we are more than enough through the One who covers us in His perfection and offers us His peace.

So, the next time the devil tries to slither his way into your mind, do the one thing he hates the most. Stand a little taller and claim who you *already* are.

Be you.

Be the real Eve.

Stories from Sisters Who Believed HE Could

JEN'S STORY:

In 2021, I was diagnosed with peripheral neuropathy, a disorder characterized by damage to the nerves that presents as pain, tingling, and numbness. After years of my seeking treatments, the Spirit challenged me to replace my incessant search for answers with a wholehearted search for the deeper things of God.

I began praying for a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit and shared this with a friend. One morning after church, her husband approached me and said, "I know what you're praying for, and I want you to know I'm praying alongside you." He told me he had a life-altering encounter with the Spirit at a revival service years prior, unaware that I'd been invited to one that evening. I considered this confirmation that I was supposed to attend.

During the sermon, the Lord brought to my mind the story of Jacob wrestling with God. I, too, was desperate for more of Him. I needed God's blessing and strength to sustain me through chronic pain. Clothed with holy confidence, I approached the altar with those who were receiving the gift of salvation and asked for prayer.

I had a personal experience with God that night. The Spirit's presence was tangible, and I sought His direction regarding what to do next. I felt He wanted me to taper off the pain medication I'd become dependent on, so I took a step of faith, knowing I couldn't do it on my own. He would have to be enough for me. While this decision was solely between the Lord and me (and is not reflective of everyone's journey with health issues), God was faithful to provide.

He not only strengthened me to endure my pain without

medication, God also gave me the strength to begin serving others who were suffering. My entire ministry pivoted to serving those in pain, in order to reveal the nature of Christ. His abundant grace is sufficient to equip us for what He's called us to do, especially when we are at our weakest. Our greatest contributions to the kingdom are not achieved through our own power but His. (*Jen R. from Maryland*)

Chapter 2

~~YOU CAN DO HARD~~ ~~THINGS~~ YOU CAN DO HARD THINGS THE EASIER WAY

This past Mother's Day, my youngest son gave me the most adorable plant holder made out of rainbow popsicle sticks. He and his classmates worked hard on crafting their gifts, and as a bonus, they included a pretty planted flower in the holder. My boy beamed with joy as he handed it to me.

"Make sure you don't kill it, Mom. The teacher says you need to water it each day."

I smiled nervously, knowing what was about to happen. Unlike the rest of my immediate family, God did not bestow on me a green-thumb gene. My mother's gardens are glorious. She creates sanctuaries of serenity that give us a glimpse into the beauty of Eden. Meanwhile, I've killed almost every plant we've purchased.

I was determined to keep this flower alive, and also my child's hope in his plant-challenged mother. I watered it multiple times a day and placed it in open sunlight on the windowsill. But as the days carried on, the flower began to wilt. I'd *overwatered* it. My mind flashed back to the summer before when I spent five hours trimming our bushes with scissors. Later that day my mom once again proved her gardening intelligence and told me they had a hedger that could've accomplished the job in a few minutes. My aching body wanted to cry.

What comes naturally to some can be hard for others, and sometimes we can make things much harder than God wants them to be.

We Live in a Tired World

Not long ago, I conducted a survey with women in my life who follow Jesus. I asked a simple question: *What are some phrases you've heard that make you feel empowered?*

One of the top answers was *You Can Do Hard Things*. And on the surface level, we can. God has made His daughters strong in multiple ways. But what happens when we peek just below the surface of our own efforts? What happens when we look at the inner workings of our hearts as we face the hardships of life head-on?

The answer can be summed up in one sentence: *We find a world of weary women.*

We grow weary from pushing and pulling and prying to make things happen. We feel tired after using every ounce of energy we have to serve those we love. We're exhausted in the depths of our aching bones because we've taken on too much and now we're worn too thin.

It's a tricky business, doing hard things. Many women come to accept the normalcy of being weary because what we are striving to do is often simultaneously hard and good. Being weary becomes worth it. We were made to do good for the glory of God's kingdom, but should

it be at the expense of barely surviving or feeling like we can't breathe? Sometimes we can wear weariness like a badge of honor because weariness proves we are doing all we possibly can. But according to the God of rest, we may be doing hard things in a much harder way.

If our noble efforts are left unchecked by the Holy Spirit, endless acts of service can lead to shame-filled burnout. Holy passion without the power of God behind it is still performance. And performing for Christ cannot coexist with His peace if we are going at our preconceived fast pace.

We need to slow our stride down.

Reducing our desire to serve, achieve, or overcome may not be the answer. But increasing our willingness to listen is. When we lessen our pace, we slow our steps in order to match our Savior's. We allow our souls to remain still in order to hear from God and follow His direction because He knows an easier, Spirit-led way.

From one resolute woman to another, resting in God's ability will always bring the best results. While we definitely need physical rest, developing a heart that trusts in what God can accomplish is a must.

Life is rarely easy breezy. Winds rage. Storms surge. We are told trouble will be entwined into our earthly days. Jesus said to His disciples, "I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). We will have many chances to do hard things and we want to do them well. Our determination can become detrimental, however, when we depend on ourselves instead of God for deliverance from our difficulties. Sometimes there's just too much to handle.

When Life's Too Hard to Handle

If you hang around Christian circles long enough, you will hear the popular phrase: "God will never give you more than you can handle."

I used to believe this too, until I realized God must think I can handle *a lot* and it didn't seem fair. But again, we come to another idea that has been taken out of context and is nonexistent in Scripture.

Many people who hold this belief quote 1 Corinthians 10:13, where Paul writes to the Corinthian church, "The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure." The apostle is assuring them God will help them resist sin, not that He wouldn't give them more hard things than they could handle.

God was letting them and us know that when believers encounter sinful temptations, God will help us endure it by giving us a way out of the temptation through the power of the Holy Spirit. Even Jesus experienced a temptation to sin but He didn't yield to it. If Paul meant God will never give us more than we can handle, then he would be contradicting himself later when he wrote a second letter to the church at Corinth.

Paul says, "We think you ought to know, dear brothers and sisters, about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and overwhelmed *beyond our ability to endure*, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and *learned to rely only on God*, who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:8–9).

What faith Paul has! They were past the ability to endure and even thought they were going to die. Yet, these trials were catalysts to help them learn how to rely on God. Paul ends by expressing his confidence that God could raise them from the dead if it was His will.

The Lord allows hard situations to happen in our lives, many being more than we can handle, in order to emphasize His faithfulness to save. If we could handle it all, why would we need Jesus? It's in the moments when we are too weak that God's greatness shines through. God's Word

makes a countercultural correlation between weakness and strength—one Paul was very familiar with.

The apostle shared about asking God three times to take away a form of affliction that was challenging, even tormenting. But God continued to allow the difficulty to carry on and it wasn't without purpose. Paul said the Lord's response was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9 *ESV*). This switched Paul's attitude from resenting his weaknesses to boasting about them in order to let Christ's power rest within him. In God's economy being weak brings about strength, because Christ's power enables us to do every hard thing.

So, the next time you feel like you've been given more than you can handle, remember, no amount of girl power can compare to God's power. We can face the there's-no-way-I'm-going-to-make-it conditions with assurance. Jesus will be our rescue. When troubles are more than we can hold, let's hand them back to Him.

What God's Strength Is Meant For

A common verse we turn to when facing hard times is Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (*NKJV*). It's such an inspiring verse, but it's also been misused.

Paul is talking to fellow Christians in Philippi, thanking them for giving toward his needs. But Paul puts a little twist in his message and tells his brothers and sisters he has never truly been in need because he has learned to be content in every physical circumstance, with little or plenty. Immediately following this explanation, Paul pens this famous verse. But he makes sure to highlight how Christ has made it possible for him to face these hard, varying circumstances.

Many people believe this verse means God will help them do whatever they set their minds to. However, when read in context, this verse

is saying God will empower us to face whatever situation *He allows us to walk through*. There's a big difference.

We can have aspirations God is not behind. This can be a little shocking, right? Just because we want something doesn't mean God will bring it into being. Human ambition and aspiration need to be aligned with God's objective and Word.

Being a follower of Christ is not about achieving our goals or even getting what we desire. Instead, it involves relying on God when we are in want and being grateful when we have plenty. If our efforts have left us frayed and we can't push through anymore, that's when our God will give us the strength to sustain and succeed according to His plan.

The beautiful thing about letting God strengthen us is that we don't have to wait until we get to the end of our floundering rope to experience His help. Everything doesn't have to be going haywire to have God step in. We can come to the end of ourselves without being sucked dry, and it's done through the posture of release.

Muscle contractions are a good example. When we tighten our muscles, we can feel the tension. But unless you have the supernatural ability to hold your muscle in that same contraction for hours on end, your body will get tired and the muscle will loosen as you experience release. Our body comes to a state of rest when we release our cares to Jesus. If we choose to tighten our grip and never let go of the worries, fears, and feelings troubling us, we'll remain in a state of rigid overwhelm. Releasing everything into the trustworthy grip of God will help us move from a place of pressure to a posture of peace.

Discerning What God Wants Us to Do

If you are a fellow over-committer like me, let's breathe a long sigh of solidarity together. I get you, my friend. Whether it's because we have a fear of missing out or we want to serve or maybe we just love being with

community, often there's no shortage of projects or activities we can do. If we want to be a part of all the action but we're exhausted, stepping away is truly an act of faith.

Circumstances get more challenging when we are asked to help and we don't want to let others down or leave them in a bind. We want to be responsible and reliable people. And we really don't want to hurt others' feelings or make matters worse. But when did it become our duty to do all the *doing*? God didn't assign us this task. When we look at the Bible, God is the One who establishes outcomes and He decides what's best for His kids.

We want to avoid being helpers who do too much and then feel helpless.

Evaluating our weary hearts and bodies is a good way to be honest with ourselves and our Maker. If weariness begins to take over, we need to ask ourselves if the roles we are performing are God-assigned or self-appointed. And if we've appointed ourselves without God's anointed wisdom or guidance, we need to take the initiative and let some of it go. We need to learn the art of saying no.

Feeling guilty should not be part of creating boundaries, but it too often is. We may feel bad for not being able to be there for others the way we always have. But saying no is an opportunity to trust God with those we love. It's a tangible demonstration of our faith in God because we believe He can do the things we can't. He also excels at the things we think we can do on our own. At the end of the day, we aren't here on earth to do what people want us to do. We are here to accomplish what God wants us to do, and we don't need to feel bad about that.

Not everyone has the same budget for doing. Some people, like myself, have less margin for taking on tasks or responsibilities because their mental load is full from life's heavy situations. We are a special-needs family, which means our home is anything but pristine. Still, I can't tell you how many times I've compared my home to the neat, cute

homes of friends. I return from their houses and start “guilt cleaning” with plenty of huffs in tow. Thankfully, Jesus values perseverance over perfection.

We *all* face struggles. No one has a flawless family. Nobody has an eternally immaculate home. Social media delivers a message of perfection, but for the sake of all that is holy, we need to stop scrolling and worshipping a standard that doesn’t exist. It’s not healthy for our heads or hearts.

By taking this needed stance, we are also releasing ourselves, as well as others, from the pressure to perform. When we decide to stop striving to be the perfect version of ourselves, we say *yes* and *thank you* to the full gospel. People we encounter suddenly become those who are valuable and capable of receiving God’s most precious gift—salvation by grace and faith alone.

As God’s daughters we are given what we don’t deserve (grace) and we are spared from what we should receive (mercy). It’s definitely a win-win! But if we try to add our own efforts back into the picture or we expect others to do the same, we actually detract from the fulfillment of the good news.

Paul says, “My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. *I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless.* For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die” (Gal. 2:20–21).

A little later he adds, “After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort? Have you experienced so much for nothing? Surely it was not in vain, was it? I ask you again, does God give you the Holy Spirit and work miracles among you because you obey the law? Of course not! *It is because you believe the message you heard about Christ*” (Gal. 3:3–5).

We are perfect in Christ because we believed He could.

Before we do, we first need to believe He did. It's not about us or our power or our packed schedules. The world doesn't need more weary women. It needs wise women who rely on God's guidance and rest in His care. God's grace is not meaningless when we give Him control of our daily decisions and trust in the foundational facts of the cross.

We don't do more in order to be like Christ. We seek Christ and then He will show us what to do.

The Root of It All

I started this chapter with the woes of gardening and my anti-green thumb. The themes of planting, farming, and trees are scattered throughout the Bible, but there's more to these themes than being something everyone can culturally relate to.

Trees are used for their symbolism. So much meaning lies behind how they are grown. In the previous chapter, we looked at Ephesians 3:17–18: “Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.”

Roots are fundamental in determining a tree's strength. It's not about the height of the tree or its width. It's not about the lushness of its leaves or the vast amount of fruit it produces. What matters the most is how deep and secure its roots are. How deep do *we* go?

When looking at this verse more intently, we find Paul is talking about the range and depth of the roots we have in Jesus. Christ's love is our strength and the true outpouring of our empowerment. We can try to root our power in ourselves, but when the winds come by force, without solid roots in our Savior, our efforts will snap. They will break into pieces and we will be left scavenging through piles of our limited self-sufficiency.

Jesus is our ultimate Root. He is the root of Jesse referenced in

Isaiah 11:10, “In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious” (ESV). The idea of resting in Christ creates an opportunity for us to rely on His capacity, which results in glory, not for ourselves but for God.

Our Father is also the wisest Gardener. He knows how to tend the soil. He knows what needs to be pruned. He knows what needs to be done in order to make us more grounded in Him, even if it pushes us outside our comfort zone.

Did you know harsh winds are actually necessary for trees to grow resilient roots and make them tower tall? Dennis Merritt Jones reported about an important experiment done in a biodome in the desert years ago. Scientists grew trees, but they would only grow to a certain height before they fell to the ground. Experts couldn’t figure it out until they realized they had created the perfect environment for growth, with the exception of wind. There was no outside force pushing against the trees to foster the roots’ growth, which in turn would have helped support the trees as they grew taller and matured.¹

Resistance is needed to grow resilience.

The hardships that come against us in life are used by our God, who knows the better way, if we allow Him to have control. God’s good purpose will win out. No pain will ever be wasted. Instead, our strength and determination will be forged through the fires as we trust that Jesus will not let us be consumed by the flames.

“But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit” (Jer. 17:7–8 NIV). We are evergreen with God’s blessing because our confidence is in Christ and our roots are firmly planted in His love. Life is not immune from trials or difficulties, but rough conditions

can produce resilience and rooted trust in God.

May we flourish into the strong women God is empowering us to be, no matter the soil, no matter how hard the winds blow.

Would you look at that? Maybe I enjoy gardening after all.

Stories from Sisters Who Believed HE Could

TERESA'S STORY:

Parenting is challenging. Nurturing children genuinely and selflessly requires more sacrifice and intention than I had anticipated. It requires constant outpouring, attentiveness, problem-solving, and flexibility. As the daily demands of motherhood slowly chipped away at my seemingly patient demeanor, it was uncomfortable and I didn't adapt well to this loss of independence.

God had gifted me parenthood, charging me to navigate this challenging journey with Him. But my irritability often opposed His work. I ignored the deeper problem and persisted while we decided to become foster parents. I exhausted myself in pouring out from my already taxed and limited love, which ironically made me centered on self.

By God's grace, I was allowed to burn out. I crumbled emotionally, becoming anxious and short-tempered. In weariness, resentment grew toward anyone who needed me. No amount of self-care could ease the exhaustion or warm the fire in my heart.

I brought my years of struggles to the cross, the safest place I know. Confessing my selfishness, I submitted myself to the gospel again. I grieved, repented, and received unlimited forgiveness. Ultimately, foster parenting remained at the altar. We discontinued a foster adoption and grieved that loss for more

than a year. It was a vulnerable place, sacrificing a ministry and feeling disqualified because of my weakness. Yet Jesus continually tended to my wounds, washed away my old attitudes, and renewed my mind. He also filled my heart.

Now I truly parent from a Christ-centered perspective. I acknowledge my need of God's love and power for every good and hard work. Having resolved to serve from God's heart and strength, I thrive in the empowerment of Christ. Beautifully, He has recommissioned the ministry of foster parenting and I know He'll enable me to do the hard work ahead sourced from His limitless love and strength. (*Teresa L. from Texas*)

Chapter 3

~~YOU BE YOU~~ YOU BE HIS

I have a pair of shoes in my closet that I absolutely love, but apparently they do not love me. They're the perfect black pair. You know, the ones that go with any outfit. I got them on sale even though they were a half size too small simply because I have a mental block against buying expensive shoes. My feet, however, are informing me I need to get over my hang-up.

Before purchasing these adorable shoes, I tried to rationalize how it could work. I wanted them to fit, so I told rational Becky to calm down because surely we could stretch them out. But even after years of trying to "break them in," they give me blisters every time I wear them and usually result in an aching back. My feet are smashed into shoes that don't fit because of my stubborn determination to make them work. Denying the size of my feet used to be worth the discomfort, but now I can no longer deal with the painful toll they take on my toes and body. These shoes deserve to be worn by someone else because (and I say this with sadness) they were not made for me.

Why am I telling you all of this? (1) I need to bite the bullet and buy new quality shoes, and (2) God sees us when we are trying to be something we are not and He wants to offer us freedom.

All too often we try to fit into a mold we were never made to fit. Whether it's shoes, clothes, personalities, lifestyles, beliefs, or choices, we can easily get wrapped up in the expectations of others, including ourselves.

That's why I understand the meaning behind the common expression *You be you* and its attempt to encourage us. I support part of this message. Nobody should try to force themselves into a mold their Maker did not craft for them. You can't be me and, no matter how hard I try, I will never be you. We are unique individuals. This is a healthy and holy stance for approaching life.

The red flags start to rise when we take this beautiful form of diversity, meant to glorify the many facets of God, and try to define ourselves according to our *own* desires and standards. Our identity stops being founded on Jesus and instead becomes tied to who we think we should be.

As we've established before, culture is trying to take Christ out of creation. Therefore, when people say, "You be you," they are not basing this sentiment on Scripture. Instead, this mentality gives us permission to be the best version of ourselves, not unique Spirit-filled reflections of God's Son.

But what is the best version of myself? This definition is extremely subjective, changing with the tide of society's trends and the opinions of others. When I think about all the things I wanted to be while growing up, they changed almost every year.

I had an undecided major in college until my junior year. When I graduated I still didn't know how God would use my Communications degree. I didn't know who I really was because I was just discovering the ways God designed me. And honestly, I'm still figuring out what God has planned as I grow older. "Being me" has been a journey, but being

me without remembering who I am in Jesus puts me in jeopardy.

The real risk of remaining in the *you be you* mindset without being centered on Christ is that our perspective can easily detach from biblical truths regarding our personhood. If we take the reins and determine who we should be without listening to God's definition, our beliefs and decisions can venture outside of His design for our lives. When we turn away from what God has for us, He's gracious and won't force us to become more like Jesus or acknowledge who we are in Christ. He may let us take the harder route, even if the path we choose is painful and perilous, before we finally acknowledge Him and come home.

I think about prodigal sons and daughters. The ones who choose to do life according to their own terms. As parents, we don't want to see them get hurt, especially when they are hurting themselves. In the Bible the prodigal son would rather have his father dead so he could receive his inheritance early, to do whatever he'd like with what was "rightfully his."

How often do we pursue our "entitlements" to passions, plans, and pleasures that promise happiness but actually prevent us from experiencing the presence of God who fills us with purpose and worth?

After wasting the inheritance given to him, the prodigal realizes what he's lost: not only possessions but also his relationship with his father and his identity as part of that family. The son has forgotten who he is—the child of a faithful, heartbroken father whose unconditional love has driven him to search the road daily for his son. The father desperately waits for his return like God longs for us to return to a relationship with Him.

Even before repentance enters the picture, the father still recognizes the value of his son because the prodigal remains connected to the father through the bond of family. Similarly, God sees us and has fashioned us to display His image and heart to the world—to represent His family well—even if we, as His children, can't see it yet ourselves. God knows us better than we know ourselves.

The Bible says, “For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory” (Rom. 8:29–30).

We were chosen and called to be like Christ because the Father has given us right standing with Himself through the cross. We were not created to be mediocre self-made versions of who we think we should be; we’ve been given God’s glory! And yet, when we drift away it gets harder and harder to hear our Father’s voice. Soon other voices begin to beckon us, and sometimes we listen to the wrong ones.

Listening to the Right Voices

There will never be scarcity in the number of voices telling us what to do.

We don’t have regular cable in our house. We have some techy thing my husband set up that lets us access certain channels we want to watch, which means we get to avoid the bombardment of ads and mass media. Praise God.

It’s exhausting watching television and its surge of voices flooding our minds with what they think we should do or become. Most care more about making a profit than profiting us for the good. They persuade and push, not provide and protect. With so many voices lingering in the air, we need to focus on God’s intentionality. His is the only one we should continually entertain and trust, and that includes not trusting ourselves.

I want to make it clear that I am not saying we shouldn’t ever trust our gut, although many times it’s actually the Holy Spirit giving us a needed nudge. I’m also not saying we don’t have knowledge about what is happening with our minds, hearts, and bodies. God has given us the ability to be sensitive to what is going on within so we can turn to Him for help

and wisdom. But we shouldn't always listen to our own voice, especially if it sounds like something the enemy would say or contradicts God's Word.

Other than Satan, we are often our own worst enemy. The critical voice inside our heads can make us rip ourselves to shreds. Negative self-talk seeps into our spirits, perhaps echoing someone's harsh words from our past. Regardless of how the voices got there, the effect is still the same. If we're not careful, we will begin to listen to what's being said, sometimes on repeat.

There's a difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is the literal "process, function, or power of perceiving sound."¹ Listening, on the other hand, involves considering what's been laid out on the table. It places interest in the words one is hearing. Listening can lead to welcoming ideas, inviting them into our hearts, minds, and ultimately our actions.

This distinction should make us pause. We may be hearing the voice of God, but are we actually listening? Are we taking in what God communicates through Scripture, the Spirit, and even other wise believers? Because while the Shepherd is calling out to His sheep, the enemy will be as wolfish as he can be. He will distract and discourage in an attempt to prevent us from following Jesus and representing His likeness in our own special ways.

One way Satan does this is by planting destructive seeds of jealousy in our minds, making us long for more *this* or at least some more of *that*. The enemy doesn't want us to be content with how we were created. He wants us to compare, critique, and compete with others. What better way to break down the body of Christ than to have the body tear itself apart?

Comparison is a covert compromiser of relationships. It's often silent but still has serious consequences. We compare jean sizes, jobs, families, spouses, houses, and things. But it goes even deeper. We can also play the comparison game with each other's God-given abilities, which are meant to develop the kingdom, not build barriers that harbor

bitter feelings. These gifts of the Spirit have been intricately woven into our being by God, but they end up becoming a threat or a discouragement when seen through the eyes of envy.

Ready for the good news? We have a way out of this prison of discontentment. We can break free from comparison by *practicing the art of celebration*.

When we're grateful for how others are made, we can celebrate their distinct makeup instead of wishing their brains, bodies, or circumstances were ours. We can come alongside our sisters and partner with them in their giftings. Creating an environment of collaboration is a sure way to stop comparison in its tracks.

God values celebration and collaboration over comparison. He says we are to "rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15 ESV). Ephesians talks about the beauty of diversity found within believers. Paul says, "He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love" (Eph. 4:16). Like a well-planned puzzle, celebration is a conduit through which the body of Christ shows joy-filled support and binds itself together in love. Celebration promotes unity and wholeness instead of partnering with the enemy's attempts to destroy and divide. Celebrating others shows we understand God's heart and we are choosing to listen to His voice above the rest.

Getting Rid of the Worst Cousins Around

You be you has a not-too-distant cousin named *You do you*. The cousins may sound cute together, but trust me, they make a nasty pair. Another way of describing them is *be who you want* and *do what you please*. For those of us who struggle with comparison or people-pleasing (raising my hand high!), this definition can be revised even more to say *be like them*

and *do what others want*. Either version of these popular phrases does not align with God's commands, and it certainly isn't found in the Bible.

Caring about what others think is a real struggle, or at least it was for me. The common saying "sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me" is just not true. Words wound. Accusations and insults hurt. It takes me a good chunk of time to get over harsh words that have been hurled in my direction.

But Jesus has helped me release these painful situations to Him. Although people may have a negative outlook about who I am, their opinions do not define me. I am not dependent on the approval of humanity. No one's opinion matters more than Christ's because nobody has done more for me than He has. We are forever indebted out of gratitude.

"But now, this is what the LORD says, He who is your Creator, Jacob, and He who formed you, Israel: 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!'" (Isa. 43:1 NASB). We are not our own. Yes, we always have free will, by which we are called to live as new creations. But the moment we decide to believe in Jesus and surrender our lives over into His love-scarred hands, we release our perceived control to God and invite Him into every part of our being.

As the apostle Paul says, "Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). That price was the sacrificed blood of Christ, a price the Father was willing to pay in order to have us by His side. It was the most expensive payment God could have ever paid because restoration cost Him the most precious thing—His beloved Son.

I have three boys. I make sure to hug them each day and call them my treasures. I memorize the looks in their eyes, the dimples on their cheeks, and the smiles on their faces. To think of willingly choosing to let one of them die for the sake of another is something I can't even fathom. I would rather die than have anything happen to them.

But God's love is just that—*unfathomable*. It surpasses understanding and goes past our knowledge. Why would God give up His Son, knowing the vast majority of the world would reject Him? Why would He allow His heart to break, recognizing many would not want to be in a relationship with Him? There is no logical answer but love.

They say love is blind, but God's eyes were wide open when He made the choice to sacrifice His Son. *He knew the cost to make us His.*

So many times we casually say God loves us. But do we really let those words sink in? Do we let the full weight of what it means to have someone want us so deeply soak into our very souls? Once we do, all we can do is lay down our lives and thank Him.

This kind of sacrifice was not done in order to empower us to do whatever we want or be whoever we want to be. God is interested in every detail of our lives and He will establish our steps as we rely on His guidance and leading. God's plans bring about a hope and future if we are willing to posture our hearts and ask, *Lord, who do You want me to be?*

You Were Made for This

Now that we've kicked *you do you* to the curb, how about we get to the good stuff. You were not made by accident. When the Creator of the universe crafted your being, He made you with purpose and precision, all the way down to the God-given longings and talents He built into your being. No one can represent God's image in the exact way you can.

Have you ever sat down and made a list of what makes you come alive? What brings you joy? Is there something others say you do well? It's wise to take note, because while we need to make sure our aspirations are aligned with our Maker's, God wants us to discover the desires He has placed within.

I was talking with my youngest boy, Ben, the other day and he said something that struck me to the core. A little context for you: my son is

an artist. And by artist, I mean he lives and breathes creating, drawing, painting, and sculpting. My cleaning skills can't keep up with his creativity. Most days our house looks like an art museum exploded.

Ben had a class project that needed to be completed, so I bought some yarn for him, thinking he could use it for hair or something similar. Before I knew it, he had used the yarn to make a perfectly shaped 3D Yoshi with eyes glued on it and everything. He was six, my friend. I couldn't do this as a fortysomething!

When he was almost finished making his creation, he looked up at me and said, "Mommy, am I a good artist?"

"Of course you are, buddy! You're an amazing artist. So talented."

He smiled and nodded. Then he stunned me. *"Yeah, I was made for this."*

I wanted to borrow some of his confidence. Could someone so young know exactly what he was made for, even before he could spell? His clarity shook me in the best way. What if we embraced how God has formed and fashioned us instead of excusing ourselves from participating? Can you imagine a world full of women who, in their own unique ways and with their specific gifts, boldly proclaim Christ? It would be a powerful sight to behold.

And yet, we often question how God has made us. We shake our heads when God tells us to step into our callings because clearly, He must be talking to the wrong girl. We see our flaws and imperfections as disqualifications or derailments from being used by God as part of His kingdom. We need to work on ourselves first before we go about God's work. And while, yes, God is constantly transforming us into the image of Christ, He does not have a prerequisite of perfection in order for us to walk in our purpose.

Think about Moses. He stammered in his speech. And yet, God called him to be a mouthpiece of freedom for Israel. Abram and Sarai (later renamed Abraham and Sarah) could not have children. And yet,

God promised they would be the ancestors of God's people who are too numerous to count. Ruth was a widowed foreigner. And yet, God called her to be in the lineage of Jesus, the Restorer who would make outcasts know they truly belong.

If God is doing the calling, He will do the equipping.

Fear may try to rob us of the joy we'll feel when we know we're right where God wants us to be. Fear is just a freezing agent. It keeps us from believing in God and His ability to use us as He wills. We don't need to worry about whether we can do it, whatever "it" may be. That is God's responsibility. The outcomes continually remain in His court.

Our Father doesn't ask us to be flawless in order to follow His plan. He doesn't see our weaknesses as something to be feared. He sees our willingness as something to be formed. Christ asked His disciples for a commitment to the commission and calling He'd placed on their lives.

We shouldn't ask "Who, me?" when we hear God's call. Why *not* you? Like Christ's early followers, when our Savior stretches out His arm, He invites us on the journey with the words *come and see*. What an adventure it will be to see what God will do through you!

The Beauty of Belonging

I want to revisit a verse from earlier in this chapter because I have a confession to make. The Bible says, "You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). I used to shy away from this verse until I realized the beauty behind it. While the thought of belonging to someone else besides ourselves may make us pause, the idea of having someone to belong to outweighs the hesitation. We are not foreigners to Jesus. We belong to the family of God. He knows us. He sees every part of our lives and hears every cry we send toward heaven. Nothing about us goes unnoticed by Him because we are significant to the Savior.

Like the father with his prodigal son, God cares more about us as children than the success of carrying out our callings. Likewise, similar to the father with his self-righteous son (the prodigal's brother), God doesn't love us because of what we do, even when we are doing things for Him. We are covered, protected, and provided for simply because we belong to the family of God. We can allow ourselves to be cared for by Jesus.

We can rely on our efforts in order to find a place to belong. We can try to create our own identity. Or we can allow Christ to gift us His. The terms "in Christ," "in the Lord," and "in him" occur 164 times in Paul's letters, making this the most common description in the Bible of a follower of Jesus.² We are united to Christ. When the Father looks at us He sees we belong to His Son, which means we will always have a place to call home. It also means we will inherit the benefits of being a child of God.

As an heir of the King, we have access to His kingdom. We are saints who can still struggle with sin, but we are also God's royal ones who reign through the righteousness of Jesus. Our spirits begin to shift away from the world's pleasures, passions, or possessions because all we need can be found in Christ.

There's nothing like knowing we belong to the Father. The price He paid is irreversible, which means it's a security that will carry on and last. May our hearts rest in this safe space.

We are God's.

He is ours.

Now *that* is a perfect fit.

Stories from Sisters Who Believed HE Could

SHAWNA'S STORY:

The train from the Upper East Side to Grand Central Station emptied like ants running from an intruder. The rush of weekday commuters consistently invigorated my aspirations and quickened my pace. My pride soared as my heels clicked along the sidewalk and through the building up to my thirtieth floor office with coffee in hand. *This is the life I was designed to live*, I thought to myself.

Five years later I exchanged my heels for sneakers and business lunches for toddler playdates. Meanwhile, my heart doubted the purpose of it all: my degree, my gifts, my significance. Joy waned as I constantly fought the belief that my life was on hold. Had I forfeited the life I was designed to live when I left the corporate world to stay home and raise children?

The constant desire for something else to satisfy my endless longings was exhausting. Over time and with abundant grace, God revealed that the life I truly desired was not found in pursuing performance as my identity or comparison as my assurance, but by faithfully embracing life one day at a time. God opened my eyes to see His purpose in the diverse gifts He entrusted to me to steward—not to build my own kingdom, but to build up His greater kingdom. With my unique gifts, experiences, and desires, I discovered that lasting joy comes from simply being His regardless of title or achievement.

What joy might we discover when we say yes to His unchanging purpose for us over our constant performance? As we say yes to what God has for us, may we uncover the beauty of each season, the diversity of our gifts, and the wonders of His everlasting love. It's the life we are all designed to live. (Shawna S. from Texas)

Chapter 4

~~BELIEVE IN YOURSELF~~ BELIEVE IN YOUR GOD

On a perfect summer evening, when everything seemed in control, I came home from my son's baseball practice only to discover our sweet golden retriever, Callie, was missing. No one knew how long she'd been gone, but our entire family frantically darted into the car, half of us without shoes. The sun was beginning to set, and coyotes commonly roamed the long stretches of cornfields behind our neighborhood. We knew our time to search was short.

The search started with just us, but soon family, friends, and many kind souls from our neighborhood were out looking for our dog before darkness took over the surrounding farmland. It seemed like an impossible feat. Neighbors said they saw Callie darting out into the cornfields, but no one had spotted her since.

My heart and stomach were in knots. Thinking about her alone at night made me feel sick. Callie was my dog. Golden retrievers love their families, but anyone who's owned a dog knows they usually pick one human as their favorite. Callie chose me. I was the blessed one she'd

look for and follow everywhere. Now my shadow was gone, leaving a gaping hole in our family.

For four hours, our boys and I called Callie's name into the night through the rolled-down windows of our SUV. At one point I pulled over, unable to stop myself from breaking down in front of my kids. A sweet stranger who lived in our neighborhood drove up behind me and asked if I was looking for the dog too. Once she saw we were "the family," she offered us her flashlight and promised to keep searching. She told us she couldn't imagine how we felt since they had a dog they really loved too.

Up until that night, we hadn't felt connected to our neighborhood. Being a special-needs family can be very isolating. But as the countless cars took to the streets, we saw the tangible outpouring of God's comfort from these people who were His hands and feet when we needed them most. Together we prayed, looked, and waited.

We didn't find Callie that night. Or the next.

No one reported a single sighting of our dog for two days, even though we did all we could. We put up posters, handed out flyers, drove on all the local roads, and walked through nearby woods.

We posted on social media, called animal shelters, and checked with vets. We put her bedding on the porch and laid dirty laundry across the front railing in hopes she would be drawn to a familiar smell. We walked our other dog where she went missing and let him mark to his heart's content. We tried everything, and still there was no word from anyone.

Truth be told, we were powerless to bring her back. We didn't know where she was, if she was alive, or what would make her come out of hiding.

No matter how much we tried or how much we believed our efforts would result in a happy ending, ultimately God would have to bring our girl home. Only the Maker could work out the impossible.

Have you been here too? Like me, have you whispered a desperate plea into the night—*God, only You can do this.*

At some point everyone will encounter an “only God” moment. It’s the eye-opening realization that we’ve done everything we can, and yet we can’t change what is happening. We’ve run out of ideas, resources, or skills and all that’s left is to trust and wait.

Yet in this uncomfortable space a necessary unraveling starts to take place. We begin to see how the message of this world doesn’t align with our actual experience. We try to put our trust in what we can do, but life shows us that believing in ourselves is not always enough. Depending on our dependability does not guarantee security or success. And while this disconnect makes us feel uneasy, God wants us to linger here in order to understand what’s true.

The Father knows we’ll confront raging fires and battles far too big for us to fight on our own, which means “believing in me” is not the best option. Culture’s idea of self-faith is fragile when played out in the long run. Walking with God is an *eternal* journey, so we need to make sure we are trusting in the One whose dependability will last.

When we believe the gospel, we are choosing to believe in something bigger than what we can produce. We exchange believing in *ourselves* for believing in our *God*. Following Jesus was never meant to be about having faith in the followers, and that includes following ourselves. If we start trusting in someone more than Christ for our worth, security, and empowerment, we will venture into unsteady, and often ugly, territory.

This isn’t anything new. Many early Christians struggled with aligning themselves to well-known disciples instead of tethering their hearts to Christ. Paul had some strong words to say about this.

When one of you says, “I am a follower of Paul,” and another says, “I follow Apollos,” aren’t you acting just like people of the world?

After all, who is Apollos? Who is Paul? We are only God’s

servants through whom you believed the Good News. Each of us did the work the Lord gave us. I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow. . . . For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 3:4–6, 11)

Our human tendency is to follow or believe in others before God Himself. But if we are serious about experiencing freedom in all its fullness, we need to be willing to ask a hard and honest question.

Who will we trust to work out the miracles and everyday moments in our lives?

The Maker, the made, or me?

The Source Determines the Course

As daughters of God, we have only two sources of empowerment we can choose from. We understand that we are given authority from someone else, usually from a higher power over us or a person with a higher standing. Or we choose to give ourselves the power, which means we believe we can create the power we need from within.

If we are living from source number two, *we are the responsible party*. We will carry the load that comes from maintaining control, even if it drains us dry. Responsibility is no small thing. Before we decide which source of empowerment to choose, we have to be willing to deal with the consequences of results resting on us. When things go wrong, we will be the one others and ourselves blame. This path inevitably leads to shame, which means it's the course Satan wants us to take.

However, when we operate from source number one, we'll view life through a liberating lens, and any present shame may sting but won't last. Dr. Tony Evans has a saying: "God is the source. Everything else is a resource."¹ The apostle Paul summarized this truth by saying, "For

from him and through him and to him are all things” (Rom. 11:36 ESV). We could have all the resources in the world to help us get the job done effectively, including our own personality and gifts from God. But without a constant source empowering us, these resources will dry up and we will eventually burn out.

Jesus doesn’t want this for us. He wants to transition our spirits from residing in a parched land to thriving in the promised land—a place where our power comes from the living water He provides.

So we need to make a choice. We’ve been invited to become gospel-centered women, not women centered around self. Our faith cannot be shaken when Christ is our foundation because overcoming depends on what God has done on our behalf. This is complete foolishness to the world. They cannot grasp how trusting in God can bring confidence, since we lose a sense of control.

But believing we are in control does not mean we are sovereign. We may think we need to maintain control in order to make things happen, but no human can hold on long enough to last a lifetime. Eventually, our sore hands will need to loosen their grip.

What’s So Bad About Believing in Yourself?

Can we pause here for a second? It’s really important I clarify myself so you don’t think I’m saying something I’m not. When I say we shouldn’t believe in ourselves, I’m not saying we can’t be proud of what we’ve done or give ourselves a well-deserved pat on the back. *We can be proud without being prideful.* I tell my boys I’m proud of them. I let them know I see the hard work they put into making things happen, as does God. He is proud of His kids like we are proud of our own.

However, in the words of Paul, we can plant, plow, and sow, but God is the One who makes it grow. The Bible tells us there’s a reward for working together with Christ, and that reward will present itself as a ripe

harvest. Even if the harvest isn't what we expected or it looks different than we hoped, we can rejoice when blessings, dreams, and God's plans come to pass.

But many followers cross a critical line.

The Bible contains numerous stories of people doing well trusting God, but then they started placing their faith in their own performance rather than their Father's. David, Samson, Solomon, Moses, Sarah, and Abraham, just to name a few, all let their flesh put *self* as the cornerstone of their confidence instead of the Creator. I could easily add myself to the list of sisters and brothers who have attempted to take over God's job. Being a human called to holiness is *hard*. That's why we need Jesus.

Culture will continue to be the cheerleader for taking matters into our own hands because proclaiming belief in ourselves resonates with society's (and Satan's) agenda. Meanwhile, God is the One who is pushed out of the picture instead of the One we push into.

Our walks as Christ-empowered women can be summarized as such: *we need to be diligent and dependent on God at the same time*. We can try our hardest and also trust God's handiwork. This mindset will help us stay in balance as we live out what we believe.

Is Knowledge Really Power?

Sir Francis Bacon once said, "Knowledge is power."² Even though this statement may have good motives behind it, knowledge by itself lacks the transformative punch. God's Word makes it clear that raw knowledge does not produce saving belief. James, the earthly brother of Jesus, wrote to the early Jewish believers saying, "You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror" (James 2:19). I remember reading this for the first time and thinking, "Wait, this has to be a typo. Demons believe in God too? How is my belief different from theirs?" Praise God, the difference is night and day.

Knowledge takes root in the *head*. Belief takes root in the *heart*.

We can know something is true and choose not to trust it. Our enemy and his demons know about God. They recognize Christ's authority, but they rebel instead of repenting. They sin instead of submitting. They don't trust God, even though God is the standard for all truth.

Knowledge is only powerful if belief backs it. Instead of only knowing about God, we need to know Him personally and rely on Him for everything, ranging from salvation to sanctification. When we believe in the character and capability of God, our actions will inevitably follow. As the title of this book proclaims: we believe HE can, so we step out in faith and do!

But sometimes our actions get lost in translation. James encountered a problem in early believers that still echoes within our church walls. Because of intense persecution, early believers had a hard time backing their beliefs with their behaviors.

The main message in the book of James is that faith needs to be fleshed out or it's dead. This is something I'm very familiar with. For the first fifteen years of my walk with God, my faith was flatlined. I'd rather clothe myself in popularity than Christ. Being liked was more important than being His. But then the emptiness inside my soul grew. No matter how many troubled relationships I was in, no matter how many drinks I downed at the bar, no matter how high the grade I received, nothing could make me believe I was worth being loved. Only Jesus could show me that by believing in Him I also had the opportunity to believe I was valuable as God's child. Beloved. Chosen. Important. Called.

Believing in God's opinion about His children helps us transition from having an unsteady identity to an unbreakable one. As we get to know God more, we fall more in love with Him. And as we spend more time with Him, we start to imitate Him, which makes us look different from those who do not have a relationship with Christ.

Possessing knowledge about Jesus is not the same as truly knowing Jesus and being changed by His personhood. This tangible transformation testifies to a faith that's truly alive.

When Belief Gets Misused . . .

Consider highlighting these next two sentences. *We are not believers in the power of our actions. We are believers in the power of our God.*

Sometimes the idea of belief gets misused because we make it our fault if something we are trusting God for doesn't come to fruition. Maybe you've been told you don't have "enough faith," insinuating that if something you're trusting God for doesn't happen as you expected, you're somehow to blame. Let's challenge this line of thinking.

Wouldn't this mindset be focused on self-dependence again, placing pressure on us to produce the right amount of faith needed to yield the miracle or make God's hand move? Isn't this a different version of salvation through works, except this time we are working toward extravagant faith?

The last time I looked, God was in charge of what unfolds.

Think about Jesus' disciples. These men walked, talked, slept, and broke bread with the Messiah. They saw daily wonders and witnessed the Word of the Lord change lives, including their own. Yet they doubted. They struggled in trusting Christ with their fears, even though they experienced His physical presence.

I think this may be why Jesus said to "doubting" Thomas after His resurrection, "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me" (John 20:29). It's far easier to believe what we see with our own eyes. But believing in Christ without touching His scarred hands, that is a choice that deems us blessed.

Ephesians 2:8–9 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of

works, so that no one may boast” (ESV). Ultimately, faith is a gift from God that benefits our sanctification—our ongoing growth in Christ—not just our salvation. We don’t possess the ability to believe, or have faith, without the softening work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. God draws us to Himself. He gives us the spiritual gift of faith so we can choose to believe truth and obey our King. Everything starts and ends with God, including our belief.

I was reading to my boys before bed the other night, and we were enjoying *Thoughts to Make Your Heart Sing* by Sally Lloyd-Jones. The reading was based off an important verse in Mark, “I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). Children’s books can be the most profound. The author wrote, “Our strong God is the one who rescues us—not our strong faith. Because faith isn’t just you holding on to God. It’s God holding on to you.”³ When Jesus called His disciples, He didn’t require perfect faith to follow Him. He asked for willing people who were learning to believe because God’s heart had taken hold of theirs.

Let’s dive a little deeper here. When Jesus said to His disciples, “O ye of little faith,” what did He mean? It’s likely He was not referring to the quantity but the quality of their faith, mainly their lack of faith in Him despite what they’d seen Him accomplish. This leads to an important realization.

God cares more about *surrendered* faith than the size of our faith. Instead of calling us to believe bigger, perhaps we are created to believe in the bigness of our God.

The fact is, Jesus healed and performed miracles for those who believed and those who didn’t. Not everyone who experienced a miracle decided to follow Him. God is uncannily gracious like that. Even after people chose to become His disciples, Jesus did not ask them to have enormous faith because bigger is not always better in the kingdom of God. What really matters in our relationship with Christ is our daily faithfulness to Him and our belief in what He is capable of doing. Jesus

didn't say to muster up enough faith. Instead, He referenced the mustard seed, one of the smallest seeds known in that point of history.

"If you had *faith even as small as a mustard seed*, you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible" (Matt. 17:20). It's not about gathering large amounts of faith; it's about the presence of the seed and its ability to impact our trust in God as He moves. Small faith can shift mountains. The tiniest amount of belief is enough for God to do what *He* wills.

Another aspect that is overlooked when people are told they don't have enough faith is the reality of God's sovereignty. I've struggled with chronic pain, which has even landed me in the hospital. I asked for prayer and received tons of support when lying in that cold hospital bed. But there were moments when I wondered what I'd done wrong to not receive the healing God has promised. God didn't put those thoughts there; well-intentioned people in my life did. They asked me if I had sin, unforgiveness, unresolved trauma, or lies I was believing about my identity in Christ. They implied that if these things existed, then that's why I wasn't being healed.

Can trauma and our belief systems affect our bodies? Absolutely. Can healing happen once God has addressed those deep wounds? Definitely. Can we even be challenged to believe God can do the miraculous? Of course! But putting a one-size-faith-fits-all expectation on those who are experiencing unwanted symptoms or other kinds of personal challenges can generate an atmosphere of shame, especially if they are following through with advice that's been given to them. Personally, I began to think *not* receiving a miracle was my fault. I wondered whether my mustard seed of faith was as good as others'. Maybe I wasn't loved as much as they were?

This is a dangerous line of thinking because it gives way to the enemy's voice. The second we begin to question the love of our Father, we need to check our thoughts because they aren't coming from heaven.

They're coming from hell. Satan wants to pile shame on top of our pain, hoping we turn away from God by doubting His ability or care.

Saying someone is not healed or delivered because of their lack of faith is a judgment I am not comfortable making because I am not the all-knowing God. I've seen God work the miraculous and do the impossible. I believe He can do it. But I also believe He is loving and faithful to His followers no matter what happens on this side of heaven.

Here's a truth I pray will bring you as much freedom as it has me: *We cannot earn God's healing.*

Just like we can't earn God's love, we can't prove to God why we deserve healing. God's heart is already turned toward healing His kids and He will do it—it's just a matter of when.

Healing does come at a cost, but it isn't a price *we* had to pay. Jesus paid for our restoration through His death, which means any type of healing we may experience on earth—whether it's the healing gift of salvation, relational healing, physical healing, or others—occurs because of Christ's sacrifice, not our striving. This is the backdrop we need when reading stories like Job's.

Job is often an unsettling narrative for various reasons. He lost everything—his family, health, possessions, security. This wasn't done because he was sinning but because he was righteous. God allowed Job to be shaken by suffering because “there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil” (Job 1:8 ESV). These are words from the mouth of God. Job did nothing to merit the suffering he endured.

And yet, Job's response to loss was one God approves of and understands. Throughout the book, God's beloved servant rode waves of grief, doubt, and conviction. He was honest with God. He was emotional and upset. But he continued to turn his face toward the Lord, even in the middle of the most gut-wrenching suffering a human can bear. Job's faith was purified and perfected because of the pain.

What can we say to this? Well, Job's three friends tried to say a lot. They wanted to reason with Job and find a *why* for his suffering. But they actually ended up misunderstanding and misusing truth regarding hardship. God was allowing Satan to mess with Job not because of Job's sin. He used Job's suffering in order to make him more like the coming Savior.

Christ's sole mission was to bring about His Father's will above all else. And what is God's ultimate will? To save the relationship between humanity and Himself, no matter what it takes. Jesus' prayer to avoid death in the final hours of His life was not passed over because He lacked belief. It was answered differently because God saw the bigger plan of redemption at hand. God's sovereignty will always reign.

Blessed Is She Who Believes . . .

I'd love to finish the story about our dog.

On the morning of the third day my oldest son woke me up out of a quasi sleep very early. He grabbed my hand and said, "Mom, the sky is orange but look! There's a rainbow." I stumbled my way to the window and saw the most unique sky I have ever seen. Orange clouds lingered in the air above the houses, and an entire rainbow arched across the sky, covering the length of the cornfields where our Callie went missing. As the tears began to well up, I remembered how the Lord keeps His promises and I knew He would remain faithful to our family. In the sacredness of that moment, my broken heart decided once again to believe.

I got in the car and searched with my boy and our other dog, Jack. We looked around for two hours with no sight of Callie. I came back home confused. I thought the rainbow was a sign from God that I would find her then and there. Instead, I returned feeling like I was torturing myself by continuing to look for her.

Then it started to rain—and desperation set in.

I told the kids to get their shoes and coats on because we were going to ask the nearby farmers if we could search their barns. Then my mom called my husband. She had a nudge from God to go look for Callie one more time out by the cornfield where she initially went missing. When she arrived on the scene, she was shocked. There was Callie, sitting near the road in the cornfield behind our street, the exact area the rainbow arched over that morning! Perhaps God in His kindness was showing us where He would lead our girl home. My mom told my husband, Madison, to head to the field and he sprinted out the door.

Meanwhile, Callie was still in survival mode. Even though she knew my husband, she darted from him and ran onto our street. Madison called me in the pouring rain. I could barely hear him say “Get outside on the porch! Callie is coming!” I sprinted out front, hoping and holding my breath.

As I looked across the street, my heart jumped. There she was! Standing still, frozen in fright. I’m sure she smelled her family and recognized where she was, but she was too scared. She looked at us cautiously while I got down on my knees and gently called her name.

Dear God, please don't let her run again, I prayed silently.

She stared. She listened. She took a few steps in our direction before starting to run in between our house and our neighbor’s.

Jesus, no! I continued calling her name.

At the last second, she made a sharp turn toward us, running right into my arms. I gripped my girl tightly and helped her get inside as the tears poured uncontrollably down my face. Our family has never cried so hard in our lives. God had reunited us! He was the One who called our Callie home.

What a faithful King we serve. What a capable God we have. He makes the impossible possible and the miraculous a reality. So much so that our spirits can sing *only God*.

We don’t need to have faith in anyone else when we have a Father

who loves us and fights for us. We don't need to believe in ourselves if our God is eternally on our side. He is for us, with us, and in us.

We can trust His forever faithfulness.

Let's finish with one of my favorite verses on belief. It applies to Mary after she found out she was going to carry the Savior of the world in her womb. Her reaction to God's promises brought her praise from Elizabeth, her cousin. Elizabeth exclaimed, "*And blessed is she who believed* that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Luke 1:45 *ESV*). Even when others thought she was lying or crazy, Mary held on to God, knowing He was holding on to her. She didn't strive to accumulate more faith in God; she practiced surrendered faith. After the angel told Mary what was to come, she responded by saying, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true" (Luke 1:38).

Oh, that we'd all have a heart like Mary.

Blessed is she who believes in her God.

Be blessed, my friend.

Stories from Sisters Who Believed HE Could

JODI'S STORY:

"God, help me today. I don't have the strength." Alone in my king-sized bed, these words turned into my prayer. With my pen in hand, my journal became my safe haven to express to God all the pain and hurt as I struggled to keep my head above water from the waves of grief from my divorce.

There were so many emotions: the intense sadness that weighed heavily on my heart because my kids would grow up in a divorced home, the deep rejection and brokenness I felt from the

one who promised to love me forever, and the great shame that haunted my mind as I thought about my failed marriage. These overwhelming feelings were like a weight on my body, making it hard to do simple things like get out of bed and face the day. On top of it all, I was trying to comfort my hurting children while dealing with the greatest heartbreak of my life. It's no wonder I was tired and exhausted.

With tears rolling down my face, I cried out to God, asking for His help. My own strength wasn't enough to weather this storm. I needed to turn to the One who could calm the raging emotions in my heart and mind.

The world tries to tell us if we believe enough in ourselves, we can conquer anything. But I'd come to a crossroads in my pain where this wasn't true. I needed to depend on God's strength, comfort, and love to get through the grief. Learning total dependence on God was a beautiful gift in the middle of my brokenness, and God wants to do the same for us all! He desires to strengthen and comfort us in our unexpected storms. The real question is, Do we believe God is enough? (*Jodi R. from California*)

Chapter 5

~~SPEAK YOUR TRUTH~~ SHARE YOUR STORY, BUT SPEAK *THE* TRUTH

I didn't realize I experienced sexual assault until years after we broke up. I thought being in a relationship with a guy meant it was okay to go to the very edge of the line without physically sleeping with each other, even if in my spirit I didn't feel like it was right. I didn't want to be rejected or cast in a negative light.

So when my boyfriend at the time asked me to take another step toward sex, I decided losing my purity bit by bit was better than losing him. He wasn't mean or aggressive, just ongoing and persistent. I chose to not say *stop* even though I wanted to. Sometimes I tried to convince myself I was overreacting. Other times I stayed silent, which I found out later did not equal consent.¹

Technically, I saved myself until marriage, but only by a hairline thread. I could claim the "true love waits" tune as my own, but felt buried in inner condemnation and self-hate. The gift of sex with my

husband was tainted by my past, affecting the way I loved myself and my body. But God had already started to align my feelings and thoughts regarding what had happened with who I truly was in Him.

After beginning to walk with Jesus more closely in college, I chose to open up more and shared my experiences with close friends, which was a big step in my healing journey. They helped me realize I didn't need to say yes to sexual acts when I didn't want to or because the world portrayed these actions as normal in relationships. God wanted to protect me and pour His love into the wounded parts of my spirit hiding in the shadows of shame.

One day the Lord gave me a visual of how He really saw me. On a beautiful, sandy beach we were walking barefoot, laughing as the waves rolled gently against our feet. When I looked down at my clothes I saw I was wearing a flowing white linen dress with an intricate emerald necklace. My hair was wavy and long and flying gracefully in the wind. In a word, I felt *free*.

Years later, as my fiancé (now husband) and I were picking out a passage to read at our wedding, we landed on Isaiah 61:1–3. We met while doing missions work and felt that it would be the perfect fit for the life of ministry we wanted to lead as a couple and family. This passage also echoed the words of Jesus Himself when He announced the beginning of His earthly public ministry. Only recently have I seen the significance in the verses just beyond the beginning of our wedding passage—Scripture that eradicates the lies remaining from the aftermath of sin and pain. “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the *garments of salvation*; he has *covered me with the robe of righteousness*, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a *bride adorns herself with her jewels*” (Isa. 61:10 ESV).

The Word of God confirmed the picture Jesus had given me—a pure bride, covered in white, with Christ's righteousness as her wardrobe. No

stain or blemish on her garment because she has been rescued from disgrace and is redeemed by the blood of her Bridegroom. The truth of who we are as God's beloved is what allows our hearts and spirits to live in liberty.

Sharing our stories is a necessary ingredient in experiencing healing, because once we bring to light what happened in the darkness, whether it be sexual assault or any other sin that's been committed against or by us, we disarm the enemy's weapons of isolation and condemnation. But hear me when I say that sharing our stories is not *the* transforming agent in our healing. "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'" (John 8:31–32 ESV).

Abiding in the Word and knowing the truth sets us free! It isn't *my* truth or any other person's truth that brings the freedom our souls crave. Yes, we can learn from others and gain wisdom from the experiences others have had, particularly when we've suffered through the same heart-breaking situations. But if we long to heal at the deepest level possible, we need to let *the* truth permeate through the lies, reaching within to the parts of us that are processing who we are to God, ourselves, and others.

The truth of the gospel rescued and healed me. And it can do the same for all God's daughters.

What Is Truth?

The question of what truth really is has been asked throughout the ages, but one scene in history stands out and is documented in Scripture.

Pontius Pilate was questioning Jesus before His crucifixion. The Jewish religious elite had finally gotten their way and were hoping to put Jesus to death through the workings of Rome's harsh governing system. The Pharisees couldn't handle Christ's existence any longer with His countercultural teachings and "unclean" methods of ministry among

the people. Plus, this man had claimed to be the Son of God with the ability to forgive sins, heal the sick, and cast out demons. Christ's authority was threatening the perceived notion of their own.

It is here that we see this famous question asked by Pilate. After Pilate asked if Jesus was the King of the Jews,

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to *bear witness to the truth*. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "*What is truth?*" After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him." (John 18:37–38 ESV)

Pilate tried releasing Jesus *at least* four times. This historically cruel and corrupt governor who was known for his brutality in carrying out orders was cautious in sentencing the "King of the Jews."² Why? What was so different about this seemingly harmless man?

The fact that Pilate was conflicted in the presence of Jesus shows the authority of Christ and His character, but more specifically, what happens when someone stands in the presence of absolute Truth.

After finding out that Jesus had supposedly called Himself the Son of God, the Bible says Pilate "was even more afraid" (John 19:8 ESV). Could he have seen a foreshadowing of the reversal of their roles, when Pilate would one day be placed on trial before God? Pilate's wife sent word to him while Pilate was in the process of passing judgment, asking her husband not to have anything to do with "that righteous man" because she was distressed by a dream she had about Jesus (Matt. 27:19 ESV). In response, Pilate visibly washed his hands before the crowd demanding Jesus' execution and said, "I am innocent of this man's blood. The responsibility is yours!" (Matt. 27:24).

In all these accounts, there's a spectrum of reactions to Christ. From

Pilate's wavering stance to the religious leaders' hardened hearts, when a person encounters Truth, a decision must be made. *Will we reject it, ignore it, fear it, or submit to Truth's voice?* While we as God's children aren't passing judgment on the King of kings, we do have the choice to react to the truths God reveals and speaks to our hearts. What is truth? Truth changes every aspect of our lives, which explains why we often do not receive it well.

Our culture has an interesting relationship with truth. People say they want it, but they also want truth that doesn't cause offense or inconvenience. Having a subjective definition of truth is much safer when society's opinions are what counts. This is a dangerous decision, however, when applied to walking out our faith. We may begin to fashion God into our desired form instead of letting God do the transforming.

J. I. Packer wrote, "A half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth."³

We can soak up half-truths all day, but they don't heal the eternal parts of our souls. We can share our stories and speak *our* truth until we are out of breath, but if we don't use the Bible as *the foundation* for truth, complete healing will come to a halt. The world and the enemy are full of partial truths that mask Christ as the Healer. Viewing any untruths in the light of God's Word will clearly illuminate their cracks.

Take the title of this book as a prime example.

By removing one letter from the sentence *She Believed SHE Could, So She Did*, we go from being self-focused to God-focused. We are able to look at a saying that didn't sit quite right and realize the reason is that it's a half-truth. As we discussed earlier, strength is meant to be sourced in God, not our self-made grit. Diligence and hard work may be biblical, but doing it independently from our Creator will only result in frustration and burnout.

Half-truths like *speak your truth* end up leading women down a path that will ultimately make them crumble under a weight they were

never meant to carry. It's not all relative. There is an objective and absolute reality. It isn't based on our ever-changing feelings, thoughts, and experiences, and it certainly isn't based on popular trends. Myths masquerading as facts will make women feel lost instead of liberated. But truth grounded in love will care for the soul the way it was meant to be mended.

Speaking *the* Truth in Love No Matter What

Take a few moments to look on social media and you will see it's a hot mess. People want others to know what they believe and why they can't possibly be wrong about their opinions. They want their voices heard, even if it means hurting others through unkind words. *Speaking your truth* has become the anthem of our days.

The idea of absolutes, of black-and-white answers with little room for gray, makes people feel uncomfortable and sometimes can be viewed as unloving. How can we say we know what's definite when so many opinions and perspectives fill our planet? Isn't it prideful to say you know the only way? Couldn't this mindset hurt relationships or your opportunities to talk to others about Christ?

In order to answer these questions, I have to ask another. When did speaking the truth imply comfortableness? Who said we had to avoid difficult conversations in order to be loving? Certainly not Jesus.

Right after the Lord tells His disciples to love one another, He says, "If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first. The world would love you as one of its own if you belonged to it, but you are no longer part of the world. I chose you to come out of the world, so it hates you" (John 15:18–19).

The world hates those who go against its grain. It won't favor those having difficult conversations with family and friends. Pushback will happen and it may be severe. In the Western world, the pushback we

experience is less physical than the persecution felt in countries where following Christ is punishable by death.

But we are all called to mature into the mind and likeness of Jesus, and then share the truth with others. “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:15 ESV). In the previous verses Paul addressed believers who shouldn’t be childish anymore, like those tossed back and forth between man-made philosophies or the false teachings of the age, which are appealing and cunning.

Rather, we are told to speak truth with love. The two go together. Love is our motivation. Truth is our foundation. Together they balance each other out in perfect harmony.

When we love someone and we know what will help them, is it loving to withhold our words because we don’t want to offend them? Yes, we must rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us in knowing what and when to speak. But if we have access to the Healer and do not give people the chance to receive His restorative balm, is this done out of fear or love? This is a conversation Jesus and I have often, and He convicts me of choosing myself instead of what’s beneficial for others. I can struggle with being rejected by others, but because I love them, I’d rather they reject me over rejecting God.

Love also does not mean accepting what everyone else says (including our pastors and leaders) as the gospel truth. There is only one gospel that unites us as believers, and we must make sure we are grounded in its fullness. Without truth, love would just be laissez-faire affections going with the ebb and flow of everyone’s beliefs. This kind of love would be more concerned with placating than pastoring.

It can be tempting in our churches to focus on powerful testimonies and meaningful stories, but when we shift away from applying Scripture to the stories we tell, we end up giving watered-down truths, or worse yet, a watered-down gospel. Partially watering a soul will still leave the

soil dry. We need the entirety of God's unwavering narrative and character, not just snippets that fit our faith or worldviews, in order to quench a person's thirst for truth.

When believers only welcome versions of Christ that fit their lifestyle and wants, they are actually allowing their half-truths to make a half-Christ.

They'll load up on a loving, gracious Jesus. They'll take the Savior who's a friend. But truth-speaking, take-a-stand-on-the-Word-even-if-the-world-hates-you Jesus gets left on the shelf. Standing up for the real gospel was never easy for the disciples, and it won't be easy for us. Comfort was never promised for a life made to stand out.

Why We Need Truth

We all have experiences that need to be validated and understood. When someone shares their story from their perspective and discloses what they're feeling, it shouldn't be dismissed. This is a huge part of showing compassion, listening, and giving love. But sharing your story does not downplay the existence of absolute Truth. Both can coexist at the same time. However, in order to experience the Lord's healing, our beliefs need to be held next to the inspired Word of God. You can share your story but also cling to what's true.

Let's say you have a neighbor. She's great, except anytime you walk outside during the day, she tells you it's night. You look up, you feel the sun, you see the light. But she is convinced it's dark. The world would try to convince you that both of you are entitled to your own "truth"—that one person's reality isn't always right. Meanwhile, nature literally shows us how absolutes exist. Nighttime earth faces away from the sun, daytime earth faces toward the sun. It's either day or night in your neighborhood because they can't happen at the same time.

To say there are no absolute truths is to deny how our physical

world works. The Bible tells us how the seen points to what is unseen. If absolute truths exist in the physical world, they exist in the spiritual even more.

Ironically, declaring truth as something that can encompass everyone's beliefs will only end up making nothing true at all. This would create a world that is confused and hurting and does not know where to look for direction. Sounds familiar, right?

Again, there is room for subjective realities in our lives because of our different experiences, circumstances, and pasts, but we need to submit our processing to Jesus—who calls Himself *the way, the truth, and the life*. We shouldn't be afraid to point out the undercurrent of truth in all we do and see. Even those who don't realize it yet need a reliable foundation to walk on. We need the steady Rock that won't break.

Okay, I didn't want to share this story, but I will, even though it's embarrassing. I hate buying shorts. I don't know whose body they use to model shorts, but it definitely isn't mine. Well, I went shopping at Walmart last summer and to my shock they had super cute navy blue shorts that looked good on me and didn't break the bank. Walmart for the win. Or so I thought.

The next day I put on my cute new shorts and drove my boys to day camp. I got out of the car and talked to their counselor as other parents dropped off their kids. Then I went to the gas station and filled up the car and completed another errand before heading over to my mom's house to say hi. When I arrived at her house I gave her a hug, told her about my Walmart win, and proceeded to sit down until Mom pointed something out to me.

"Do you know there's a hole in the back of your shorts?"

"What?!" Well, no, Mother, I did not. In fact, I was feeling quite sassy in my shorts as I ran *all around town* that morning. From my point of view, everything seemed fine. But in reality, I had a three-inch rip down the center seam line of my rear. Bless it, Jesus.

Thank God for my mom who wasn't afraid to tell me the truth. I can only imagine how many innocent bystanders would have been forced to see what they didn't want to see. I'm grateful for those who speak up and say what is true, even if it will make others feel uncomfortable or upset. As long as it is done in love and is led by the Holy Spirit, we can be glad others are bold enough to tell *the* truth versus the half-truth people want to hear. We can ask God to make us those kind of truth tellers as well.

The Path Toward Real Healing

Searching for spiritual and emotional healing can be tricky. We can experience *temporary* healing through man-made programs and ideas, but *total* healing can only come through Jesus Christ. If we pile on Band-Aids to cover a serious wound but don't clean out the bacteria, an infection can fester beneath the surface. Unfortunately, I know this from a physical, mental, and emotional standpoint.

When I first became a mama, our birth experience was nothing like we expected. We wanted to be prepared and brought our eighteen-page birth plan to the hospital, to which the nurses smiled (and I'm sure thought "bless your heart"). They didn't give it a second glance.

After twenty-seven hours of intense labor and three hours of pushing, our baby boy was still wedged inside of me and both of our vitals started to drop. The next thing I knew, I was being rolled off to an emergency C-section and within half an hour we had our son in our hands. But recovery for me did not go smoothly.

My incision site became infected, and I had to be reopened and packed with gauze two times a day until my large cut closed. It was extremely painful, but crucial for repairing my body the way it needed. Little by little, from the inside out, with care and precision, my cut closed and the infection ceased. Band-Aids wouldn't do for this kind of deep wound. Now my scar tells the story of powerful healing done right.

Jesus wants to remove anything that threatens to infect our hearts, including lies and unbiblical beliefs. He doesn't want His daughters relying on half-truths that will leave their souls aching. God wants our whole being healed and free, where blame is banished and fear is expelled. Christ has more for us, more than this world and its inferior forms of empowerment and healing can offer.

Besides rooting our identity in God's love and reacquainting ourselves with the realities of God's Word, healing can also be found within community. When we share our brokenness with others, the beauty of recognition and restoration is on the other side. Finding those we trust, who will tend to our wounded parts and carry us back to Jesus, is as necessary as air. Christ-centered fellowship fosters freedom, as fellow sisters say *I've been there too*.

Sharing leads to caring, which then can help us conquer.

The enemy of our souls wants women to remain blind to the healing they could have. Many times, we can't see what's wrong unless a mirror is held in front of us, and even then, we may miss inner injuries because we can't see them. But having other women in our lives who know us and have suffered through similar situations brings a life-giving power that encourages us to take the next steps toward the treatment we need, especially when we can't see clearly or we don't feel like we have the strength to move on. God uses other people as a physical expression of His friendship and His guidance going forward. When we don't have the faith, God gives us sisters who will have faith for us.

Healing is done hand in hand.

Scripture says we overcome the enemy by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony (Rev. 12:11). We need to share our stories not just because it helps us remember the faithfulness of God but because it stops Satan's schemes. Instead of allowing the enemy to sequester us into pockets of shame, we refuse to stay silent and share our stories for the benefit of our spirits and others. We open our mouths and

speaking God's promises over our past, present, and future. Meanwhile, we are communally drawn closer to Christ. We defeat the devil and declare the truths of the gospel each time we share our story and speak *the* truth.

And what is the truth for you, dear reader?

No matter what's been done to you, no matter what's been said, no one can take away the truth about who you are to Jesus. He's adorned you with radiant righteousness and calls you part of the church, His spotless bride. The scars He has on His body testify to the depths of His love. You cannot measure the grace He pours out over your life or the healing He wants for your heart. Let His precious truth wash over your spirit in the most tender places today.

Stories from Sisters Who Believed HE Could

AMY'S STORY:

Learning the difference between God's truth and the world's truth has been a journey for me. Growing up, I lived in eighteen different homes, and at the age of eleven, I was sexually exploited. My unaddressed pain led me to believe many lies about who I was and whether God really loved me. The world's lies, which were masked as truth, kept me isolated from God and the life-giving community I desperately needed.

In God's great faithfulness, He pursued me and met me where I was. He taught me the value of spending time with Him and His promises for my life. Trauma has a way of distorting all that's good and true, but God has a way of restoring and rebuilding beautiful back into the lives of His daughters.

After a life-changing trip to Africa, I founded a nonprofit that empowers the rescue and restoration of exploited women

and children. Ten years later, more than a thousand lives have been miraculously changed.

Friend, your history may have marked you, but it is not authorized to label you. It doesn't matter what other people have called you, and it doesn't even matter what you called yourself. There's only one who has the right and authority to tell you who you are—God. His truth is the only truth that matters!

So what can we say to ourselves when we feel overwhelmed by life or heartache from our past? Here are three truths worth remembering:

1. Remember *who God is*.
2. Remember *who you are in Christ*.
3. Remember, *God's truth is greater than your own*.

May we experience the freedom that comes from speaking *God's truth* over every aspect of our lives through the Word of God. He is always with us. He hears us when we cry out to Him. And He has promised never to leave. (*Amy K. from Ohio*)