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# Unsettle Me

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UNSETTLE ME: A JOURNEY OF FAITH REFINED IN COLLEGE

by  
Alaina King Anderson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
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Approved by

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*This book is dedicated to the college student.  
May God teach you more every day about Himself,  
the One whose image you bear,  
and about the mystery of Jesus Christ,  
the One whose love never fails.*

ABSTRACT  
LANIE KING ANDERSON: Unsettle Me  
(Under the direction of Dr. Ben McClelland)

This book is about my journey of faith in Jesus Christ during my undergraduate studies at the University of Mississippi. I read memoirs about others' spiritual journeys and studied their writing styles and storytelling methods before beginning my own memoir about my moments of spiritual unsettledness in school. I am convinced that the college experience, if whole-heartedly embraced, changes people. As a student, I have grown personally, cognitively, socially, and culturally in four years, such a short time for such change and growth. But I have especially grown spiritually because of my experiences in college. Questions have arisen about my faith that do not have easy answers, maybe no answers at all. I have learned more about why I need a Savior and I have learned that I have so much *more* to learn about my Savior. I have changed my major to pursue my God-given passion rather than what I thought I was "supposed to do" to be successful. My idea of church has also transformed into something larger than the building itself. This book reflects on those pivotal moments of my faith in college. In conclusion, I have found that, if I am willing to *work out* my salvation, God is willing to *work in* me to reveal more about himself and about the mystery of Jesus Christ.

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Unsettle me . . . The funny thing is I've spent my whole existence trying to find a place to settle down, people to settle down with, and a spirit about me worthy of all this settled down-ness. All of this is good. A contented heart, thankful for its blessings, is a good way to settle.

But there are areas of my life that have also settled that mock my desires to be a godly woman . . .

I dare you, dear soul of mine, to notice the stark evidence of a spirit that is tainted and a heart that must be placed under the microscope of God's Word. Yes, indeed, unsettle me, Lord.

Unearth that remnant of justification.

Shake loose that pull toward compromise.

Reveal that broken Shard of secrecy.

Expose that tendency to give up.

Unsettle me in the best kind of way. For when I allow Your touch to reach the deepest parts of me—dark and dingy and hidden away too long—suddenly, a fresh wind of life twists and twirls and dances through my soul . . .

Goodbye to my remnants, my justification, shards, and tendencies. This is not who I am—nor who I was created to be.

Lisa TerKeurst, *Made to Crave Devotional*

## **My Practice**

"Inhale," Jillian says, sweeping her arms above her head and joining her palms.

I mirror her moves.

"And exhale. We're warming up the body, getting our blood flowing." She brings her hands to her sides and I follow suit.

I've always wanted to practice yoga. Poses like the sun salutation, chaturanga and cobra sound like moves for the goddesses, and the women behind Jillian Michaels who demonstrate her yoga instruction look like goddesses, too. That's what I'm after: the cut arms, toned legs and slim backside I'd lost during my freshman year of college.

"We're moving into cobra. I want you to melt your heart to the sky."

Jillian looks as if she's about to go into pushup position but hovers her knees and rear just above the ground, then curls her back and neck upward. This isn't so bad. I feel the pull in my quads and stomach. My body's never stretched like this before. I focus on pointing my chest toward the ceiling, melting my heart to the sky as she calls it. This sounds like poetry, and I can exercise when someone makes a workout sound like poetry.

"Now we're going to do chaturanga pushups."

I hate pushups. "Chaturanga-ing" would sound fun if it weren't paired with pushups.

"Get in a pushup position. When I say, 'Down,' I want you to do a pushup, but hold your position when your forearms are parallel to the floor. I'll tell you when to push yourself back up."

After three chaturanga pushups, there's a sweat puddle under my face. After a few more, when my palms are slipping on my yoga mat like a shaggy dog on a hardwood floor, we finally move on.

"This is our last circuit. We're going into crescent moon. I want you to dig deep," Jillian says, pounding her fist in her palm.

I lunge, bringing my arms above my head and joining my palms behind my head. Back is arched. I nail it: the crescent moon. I release my hands back to my sides and rise from my lunge, legs still spread and feet planted in the floor. I repeat and follow Jillian's motions, which are quicker compared to the beginning of the workout. I'm feeling the burn in my rear-end and thighs like needles puncturing my muscles, but the burn is the short-term goal, leading, I hope, to the long-term goal: smooth thighs and faint ab lines.

"I want you to brrreeaaathe. Give me all you've got right here. Get comfortable with being uncomfortable!"

*I'm uncomfortable, Jillian. I hear you. I'm there. Does that mean we're done?*

We're stretching now. Jillian keeps talking. "Well done. You should be proud of yourself—proud that you actually worked out today, maybe even tried something new."

*You read my mind, Jillian.* "Yoga takes practice. In fact, people who do yoga call it their practice." I liked the sound of that. *My practice.*

...

My new practice was short-lived. Some months later during my sophomore year I gave up on yoga when I realized that all of the chaturanga pushups and crescent moons were giving me what felt like manly shoulders and thighs rather than the definition it had given Jillian and the girls on her *Yoga Meltdown* DVD. However, I've still got other "practices" that I've maintained, like clean eating habits and running.

It's the fall semester of my senior year in college, and in January I began reading Lysa TerKeurst's book, *Made to Crave*, about her spiritual journey of finding satisfaction in God rather than food. I'd seen it several times front and center in the "Spiritual Living" section of Barnes and Noble. I finally bought it to see what she had to say about her struggle with food. I was at the end of my rope with the food-and-weight battle like TerKeurst and many other women. I'd eaten entirely too much during late-night study sessions in the library throughout my freshman year and had noticed dimples and stretch marks in unwanted places. This led to brief endeavors like practicing yoga, counting calories and slashing carbs my sophomore year. When my junior year rolled around, I was frustrated with dead-end weight loss methods and didn't know what direction to take next to rid my body of freshman-year pounds. (More on this struggle is coming later.) I also purchased the sixty-day devotional companion to TerKeurst's book and decided to read it for accountability and encouragement. In "Day One" of the devotional, TerKeurst shared the prayer (the one at the beginning of this chapter) from her journal when she decided it was time to exchange her addiction to food for a closer relationship to God:

I dare you, dear soul of mine, to notice the stark evidence of a spirit that is tainted and a heart that must be placed under the microscope of God's Word.

Yes, indeed, unsettle me, Lord.

Unearth that remnant of justification.

Shake loose that pull toward compromise.

Reveal that broken shard of secrecy.

Expose that tendency to give up.

Unsettle me in the best kind of way. (ch. 1)

I realized that TerKeurst's prayer was, in spiritual terms, Michaels' exhortation during crescent moons. "God, unsettle me. Make me comfortable with being uncomfortable." TerKeurst wrote about the physical *and* spiritual aspects of her journey of uncomfortableness and unsettledness to health and fitness in her book, and I could certainly relate. But I think TerKeurst was on to something that goes beyond health and spills into other areas of a growing relationship with God.

I am a runner. That is my "practice." But I'm not a woman who wakes up at 6:00 a.m. with no caffeine in my system to go for a "light" six-mile jog. I enjoy healthy eating, but it's a sacrifice to go longer than a week without chocolate or something with a lot of cheese. I'm okay, however, with getting uncomfortable and making sacrifices to stay in my jeans. To get in better shape, I've had to be willing to sweat some and to rid my diet of the sodas and frequent trips to Sonic for Blasts.

While in college, I've also become okay with being spiritually unsettled and uncomfortable because I'm learning that results in a growing relationship with God. Just like yoga *was* my practice for a short time and Jillian Michaels was my trainer, my relationship with God is my spiritual practice, and Jesus Christ is my trainer and the one whose moves I should try to mirror. To grow in faith, God has changed my thoughts

about what it means to follow Christ. God has challenged my idea of church. He's revealed my brokenness and shown me why I need saving. I've learned that growing closer to God requires time with him in his Word, conversation with him in prayer, and a focus on him throughout the day. More intimacy between God and me begs for time spent between God and me like any earthly relationship. I've had to get spiritually uncomfortable, allowing God to unsettle my heart for more because I've realized that God didn't intend for me to stay the same after I chose to believe in him and follow him. This isn't a theory I've devised on my own. As I've read my Bible while in college, I've noticed that being unsettled and uncomfortable to grow in faith is a common thread that runs through its pages.

In the Bible, Paul always seems unsettled in his faith. Let's look at Paul's pre-Jesus story before we move ahead to his unsettled faith. Before he became a Christ follower, he was a Pharisee, a religious person who followed Jewish law to a tee, and he persecuted the Christian church because it proclaimed that Jesus was God's Son and the Savior of the world the Jews had anticipated. Jews including Paul were unconvinced that Jesus was the anticipated Messiah, and Paul had the power to do something about people who thought otherwise. The Bible says that he "dragged off (Christian) men and women and committed them to prison" (*English Standard Version*, Acts 8:3) and "breathed threats and murder against disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). From Paul's descriptions in the Bible before his conversion, I get the sense that he, Stalin and Hitler could have gotten together over burgers and beer and had plenty to discuss. Then Paul had this crazy experience on a road where light shined so bright that he lost his sight and Jesus spoke to him from Heaven. He couldn't see for three days so he fasted and prayed the entire time.

After Paul regained his sight, he wasn't the same man. Paul was all about Jesus. He never got enough of Jesus, and his goal was to be more like Jesus. Paul wasn't ever comfy and cozy where he was relationally with God. In a letter to a church, I can sense Paul's distaste with stagnancy:

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him . . . Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:8-14)

Those are the words of an unsettled man ready to make daily changes to be more and more like Jesus. Paul's mantra would've been, "Out with the old, in with the new!" Paul was forgetting what lay behind: his history with the Christian church, his defiance against belief in Jesus as God's Son and his religious practices as a Pharisee to make him "good enough" in the eyes of God. He said, "I press on to make [my faith in Jesus] my own"—not his parents' faith, the culture's faith or his Pharisee-friends' faith. His only role model was Jesus because of the love Jesus had shown him in making Paul his own.

I'm a young adult coming from comfortable circumstances. I grew up in small-town Corinth, Mississippi, on the pews of a Baptist church. My grandfather was a preacher, and I probably began learning about God and Jesus Christ in the womb. At the age of seven, I chose to believe in Jesus as the way to salvation and began a relationship

with God. As I grew, my extracurricular activities included church and basketball, and my closest friends were in my church youth group. I went to an all-white public school, and all of my classmates seemingly went to church. Those brave enough to admit they were not Christians or had their skepticisms about God in America's Bible Belt were few and far in between.

I went to the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science during my junior and senior years of high school, and it is exactly what it sounds like. We were the kids who got excited about lab day in chemistry class, and I'm still not sure whether our mascot, the Blue Wave, referred to an arched body of water that ran upon sandy shores or a sine trigonometry function. I was in the minority as a white student, and most of my classmates were part of the first generation in their families born in America. MSMS was a melting pot of opinions, religions and cultures—completely different from my hometown. Our commonality was the high we gained from learning and our hopes to get into a good college. I loved the entire experience.

Come fall of our senior year application deadlines were fast approaching. We not only had to package the perfect ACT/SAT score with the "I'm-involved-in-everything" resume, but we had to wrap it in a bow with the most compelling way to "tell about a significant experience that impacted who I am today" if we wanted to ensure full-tuition scholarships and spots in our top college choices. I had no story for my essay. I wasn't adopted. My parents were happily married. I didn't flee another country because of political persecution. I had nothing. Nada. Until I went to my English professor. She pulled *One Writer's Beginnings* by Eudora Welty from her classroom bookshelf, and her words were like gold to this college applicant: "I am a writer who came of a sheltered

life. A sheltered life can be a daring life as well, for all serious daring starts from within” (104). My whole essay hinged on Welty's words. I wrote about my sheltered life growing up in Corinth, Mississippi, and I told the University of Mississippi that I had the same serious daring within that Welty had. I was ready to embrace the changes and challenges that came with college.

I'm thankful for my sheltered life. I wouldn't change a thing. I love my small-town upbringing, the safety I felt there with my parents, and my church. But I'm also thankful for the "serious daring" God stirred in my heart since I began college. Maybe all of that unsettledness and uncomfortableness started at MSMS, but I look back and don't think my sixteen-year-old mind was ready to wrestle the questions I had about my faith or change the way I viewed the world. College was a game changer for me. I realized that, if I wanted to grow in faith and confidence in what my eternity hinges on, I had to face my questions. *What was church really supposed to look like? Why was I born here in America with freedom and comfort while children are struggling to grow up in Third-World countries? What does it mean to follow Jesus? What's my purpose here?* I'll never reach a point of total maturity, and that's the point of Christianity. It's more than my religion. It's my practice. I'm not working to make my faith my own just to earn God's favor. Jesus Christ earned God's favor for me. As Paul said, because Christ made me his own out of his love for me, I'm making my faith in him my own. I love Eugene Peterson's interpretation of the verses I mentioned earlier in Philippians:

I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself

an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal where God is beckoning me onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back. (*The Message*, Philippians 3:12-14)

I'm not an expert at what it means to follow Jesus. It's intended to be a lifelong learning process. But I'm off and running.

At my university, warmly known as Ole Miss, I am a leader for FreshStart, a ministry on campus specifically for freshmen and transfers (newbies to the university) at the Baptist Student Union. (I'll probably refer to this organization a lot so, when I mention the “BSU,” you'll know what I'm talking about.) When preparing for FreshStart in the spring semester of my junior year, I asked myself lots of questions. How would I describe my spiritual experience in college to a group of freshmen and transfers? What advice do I wish someone had given me? What do I wish someone would've told me to expect that I didn't? That's when Michaels and TerKeurst's words came full circle for me. “Expect a heart change. Get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Ask God to unsettle you during your college experience. Then yield your control and watch him work in your heart. You will not be the same, nor should you be the same, when you graduate.” That's what I'd say.

“I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
my soul knows it very well.  
My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.”

Psalm 119:14-15

## A Change of Costume

The Cinderella dress, purchased two years ago in fourth grade, is my costume of choice for the third Halloween in a row, maybe for lack of creativity or planning time. I'd chosen the typical blue Cinderella dress with quarter-length, lacy sleeves in Walmart, and it became the go-to costume when a Halloween party crept up and I had no character in mind.

I had decided at the last minute to attend the Halloween carnival at church, even though I didn't have a costume planned, when Mom suggested the Cinderella dress. So here I am, slipping it over my head and navigating my hands through the lacy sleeves one final time. This is it for the dress. I'll be a teenager in junior high next year, and junior high kids might go to Halloween parties, but they don't dress up (until those junior high kids go to college—then it's somehow cool again).

But this Halloween I don't feel like the princess I was the previous two years. This Halloween is different.

Months before, I'd had my first summer love *and* my first summer breakup. A short, freckle-faced kid like me, Ragan, was my best friend in fifth grade. He'd asked me to be his girlfriend before our summer break began, and, of course, I obliged. I was nearly a teenager and thought I was ready and deserving of a first boyfriend. Girlfriend duties that summer consisted of late-night conversations on the house phone (pre-iPhones) and occasional movie dates *with* our moms. I was smitten by his charm and humor and thought he could do no wrong. Until Ragan moved to another school in sixth

grade and word traveled to me that Ragan had a new best friend named Haley. They were such good friends that Ragan had kissed her at a junior high football game and Ragan hadn't dared to kiss me. Needless to say, Ragan and I broke up.

Looking at my reflection in the Cinderella dress, I think Haley has something I don't. Whatever Haley looks like, she must be a *real* beauty. Haley is the Cinderella, and I'm the cheap imitation.

I start my nitpicking and critiquing.

This lace reveals my flabby arms. I cut it from the dress where it meets the blue fabric and find a white long-sleeve shirt in my closet. I lift the dress from my ankles and over my head. I put on the white shirt and then the dress. Flabby arms are covered up.

I scrutinize the legs next. I already disdain them because my legs and hips don't naturally fill the American Eagle jeans like other girls' do. I'm secretly still wearing jeans with elastic that accommodate for my small waist and wide backside. Plus, my skin is pale and has little circulation. It turns purple and veiny in the chilly October air. I dig through my stockings drawer and find some white tights to go under my dress. Problem solved.

After I shimmy and stretch into my tights that land just above my belly button and put on my white Ked's shoes, I check myself in the full length mirror on the back of my bedroom door. And I begin to sob big "alligator tears," as my dad calls them.

My face. I'm not sure what's wrong with my face, but something must be wrong. Mom hears my sniffles, and I hear her bare feet slap the wood flooring in the hall way. She bursts through my bedroom door, almost hitting my face.

"What's wrong, honey?"

“I don’t feel beautiful tonight, Mom. I don’t want to go.”

“You’ve got to stop doing this. You *are* beautiful,” Mom says, and I think she’s saying that because that’s what moms should tell their daughters.

But Mom grabs my hand, leads me to her bedroom, and forces both of my shoulders downward so that I land on the chair in front of her vanity. She pulls her blush out of a drawer and gently dabs her big blush brush against my cheeks, adding to the deep red that’s already there from crying. Next, she gets the lipstick and slowly glides it across my upper and lower lips, coloring inside the lines they form.

“Now,” she says. “You’re going to that Halloween carnival, and you’re going beautiful.”

...

Lu Lu is from Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. I met her last summer in Nashville, Tennessee, when I worked as an intern for World Relief, an organization that resettles refugees in Nashville and other cities around the world. Lu Lu, a caseworker at World Relief, invited some coworkers and interns to her apartment for a Burmese dinner. When we arrived, we found out that several members of her family—brothers, sisters, distant cousins—were joining us, too.

Little did I know that Burmese food was hot, and I mean *hot hot*. They gave us bowls of long, skinny noodles with chicken, and it appeared like their version of chicken noodle soup. *I like chicken noodle soup*, I thought.

“We know that all of you aren’t used to spicy food so we didn’t make it as hot as we normally do. We hope you enjoy,” Lu Lu said.

I took one bite, and my mouth was on fire. *Hold your composure. You're a guest*, I told myself. I looked up at Christina, another intern, who had tear-filled eyes from the heat.

“Is it still too spicy?” Lu Lu asked. She'd noticed Christina's tears. Christina nodded, and Lu Lu's sister came out of the kitchen with a plate full of sliced lemons. Squeezing lemon juice over spicy food apparently makes it more bearable for people like us in the Western world with weak taste buds.

Praise God for lemons.

There were twenty-five-ish of us around the circumference of the room, and after we finished our first and second helpings of flaming Burmese chicken noodle soup, Lu Lu's sister said, “We want to hear your testimonies.”

All of us from World Relief looked at one another. We knew what she meant. She wanted to know when and how we became Christians and how God had since worked in our lives. And we knew we wouldn't have stories like hers or Lu Lu's. We hadn't heard their stories yet, but we hadn't faced the struggles that they must have faced in Burma.

“Why don't you go first? We'll follow,” Christina said.

*Great idea, Christina.*

Lu Lu's sister explained that she lived in a remote village in Burma, a country with a corrupt government. She had not heard of Jesus until missionaries she referred to as “angels” came to her people's village and translated the Bible into her language. (Burma is a country with many dialects, so it's difficult to translate the Bible into Burmese in a way that the entire population can read and understand it.) After the

missionaries shared the gospel with her, she decided to believe in and follow Jesus Christ. Her memories of Burma include deadly floods in her village and periods of drought when the villagers had little food to eat. These problems didn't disappear after she or the other villagers became Christians, but her faith in God strengthened even through the devastation.

And she was done. I was hoping our time together would end before my turn. How do I follow a story like that?

Leaving Lu Lu's house that night in Nashville, I felt that my story of belief in Jesus was inadequate. I'd never experienced a drought. My parents sometimes grow a garden in the summer for the fun of it, but we'd be just fine if we couldn't grow our own food because Walmart is open 24/7. Corinth flooded a couple of times a year, but the flooding has never wiped out the city.

I questioned the significance of my story and how God could use it over the course of the next week, and I think all of us interns did. During our weekly meeting with our summer coordinator, she addressed the testimony time at Lu Lu's: "I don't know about you guys, but I'm not sure what I would've said if I would've had time to share my testimony."

*I'm glad I wasn't the only one.*

"It might be a good idea to think about our stories that we'd share if we are ever put on the spot like that again and maybe even share them with each other," she recommended.

I took her advice to heart and mulled over my testimony, my personal story of how I became a Christian.

I'd been raised in church, and, while some might argue that I was born into what I believe, I'm grateful for a lifetime of learning on Baptist church pews. But, in order to have genuine faith in anything, I eventually had to own my faith apart from other people's opinions and beliefs.

At four years old, I started learning Bible verses as a Cubbie. My church had this evangelism and discipleship program for children on Wednesday nights called Awana. It's like Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts for church. Being a Cubbie was the equivalent to being a Girl Scout Brownie. We had vests, patches and the whole nine yards, and we earned embellishments for our vests when we memorized a certain number of verses from our Awana books and recited them to our teachers.

After I graduated from the Cubbies class, I became a Sparky. Getting children to memorize Bible verses obviously calls for incentives, and the Sparky who memorized the most Bible verses was named "Sparky of the Year" and got a big trophy. Needless to say, I wanted that trophy.

I got my Sparky book and started memorizing verses as if my life depended on it. I memorized Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory" (*English Standard Version*). Check. *Teacher, sign off on that one.* Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Next. I recited John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." *Whoop, whoop. One step closer to Sparky of the Year.* Romans 10:9: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Check.

While I was working my way toward the biggest trophy of the year, these verses began to take root in my heart and mind, especially verses like Ephesians 2:8-9 that say, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” I realized that all of these checks in my book, badges on my vest, and a trophy on my bedroom dresser might be impressive credentials for a second grader, but they weren’t getting me any closer to God.

Meanwhile, I was going to church on Sundays and hearing pastors and Sunday school teachers talk about a “personal relationship” with God through Jesus, and my young mind was at least capable of understanding that a personal relationship hinted that I had to enter into that relationship myself. No one else could do it for me. I listened as the sermons and Sunday school lessons and summer vacations Bible schools spoke to me personally, unsettling my young heart. I felt a need to figure out religion on my own.

In 1998, Halloween fell on a Sunday. When that happened, everyone in our small-town community just knew to trick-or-treat beforehand on Saturday night. There was no question about it. My mother and I hit up all of the noteworthy neighborhoods for trick-or-treating, and those who answered the doors we knocked on knew why we were there.

That left Sunday night open for church like every other Sunday night. Mom went to choir practice around five ’o clock, so I always found something to do in the church until she finished. Sometimes I’d play with the basketballs or dodge balls or whatever kinds of balls were in the gym, or I’d find some crayons and a Bible stories coloring book in a Sunday school room to pass the time. But this week I sat alone in the sanctuary.

Salvation was hard-pressed on my mind that week, and I'd had a couple of late-night conversations with Mom and Dad.

I'd learned the verses in Awana. I knew the steps pastors use to explain how to be saved. But, in that moment, I threw the "ABC's of Salvation" and the "Roman Road" out the window. A swift prodding of God's Spirit in my own spirit pulled me to the altar at the front of the sanctuary. Before I knew it, my backside was off the pew and sitting on my heels with my knees on the ground and head bowed at the altar steps. My prayer was very simple, very much as you'd expect an eight-year-old's to be: *God, forgive me of my sin because I know I am a sinner. There's nothing I can do about that myself. But you can save me through Jesus. I believe he died on the cross for me, rose from the dead and is the way to you. I choose to follow him, and my life is yours now.* There was nothing eloquent about it and it didn't have to be eloquent. As I lifted my head, I knew I was God's, and no one could break that relationship. My destiny had changed and a bridge was built—

from Hell to Heaven,

from separation from God to eternity with God,

from depravity to richness of the soul,

from hopelessness to a life lived with hope.

I felt a new peace I had not experienced before.

That was my testimony. No floods. No starvation. No poverty driving me to Christ. In Nashville, my story felt insignificant compared to Lu Lu and her family's stories.

Until God showed me that I have a story. A story of real redemption that doesn't end at the altar steps in second grade.

While in Nashville, my roommates and I read a book called *When Helping Hurts* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. Corbett and Fikkert explained that God established four foundational relationships for each person before Adam and Eve sinned, causing all of humanity to have a sinful nature. These four relationships are a relationship with God, with self, with others and with the rest of creation. They wrote, "These relationships are the building blocks for all of life. When they are functioning properly, humans experience the fullness of life that God intended, because we are being what God created us to be" (54-55). They diagnosed the dysfunction of these relationships as brokenness.

We've all got it—this thing called brokenness. It's why Lu Lu's village and many parts of the world experience poverty. It's also why America has a divorce rate of about fifty percent. Our relationships are all broken in some form or fashion whether it's with our resources, coworkers, spouses or government. Corbett and Fikkert emphasized that we must all accept our mutual brokenness before we can help each other. Corbett and Fikkert wrote, "The goal is to see people restored to being what God created them to be: people who understand that they are created in the image of God with the gifts, abilities, and capacity to make decisions and to effect change in the world around them" (77).

God revealed my brokenness while I read this book. I was in Nashville doing ministry, trying to help refugees realize that they were created in God's image and that he loved them and wanted to restore their lives from a broken past in their home countries.

But I didn't realize *my mutual brokenness* with Lu Lu, her family, and everyone else on the planet for that matter.

I have lots of broken areas in which I need God's help. I have arguments with my parents. I take things out on the people I love. I neglect spending time with God in prayer or in his Word in order to turn in assignments on time or study for tests. I have selfish ambitions.

But, if I had to pick one way I'm broken that consistently creeps up in my mind and paralyzes me from understanding that I am "created in the image of God with the gifts, abilities and capacity to make decisions and effect change" as Corbett and Fikkert wrote about, it's a brokenness with self.

Why? Because the Cinderella in me never surfaced. The seventh-grade girl hiding her arms and legs to go to the church Halloween carnival didn't get better. In fact, my self-perception worsened in high school. I went through more cheating scandals—well, "scandals" to gossiping high schoolers anyway—and break ups with guys who were biologically becoming men but lacking in their abilities to act like men. Subscriptions to *Seventeen* and *Cosmo Girl* magazines didn't help either. I couldn't compete with Ms. Teen Celebrity who already had a personal trainer on the front cover with her fan-blown hair, tiny tan legs, and Photoshopped curves. I was a fashionista in high school and loved to clip outfits from magazines and recreate them for myself when I went shopping, but I subconsciously thought I had to look like the size-zero girl flaunting those outfits on the page. Before I was in eleventh grade, I had already tried the Atkins Diet and was eating around twenty carbs a day.

And, no, I wasn't overweight. I played basketball and ran in the off-season. I was just another girl with an unhealthy self-image that resulted in several days of eating eggs and "zero-carb" fake bread for breakfast. While eating green beans for lunch, I burned six-to-eight hundred calories a day on the elliptical on top of whatever I burned during my day-to-day activities and summer job. There were many mornings I crawled on all fours from my bed to the kitchen on the cold linoleum floor to scramble egg whites before I fainted from yesterday's calorie deficit.

I'd like to say that some great self-reflection happened and I became comfortable in my skin over the summer between my senior year of high school and first year in college, but it didn't. College made the young woman I was in the mirror look worse to me. As I walked from class to class on campus, I noticed the tanned, slim legs of other girls that looked much better in Nike shorts than mine did. Their lower halves didn't look like mine with its hips that had expanded and stretch marks and varicose veins (thanks to my mother's side of the family) that had popped out from nowhere over the summer. *Newsweek* even ranked Ole Miss number one for "Most Beautiful" student body my sophomore year, and I felt that I hadn't contributed to that accolade when I looked around at the other girls.

And people warn you as a freshman about the "freshman fifteen" pounds you'll gain, but they don't tell you that so much studying makes you want to eat. And eat. And eat. I pulled several all-nighters in the library with a liter of Diet Coke and Subway cookies from the student union by my side. I ate when I was sad or stressed. I ate when I was happy that I'd pulled out a B instead of a C or D on a test. I went from eating my emotions one day to running nine miles and eating five hundred calories the next day,

because I felt so guilty about eating badly the day before. There was no balance in my diet and exercise plan the first two years of college.

And a significant other telling you every day that you're beautiful doesn't fix self-esteem issues either. I know because I have a wonderful husband and man of God who tells me every day how beautiful I am to him. But, while his words may briefly let me forget my insecurities, they don't remove them. His words don't heal my brokenness.

In Nashville, I learned that only God could heal my broken self-perception. God showed me that this was my story and that it was an ongoing story. My brokenness didn't come in the form of poverty, drought, flooding or dirt floors. It didn't come by way of an addiction to drugs, sex or alcohol. It came in the form of a messed-up perception of myself—a perception that says that I am not beautiful enough and, therefore, have nothing beautiful to offer to the world.

And that's a lie from Hell itself.

Because I also realized another dimension to my story of brokenness—a dimension that says that I don't have to live in the lie that says I'm not beautifully made in God's image. That doesn't have to be my reality. And it's all because of what Jesus did on the cross.

I love that I began a relationship with God on Halloween. It's your time to dress up and become something you're not. When I was saved on Halloween night, I became something spiritually I had never been. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come." I became a new creation, but I didn't have to take my costume off at the stroke of midnight. It was permanent. And what was my new one? The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that I

became “the righteousness of God” in his own eyes because of Christ’s love. I love how Peterson puts it in *The Message*: “God put the wrong on him [Christ] who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

My brokenness before God is restored in Christ. Because I began a relationship with God on Halloween, God forgave my body bashing in the Cinderella dress on Halloween four years later. God forgave the many times after that I cursed my body in front of the mirror—the body he gave me. He’s forgiven me for the times I deprived my body of the nourishment he designed it to need. He’s forgiven me when I ran to chocolate cake or pizza for comfort in college instead of him. He’s forgiven me for trying to find my value in my friendships, relationships with my parents, or my marriage, rather than going to his Word and reading what he says is true about me.

No, my brokenness didn’t go away after I was saved at seven years old. But it keeps me dependent on my Heavenly Father. It keeps me going to God every day and asking him to help me to have the discipline to take care of the body he’s given me as well as the contentment and assurance in knowing that he designed my body in his own image with his purposes for my life in mind.

I can praise him that I have muscular thighs for running long distances. I can thank him that I have strong arms to carry my child to bed one day. And I’m sure I’ll eventually find a reason to give thanks for stretch marks and varicose veins, too.

So what about four years after I was saved when I was crying alligator tears on Halloween over my reflection in the mirror?

I didn’t have to do that. I could’ve made the choice to ignore Satan’s lie that I wasn’t beautiful and listen, instead, to God’s word that says I am “fearfully and

wonderfully made” (*English Standard Version*, Psalm 139:14). But my story is a process. I’m still learning how to go to God on this major issue in my life rather than turn to my own devices of self-pity and negativity about my body.

This was something that Paul (yes, the man I’ve been talking about) also understood. Something was broken in Paul’s life, and scholars speculate that he had a speech impediment. Whatever the case, Paul wrote in Philippians 12:8 that he had begged God to take his brokenness away from him.

He also recorded God’s response: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

In *Jesus Calling*, Sarah Young wrote what God might have to say today about weaknesses: “Do not fear your weakness, for it is the stage on which My Power and Glory perform most brilliantly. As you persevere along the path I have prepared for you, depending on My strength to sustain you, expect to see miracles—and you will” (367).

I hope that God uses my story as he did the stories of Lu Lu and her family. No, mine is not their story of brokenness, but it’s still a story of my personal brokenness. It comes in all shapes and sizes like bodies do, and God wants to use it as a stage for his glory and healing power to be displayed to the world.

“I’m deeply curious about the mystery of Christ, the gracefulness of the everyday, and the sacredness of our inner lives. Everything I write or speak about comes from this curiosity and the deep conviction that every need, desire, and expectation is met in the person of Jesus Christ.”

from “Chatting at the Sky,” a blog by Emily P. Freeman

## **The Unfolding Mystery of Jesus**

Manhattan is so close. Only the East River and early morning fog separate me from the concrete island with its tall buildings and busy sidewalks of people grabbing their street coffee and cinnamon-raisin bagels.

The wooden park bench is making imprints on my backside, but I don't care. In early July, I've come to Astoria Park to hear from God.

I'm here in this park almost every day, but I'm hardly ever sitting. I'm usually running around the track that marks the park's boundaries. A pure euphoria for me comes from running here. There's so much to see, to hear. It's different from back home in Mississippi, running between two quiet fields with cows for spectators on the road that leads uphill to my home. In Astoria Park, bridges from Manhattan run across the East River and secure themselves to the ground. I hear the *whoosh* from cars passing and the *eerk* from brakes screeching overhead as I dig my toes into the concrete and run under the bridges, studying the murals painted on their anchorages. Next, I round the running track on the south end of the park. Athletes with solid thighs pound the asphalt as they practice sprints. Mothers, with their strollers neck-and-neck, chat and hope some of their baby weight is leaving their bellies and thighs. Children from Mexico and South America come together for a soccer game in the track's grassy center. My favorite posse is a group of break-dancers that comes out most nights to film its routines. Break-dancing is something I'd only seen in *Step Up*, the dance movie that made the entertainment world

pay attention to Channing Tatum, so each time I run I nearly smack into several people because I look over my shoulder to watch the break dancers spin on their heads and backs until they are no longer in view.

But I'm not running this morning. Running got me here on this splintery bench, asking God questions—or maybe questioning God. I'm not sure.

*I need a word from You today, I tell him. You've got to give me something.*

On one of my runs last week, I saw a woman in a headdress roll out a mat.

*She's about to do some yoga, I thought.* A lot of women come to the park at the day's end to do their sun salutations and chaturangas in the grass so that was a valid explanation to me for the mat.

I was dead wrong. She was about to melt her heart to something besides the sky as Jillian Michaels instructed me to do during my short-lived yoga practice. She was about to melt her heart to Allah and pray.

My run last week is one reason I'm sitting on this bench under a bridge staring at the Manhattan skyline and silently asking God questions and questioning God, hoping he'll answer me through the Bible that's open on my knees. The woman melting her heart to Allah, piled on top of other encounters with some of New York City's eight million people, is why I'm here.

Since I'd arrived in the city in early June, my Christian beliefs had been challenged. My faith had been stretched. At times, my buttons had admittedly been pushed. I'd ridden the subway, played basketball in the park, and rubbed shoulders with people from all over the world who came from different cultures and had different opinions, food choices, dialects, thought processes, styles, and religions. The diversity in

New York City is a culture of its own—a culture unlike small-town Mississippi where everything seems so black and white.

I'd fallen in love with the city's diversity, especially in Astoria, a neighborhood in Queens. But, by early July, my mind and my soul were exhausted and confused. Spiritual lines had been blurred. I daily found myself between extremes. A mosque and Jewish temple were two blocks apart where some of my neighbors faithfully attended. Jehovah's Witnesses had cornered me more than once to discuss differences in our theologies. I had talked with several Astorians over coffee at Starbucks who had chosen to believe that the divine is in the individual.

And I enjoyed these conversations. I thrived on the openness from people of other cultures to discuss spiritual matters because that isn't so common in other parts of the country. But all of the opinions and belief systems had mounted and built what felt like a wall between God and me, and I needed God to break through this wall. I needed him to take a wrecking ball to my confusion and remind me of the foundations of my faith. I needed to know that what the Bible says about Jesus wasn't just a bunch of hullabaloo. That's why I'd walked to Astoria Park in the early Sunday morning hours. I needed intimate time with the One who made me and knows me best.

I bury my forehead into the opened Bible on my knees, hair falling forward. I'm sure I look asleep to passersby, but I begin to bring my concerns about my faith and about Jesus before God's presence, concerned whether it's okay that I have concerns. After all, I'm going to church after my early-morning chat with God. I won't be sharing my unsettled thoughts with the people there. I probably should talk them out with someone because that's the purpose of a church community. But I'm in New York City because

I'm an intern for a church plant—a new church. So I spill out what my heart is feeling in prayer:

*God, I've believed in Jesus Christ since I was eight years old. I've believed he is the way to you. I've believed that the faith in my heart I have is real. But now everything seems so unclear and confusing. I'm surrounded by so many different beliefs and so many different ways to you. Is Jesus truly the way to you? And who is this Jesus I'm following anyway?*

That moment was a turning point for me spiritually. One, God showed me it was okay to ask him questions and bring him my concerns about the faith I'd so strongly clung to since I was a child. Right after my prayer, I read these words: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (*English Standard Version*, Philippians 2:12). This verse became the stillness for my anxious heart because it showed me in the park that day that God apparently expects us to ask questions. Asking questions in order to grow in faith is what "working it out" means. As I work it out and work through the confusion, the questions, and the doubt, God works in me.

Two, I began to yearn to know Jesus in a way I never had before. After all, my faith was about not only believing in him as the way to God but also following him as the way to live this life. I knew what Jesus had said so long ago about being the way to God: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). But my faith is about so much more than belief. It's about knowing Jesus, following Jesus, and becoming more like Jesus. I realized that I could pencil down a list of similarities and differences between my faith and others' faiths or belief systems

for hours. But Jesus didn't come to the earth and die on a cross for me to make formulated lists or have a formulated religion of do's and don'ts. He did so in order to have a relationship with me and with the rest of the world. He did so to show God's love for us. And he did so to leave an example of how to live this life.

In that moment on a park bench over 1,000 miles away from home, I began to grasp this for the first time while flipping through my Bible's pages. As I reread foundational verses of my faith and of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I realized that Jesus was what I was after. Jesus was the goal in this life. I hopped up from the bench with numb legs and ambled east four blocks and south about ten blocks to City Light Church for the Sunday morning service with a new prayer. My prayer was twofold.

I asked God to help me live out the rest of my summer in the city (and the rest of my life for that matter) more and more like Jesus might have if he were in my shoes today.

And I asked him to reveal more of Jesus to me in the everyday.

...

A year and a half after my epiphany in the park, I was back in New York City, this time on my honeymoon in December with my husband, playing in the Central Park snow, taking selfies in front of Rockefeller Center's tree, and ice skating in Bryant Park behind the library. I loved being back in the place where God challenged my faith and strengthened my belief in his Son through working with a church plant. So much had changed for me. I was newly married and graduating from college in May. I was no longer a pre-med student but pursuing my passion for writing and ministry instead. But some things were still the same.

The eyes of my soul were and still are on the lookout for Jesus in the ordinary days.

As I sat with my husband of three days in New York's three-story Barnes and Noble Café, I was reminded again, while reading through Ephesians, of what God taught me in the park two summers ago.

In the Bible, Paul calls the gospel of Christ, or the "good news" of Christ, a "mystery" a lot. I don't think Paul means to hint that Christ is such a mystery that it is impossible to learn about him or have communion with him. Christ is just so multi-dimensional. He is God incarnate. Romans 11:33 says, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" and, if God is so complex, imagine God in human form.

While reading Ephesians in Barnes and Noble, I ran across Ephesians 1:9-10: "[God made] known to us the *mystery* of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and on earth." God reminded me that, while the person of Christ seems so complex at times, he has revealed the mystery to us, and it's very simple: God's ultimate aim through Christ is to unite all things to God himself. Paul wrote in the next chapter of Ephesians that we "have access in one Spirit to the Father" through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:18). So this mystery isn't some aloof thing dangling out of reach above our heads. God made known the mystery of his will and the greatness of his love in the person of Jesus.

However, a mystery still hints that there's something to be learned. I think Paul explained the aim of understanding the mystery of Christ when he told the Ephesians next what he prayed and hoped for them in Ephesians 3:14-20:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend . . . what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with the fullness of God.

This love of Christ that is so broad and long and high and deep must take a lifetime of learning. It's rooted and grounded through faith in Christ. But, through God's very spirit living in our hearts, he teaches us more about his love that surpasses knowledge, a mystery to say the least. He teaches us to see more of the person of Christ in each day and to be more like Christ in every circumstance.

My eyes moved upward from my Bible to Will, my husband, across the table after reading these verses, and God revealed Jesus to me then. God made marriage to mirror Christ's relationship with the church; each time Will shows grace toward me when I'm ill without reason, the character of Jesus shines through him. And that's just one way of many in which Jesus has taught us a little bit about himself in our marriage and in our lives.

Only one week after we had gotten back from our honeymoon, Jesus revealed his character to me in a mighty way.

I have wanted to get more involved in our church in Oxford, Mississippi, so I went to More than a Meal, a community effort to provide a weekly meal for families for whom a free meal might ease financial burdens. I'd been excited about the opportunity, but I had some nervousness, too, because I honestly wanted to be able to relate with the people I'd meet. I felt I had nothing to offer and didn't want to be that person to them who was serving a meal to make myself feel philanthropically invested in the community so that I could simply sleep well at night. I'd been praying all day to be motivated by love rather than paralyzed by fear.

Fast forward to that night. I put on my apron and, with ladle in hand, I did my duty and dipped out chili from a crock-pot. After everyone had gotten a plate, I noticed that many of the people from church stood around the perimeter of the room while the people who'd come for the meal sat at the tables in the center of the room. And I get it. Many church members probably felt as I did. We were all fighting our own battles, but I don't think most of ours were a lack of food or money for dinner. We all felt we had nothing to say or offer. But God's Spirit inside of me reminded me of Christ's love for all people and his ability to move between party lines, classes and circumstances. I was prompted to find a table in the middle of the room. I knew that I had to personally get over my fear of rejection. So I took my apron off, grabbed some food, and plopped down in a metal chair beside a beautiful mother and her three children.

After Michelle, the ten-year-old girl across from me, and I talked about crayons and the bracelets on her wrists she'd made from tiny rubber bands, some church members

began to hand out household necessities like toilet paper and towels, as well as coats and gloves for the cold weather. A teenager almost handed me paper towels but must've seen my nametag and realized I was "with them." I was with the church.

I almost immediately said, "Oh, no, I don't need *that*," embarrassed that she thought I couldn't afford paper towels.

And then I was immediately ashamed.

It was then that God convicted me and revealed more of the person of Jesus Christ.

As I said before, there are many accounts in the Bible of Jesus surrounding himself with people who weren't like him. Jesus was a carpenter. He had an income, but he spent time with the poor. Jesus was a Jew, but he ate with the Gentiles. Jesus was a virgin, but he had a personal conversation and took water from a woman who'd been married five times. And the beautiful mystery of Jesus is that he didn't care what others thought. People talked, especially religious people. The Pharisees were furious that he spent his time with tax collectors and those that society deemed as sinners and outcasts. They were appalled when he healed people of their diseases on Sundays. If he was the promised Messiah, he'd surely be in the synagogue all of the time. But Jesus went about his business, loving people even to the point of being associated with whatever reputation they had. To him, people were people, and these were the people he came to save and to show the very love of God.

And what's even more beautiful about this mystery is that he was God himself. God himself came down from Heaven to spend time with and save ordinary people like me. That's true love. That's real grace. And that's a beautiful mystery. If that's the

example and if Jesus is my role model, then sitting with people at More than a Meal should be a given. Loving people and getting to know the person that God made each of them—no matter their socioeconomic status, origin, sexual orientation, or opinions—should be an automatic reflex for me as a Christian.

Lesson learned. That’s just one example of how God has revealed a little bit more to me about the mystery of who he is and who Jesus Christ is. God is everywhere and reveals himself and his Son in a million little ways. It’s in the sunrise Will and I watch every morning while we eat our toast and eggs. It’s in the financial provision that comes right when we need it. It was in a high school breakup when I thought the floor had fallen beneath me that God said, “It’s okay. Let me catch you in my arms and hold you,” while on my knees at the church altar. It’s in those quiet mornings when God gives me just what I need in his Word. It’s in an encouraging text from another believer that begins with “God just put you on my heart today . . .” when I need it most. It’s late at night when I’m saying prayers inside my head while lying on my pillow and have a sense of peace that the Creator of the universe is listening.

I can’t completely explain it and do it justice. I can only describe this stirring in my heart and this evidence in my life that Jesus unites me to God. It’s a mystery, some times definitely more than others. But, even when doubts, curiosities, questions or concerns arise about my faith and even when the answer doesn’t seem clear just then, I have a deep sense of conviction and peace that the mystery of Jesus Christ is somehow in the mix and that he’s using those thoughts as starting points to teach me more about himself and about how to live this life like he would.

“Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

*Westminster Shorter Catechism*

## **A Heavenly Perspective**

Will and I were in High Point Coffee only two months after our engagement in January 2013. High Point is a popular coffee shop in Oxford, Mississippi, and personal favorite for us because of their delectable chocolate-covered coffee beans. The bag of coffee beans sat between us on the round table, and we took turns grabbing from the bag and eating them as we discussed *Searching for God Knows What*, a book by Donald Miller I had been reading. In one of my favorite chapters entitled “Naked,” Miller takes an in-depth look at Adam and Eve’s relationship with God before sin came onto the scene. I’ll quickly give you a summary in case you aren’t familiar with the book.

Adam and Eve were made in God’s image. God put them in the beautiful, lush Garden of Eden, and they had conversations with God in the garden. Heaven existed so the Garden of Eden wasn’t Heaven but it was close. Adam and Eve didn’t know good from evil. They only knew God—the ultimate source of goodness. Their purpose was essentially to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. They enjoyed him so much that they were oblivious to their own nakedness. In *Searching for God Knows What*, Miller addresses the thought by some that this makes God sound like a narcissist. Miller said a friend once told him that “the most selfless thing God could do, that is, the most selfless thing a perfect Being who is perfectly loving could do, would be to create other beings to enjoy Himself” (ch. 8).

Newly engaged, Will and I were excited to discuss Miller's take on the first marriage—Adam and Eve's union in the Garden of Eden—especially this idea that we were created to enjoy God on earth now instead of waiting for Heaven. We agreed that we thought Miller's friend was right—what a paradise to simply enjoy God, a perfect Being who is perfectly loving, and to glorify him through our thoughts and actions. But that relationship with God was broken when Adam and Eve sinned. Brokenness entered into the world and still runs rampant today. The brokenness that comes from sin makes it harder to glorify God and enjoy him here on earth than it is to do so in Heaven. The monotony of an everyday routine, the stresses of school and work, the loss of a loved one—the list goes on and on—makes the statement “Man's highest and chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever” a nice mantra for a refrigerator magnet but a difficult manifesto to live out every day.

As Will and I continued our conversation about glorifying and enjoying God on earth rather than waiting for Heaven, I grabbed the white napkin that hugged my coffee cup and drew a time line with two tick marks on it—one on the left at the beginning of the time line and one shortly after it. The line continued to the right with an arrow at its end and an infinity sign. I wrote “Born” under the first tick mark and “Died” under the second tick mark.

“Okay,” I began, after I finished my drawing, “*This* is a timeline of our lives. With this infinite amount of time in Heaven,” I said, pointing to the portion of the timeline that represented life after death and into infinity, “why are we so concerned with the space between the tick marks? How do we escape that way of thinking? How do we see things from a heavenly perspective like Adam and Eve did before they sinned?”

“I think we aim to live like this isn’t here,” he replied, putting an “X” over the tick mark above “Death.”

And he was right. After all, that was our purpose in the first place as human beings before Adam and Eve sinned. I’d never thought about life this way. We don’t have to wait for Heaven to experience God. Jesus came to earth so that we could enjoy and experience God *now* and glorify God *now* by following Jesus’ example. Jesus had to come to earth to heal our brokenness and to restore our relationship with God. He is the bridge between God and us. He makes it possible to have this heavenly perspective.

And Jesus badly wants this for us. He desires so much that we would live steeped in this heavenly perspective that he addressed it several times during his earthly ministry. Before Jesus began his public ministry, he delivered his famous “Sermon on the Mount” to his twelve disciples in an intimate mountainside setting. In this sermon, he gave them instructions to live by, including how to pray: “Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (*English Standard Version*, Matthew 6:9-10). Jesus was so passionate about God’s children glorifying him and enjoying him forever that he told his disciples to earnestly pray for God’s kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Jesus later addressed this topic again in his sermon when he said, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [food, clothes, and shelter] will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). Jesus wanted his disciples to pray for God’s kingdom to come on earth and he wanted them to seek God’s kingdom and his righteousness rather than worrying about their needs. God’s kingdom on earth was clearly important to Jesus.

But what is God’s kingdom? As Will and I tackled this topic, I admitted my lack of understanding. “What exactly do you think God’s kingdom refers to?” I asked him.

“Well, as an American citizen, we pay taxes,” he said. “We follow traffic lights and adhere to the law. I think that seeking God’s kingdom means that we see ourselves as citizens of God’s kingdom. We have a kingdom perspective that is often different from a worldly perspective.”

And this is why I did and still do love my husband. His answer made perfect sense to me, and his analogy was something I could wrap my mind around because a kingdom perspective—a heavenly perspective—is a hard concept to grasp.

But what is this heavenly perspective—this kingdom mindset—and how do we see the world through this perspective during the everyday and the mundane? I’ve learned in college that I don’t just gain this heavenly perspective as a believer in Jesus Christ. It’s a practice—similar to yoga, as I mentioned at the beginning of this book.

...

I like to think of a heavenly perspective as if I’m Robinson Crusoe on a shipwrecked island. Bear with me here—I’m an English major. In Daniel Defoe’s novel, Crusoe is shipwrecked and wallows in self-pity for some days before finding a more positive perspective on his circumstances. Crusoe decides to make a list of the island’s “evil” aspects in the left column and “good” aspects in the right column. For example, in his column of evil aspects, he writes, “I have no soul to speak to, or relieve me,” and in the right column, he argues, “But God wonderfully sent the ship in near enough to the shore, that I have gotten out so many necessary things” (Defoe, 54). I love Crusoe’s list,

and I think it is a good example of a worldly perspective versus a heavenly perspective; there's always a "But God" if we are willing to look for it.

If I made a list like Crusoe's, here's what a portion of it might look like:

<b>Worldly Perspective</b>	<b>Heavenly Perspective</b>
My self-esteem is running low today.	But God says I am fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14).
I am stressed <i>out</i> .	But God says to cast my anxieties on him (1 Peter 5:7).
I am worried about the future.	But God says not to be anxious about tomorrow (Matthew 6:34) but to pray about my future as he guides me (Philippians 4:6-7).
I feel inadequate and unworthy of his love.	But God's grace—not what I do—saves me and makes me worthy of his love (Ephesians 2:8-10).

These are just some examples. This is what it means to live with a heavenly perspective. The Bible is packed with God's perspectives on living. And I believe that's part of how we learn about life from God's point of view. In college, it's how God has taught me to see the world and my circumstances as he sees them.

...

During college, "overwhelmed" has sometimes been an understatement of how I felt. In January of 2012, I stepped into a new role as president at the BSU—a position I kept until December 2013—while trying to manage classes. I pulled many all-nighters in the library while I turned up Five-Hour Energy and memorized physics

formulas. When Will and I started dating, I tried to balance a new relationship but not neglect “me time.”

And planning a wedding in fall 2013 while in school was definitely a test of self-discipline and faith in God. Due dates for homework and job applications hung over my head. Wedding invitations sat on the coffee table, reminding me that I’d missed the six-weeks-prior-to-the-wedding deadline for sending them out, according to my wedding planning book. Piles of clean and dirty laundry were all over my floor and needed to be washed or put away. I was exercising every day, reminding myself of the wedding dress I had to fit in as I pounded my feet into the treadmill. I had meetings on Monday and Tuesday nights at the BSU and one-on-one meetings at the local coffee shop with students during the week. I did a lot of meeting. Meeting deadlines, people, expectations, obstacles, you name it.

My aim in college has often been to make it through the day, the week, or the semester. I’ve sometimes felt as if I was watching my life pass from above, going through the motions but not actively participating. And I felt, during those times, as though there had to be more—a different perspective than the one I had. *There has to be more than just trying to get through the day*, I thought. *There has to be a greater purpose than just meeting deadlines, worrying about a job, trying to make people happy and doing laundry. We must be made for more.*

Is anybody walking with me here? The times I find complete peace and stillness, especially in college, are when I spend alone time with God. When I haven’t had that time, I have been a wreck during the day.

When things were really hectic during my sophomore year, I decided that I'd do whatever it took to roll out of bed early enough for intimate time with God. I played my favorite Christian artist, Kari Jobe, to stay awake and jumpstart my time with the Lord. I listened, eyes closed, as she belted, "I will find you in the place I'm in, find you when I'm at my end. Find you when there's nothing left of me to offer you except for brokenness. You lift me up, you'll never leave me thirsty. When I am weak, when I am lost and searching, I'll find you on my knees." And that's what I did. I found God on my knees. As an older mentor of mine used to say, I "ate the carpet" every morning while in prayer, head bowed to the ground, and I poured my heart out to God. Alligator tears often came, too. I told God how stressed I was. I told him who I was trying to please. I expressed my distaste for everything from the all-nighters I'd been pulling to the cellulite forming on my hips.

And then I listened.

I cracked my Bible open on the floor, head still bowed low and knees on the ground. I kept a journal and Paper Mate Ink Joy pens in different colors scattered in a pile to my right. I read and then wrote. Then read and wrote some more. I even had a color-coding system for my journal. Call me crazy, but it worked. I wrote in black for general thoughts. Red was for verses I wanted to remember. Purple was for prayers. Take a look at my journal now, and you'd think the Skittles rainbow exploded on its pages. But some of my sweetest moments are recorded on those pages.

God spoke through the pages in his Word so many times and still does every time I crack it open. It's because it's "alive and active," according to Hebrews 4:12. There

are many places in my journal where I have a verse written in red and, “God, that is just what I needed!” following it in purple. It’s amazing, really.

Alone time with God in his Word is where we find the heavenly perspective that Jesus wants us to have. It’s where we find out how to glorify God and to enjoy him forever, starting here and now. Without God, we are left with a worldly perspective that doesn’t meet our deepest spiritual needs. In *Searching for God Knows What*, Miller beautifully explains why we need God and his perspective:

It feels as if we live on a planet where there is just a little bit of water left, poisoned as it is, and we are all trying to get it and drink it so we can stay alive. But what we really need is God. . . We need this; we need this so we can love other people purely and not for selfish gain, we need this so we can see everybody as equals, we need this so our relationships can be sincere, we need this so we can stop kicking ourselves around, we need this so we can lose all self-awareness and find ourselves for the first time, not by realizing some dream, but by being told who we are by the only Being who has the authority to know, by that I mean the Creator. (ch. 8)

When I am steeped in God’s Word and attuned to what he says about me and other people, my perspective changes. I see my life, my circumstances, my body, my bank account, my husband, my family, my friends, and those I don’t even know in a new light. I treat people differently and love intentionally. My self-perception changes. And I am more thankful and trusting of God.

The view is so much better through God’s lens than my own.

“Worship is us giving God his breath back.”

Louie Giglio

## **A Degree in Giftedness**

In a room with about 2,000 other college students at Mississippi College's Leadership Training Conference, I listened as the church planter/pastor beat his Bible against his left palm and begged for some self-reflection from his audience of twenty-somethings.

“Don't ask yourselves what you can live with or without doing to get by,” he said. “Ask what you can't see yourself *not* doing every day when you wake up, and *THAT*, my friends, is your purpose.”

...

I'm not doing what I set out to do in college.

I have failed miserably when it comes to the goals I set for myself—goals that my family and friends were happy I was pursuing. Maybe failure isn't the right word to describe it, but my career ship has definitely changed its course in college.

The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, where I graduated from high school, had its geniuses. My classmates' ACT scores probably averaged 32.5. One girl ran out of calculus classes to take so teachers had to come up with curriculum for a new math class. My MSMS classmates were on the fast track to a doctorate in engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or medicine at Johns Hopkins Medical School.

Other students were equally brilliant, but weren't interested in pursuing a career in math or science. They wanted to be writers. MSMS had amazing English teachers, an award-winning journalism program and an annual creative writing publication. Or they wanted to be musicians or Broadway actors and actresses because MSMS also had a great performing arts program. Who would've thought?

Then there were the rest of us. We liked it all. *I liked it all.* I did well in my math and science classes, and I didn't abhor them by any means. I weirdly enjoyed balancing chemical equations and looking at my own cheek cells through a microscope lens. But I loved my English and journalism classes even more. I celebrated artful sentences that came together after I'd worked on a feature story for the student newspaper. The thought of forming an image with words for a reader who maybe hadn't beheld that image otherwise excited me. And I had plenty to say during roundtable discussions in my senior English class when we dissected works like *Gulliver's Travels* or *Pride and Prejudice*.

Those of us who liked all of it came to a crossroads as we began to fill out college applications. We were forced to choose between what we liked most and what we and everyone else thought we had the "potential" to do with our lives.

I thought I'd become a doctor. Even my childhood pointed to a white coat with my name on it and stethoscope around my neck. While in elementary school, I was the nerdy kid who had a rock glazer and a microscope on my desk at home. I asked Santa Claus for encyclopedias in fifth grade and woke up at 5:00 a.m. just to grab them from beneath the tree and flip through them while in bed, leaving the other gifts untouched. In high school, I wanted to be the oncologist at St. Jude Children's Hospital who discovered

the cure for cancer. My parents and the rest of my family were convinced that I'd be Dr. Alaina King, too, especially after I'd chosen to attend MSMS. After all, we thought students who became doctors were nerdy kids, and the fact that I owned a rock glazer put me in the nerdy category.

So I chose to pursue medicine in college.

*That's my gift, right?* I thought. *That's my purpose in this life. It must be because everything I've done so far points to medicine.*

I decided that my days of reporting, writing and chatting about books were finished. I entered Ole Miss still undecided on a major but with a concentration in pre-medicine.

And I was unhappy. I had a desire to write in my gut that Biology 161 did not fulfill. I missed literary conversations and wasn't getting them in Chemistry 105.

Sure, I liked the idea of one day helping people through modern medicine. While taking these grueling courses, I was holding down a part-time job at the hospital back home as a nurse aid. I was the family to a patient who didn't have one to stay with him or her. I jumped at the opportunity to offer anything, whether it was encouragement or bath towels. I visited patients on my days off.

But I quickly learned that if you don't enjoy more than the patient care aspect of medicine—if you don't get at least somewhat excited about the molecular structure of DNA or the blood-clotting process—it's going to be a long eight years of school.

I wanted to write again. I wanted to create thoughtful sentences and tell artful stories with threads running throughout of my memories and observations. I wanted to do what I'm doing right now.

In the meantime, I'd also gotten involved more in the BSU, and college ministry made me feel alive. I anticipated our weekly lead team meetings when we discussed God's Word; it gave me that roundtable feel I'd missed from my English classes. As president, I enjoyed all of my roles, whether it was leading a team meeting or cleaning the bathrooms. During my summers in New York City and Nashville, I realized even more my passion for service in any capacity.

So midway through college I changed my mind. I dropped my pre-medicine concentration and declared myself an English major and journalism minor.

Why? Because I answered the pastor's question at the Leadership Training Conference for myself: "What can't you see yourself *not* doing every day?"

Writing and ministry in some capacity. That's what it was all along. I couldn't live without it.

I recently read a quote from Howard Thurman, inspirational theologian and civil rights leader during the 1950's and 1960's: "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

His words play over and over like a movie in my head. It's become a personal manifesto for me. I think he's right. I thought the world needed me to be a doctor. More importantly, I thought God needed me to be a doctor.

...

I used to think that middle school dreams and high school goals scribbled in a series of journals over time was happenstance. But, looking back, the passions I have now were in my heart all along. In an "About Me" brochure, a high school English

project, I'd put that I wanted to be a pediatric oncologist *or* a writer. I know they're two extremes. But writing, a dream deferred, was still in the back of my mind. When I'd gone to New York City for a week before my junior year of high school, I had the notion I'd be back longer-term, serving in some way. And four years later before my junior year of college, I was interning for a church plant in Queens. It's those (then) subtle hints to my passion and God's purposes for my life that make me have those "Wow, God!" moments now.

So I'm trying to ask myself daily what makes me come alive. Maybe it's not so crazy for each of us to ask ourselves that question—to make the choice to pursue what makes us come alive. Because the world does, indeed, need people who have come alive.

And I think God also wants us to ask what makes us come alive because *he* is the God who set that fire ablaze in hearts for purposes beyond ourselves. We are God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works" that God prepared for us (*English Standard Version*, Ephesians 2:10). While reading *A Million Little Ways* by Emily P. Freeman, I recently learned that *poiema*, the Greek word translated to *workmanship* in this verse, is also where we get *poem* from in the English language (25). And I think that's beautiful. We are walking poetry. We are God's image bearers, writing poetry with our lives. But our poetry is not about us. Because we're in Christ Jesus and because we're God's image bearers, our poetry serves a greater purpose in this world. The poetry of our lives points to the glory of God himself.

Recall what Steve Corbett and Bryan Fikkert wrote in their book, *When Helping Hurts*: "The goal is to see people restored to being what God created them to be: people who understand that they are created in the image of God with the gifts, abilities, and

capacity to make decisions and to effect change in the world around them” (77). God has given us gifts, abilities and passions to change the world around us for his glory. When we ask ourselves what makes us come alive and we ask God how he wants us to write the poetry of our lives for his glory, I believe that’s when we find our God-given purpose. And I think that’s also how he uses us as a vehicle for hope and change in the world.

It’s exciting.

It’s liberating.

And it’s also scary.

I remember when I decided to officially drop pre-medicine in college. I was on a church pew in Oxford when the pastor asked, “Why are you doing what you’re doing? What is your motivation?” My bottom eyelids suddenly served as troughs for the tears welling up in my eyes. I’d wrestled all semester with whether to continue pursuing a medical career, and I knew, when he asked the question, why I was doing it. I loved serving people in some form or fashion, but God had already shown me that I didn’t have to be a doctor to do that. But there was also security in medicine: there was money in medicine. But I was so weary from pursuing something that I wasn’t passionate about, that a big paycheck didn’t matter so much anymore. I left the sanctuary that day, knowing that, while I wasn’t excited about explaining to everyone else why I’d chosen to forsake medicine, I had peace in my heart about pursuing something different. After all, God knows me better than I know myself, and he had gradually unsettled me in college and showed me that it was time for change.

But feelings of fear instead of freedom increased when I chose to drop pre-medicine. Besides the looming thought of the necessity to make a living when I graduated, fear and self-doubt made their appearances.

I'm a perfectionist and will admit it. I had no confidence in my writing, and, after two years of practice and devotion to my craft, confidence isn't exactly welling up and spilling over inside of me today. It's sometimes painful more so than pleasant to sit down and write. There are times when I finish and feel I've just rambled or should send my Word document to the trash bin on my desktop. Maybe just start over. I often feel inadequate or unworthy.

Looking back through a journal from my summer in Nashville, I found this entry from June 24, 2013:

I have been in Nashville for two weeks and five days, and I have not written anything besides what's on my blog. I don't know how to begin to write, and I am paralyzed by fear—a fear of failing I guess. I know I should be writing every day about any and everything from experiences to what people say and do to feelings and everything in between . . . I feel paralyzed when I begin to write. I almost put my pen to the paper or fingers to the keyboard, and then I stop. Will and I have been meeting every morning and talking through Romans. This morning, we read Romans 8, and verse 15 personally spoke volumes to me. It says that believers in Jesus Christ “did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear.” Fear of anything always feels like “slavery”—like being paralyzed.

It seems silly to be so afraid of the thing I enjoy. But I discovered in Nashville that I was not alone. My journal entry didn't end there. I'd had some self-discovery later that day about fear during my time in God's Word.

2 Timothy 1:17 says that God didn't give us a "spirit of fear." The verse is on lots of inspirational and sympathy cards. It's on coffee cups and bumper stickers. It's a good one, and it's from a letter that Paul wrote to Timothy. I'd never paid much attention to its context until that day in Nashville.

Paul was Timothy's mentor and apparently "laid hands" (prayed over) Timothy that he would receive the gift of teaching others about Jesus. In 2 Timothy 1:6, Paul wrote to Timothy, "I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands." Then he told Timothy in verse seven, "God did not give him a spirit of fear but of power, love, and self-control."

I love Paul's wording: "I'm reminding you to fan into flame God's gift to you!" Fanning into flame isn't code for Timothy to never put his gift into practice or to be modest and keep it for himself. Paul knew Timothy had something beautiful from God to give to the world.

Eugene Peterson's interpretation of 2 Timothy 1:6-7 in *The Message* says, "The special gift of ministry you received when I laid hands on you and prayed—keep that ablaze! God doesn't want us to be shy with his gifts, but bold and loving and sensible."

It seems to me that God not only wants us to do what we love because our passion likely points to a gift he's given us and wants us to use for his glory. It seems we have a duty to do so. If God has given me the gift of writing, I have a calling to "keep it ablaze."

Paul made it clear that Timothy had a responsibility to nurture his gift. Later in Paul's letter, Paul wrote, "Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you . . . Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress" (*English Standard Version*, 1 Timothy 4:14-15). Whether our gifts are healthcare or ministry or writing as believers in Christ, we should "immerse" ourselves in them.

And I love that God knows us so well that he gives us a gift we *desire* to immerse ourselves in. I love that he gave me a desire to write and to tell stories in high school and even brought me back to it when I strayed away to pursue medicine. I love that he brought me back to what I love. It might be scary and intimidating, but God says in his Word that he has "a hope and a future for me" (Jeremiah 29:11). And he promises to provide what I need along the way, too.

...

When I finally came to the realization of what I could not live without doing, I had to choose a major. I was at that crossroads once again and felt like senior in high school.

Choosing a degree in college is a joke among college graduates. I hear those on the other side of things say, "Going into college, 'Undecided' is the way to go as a freshman because you'll change your major so many times," or "I changed my major four times during college." It's true. Sometimes, trying to pick a major that fits your passion and God-given gift is like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. And it feels as if your degree isn't fluid in the working world and declares what you will do the rest of your life. At least it felt that way to me sometimes. But God is teaching me that he is bigger than my major or my resume. In fact, I like to think that God is building my

resume. He has a purpose for where I'm at right now, and he has a future for where I'm going. I'm learning that God's plans for me lined up with my passions in life. And my passions in life ironically lined up with my major, internships, leadership opportunities, and volunteer experience.

If I could give college students advice on choosing a major, internship or a career, it would be to follow your passion. It's God breathed into our souls. We're God breathed, God image-bearing, walking, talking poetry. When we worship him with our lives, we simply give God his breath back.

“Jesus engages people inside and outside the church. It’s almost as though He sees the church as one, without walls, denominations or tribes. I’m starting to see the church that way, too. . . I assure you, He’s alive and well and happy and working both inside and outside the traditional church. He’s going places many of us are unwilling to go, or perhaps scared to go. He exists outside our worldly tribes, even if those worldly tribes are labeled as local church.”

Donald Miller, “Storyline Blog”

## **Finding Church**

I love church. I'm an advocate of church. But church has been complex and sometimes confusing for me as a college student. As I mentioned at the beginning of the book, my grandfather was a pastor until his death in 2011 at Shady Grove Baptist Church of Corinth, with about 100 attendees on a given Sunday, wood paneling on the walls, and mauve carpet. It's the epitome of "old country churches" in Mississippi. My grandfather always wore a suit and tie when he preached, and a church deacon always prepared a glass of water for him because he yelled during most of his sermon. And I loved my "Paw Paw" for it. Paw Paw had a burning desire for studying the Word and for telling others about Jesus, and I loved most his down-to-earth-ness. When he wasn't in the church pulpit, he was in his blue Dickies overalls, tending to his beagles or cows on his farm in Theo, a Mississippi town with a population probably smaller than his church.

But we left Paw Paw's church. When I was three years old, my mother broke the news to her father and pastor that we'd be moving to another church three minutes from our home. Because at Shady Grove Baptist Church there wasn't much emphasis on youth and children's ministries. My mother wanted to attend a church that had activities for children and youth where I'd have teachers who'd disciple me and friends to do it with me. So we moved our church membership across town.

I grew up on the pews of Farmington Baptist Church. Mother was right about the move. I did have more opportunities there, such as Awana, to learn and grow in my faith as a child and teenager. In junior high and high school, I was very involved in the youth

group. Every summer we attended SOAR, a conference in Texas, with 5,000 students from around the country. And that's where God began to unsettle me about my idea of church, which consisted of all that I had experienced at the time: the traditional Southern Baptist church in Mississippi.

During the summer of 2010, I decided to attend SOAR one more time with my youth group even though I was about to be a college freshman at Ole Miss—I was the oldest person besides the youth minister and chaperone. I took *Radical*, a book by David Platt, to pass the time in the fifteen-passenger church van with no working air conditioner. Platt described his experience in one of China's underground churches when these words slapped me in the face:

Despite its size, sixty believers have crammed into it. They are all ages, from precious little girls to seventy-year-old men. They are sitting either on the floor or in small stools, lined shoulder to shoulder, huddled together with their Bibles in their laps. The roof is low, and one light bulb dangles from the middle of the single as the sole source of illumination.

No sound system.

No band.

No guitar.

No entertainment.

No cushioned chairs.

No heated or air-conditioned building.

Nothing but the people of God and the Word of God.

And strangely, that was enough.

God's Word is strangely enough for millions who gather in house churches just like this one. His Word is enough for millions of other believers who huddle in African jungles, South American rain forests, and Middle Eastern cities.

But is His Word enough for us? (26)

Just as I finished reading Platt's question, an eighth-grade boy on the van whined, "It's sooo hhot in here!"

I wanted to turn around and say, "Shuuut up! There are people in China right now having church underground with no air conditioning despite the threat of being killed. So I think you can handle it."

I admit now that there wasn't a lot of grace in my temptation to put him in his place, but I refrained. In all honesty, I was just as naive as he. This was a foreign way (metaphorically and literally) of doing church for me. I knew that Christians could not openly practice their faith in China, but I'd never been a part of or heard of a worship service like this before with no worship music, cushioned chairs, air conditioner, a greeting committee or welcome pamphlets complete with an itinerary for the church service and tear-off card for guests to fill out and put into one of the offering plates. It was the first time I'd heard someone say that the essence of church wasn't about all of this.

...

In January of my freshman year following the youth trip to Texas, I went on my first mission trip with the BSU to the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Because Haiti is considered a third-world country and the Dominican Republic is not far behind it, I felt

over-privileged and unsure of what I had to offer when I arrived. For the first time, I was able to put a face with poverty. In Barahona, a city on the southwestern coast of the Dominican Republic where we stayed, many houses had only one room and dirt floors. Girls in dresses but no underwear ran around and squatted in the dirt. During a storm one night, the power went out over the entire city because of insufficient electrical wiring in the country. Church was even more foreign for us college kids.

It's Sunday morning in the Dominican Republic, and we wake up for some stout Dominican Republic coffee, eggs and toast before walking from the missionary compound to the church next door. It's made of painted cement blocks, and there's nothing we'd consider special about it compared to our elaborate American churches back home. Two rows of pews line the "sanctuary" with no carpet, banners, or stained-glass windows. I remember Platt's words as I sit toward the front: "God's Word is enough."

It doesn't take long for three beautiful black girls, all around eight to ten years old, to pin me to the pew from the sides and begin to separate my brown hair into strands for braids like their own. One girl takes her ponytail holder with beads from her own hair. She stretches it with her fingers, and the corners of her mouth almost reach her ears as she smirks, telling me that there was no need for fixing my hair today. She gives me a side ponytail while the others make braids of all sizes down the sides and back of my head. They prick and pull, occasionally throwing their heads back with laughter, then squeezing my neck with both hands.

We begin the church service, and the pastor kindly welcomes our team of fifteen from Ole Miss in English after he does the same for his Spanish-speaking regular attendees scattered about the room. As he's talking, I look up and over my shoulder

toward the window, and a chicken is perching on the cement windowsill. *There's a chicken in the church house. Does anyone else see that?* I think.

Two of the girls sit on my knees now with their legs straddled, and the other has her arm wrapped around mine. We stand as the keyboard player begins to play, and the girls who were on my knees leap to the sides of my hips, forcing me to hold them through all of the music. I don't know a word of the songs, which are all in Spanish, but everyone around me is clapping and swaying. *I can do that*, I think, so I begin to sway. The girls are clapping while in my arms, singing as loud as their young voices will carry.

After three songs, we take our seats on the pews again, and the pastor begins his message to the congregation, again in Spanish and then English. A baby on the pew in front of me begins to cry for lunch, and the mother reaches for the top of her shirt and starts to pull it down. *What is she doing, what is she doing? Yep, she's doing it.* She pulls one of her breasts out of her shirt and starts feeding her hungry infant. This is awkward for me. This is not something I see during our Sunday morning services at Farmington. But that was normal in this country. As mothers and fathers listened to the sermon, their faces beamed with hope and joy. I heard "Amen!" and saw hands lifted in the air. And while it might have seemed like informality at the time, the spirit in the room was invigorating and refreshing.

Midway through the week we went to Haiti, and the poverty worsened across the Dominican Republic's border. We traveled to a village where the missionary leading our team knew a pastor, and he showed us his home. The one-bedroom house, home to eleven people, was made of cardboard and paper thatched together. There was no sewage or water system. A cement ditch ran through the village with flowing water where people

went for both drinking water and baths, contributing to the cholera breakout we'd heard about months earlier on CNN. I slid my sunshades from the top of my head to my face in order to hide my tears. *This is it*, I thought. *This is it for these children*. There was no Malco movie theater around. There's no car in the garage to hop in and go to Sonic. The children wore school uniforms, but the odds were that most of them would drop out of school to work in the sugar cane fields to help support their families.

We went to a church in Haiti, too, and it looked much different from the church in the Dominican Republic. No bigger than the average college student's apartment bedroom, the walls and roof were made of thatched leaves and wood. It had a gravel floor and wooden pews. But Haitians worshipped God with the same excitement, hand-clapping and dancing that those in the Dominican church did, but in a different language.

The keyboard player whose name, I'd learned, was Sampson, traveled with us. I'd talked to Sampson more since I'd first seen him play back in the church at Barahona. He said he was from Haiti but was studying English in the Dominican Republic. I loved to watch Sampson play. His skin color was a rich black, and, when he played, he smiled from ear to ear, revealing his pearly white smile.

Some might think Sampson had enough reasons to justify never striking another piano key for God's glory. All of the Haitians had enough reasons. Their country, already one of the poorest in the world, had been devastated by an earthquake of 7.0 on the Richter scale. But those in the Haitian and Dominican churches sang with a conviction of complete joy and unfailing hope in Jesus. I'd experienced first-hand what Platt had experienced in China. The Word of God and the promises of joy, provision, hope, and salvation it contains was enough for them. And it should be enough for me.

...

In 2012 two summers after my mission trip to the Dominican Republic and Haiti, I interned for the church plant I've previously mentioned in New York City, a place where most new churches rented schools before they were prevented from doing so earlier that year. Now, they rent restaurants, coffee shops, theaters and other longstanding churches because there is no place to build a new one. The cost to build a church would be outrageous in the city even if a pastor found an empty lot. The Connection Church staff that I was a part of for the summer paid monthly rent to meet in a beautiful Lutheran Church for Sunday night meetings. In Nashville, Tennessee, where I interned for World Relief, I attended a Nepali house church on Friday evenings and the Church at Antioch, a church plant that meets in an elementary school auditorium, on Sunday mornings.

These churches have a common thread, and it obviously has nothing to do with their venues. Through these church experiences, God has unpacked and redefined church for me. As I've searched for the true meaning of church, God has forced me to think beyond the confines of a church's construction—its walls, steeple and stained glass windows. He's taught me to consider more than a church's worship styles and ministry programs. There's something deeper than aesthetics that defines the church if these communities I'd experienced fell under the "church" category.

The Bible book of Acts didn't focus on these aspects of church. It says that the early church had ears (*English Standard Version*, Acts 11:22). It prayed for persecuted Christians (Acts 12:5). It gathered together to praise God (Acts 14:27). It sent missionaries to various cities (Acts 15:3) and welcomed other missionaries passing through its own city (Acts 15:4). The church had feelings of fear (Acts 5:11) and peace

(Acts 9:31). That doesn't sound like a building. It sounds like a person. The church was and is a living, breathing organism—a body of believers—with Jesus Christ as its head.

Paul used this very comparison of the church to a living body in Ephesians:

"[God] put all things under [Christ's] feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:22-23).

Eugene Peterson interpreted Paul's words in *The Message* in this way: "He is in charge of it all, has the final word in everything. At the center of all this, Christ rules the church . . . The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence" (Ephesians 1:22-23).

In the second chapter of Ephesians, Paul used another metaphor besides the comparison of the church to a living body and likened believers to a temple: You are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God . . . Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (*English Standard Version*, Ephesians 2:19-22). Paul made the point that it's not the building, the worship style, the potluck dinners, or marketing techniques that make up a church. The people are individual building blocks that make up a church with Jesus as its cornerstone. Jesus is the common thread of churches in Nashville, New York City, Haiti, China, my hometown, and around the world. The heart and soul of the church is Jesus.

During my summer in Queens, I was enjoying some red velvet cheesecake at Martha's Bakery, an unlikely place for God to give another one of those "lightbulb" moments, such as I had on the church van. I was reading 1 Corinthians, a letter from

Paul to a church plant. This is how he began his letter to the church: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (1 Corinthians 1:2).

In that moment, God showed me why I could go to the churches of the Dominican Republic and Haiti with completely different styles of worship, languages, and cultural norms. This is why I could attend church in two completely different cities—New York City and Nashville—and feel that I was a part of a family. The common thread in all of these churches was Jesus, and we were all a family because we had all experienced the joy and hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Before college, I'd been guilty of judging a church by its appearance or presentation on Sundays, and I wasn't even aware of it. I believe a lot of people, Christians or not, are quick to do the same. We see the church as First So-and-So Church on the corner of Main and Fifth streets or Saint Paul's This-and-That Church on the edge of town, but it's so much more. Church is about the people, and Jesus is its foundation. Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Church in New York City, wrote in *The Meaning of Marriage*, "For believers in Christ, despite enormous differences in class, temperament, culture, race, sensibility, and personal history, there is an underlying commonality that is more powerful than them all" (ch. 4). Church is about the people, the building blocks, and Jesus is its foundation. And the Word of God. The Bible and the gospel it contains is the cement in between the building blocks that holds it all together. Like Platt said, the Word is enough.

I love traditional church. And I love non-traditional church. I grew up in a church with over 150 years of history that nurtured my faith until I left for college. But God has been teaching me that church looks different and is done differently in various parts of the world. And I've learned that that is okay. God gave us some loose guidelines about church in the Bible, but he also allowed room for how church is carried out among different people and in different parts of the world. Church is more about the community. It's fluid. It's inside and outside of the church building. And Jesus wants to use his church as a vehicle to display his love to the world.

“The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ’s body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence.”

Eugene Peterson’s translation of Ephesians 1:23 in *The Message*

### **Finding Church (Again)**

After I read Platt's book, *Radical*, and after my trip to the Dominican Republic and Haiti, I started my own little hate war on church fluff.

My home church had been doing some renovations during my first semester at college, and I returned for Christmas break to find that my church had installed two huge viewing screens at the front of the sanctuary and added a stained glass window in the baptistery.

“Is all of that really necessary?” I asked Mom in the kitchen while we prepared lunch together after church.

"I think it's a nice addition," Mom replied. I felt that she was giving the answer that the church piano player is required to give so I kept pushing for more explanation.

“Well why couldn't they have sent that money to churches who actually need a place to meet instead of adding more stuff the church doesn't necessarily *need*?”

“Well, Lanie, people in the church donated money specifically for those things.”

*The older generation probably wanted the stained glass, and we added the projectors for the younger generation, I thought.*

I was upset about it all.

I was arrogant about it all.

I was prideful about it all because I'd had this new revelation about church on my mission trip.

And I was wrong. Very wrong in my thinking.

Yes, maybe some of that money could've gone to something different. But what that money should or shouldn't have gone toward is not the point. Because there's no perfect church. There's no church that perfectly budgets its money or budgets it the way you or I think it should. There's no pastor that perfectly teaches the Word of God every Sunday morning and never gets impatient with his children or angry with his wife. There's not one perfect way to worship God whether a church worships only through song and no music or whether it has a full band. And there's definitely no church with perfect people.

When I was huffing and puffing about the church's additions, I was acting as though I had it all figured out in terms of what a church should look like. I acted as if I'd found that perfect church when I had not. I wasn't even active in a church in Oxford, my college town. Sure, I attended a church, warmed a church pew on Sunday mornings and helped with its youth group from time to time, but that was the extent of my church involvement. I was taking up space, even though I had the ability to do something about it and to be part of a solution rather than a part of the problem.

Did I mention it's hard to find a church when one is in college? It's so hard to find a church in college and really feel like a part of the body of Christ I talked about in the last chapter. I've heard this over and over from other college students, too. I'd personally grown up in one church all of my life so I knew everyone there. My best friends were in my church youth group, and the older women in the church were like grandmothers to me.

In college, it feels as though there's this great divide between the college students in church and the rest of the congregation. It's hard and intimidating to break that barrier for a Christian college kid, and I feel that's why a lot of students give up on finding a home church in their college town. Then there's all of these different churches to choose from: Baptist (and under that huge umbrella is Southern Baptist, Missionary Baptist, and just all kinds of Baptist), Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Nondenominational, and so on. By the time many college students find a church, it's time to be an adult, apply for jobs, and pack up their apartments. I can't speak for people who aren't Christians, but I would imagine that college students who don't believe the claims of Jesus but are curious and want to attend church don't come because they've heard about Christians being hypocritical or judgmental. Church might also seem like an exclusive club, and you have to be completely convinced of Christianity or you're not in it. It's just a tedious and confusing process to find a church as a college student.

It wasn't until the summer before my senior year that I finally listened to God's command to roll up my shirtsleeves, stop warming a pew and get involved in a church, and by "church" I mean a local body of believers in Jesus Christ. The BSU was a form of church. I was getting community there. But I needed a community with the young and old, the married and unmarried, the students and workers. I craved the all-walks-of-life congregation of a church.

During my summer in Nashville interning for World Relief, Will and I attended The Church at Antioch, and part of our job was to connect people there to refugee families that they could love and serve. We immediately felt right at home. The church was full of people with different races, backgrounds, and stories, but they were all there

because of Jesus whether they were curious about Him, new to faith in Him or had believed in Him for a long time. The pastor was faithful to the teachings of the Bible, but was also honest about his personal struggles with sin and victories in His life because of Jesus. There was a sense of community and family that went beyond Sunday mornings. We met weekly with a community group to encourage and pray for one another. I loved the sense of community and family with these people. And I wanted it back home.

Will and I returned to Oxford, determined to find a church, a family with whom we could share our lives, grow in faith, and serve our community. We knew there wouldn't be a perfect church. I love what I've heard several pastors say recently: "If you find a perfect church, don't go to it, or you'll mess it up." We recognized that we were definitely imperfect people and would be looking for a church with other imperfect people.

But that's why the church is such a beautiful thing. It's full of imperfect people held together by a perfect God.

In *The Meaning of Marriage*, Tim Keller explained that the bond believers have through Jesus Christ outweighs differences in "class, temperament, culture, race, sensibility, and personal history" (ch. 4). Instead of looking at one another and magnifying others' flaws, believers in the church are to look to Jesus Christ, "helping each other on their journey toward the new creation (who they will be in Heaven), as well as doing ministry together in the world."

To me, community is where all of the unsettledness, confusion and decisions in college are hashed out. It's where gifts should be used. It's where brokenness should be surrendered. It's where honesty should be at its finest. It's not a place for perfect people.

It's a place for broken people helping one another along and serving a perfect God. And, as wonderful as this openness to others sounds, church doesn't always look this way. That kind of vulnerability does not always come so easy. But we keep trying because God lovingly created this worldwide family for community and for his glory.

And it's an opportunity I missed out on for most of my college years because I didn't realize the importance of participating in a community of believers until my senior year. But community is a crucial part of faith in God. He loves his church, his Bride, and wants us to love his Bride, too. After all, the church serves a purpose in the world. This is no comprehensive list, but below are some things I think God purposes for his church.

### **Purpose #1: A Place for Gray**

In a Sunday night prayer meeting at the church I currently attend in Oxford, a college student stood up and asked that we pray for him and his friends who had been regularly meeting with some Muslim guys and discussing differences in Islam and Christianity.

"The other night when we met for dinner," he said, grinning, "I opened the fridge wide where all of our new friends could see a six pack of beer sitting on the top rack. So please pray for us that we'd be sensitive to others' beliefs in situations like that as we talk about our faith with people of different religions."

*Did he really just admit in a prayer meeting that he had beer in the fridge?* I thought to myself. I looked toward the stage at the pastor who was smiling, too. Others in the room had a good laugh, and I laughed after I realized I wasn't the only one. And then we moved on to the next prayer request.

I'd never experienced that before—never talked about beer in church. There is no doubt that it's a gray area, and many churches take a stance against alcohol or avoid the topic altogether. The Bible mentions that drunkenness is a sin, but the Bible also makes mention of alcohol. Jesus even turned water into wine at a wedding. But we'd never dealt with it in church that I can recall when growing up. We'd actually never dealt with many gray areas *at all*.

And there are many gray areas in the Bible. Many times I wished God had left more specific instructions on dating. I wish he had made it more clear about when we can know when he is testing us to make us more like Jesus or when Satan is tempting us. I wish he had told us how much alcohol to consume or how much kissing before marriage is too much before it becomes impure. These are all gray areas to me.

While discussing this fact that there are gray areas like these, a friend told me, "In the gray areas of the Bible, go back to the black and white. Then go from there with God as your guide." There are several gray areas that the Bible does not cover, but it does seem to be black and white on a lot of things, and we can take the black and white that God gives us in his Word to work through the gray areas that arise.

Last year, I did a Bible study on why Christians should study apologetics, the case for why we believe what we believe. It talked about how many people argue that they don't need to study apologetics because God calls us to have "childlike faith."

They get this from Matthew 18:1-3. In this part of the Bible, one of Jesus' followers wanted to know who was the greatest of them in Heaven. The disciples seemed to always want to know who was the best in the eyes of Jesus and how they could get to the top. Jesus called a child out from the crowd and told them that whoever doesn't

become like a child would not enter Heaven. He continued, “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven” (*English Standard Version*, Matthew 18:4).

Jesus was not telling them to be like children in terms of how knowledgeable they are but how humble they are. Children are needy. They are needy every second of every day. They know they are needy and so they call to Mommy and Daddy all of the time. Jesus was making the point that, just as children unknowingly humble themselves when they recognize their need for love and provision from their parents, those who enter the kingdom of Heaven know and understand their need for the Father’s love, provision, and mercy.

Jesus wasn’t saying we need to be like children in terms of our knowledge of God. Besides, children ask questions. They are inquisitive and ask “Why?” at least fifty-two times a day when they reach a certain age.

I have thought this part of the Bible always meant that I just needed to be okay with having a child-like understanding about my faith. When the tough questions came up, I just told myself, *Lanie, approach it like a child and know you’re not God*, and that’s true to a point.

Paul, a man who followed Jesus closely and hung to his every word, disagreed with this argument, too. He specifically told people in his letters *not* to be like children. In Ephesians 4:11-15, Paul had this to say to the church in Ephesus:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the

knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

Paul wanted the people of this church to mature spiritually. He wanted them to grow in their knowledge of God and in unity with one another so that they weren't always confused about what they believed. He wanted them to "grow up" into the image of Christ.

Paul also wrote in Hebrews 4:11-15, "By this time you ought to be teachers... [but you still] need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish between good and evil."

Paul basically told these people that they needed to wean themselves off of "spiritual baby milk" and eat hardier meals. They needed "constant practice" of growing through faith and tackling the grey areas with other believers. They had already learned the "basic principles," the black and white. He wanted them to move on from those and discuss the gray areas of life as a community of faith.

He seems to suggest that somehow when we as believers do this our "powers of discernment" are trained to "distinguish between good and evil." I'd like to have my

powers of discernment trained. The power to be able to know where the fine lines of good and evil lie sounds awesome.

And that training happens alone to a certain extent. But, in Ephesians, Paul was speaking to the *church*. He wanted them to tackle the gray areas and tough questions. He wanted them to openly talk about their beer in the fridge so that they weren't "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning and by craftiness in deceitful schemes." He wanted them to grow toward unity in their faith in Jesus Christ.

But Paul also understood that he wasn't God and couldn't understand everything. In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul wrote, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." There are some answers I just won't know until I get to Heaven, and, as a church, sometimes it's okay just to arrive at that conclusion, too. But church is a place to talk about issues rather than skip over them. It broadens our knowledge even as it keeps us dependent on the God who is omnipotent as we learn together.

"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Romans 11:33).

### **Purpose #2: A Place for Gifts**

There's a passage in 1 Corinthians 12 in which Paul talks a lot about God-given gifts. He used an extended metaphor of the human body and explained that the parts of the body have different functions. Likewise, people in a church have different gifts and ways that they can serve the universal church. This goes back to what our passions are and what we can't see ourselves *not* doing.

I wrote an article for a journalism class on church planting and interviewed several pastors. I currently attend a church plant in Oxford so I thought who better to go to about church planting than my own pastor.

When I asked him how he and the leaders of the church encouraged the congregation to get involved, I was surprised by his response.

“We don’t create programs for people to participate in,” he explained. “We allow people who really have a certain gift or a passion for a certain ministry to start up something themselves. We don’t want to be the leaders of something we have no passion for. We want those who get excited about something to be the leaders.”

That sounds simple enough, but I’d never heard of that approach in church. In my naïveté, I’d always thought ministry in the church worked this way: the church staff creates a program, hoping other people will participate. But that’s not what he was saying at all. He was saying that the church staff was not the only group of people that could start or lead a ministry. People like me who aren’t on staff at the church are the ones he hoped would create ministries and lead those ministries as well.

After I’d mulled his approach over in my mind, I recalled several examples. In my home church, people of the congregation started ministries or oversaw get-togethers or Bible studies that they were passionate about. I know a pastor’s wife in upstate New York who once started a weekly scrapbooking get-together with some of the women in her church. A woman at the church I go to started a weekly yoga class because she really loves her practice. A group of men also started meeting at the local bakery for “Theology Thursdays” because they love croissants, coffee, and theology. All of these people simply had a love for something and used their passions as a way to serve their local

churches. And what's cool is that the people there are growing in faith. Women are encouraged as they share scrapbooking materials, good laughs over stories about their children and ways that God has revealed Himself in their lives. Women (and even men) in the yoga class take care of the physical bodies God has given them and nurture their souls as they fellowship with other Christians. The men at the bakery digest more than their croissants; they digest hard questions about the Bible.

God wants us to use our passion and gifts, and I believe it is God who gives us the vision, too, about how to corporately do that within the Body of Christ. In *I Am Not but I Know I AM*, Louie Giglio explained that God's plan is always in motion "to work for His fame":

So often we think that everything begins when we step through the door.

We think the project happens because we have the brilliant idea and are convinced that the mission was accomplished because we chose to participate, but things don't start when *we* have the vision or we think of a new way of doing things, choose to act, have a creative burst of inspiration, give or pray. God's story is the already-in-motion story . . .

That's why we should wake up each day on the lookout for the story of God constantly thinking to ourselves, "God is already here. What is He up to?" (107-108)

It's a hard thing to wrap my mind around, but God already knows how he will use my gifts and passions, especially in his church. In fact, Paul also writes about that in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are

varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.”

God has an idea of who will do what for his glory, but I praise him that he doesn't give us things to do that we hate. He's a God of creativity. He's a God of engineering. He's a God of healing. And he allows us to give him glory by doing those things we enjoy through the local church.

### **Purpose #3: A Place for Leaving**

Three months after I'd returned home from interning for Connection Church in New York City, Hurricane Sandy hit the city and caused catastrophic damage everywhere.

I watched the television as CNN featured a hard-hit area in Queens called Rockaway. I longed to be back in Queens, helping with the cleanup efforts, because I'd fallen in love with the people and the place. I kept up with my friends from the church on Facebook as they updated their statuses and posted pictures while they helped however they could in Rockaway. One of the pastor's wives posted a conversation she had with her four-year-old son:

I started telling Micah today about why we are going to serve a hot breakfast to people in Rockaway tomorrow morning. I told him that the hurricane made people's lights, warmers and music go off. They are very cold and their hearts are very sad. We are going to show Jesus to them by making them a warm meal. He looked at me with the most precious look on his face and said, “We need to give them a Band-Aid for their heart.”

God longs to give people Band-Aids for their hearts through the church. The church is here to show Christ's love by serving its community and the world. God helps people in various ways that we can't always see or understand, but the Bible makes it clear that one of the ways he longs to do that is through the church. In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul calls Christians "ambassadors for Christ" through which God makes his appeal to people. We do that by loving people with the same self-sacrificing love that Christ loves people.

When people's warmers and music go off, we as God's church should jump at the opportunity to help. Why? Because we are being filled with God's love so that it overflows out of our lives and into the lives of others. We are filled with God's love when we recognize our brokenness, when we choose to dig into God's Word and move in line with his truth about who we are and how much he loves us, when we realize our salvation is found in Jesus Christ and then when we do all of this alongside other people, too. It's a beautiful thing. Our love for other people regardless of race, gender, culture or beliefs becomes merely an outflow of Christ's love in our lives.

And I believe that's what being in college taught me most—that God has a heart for everyone. God knows everyone intimately—people in suburban America, people in cities, people in remote villages of Africa, people in the deep forests of Papua New Guinea, people in the dusty roads of Haiti and people in the packed streets of China. And he wants me to take the time to get to know people intimately, too. After all, we're all his image bearers, his poems, and there's something beautiful about all of us in our own unique ways.

“Church Aisle” by Scott Mutter, a personal favorite photomontage, is a picture of a grand sanctuary. The church has a beautiful banner hanging from the ceiling with the Great Commission, Jesus’ final command before ascending into Heaven, on it: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19-20). As you follow the center aisle with your eyes from the front to the back of the sanctuary, the aisle changes into a street.

I love this picture. It encourages the church to *leave the church*, to move beyond its walls and into the world.

So, yes, God graciously gives us this amazing family that supersedes various differences because of Jesus. He gives us gifts and passions that we thrive on and an outlet, the church, to use them. But all of that is in no good if we stay inside the church’s walls because God desires the world to know him. In Isaiah 61, the prophet Isaiah wrote about the coming Savior of the world, and Jesus later read this passage to church leaders when he told them he was the promised Messiah. Long before he arrived on the scene, Isaiah penned the words of Jesus, our Savior: “The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.” If this was the desire of my Savior, then it should be my desire. It should be his Bride’s desire. If this is what he did for me, then this is what I should want to see him do for others.

His love motivates me. It’s enough to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. It’s enough to get unsettled and move.

## Namaste

I'm a yogi in training. I've more dedicatedly returned my yoga practice and joined a studio, hoping the camaraderie and personal instruction will spur me on this go-around. I even popped in Jillian Michael's *Yoga Meltdown* DVD and tried her Level 2 workout a couple of days ago.

Jillian again encouraged me to get comfortable with being uncomfortable: déjà vu, of course. But she said something in Level 2 that she hadn't said in Level 1: "With anything you do in life, you'll never grow unless you get uncomfortable." I smirked as I glided into the chaturanga position.

At the end of the semester, I will turn my tassel and graduate from the University of Mississippi with a degree in English, but I feel as if my degree represents so much more. In four years of college, I've clapped and danced with Haitian and Dominican brothers and sisters on a rooftop overlooking the Caribbean Sea, its water reflecting the clear night sky overhead. I learned to navigate the subway in the Big Apple, and lived two months in a neighborhood that is considered to be one of the most diverse places in the world. I was blessed to work alongside my husband (fiancé at the time) in Nashville, Tennessee, a place where the United Nations resettles thousands of refugees from other countries every year. Who would've thought? Will and I picnicked and played soccer in Centennial Park with a husband, wife, and their three sons from Iraq; a replica of the Parthenon was our backdrop in Centennial Park, across the way from Vanderbilt

University. We made cookies from scratch with four siblings from the Democratic Republic of Congo and had to explain what “making cookies from scratch” means. The eldest brother warmly called them scratch cookies the rest of the summer.

I changed my major, dropped my pre-medicine classes, and got married at twenty-two, things I believe were part of God’s plan for my life but never thought I’d do in college. But there’s so much I never thought I’d do in college. I never thought God could teach me so much about himself *and* myself in such a short amount of time. And I never saw coming the heart change that I experienced about so many aspects of faith from who Jesus is to what church is to what on earth I am here for. The transformation has been unsettling and uncomfortable at times, and I’ve had to loosen my grip on some pre-college presumptions about my faith. But, as Michaels says about being stretched physically, I can never grow in faith unless I’m stretched spiritually.

...

Knowing all day that my aim was to sit down at my laptop tonight and finish this chapter, I’ve asked God today for words that best wrap this up. At a Bible study tonight, God shed new light on a verse I’ve read many times: “God works in you, both to will and to [act] for his good pleasure” (*English Standard Version*, Philippians 2:13). This doesn’t mean that we have no choice in the matter. God makes it clear in the Bible that we have the freedom to choose his will for our lives or to follow our own path. We must meet him half way. And that’s where Paul’s words in the verse before this one come into play: “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). Things came full circle for me tonight after one year of writing. If I am willing to *work out* my salvation—to put my questions against God’s Word, to surrender my gifts and

future trajectory to him, to commit to daily learning more about the mystery of the gospel and of Jesus Christ—God will *work in* me. And he’s done so in college. And, if the times of unsettledness and uncomfortableness result in this closer walk with my Creator, the One whose image I and everyone else bear in a lifetime, then I say, “Welcome, my unsettled heart. Bring on the next four years!”

As we say at the end of every yoga practice, Namaste. Farewell.

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