

ZONDERVAN

Every Bitter Thing Is Sweet

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THE QUESTION UNEARTHED

“Blessed are those who hunger.”

My life wears stretch marks from a child. A child I never conceived yet spent a decade birthing. A child who, in the swirl of my wounds, has healing for me still.

I don't search for a remedy to remove these marks. Though ugly to some, they are a sign of life.

God scarred me with beauty.

He gave me a story to tell. He wrote on my life.

I am branded.



I stepped through the doorway into her home, tentatively.

While I would classify myself as an introvert, social settings are rarely, if ever, intimidating to me. I love stories. And people always carry stories.

That day as I entered the foyer, I met three women: A distracted twentysomething who was constantly reapplying her lip gloss. A girl, underdressed for the occasion, but fashionably confident in her thrift jeans. A jumpered mother whose sleeve wore the remnant of a child's morning oatmeal and whose gray hairs revealed layers of beauty. Each of them had a story.

At another time, that foyer would have been my social

playground. God-prints were all over these women, who, at this intersection, might move from acquaintances to friends.

But this day was different.

The woman reapplying her lip gloss was pregnant. Her story stopped there for me. The jumper-clad, oatmeal-smudged mom clearly had something I didn't. And the girl, I quickly learned, though youthful in demeanor, had three children at home and had just discovered—to her surprise—her womb had been opened again.

I came dressed with confidence and holding a gift wrapped with class, but alongside these women I felt insecure and empty. I had nothing to offer this crew.

Minutes before, driving through those rolling Shenandoah hills, I wanted to turn around and go home. But I had sent my reply. And my desire to please my expecting friend, who was the guest of honor, and her friend, who was hosting this event, trumped my fantasies of changing out of my church clothes into sweats and gulping down a chai.

Baby showers had become a “no go” for me since my little stint of not being able to conceive grew into a state of being. I almost always had an easy out, with a fully scheduled life, but a few times I had to offer my real explanation for not attending. And then, of course, there were always the necessary exceptions.

This shower was my exception. It was for a dear friend, a small shower, and I knew my absence would be obvious. When I had sent my reply, my heart was in a good place. I felt settled with the lot God had given me, and was even more determinedly pleading in prayer with the belief that my day would come.

But grief's tide can't be predicted. Two weeks later, I wasn't so ready to participate in this baby brigade.

But I was there, smiling. Congratulating.

Then, among the wrapping paper rips, the sips of punch, and the clanking of forks on chocolate-smearred plates, the stories began.

At first they were humorous, ones I could easily laugh alongside. Funny, cute, first-days-of-life-in-the-great-wide-open accounts.

But as the gift-opening slowed, it was only natural that the advice for this new mom-to-be filled the empty space.

There were only eight of us. All of whose wombs had been opened but mine—an observation, it seemed, no one else made. On the one hand, I was glad: *Oh, please, let no one feel sorry for me*, I thought when the conversation shifted, even as the membrane between mind and heart disintegrated and I became deeply sorry for myself. On the other hand, I was searching for a way—any way—to put an end to this conversation.

Please stop.

Someone stop these tales of labor and delivery that single me out. Your rite of passage, for me, holds a sign at the front that says Do Not Enter. It carries with it so many questions, so many doubts, fears, and insecurities. About me, and about God. When I open that door, when I go to that place, alone, I am lost.

As the laughter of shared experience increased, this sorority of sisters formed bonds around their anecdotes. And I drifted inward and downward.

Comparison plagued my soul.

At the first opportunity to graciously excuse myself, I left. Since the women didn't seem to notice my silence, I was certain no one would notice my absence.

EVERY BITTER THING IS SWEET

Like most pain, until you have known it for yourself, you are blind to it.

In the car, my eyes released tears and my heart soured toward the women I had shared cake with that afternoon. Their stories were no longer alluring to me, and the only God-prints I saw were the ones I lacked.

They were fruitful; I was barren.

In times like this of losing myself in comparison, I didn't see God as a belligerent Father refusing the simple, natural requests of His daughter. He wasn't stern and angry with me, leading out with punishment. He wasn't even absent, His mind caught up in more important matters.

This wasn't about false perceptions of God at all—or so I thought.

It was about me.

My question was not, *Is God good?* But instead, *Is He good to me?* I was overlooked. Forgotten. Not important enough to bless, and easy enough to dismiss.

Cursed.

If the mother whose womb had been opened was living her reward, what had the barren one done to carry such a vacancy?

This question wove itself into the backdrop of my every interaction with those who had what I didn't. And it was the question (and its hidden assumptions) I was learning had to be brought into my conversation with God if I would ever find life through barrenness.



The morning after the shower, I returned to a habit that began years earlier when the darkness on the outside forced a reckoning with God on the inside. I padded around the first floor of

our house on the hill, in the room-to-room circle my feet now knew from memory. The world was silent, the lingering night sky keeping it placid, while I talked to Him.

This season was still barren on the outside; I could hardly point to one area of my life that was working as it should. But I was full on the inside, finding a rhythm of using the pain of my outside circumstances—such as the sting from the shower—to drive me deeper into this secret conversation with God. Just as each foot found its way into an imaginary groove in the floor as I made that circular loop, I was learning where to take my ache. I was creating a space here, inside, for a new home with Him. After years of having a stone-cold heart toward God's whisper and His Word, I began to feel a shift. I had little left but that Word and that whisper. He had whittled me down.

The Bible resting on my chair showed wear—how could it not? My friend, my best friend in this hour, was the Author. The book I'd once used to plan youth ministry talks, the book I'd once used to quote pithy sayings and to confirm opinions I'd already formed, that book had found its way into my deep.

The God behind it was proving Himself to be fundamentally different than what I'd supposed for at least a decade, maybe more. But I was finding Him. In the places I had feared most and spent a lifetime avoiding, He was meeting me. My worst, my very worst, moments were getting rewritten without circumstances changing. I was getting acquainted with the kind of deep satisfaction that bad news can't shake. He was showing me Himself as strong enough. He was letting me hide in Him, letting me find a safe place.

And so I cradled my midnight questions while mamas cradled their babies, and I let God's psalms tell me He cradled

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the answer in Himself. I felt forgotten, but I heard God speak that He had not left me. I felt weak, but I heard Him promise an overshadowing. I felt anxious that my constant fumbblings would annoy Him, but I heard Him say He delighted in me.

And I felt hungry.

I wasn't this hungry when God was a distant coach, forcing me to perform.

I wasn't this hungry when I had a life easily explained, easily predicted.

I wasn't this hungry when everyone understood me.

Pain had created space. Space to want more. Space to taste a sense of being *alive*. An alive that would grow to be my favorite kind of alive: secret, hidden to all eyes but mine and those nearest to me.

This had to be the hope of a lifetime, Him and Him alone.

But redemption is full of dimensions.

Little did I know that staring at Him, looking deeply, wouldn't always be a secret. This new perspective was infectious, inside and out.

Little did I know that I was to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.



A brown hand reached around the gate to pull it open at the sound of our driver's horn. I moved from a posture of absorbing all that was around me—this slice of Africa I'd just met hours earlier—to homing in on the purpose of our travel excursion. My little girl's bed was in this house, enclosed. My son's playing field was in front of me.

We were led by the house mother through the hallway to their rooms. All these months of waiting had allowed me to

fashion this moment one hundred different ways in my mind, none of which I was experiencing now. I had pictured a waiting room, a place where we would collect ourselves before stepping across the threshold of an introduction that would change our lives forever.

As I peeked in and out of rooms, wondering where we'd perch and wait, a split-second interaction would leave me with an armful.

"Meske!?" the house mother shouted from across the hall while stepping into one of the rooms and scooping up all seventeen pounds of Eden's three-year-old body. She thrust her into my arms.

We'd planned that I'd first hold our new son, Caleb, and that Nate would first hold Eden, our new daughter. So I nervously handed Eden what was intended to be Caleb's gift, a bear. My peace offering wasn't necessary. It was me that she wanted.

She wrapped fingers, too small for her age, around the upper part of my arm and didn't let go. (And she wouldn't. For hours.)

My little girl glowed. Her eyes held an expectant look that said, "Can we make up for my lifetime in this one afternoon?" The rise and fall of her chest against me overshadowed the fact that she didn't speak. She breathed safely. She rested. Everything about her little person said amen.

And he? Caleb was Daddy's boy from the minute he saw his white-skinned counterpart. I noted something in him, then, which has taken years of understanding his story for me to name. Caleb met fatherly love for the first time when he met Nate, the kind of love in which you could wrap yourself and find healing by its very nearness.

Nate overshadowed Caleb's story that day. A new day had come. We didn't know how new it was for him until years later. Like any good story, time revealed its layers.

I'm not sure how long we stayed in that home, but things like naptime, potty, and snacks weren't yet on my priority list. We didn't let go of our son and daughter even as we also cuddled the other children who wandered in and out of the room. We wanted our two to know that we were different from the others who'd passed through. As they climbed over and around our laps, we frequently interrupted them to whisper in their ears in broken Amharic: "I am your mommy." "I am your daddy."

What we said, they already seemed to know. As if they were newborns who had spent months incubating inside of their mother, our scent—to them—was like their own. The umbilical cord stretched over a wide ocean but was there, nonetheless. The Father had forged a connection, even before our eyes stared into theirs.

After we bridged what felt like years in just a few hours of nearness, we said our goodbyes to the nannies who had loved them so well. I wondered whether Caleb and Eden knew those goodbyes were forever.

Then we went to the guest home where we were staying and gave the children baths. We dressed them in the pajamas that had been folded in a stack at our home for them for months, in the room that had been our guest room for years. The room that now had plaques with their names painted on them, hung on the wall.

He slept heavily. She spent her first night fighting sleep so she could peer out from the covers every hour or so to make sure we were still there. I'll never forget the sound of the sheets around her little body as she jolted up in bed, paused to get her

bearings, and searched out our silhouettes under the sheets in the bed across from her.

We had become a family, in a moment, yet I still didn't know Caleb's birthmarks or Eden's freckles. I couldn't serve them their favorite meal or find their ticklish spots. They hadn't yet heard my deep belly laugh or become familiar with the way Nate glanced at me, sideways, when he was trying to read my response to something he'd said.

We were also getting acquainted with us as *four*. Each of us was a new part of a new whole, though God had known us as "us" since the beginning of time. We had a history together, though we'd lived apart. We'd each known brokenness and loss, yet with no concept of how those paths would merge into each other's beauty one day.



Healing that had been coursing inside of me, spanning years, surfaced that July in Ethiopia. When my lips brushed Eden's forehead for the first time, a holy vindication echoed throughout the heavens. My life surfaced a win, His win. It had always been there, but now I could touch it. Evidence that God not only loved me but liked me and enjoyed me—something I'd spent decades subtly refuting—now worked its way into my visible story. I got to sweep aside the ashes of years and try on beauty.

And it fit. Just right.

I had grown to know God when no one was looking and when life still wasn't "working" as I'd suspected it should. There, He was the God who saw me and *knew* me and reveled in what He knew. That understanding, as it worked its way into my insides, though not my circumstances, steadied me.

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And now, here I was, in the unfolding fulfillment of many (though not all) circumstances, living wildly alive. God's signature over my barrenness, over my broken story, once unknown, was now a spiritual branding on my flesh.

It said: God is good . . . to me.

For Your Continued Pursuit

Isaiah 61:3 | Romans 9:20–21 | Psalm 32:7 | Job 23:12 | Psalm 27:13 |
Psalm 91:2 | Hebrews 6:19 | Genesis 8:11 | Zephaniah 3:17 | 2 Corinthians
4:17 | 2 Corinthians 2:15 | Colossians 1:16 | Jeremiah 29:11

This section at the end of each chapter is for those readers who, like me, want to trace any spoken declarations back to God's truth and use those as starting points for adoring Him, for making His Word part of their everyday language. Some verses are quoted within each chapter, and others are implied.

MOMENTS OF YES

“Draw me away!”

The November when I was fifteen, I stood underneath the canopied expanse of Michigan sky, and the very big God who created it came near.

Hundreds of us, teenagers, had just filed outside from a sweaty dining hall where one not too much older than us casually stood up front with his Bible and told us about this Jesus who didn't just come to imprint history but came to enter our hearts. We were there for a weekend of fun with our friends, just a retreat. Many of us were unsuspecting. We didn't know that this weekend might forever change us.

As tears dropped one by one off my cheek and onto my woolen mittens, I heard the movements of those around me who were also considering this message. The shifting of boots in the snow mingled with sniffles and stifled sobs. The dark sky created a hiding place for the hundreds of hearts in that field who for the first time this night had their eyes opened to God, whose eyes had been fixed on them since before they were born. The curtain was pulled back and a new dawn offered, in the night.

I'd grown up in church. I believed in Jesus. I had my own Bible. I paid homage to His death year after year before

devouring scores of peanut-butter-filled chocolate eggs. Our big events revolved around His big events. God was commonplace in our home.

But God's appeal for relationship, however many times I had heard it before, was new that night.

As I stood in my fifteen-year-old frame, which was wrapped in layers of long johns, and considered Him, His unraveling of me began.

I could not name it at the time, as I walked back to the gathering place alone, alongside the others, but this was just the beginning of a life of regeneration.

I knew then that I wanted something new. I know now that we were made for newness.

The next day, I wrote carefully in red ink on the front of a yellow legal pad that became my first journal: "November 13, 1992. My new relationship with Jesus Christ."

It may have been more appropriate to write: "November 13, 1992. The beginning of a lifetime of 'new.'"

My young heart didn't receive then that, yes, the new would come, but both death and life would run as commingling streams throughout the decades ahead. For the new to come, the old in me had to go. I would be left with an uncomfortable hunger, a longing, for new life yet to be born.



The summer after I etched that date on the yellow legal pad, it was all still fresh. The Bible I'd gotten for my confirmation years earlier now showed signs of wear. I held it, casually and comfortably, just as I'd seen the man do that November night when he spoke to the room of sweaty high school bodies that were steaming up the windows of Camp Storer. My Bible *was*

becoming comfortable for me to hold. His Word had begun to be familiar. I enjoyed it.

I'd always been a reader, but this was different. I mimicked what I'd seen friends—some who were also new to the practice of inviting God into their adolescent, everyday world—do with their Bibles. I highlighted verses and put stars next to phrases that spoke to me. I switched from the legal pad to a journal, where I wrote prayers to Him, like letters. His Word was easing its way into my normal high school experience. The idea of a relationship with this God was becoming normal to me, though still mysterious.

As the summer musk grew from June into July that year, I found myself often escaping to our backyard swing after I'd gone out for the night with friends. The spotlight from the porch just below my parents' window, combined with the moonlight, illuminated the Bible cracked open in my lap.

I didn't wear my watch.

This wasn't a duty; I just wanted more of this Jesus who filled the pages. I stayed up late into the night reading and talking with Him and journaling. I couldn't get enough.

I'd defined summers prior to this one by a certain boy I liked or a vacation my family took. This summer was different. I was falling in love. But this time with God.

I didn't have rules or parameters for this love. I was forging something new. I was fifteen years old, hungry for God.



Along with this hunger, I felt the beginning of a zeal I couldn't ignore. My life was on a new trajectory that in some ways felt more natural than anything I'd known before. I wanted others to meet God as I had. I began to crave the thrill of watching

a person open her eyes to a new reality. It was as if witnessing that heart-turn in another solidified that same shift in me.

Though I found this particular dimension of God—His working through me to reach others for Him—fascinatingly complex, it slowly, over time, eclipsed the fledgling simplicity of those nights that were just God and me on my back-porch swing. He had become, to me, the God who calls His people to minister. These were the verses I highlighted, the sound bites I took away from sermons. As this dimension of Him grew in my mind, it didn't leave much room to explore different sides of Him.



Just a few years later, the memories of those summer nights on the swing had faded.

I found myself in my college bedroom in an old house with stately French doors that opened to an overgrown yard. This particular day, the doors I'd rarely had time to notice were inviting. The yard seemed no longer weed infested; it was stunning. The sun breaking through the branches above formed an invitation on the fall-painted leaves.

This would have been a perfect day to open those doors (always shut), roll out my own blanket over the blanket of leaves, and fill my mind with things too big for quick consideration. My housemates and I had been delving into a Bible study that made my thoughts of Jesus linger beyond the study. It was the first time in years that I felt drawn to God in that way.

However, I reasoned, it was Sunday afternoon, the Sabbath. And to one who didn't know rest in her core, Sabbath simply meant work of a different flavor. There wasn't time on this day of Sabbath rest for things like resting.

But why? I argued with myself. *Because there are high school kids to call and Bible studies to plan.* I still had lists on this Sabbath; they just were of a ministry flavor.

Ministry is rest, isn't it?

After years of defining my Christian faith by how much and how often I poured out, my fourth year of college I was tired. That same fall, I dreamed about catching mononucleosis or some other ailment that might give me a justifiable reason to rest, deeply. My own reasons for rest—including the tiredness that had begun to set into my soul—apparently weren't enough. I needed something to force me to go there.

I was convinced that because the world around me was full of people who didn't yet know Jesus, whose hearts needed to be won, I had to meet their needs. But that outward pouring also served a different purpose. It masked me, the one who wasn't quite ready to be uncovered before the God-man I'd said yes to years before. This is really what kept me from picnicking on what I still remember to be the most beautiful fall day of my college years.

I watched that day from my window. French doors closed.



Some memories reflect our forming and some memories form us still: I stood on a stage, all fiftysomething pounds of my seven-year-old self spotlighted. I'd finished my audition song and was waiting for the voices to break through the pitch-black theater.

"So, can ya dance?" bellowed the show's director.

Up from within my bony frame came my confident reply: "Yep!"

Of course, I'd never known a dance lesson as I stood under

those big white lights. But my daddy had told me that I could do anything. So I could.

My daddy—who hiked the Grand Canyon on a whim with nothing but a Diet Coke in his hand and who created my very first memory as he flew me over that canyon in the prop-plane he copiloted on that same trip—filled my childhood with strong words.

He cracked open the sky for me.

I didn't know fear or limits. Then.

Then came the day when I pedaled home from my best friend Laura's house during the wisp of a summer between junior high and high school. I found him on the couch, slumped in pain. Man down—my invincible daddy was wounded.

One doctor's appointment gone awry, one false move, altered the course of his life.

Forever.

My dad, a coach, spent a fall that was normally jam-packed with tennis tournaments and back-to-school activities on a bed we moved into our family room. He couldn't walk the stairs. Coach Welter was out for what we hoped was just a season. It turned into years. And it took with it that little girl on the stage who could do anything.

When my dad's body broke and his back gave way, my heart went too. The man who had told me I could do anything couldn't get out of bed for months. He walked the rest of his life with a shadow over his once-vigorous existence. His words of confidence lost their weight alongside his broken story, and I received an early seed that later sprouted a question: Is God good *to me*?

So I did, then, what human nature tells us to do. I filled

in the gap between what I once knew—how I knew things should be—and this new reality. I compensated.

I moved from hair in the wind, sunshine whipping through my carefree spirit to coloring carefully within the lines. I grew cautious, craving an order that verged on rigid. I called this “measured.” I drew boundary lines for myself with consequences. I called this “discipline.” I moved from innocent zest and fearlessness to self-protection. I called this “maturity.”

I wrapped my new patterns around myself, familiarity in an unfamiliar world.



I graduated from college and that French door home, but not from the pace I had kept there. I remember one morning as I sat in the kitchen nook of the post-college apartment I shared with a friend, with my Bible and prayer list spread out in front of me, my eyes glazed. The names on that list held stories in which I was invested and represented people I loved, yet something felt stone cold within me as I recited their names in my head as prayers, and thought, *What really is prayer anyway?* Their faces rolled through my mind like ticker tape. Check. Next name, check.

I watched the clock.

My unspoken rule was that this set-aside time, my “quiet time,” as I called it, should be at least thirty minutes, but, thankfully, no more than an hour. It was a rare day when I wasn’t counting down time. Life was too full with ministry to high school and college students and the community that enclosed them. I had no off button, no space apart from all this output. My mind felt like the floor of the New York

Stock Exchange. *How do you press pause on this level of activity?* I thought.

And this designated time to press toward Him, to receive? Most days it was, to me, dry obligation.

He was there and I was here and, though I spent my days telling others about Him, most of my repertoire was memories. He'd intersected my life profoundly when I was fifteen, in a forever life-altering way, but how long could the fuel from that night burn?

Sitting at the kitchen table that morning, I remembered a conversation I had with my roommate in college. I'd been propped on the dorm-room bed when I asked her, "Don't you wish you could just lump all of your time with God into one afternoon, at the beginning of the week, so you could make sure you got it done?" In other words, "Don't you wish you could just get it over with?" I could still see her frozen expression. She paused and drew in her breath, almost in disbelief that the fervent person with whom she'd lived had that line of reasoning going on inside of her. Her response signaled that what I'd shared, looking for sympathy, was not exactly the common understanding of spending time with God.

But my out-loud thinking betrayed what I lived. God was big enough for me to pattern my time into telling others about Him, but not real enough for me to find any delight in Him. He was a task, a box to be checked. The carefree little girl I once was didn't ride her bike with hands off the handlebars anymore. She was measured, careful. She was here to "do" for God.

It was as if somewhere in the recesses of my mind I believed that if I kept pouring out externally, I wouldn't need to face any internal rifts in my heart. The disconnect between who

God had made me to be and who I was becoming in order to please Him—to do this Christian life as I believed He'd ordained—was subconscious, but I made a pattern out of not addressing it. My concept of God and of following Him was creating enough flurry to hide what was broken inside.

Growth, to me, wasn't in; it was up and out. I didn't know that my insides were designed to reach and press and expand, just like I didn't know that there were sides of God I'd barely noticed. I thought I knew who He is and what His purpose is for His people. The great mystery of faith seemed a one-time decision, not a lifetime unfolding.

But this emptiness, this version of barrenness, was serving a purpose.

Soon enough I might feel so hollow, have such longing, that I would crave life. Soon enough I might recognize that God had more for me. Soon enough I would have desire.



Amid this flurry of service to God that lingered post-college, I found myself a partner who was also zeroed in on making Him known to those who didn't yet know Him. We were foisted onto a team together, reaching out to kids from the same high school.

Nate was everything I was not. He was unfiltered and spontaneous in a way that might, at times, bleed into carelessness. I was cautious, with a heavy filter, in a way that was almost impenetrable for a “feeling” person. Where I hesitated, he sprang. We did share one major thing in common, and at this stage of life that one thing—a zeal for ministry—was my *only* thing. Nonetheless, I kept my distance from this guy for fear he might distract me from my purposed life.

Unfortunately for me at the time, some feelings I just couldn't harness. One afternoon, I had one of those rare moments alone to process the growing whirlwind of feelings for Nate I couldn't seem to keep down. This was one of the first times in my adult existence when I couldn't will myself to stop something. I escaped to a lake near the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains to get my head straight.

I needed to ask God about this.

I sat with my open-ended question and my Bible, expecting an echo. I'd gotten used to talking at God; a mutual exchange was unfamiliar. But I was desperate to quell these feelings I'd deemed inappropriate. I couldn't see how a relationship at this stage in my life would do anything but hinder what God had "called" me to do in reaching those who didn't yet know Him.

God came, tender, touching the heart I didn't know was hard until it felt His fingertips.

He led me to Genesis 2:25, in a way I'd not known "leading" recently but quickly understood as outside of me. "They were naked and unashamed."

A verse I blushed to read hinted of a secret that, when it moved off the page and into my reality, might unravel a life-long stunted perspective on God.

I came expecting a strategy for extracting myself from a circumstance I'd labeled distracting. I left with a phrase that reverberated from His Spirit, within, to my heart: *You will marry Nate.*

I had spent years in a desert, familiar with its dryness and assuming it was just part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, but in that desert came a drop of water. I'd squelched almost every emotion in the name of focus. Emotions were

unnecessary to me. When this dewdrop fell onto my parched heart, however, thirst arose.

Could it really be His voice? He didn't give me more people to seek out for Him. He didn't impart strategies for advancing His kingdom. He didn't download my next talk or lesson or some cross-reference in Scripture.

What He offered was permission to feel, to love.

And so ensued the waterfalls.

I cried nearly every day for a month.

Years of tears, stored up, were given license for release. Some days they came out of angst; I couldn't believe the partner God had chosen for me. *Nate? Really, God?* Other days I had a looming sense that this nudge from God meant the end of living in that one-bedroom apartment I'd decided I'd know my whole lifetime. Nate was everything I worked so hard not to be. He was unbridled. It was as if I knew that joining myself to Nate meant I couldn't stay who I was or where I was.

At the time, all I knew was that Christianity (as I'd configured it) was work, and the pool of energy that I had to give had already been allotted. Where was there room for anything else?

That month was exhilarating. I began to understand that the decision I'd made as a teenager had taken me on a path of both death and life. My growing desire for Nate introduced a hunger for that life that gave me a new, though subtle, willingness to walk through death to get there. Somehow I knew, through the deluge of tears, that marriage—abandon—might fulfill the yes I'd given to God years before.

Nate would witness both the beginning of me and the end of me. His hands would hold my new understandings of God, freshly birthed, as if he were cupping our infant. And having our lives merge as they did when we were young and immature

EVERY BITTER THING IS SWEET

would incite a death in me of which he and God, alone, would know the intimacies. Nate would both cradle and kill.

For this union to grow, it would require the end of calcified ways of seeing God, myself, and others, and call forth from within me beauty and perspective and perseverance I had no idea were there. I couldn't articulate this, then, but something inside of me knew it.

Nate was a signpost: the new was coming, on the heels of the old dying. I was familiar with hunger once. I would be hungry for newness once again.

For Your Continued Pursuit

John 17:24–25 | 2 Corinthians 5:17 | Galatians 2:20 | Matthew 5:6 | Song of Solomon 1:4 | Genesis 2:25 | Jeremiah 29:11 | 2 Corinthians 4:16 | Ephesians 3:16–19 | Psalm 42:1 | John 4:14 | Isaiah 55:1 | Psalm 42:7 | Song of Solomon 8:6 | Proverbs 20:27 | John 15:13 | 2 Corinthians 1:21–22 | Colossians 3:10

NOT MY TYPICAL PRAYER

“Let me see your face, let me hear your voice.”

New life rarely comes without pain. Five days after the wedding rice had been swept from the floor, I felt not hungry but empty. The emotions of our courtship, the intense sprint through our five-month engagement, and the ongoing responsibilities of leading a ministry had left me flat. I had just said a life-altering yes to Nate, but with bags under my eyes, and a weary body.

Early in our honeymoon, I spent my time lying by the pool with my Bible open on my lap and my eyelids drooping shut. I felt a growing, though still vague, discomfort with where I was and who I was, and with the fact that sleep was more appealing to me than engaging with God’s Word.

Here I lay on vacation for nearly two weeks with nothing but time, and that time was disconcerting to me. With no one to minister to, I didn’t know what to do with God or how to come before him without any time limitations. I was awkward with Him, as if on a wedding night, unsure of how the two of us should be around each other now that the crowds had gone home.

These were supposed to be the happiest days of my life, and I was too tired, dazed, lost to receive them. What had been starved on the inside to produce this exhaustion?

I had a growing sense that the problem was me. It wasn't that God was the hard driver. It was that I was driving myself and calling it God. There was a disconnect between who He really is and who I'd made Him out to be, and all the activity kept me from acknowledging that disconnect. Until now.

I had just said yes to a life of husband and wife, unaware of how that covenant might work its way into my understanding not just of Nate or myself but of God. Marriage would both undo me and rebuild me. Another circumstance might have yielded the same results, but God chose marriage, as the first of many events in my life, to spark my end and new beginning. Nate and I would find death and life in those rings and those vows, which were too big for us then and now.

All of this was happening without my buy-in. I acknowledged weak hunger pain, but that was the extent of my participation.



Despite the restlessness that crept into my honeymoon thinking, I returned home to do life exactly as I'd been doing it before.

Just weeks after our wedding, we had an opportunity to take a handful of high school kids to hear a worship concert. It was ministry, so I readily agreed.

The auditorium was thick with enthusiasm and expectation. I felt out of place in this venue; I was used to observing concerts, not participating in them, but I could tell that this crowd was ready to engage. People came full of expression, even before the music started.

The focus on worship was unfamiliar to the few souls I had brought, too. They knew concerts and sporting events and ral-

lying places, but many of them were fresh to faith in God. Such a loud, intense gathering for praising God was new to them.

The lights were low enough for me to take in the surroundings amid the teenage flutter around me. At that time in my life, anything outside of my paradigm of Christianity fell prey to my evaluation. And this display of music, dance, and preaching was on the edges of what I considered familiar.

I was a driver that night, ushering these high school kids to the place where they might see God. I could do this role in my sleep—leading, guiding, shepherding—but as the music played, I started to steal fewer looks at how these ones I loved were receiving this experience. I felt something dislodge inside me.

My heart was ever so slightly moving. Rather, it was being moved. Not uncommon for a believer in Jesus, but in recent years my spiritual life had little connection with my heart.

In fact, in my experience of Christianity, my heart rarely moved except around the conversion of other hearts. A holy night when a soul saw Him for the first time was my chance for the straw by the manger to crease my knees too. I saw Him welling up in the lives of others. Their stories then became my stories, so deeply that I lost my own journey.

When others grew, I grew. I knew no other way for it to happen.

So the night of this concert was strange to me. The high school kids already knew Him, so I didn't have an opportunity for Christian "success" in the way I'd defined it. Yet I found myself moving from being stirred to being overcome. I sensed that I could stop the in-flooding of emotion, but I didn't want it to stop.

This stirring spoke to that hunger pain that crept up weeks before on my honeymoon. It lingered in the days that followed,

this movement from God. Just like falling in love with Nate, it was distracting.

Days later, still only weeks after we'd said "I do," I found myself scribbling a prayer that was more of a raw asking than an item on a list: "There has to be more of You, God, than what I'm understanding. I want to know more of You." The words came from outside me, though already attached to me. This was not my typical prayer.

Later, I learned that Nate, who was buried in a mass of high school testosterone just rows ahead of me that night, was having his own private conversation. He'd witnessed an older, respected friend a few rows over from him, arms outstretched, unashamed of private worship in a public place. This guy wasn't demonstrative by nature, but apparently that night, something called for an expression that was open for others to see. Nate couldn't look away. He hadn't seen a man worship like that before, on this continent at least.

Instead of viewing his friend with a skeptical eye, Nate had this thought-turned-prayer: *He has something I don't. I want what he has.*

Nate and I unknowingly had a convergence that night, one we first identified together months later. Those simple prayers, though not flippant, were casual. They certainly weren't eloquent, but they were the beginnings of a deeper hunger—and a lifetime feast.

The entwining of lives and stories that happened on the day that I wore white and Nate's tears fell into my bouquet was beginning to take the shape of a singular love story, one much greater.



We had not yet reached our first anniversary on that mild January day in Charlottesville. My mind was oblivious to the weather, though, as I neared her office door. It was thinking, *Run and hide!* I slumped my shoulders as I opened the door to the corridor that held her office. *What did I do to get myself here?*

From my perspective, counselors were for true down-and-outers—those whose communities and belief systems couldn't fix what life had dealt. Counselors were a last resort for those beyond repair.

But I was beginning to believe that I *was* beyond repair. I couldn't even conceptualize what repair would be like. I felt a dull throbbing all over. I couldn't point to an event that instigated this kind of pain, so my natural conclusion, and fear, was that my heartsickness might be a forever sickness.

Thanksgiving had been bleak, Christmas even colder in my heart. The word *depression* crept into my mind's periphery, but I refused the label. I prayed that prayer just weeks after our honeymoon—*There has to be more of You, God, than what I'm understanding. I want to know more of You*—and now here I was plodding through each day with a lump in my throat. I couldn't understand how I could pray a prayer so big and then be forced to live in a box that felt so small. Didn't hunger provoke a feeding? I was more starved now than I had been just a few months before.

"I just can't continue to live like this, Nate," I had said, as I was swept away by the post-holiday blues that people who celebrate the birth of Jesus weren't supposed to feel.

A sadness hung like a shroud over my newlywed existence. I continued the motions of preaching Jesus to others (what else was I to do?), despite the fact that I was unable to detect Him in my own life. But the deeper I sank, the hollower my words

about Him were. *Maybe if I just keep talking*, I thought, *maybe He will come*.

I didn't know how to pray and wait. I had made a big ask of Him—one I had never made before—and then resorted to living life my habitual way, with no idea what to do with the question I'd just posed.

I stayed there until “bone dry” became uncomfortable enough for me to move. So Nate and I concluded that counseling was the best option for help. And I landed at the door of a woman I'd never met, alongside a friend who agreed to sit in with me as a silent support, with an ache in my heart that said, *Somebody, anybody—help*.

I didn't know, when my fingers wrapped themselves around the handle of the glass door on that day and my head hung low in the hope I wouldn't see anyone I knew, that I was on the edge of one of the greatest awakenings of my inner life.

Hunger often looks more encumbering than holy. It seems to detract and distract from life's real ascent. The hunger that got me in the door that day didn't feel holy at all. It felt awkward and uncomfortable, like any hollowness might feel.

But holy it was.



I wasn't prepared for her questions. She asked obscure ones, seemingly unrelated to my issues.

“You're a runner? What's the longest distance you've ever run?” she asked without looking up from the legal pad on which she was noting my responses to her rapid-fire questions.

“A marathon,” I said. “Last year.”

“What did it feel like to train for the marathon? Did you set a time goal?” She was clearly driving at something, but I

couldn't answer her question when at the same time I was analyzing where she was going. I could tell that how I answered would determine what she asked next. Choose your own adventure.

One hour later and leaving behind a file full of notes, I left with a glimmer of hope, though the hour had not at all been what I'd expected.

There was no discussion, just questions and my answers, except for one comment she made before I left. God left me a crumb—because a crumb was all I could chew at the time. “How well do you think your husband knows you?”

“Really well,” I responded without thinking.

After a studied pause, she asked, “What percentage of ‘all of you’ does he know?”

“Eighty percent,” I said confidently. We had known each other two and half years, with just more than a year of that time spent holding hands, not just brushing elbows, in ministry, and several months of being a wedded couple.

“We'll talk about this more later, but I might suggest that he knows about one percent of you. Five percent, at best. There are vast frontiers of you to be discovered that he has not yet explored.”

Minutes later, she was ushering me out. I wrote her a check and scheduled my next appointment as if I were at the dentist.

I didn't realize the reverberation that that one thought—one comment by an outsider—might have in the hours, and years, to come.

I had grown to know myself and others and the world around me in binary dimensions. It wasn't as if I saw layers in Nate or myself and feared pursuing them. I'd simply never thought about it.

The counselor's words, later lingering over me, made me consider a seminal image of my childhood that Nate had never witnessed: When I was growing up, we had a swivel chair in our sunroom that I'm certain was worn soft with the imprint of my tush. My mom would find me there most days with the back of the chair toward the door and me tucked away in that little corner, face in the pages of a book.

I loved to read.

Our local children's bookstore, The Reading Railroad, was like a candy store to me. It came second only to our library. The summer our county unveiled its new library building, Nikki from up the street and I pedaled our ten-speeds there almost daily and topped off our trip with a stop at the TCBY. We'd get lost between the stacks of books and corner bean-bag chairs, breaking only for a sweet treat. The smell of new, uncracked-open pages invigorated me just about as much as the feel of the worn pages of library books.

Somewhere between the days of folding myself up in that chair and the days of owning a car that could have sliced the all-day trip to the library down to a quick dash, I decided that the love that stories stirred in me didn't contribute to my goal of being a passionate pursuer of God. So I dropped them.

Sure, I kept reading and filling my bookshelves, but I limited myself only to practical books I thought would grow my faith. Good and rich books, but not the stories that once drew me in and painted pictures on my mind.

This was a reflection of the shift my life was taking: Less time getting lost in story, more time zeroing in on what I might produce.

That was the woman Nate married. No sunroom reading chair in sight.



Nate and I had entered marriage in our early twenties. What we lacked in life experience we made up for in opinions about how life should be lived.

The honeymoon had ended before it started; our first big fight as a married couple, just a few days into “newlywed bliss,” had left me walking back to our hotel by myself, by my own choice. It was a little argument—a decision about what to do the next day—but because we lacked the maturity to face the workings of our own hearts, even the smallest argument seemed to return us to that chasm between us—and the chasm between our individual hearts and God’s heart.

Our move from friendship to engagement to marriage had happened in a flash. We each had attached ourselves to parts of the other one, parts we described to friends who hadn’t yet seen us together.

“He loves seeing high school kids come to know Jesus,” I’d say. “He wants to do full-time ministry for the rest of his life, too.”

“She’s a born leader,” he’d say with pride.

Not only did we define ourselves by our output, we defined each other that way too. I loved how Nate pursued evangelism, and I saw his faith in light of the lives he might touch in his lifetime. I noticed his heart for those who were “lost.” I praised him for the line behind him of lives that he had influenced.

At one point while we were dating, Nate mentioned his stint across Europe in his college days and the art museums where he’d spent hours. His music collection held classical composers he loved—scratched CDs from his childhood home. When we started to join our stuff, as the representation

of lives being joined, I remember vaguely noticing stacks of poetry books. But few of these things came to mind when I considered Nate. They were negligible details about his life that didn't fit within our narrow focus on ministry. I discarded them, just as I had discarded parts of my own life.

I'm certain I never told Nate about all those years I spent buried in books. I'd never mentioned that my favorite Christmas memory is that every year my parents would let me stay up, reading, as late as I wanted on Christmas Eve. I had dismissed those parts of my past as insignificant parts of me as well.

So when, not long into marriage, I discovered that Nate made space in his schedule for things I considered needless, I grew irritated. Things like reading novels and going fishing and attending the symphony were a waste of time to me. There were souls to save, lives to win for Jesus. How did a cello fit into that?

I'd been successful at managing my life, making sure there were no colors outside of the lines. Now I had another life, pushed up against mine, that I assumed was mine to manage.

I monitored him, as best could a woman married to a strong man who valued his independence. I made feeble attempts to convince him that my narrow way was *our* way and *God's* way and the *only* way.

Naturally, he bristled. Who wouldn't?

Round and round we went, me determined to steer our course and Nate determined to be his own man, and I didn't always like how he chose to do that.

Externally it appeared to be the conflict of two stubborn leaders who couldn't bend for the other. Internally, there was another pursuit.

That little girl in pigtails with books stashed in her backpack—pedaling faster on the way home from the library than

she did on the way there because she couldn't wait to stick her nose in the pages—was as much who I was as the woman with a zeal to see lives changed. God had led me to a man who might, one day, clasp my hand and visit with me the parts of myself I'd long squelched. And He had brought Nate a woman who would, one day, do the same for him.

More of You, God, Nate and I had prayed together, apart, that concert night. It wasn't just the beginning of unraveling our understanding of Him. It began the unraveling of our understanding of ourselves.

I began to crack open the books, his, that I had put into boxes to give away once he no longer missed them. I wept the first time we went to the symphony. And I remembered he had been an English major the year I started to write.

But that counselor's question incited another question in me: If there was more to me and more to Nate—more to us—could it be, also, that my version of God was limited?

If my complexity was exponentially greater than I'd assessed, what did that say of the One who made me?

Could there be more to Him?

The weak plea I'd made to Him early in my marriage would lead to a death. But death was necessary for this prayer to be answered. To find Him, I had to let go of me. Or rather, let go of the me I had designed so carefully over the years. The hardest part would be letting go not just in front of God but alongside the human husband who was himself learning to let go.

For Your Continued Pursuit

Romans 5:3–5 | Romans 8:28 | Ephesians 1:17–19 | Colossians 1:9–12 | Psalm 42:2 | Psalm 63:1 | John 6:35 | 1 Samuel 16:7 | Psalm 8:3–8 | 1 John 3:1–2