

Foreword by Sarah Mae, Angela Perritt & Ruth Schwenk

own
your
life

*Living with deep intention, bold faith,
and generous love*

SALLY CLARKSON

If you've ever wondered what a life well lived looks like, you'll find the secret between the pages of this book. Sally Clarkson generously opens up her story with the hospitality of a mentor, a mother, and a friend wrapped into one. On these pages you'll discover inspiring examples of what life to the full can look like when you are fully surrendered to Christ.

LISA-JO BAKER

Author of *Surprised by Motherhood* and community manager for (in)courage

Since the time my children were babies, I have been so challenged by reading Sally Clarkson's writings. She's inspired me to embrace each day, find simple ways to cultivate beauty in my home, and take time to invest in myself so that I can better nurture and bless my family. If you are a busy woman who longs to live with meaning and purpose, you'll be blessed by reading *Own Your Life*. It's packed with heartfelt encouragement and practical strategies to help you savor life more and make each moment count.

CRYSTAL PAINE

New York Times bestselling author of *Say Goodbye to Survival Mode* and founder of MoneySavingMom.com

Sally is a woman teeming with wisdom and zest for life, and they're contagious both in her presence and in her written words. Every moment I've shared with her has been a blessing, and it's an honor for all of us that she so graciously shares her life lessons and timeless truths in her writing.

TSH OXENREIDER

Author of *Notes from a Blue Bike*

Life was made to be lived with purpose. But sometimes our busy and broken lives get in the way of our intentions. *Own Your Life* is more than an inspirational book; it's a guidebook to living a life that matters.

KRISTEN WELCH

Author of *Rhinestone Jesus*; <http://wearethatfamily.com>

Sally writes with as much compassion and concern as she displays when chatting with a dear friend. She and her husband have an abundance of experience, including thirty years of marriage, parenting, world travel, and more, and the interesting personal stories Sally shares provide solid,

incredibly applicable wisdom. As she intimately draws you into each story, her words will break down the barriers that keep you from owning your life and will motivate you to fulfill your God-given purpose.

JENNIFER SMITH

Author of *The Unveiled Wife* and founder of Unveiledwife.com

Too often we get caught up in the daily chaos, and we miss the realization that we're leaving a legacy. *Own Your Life* shows readers how to live the God-shaped destiny designed for them. Living for God's Kingdom and glory is something Sally Clarkson does with all that she is . . . and now her caring, wise voice guides readers on how to do the same. This book is perfect to read with a friend or small group. Highly recommended!

TRICIA GOYER

Author of forty-five books, including *Balanced*

This book, rich with the wisdom of a life lived intentionally, is a gift to women of all ages. It's the tool we need to ask God what He wants us to dream for Him and how He wants us to live that dream. Sally emboldens and equips us to make faith-filled choices and to live with generous love, no matter what the cost. She meets us where we are—in the hard places of real life—and gently leads us to where God waits to mold us into our best selves.

ELIZABETH FOSS

Author of *Real Learning* and coauthor of *Small Steps for Catholic Moms*;
www.elizabethfoss.com

Sally Clarkson has always been such an incredible inspiration to me as I've fumbled along this path of parenting, and I count myself blessed to have her words and wisdom mentor me along the way. Once again, Sally has written a book full of godly advice and wisdom, pointing us to the ultimate example and mentor of all. As I read *Own Your Life*, I found myself feeling as though I was cozied up on Sally's couch with a warm cup of tea, soaking up every bit of motherly and yet godly wisdom on how to truly live a beautiful life of balance and purpose.

SUMMER SALDANA

Writer/blogger at SummerSaldana.com

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SALLY CLARKSON



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FOREWORD

by Sarah Mae, Angela Perritt, and Ruth Schwenk

My life journey has been scattered with so many heartfelt friends who feel like a kiss from God. Here, three such friends share what the concept of “own your life” has meant to them. Over the past five years, I have been hosting leadership training weekends in my home to personally focus on the hearts and spiritual lives of women. After attending one of the intensives, Sarah, Ruth, and Angela told me how transformed their lives have been by the content that began as a conference in my home and has now become this book.

During our time together I answered some of their questions: What has God called me to do? How do I raise kids to love God and others well? What difference can I make in this world? As a woman a couple of decades ahead of them in life, I enjoyed passing along some of the hard-won lessons I’ve learned; in turn, they have taught me much about living with wisdom, honesty, and grace.

After you’ve heard from them, I want to invite you into our conversation. My prayer is that, after you finish this book, you too will experience the meaning and satisfaction that come when you own your life.

—Sally

It was July.

Sally and I had just finished a lovely breakfast at the Broadmoor, a beautiful and ornate hotel in Colorado Springs. She had brought me there to spoil me and make me feel special; Sally has that way about her, wanting others to feel loved and valued.

After feasting on the fluffy eggs, crisp bacon, freshly squeezed orange juice, and more delicious offerings, Sally led me to a small, quiet space tucked away in a corner of the grand hotel. The little room, boasting a fireplace, couch, and two comfy chairs, beckoned us to sit awhile, and of course we did.

We filled up two hours in that place going through Scriptures and drinking tea as I poured my heart out for Sally to tend to. And she did. She tended to my heart and my soul, and when we left, I not only had received renewed vision for my life but also had stored away a game-changing phrase that has been at the forefront of most of my decisions since. The phrase was this: *Own your life*.

Sally taught me that a wise woman—that a wise *person*—takes responsibility for her choices and understands that “each person has the power and authority to bring his or her life back into order. Each of us is a steward of the days allotted for our lifetime.”

Friends, Sally has done the work; she is a woman who has walked faithfully and with integrity throughout the seasons of her life, and she has words that are worth heeding.

Her gracious admonishment to own our lives and leave a legacy that matters is not just a sweet encouragement but also a life-changing call to live for God with all of who we are and in all the choices we make. And furthermore, Sally doesn't just tell us to own our lives; she tells us *how* we can do that.

I'm first in line for this message, and I'll be last in line as well, because I *need* these words. In fact, we all do. Our lives matter because God has a story for us to live for His Kingdom.

And to live it, we must be willing to own our lives.

—*Sarah Mae*

Coauthor of *Desperate: Hope for the Mom Who Needs to Breathe*

The fact of the matter is we all have but one life. Our time here is short—like a vapor, really. Here one day and gone the next. From the

moment we take our first breaths, our days are numbered, so how we live matters. The decisions we make—the important ones and, yes, the mundane ones too—they all matter. Everyday decisions add up to form the life we live and the legacy we leave behind.

In *Own Your Life*, Sally Clarkson calls us to a stewardship of the precious life God has given us. It's important to keep the end goal—the legacy we leave behind—in mind because it helps us to be wise and discerning with our present-day decisions. I love the insights and challenges Sally gives to all of us, encouraging us to own our lives and explaining the importance of this intentional decision. Don't just sit back and let life happen to you: Engage it, embrace it, and live it out with intention, purpose, and trust in our Lord. Live a life of faith; don't be afraid to take risks and love those God has placed in your life.

Years from now, people may not remember your name, but the way you owned your life, the choices you made, the way you loved . . . your legacy . . . that is what will ripple through the generations who follow after you.

We may be here for just a moment, but let's make that moment really count! Honor God with the life He has given you by being wise in how you live . . . how you own your life.

—*Angela Perritt*
Coauthor of *You Are Loved*

I still remember the night I first met Sally Clarkson. Okay, I'll admit it—I was a bit starstruck! For years I had known Sally through her writings, so to get a chance to meet her in person was quite an honor. I had no idea that this night would be the beginning of a beautiful friendship that would challenge and inspire me as a wife, mom, speaker, blogger, and leader.

For the past three summers, I have had the privilege of spending time with Sally in her home and experiencing firsthand the message that burns so deeply within her: "Own your life." With wisdom,

encouragement, and vision, she helped me see what I needed to change, what I needed to let go of, and what I needed to grab hold of in God's calling on my life.

Like you, I wear many hats. As a mom to four beautiful children, a pastor's wife, a speaker, a writer, and a blogger, it is difficult to imagine navigating this journey without Sally's friendship and insight. I am grateful that God has gifted me and other women in my generation with Sally's voice. Her message is one we desperately need. I am grateful to call her friend, mentor, and fellow chaser of dreams!

—*Ruth Schwenk*

Author of *The Better Mom* blog

THE BEGINNING

What Will Be the Legacy of Your Life?

“What will be the legacy of your life? What story will the days of your life tell? Will you invest your life for eternity, or spend it, wasting the days on things that do not matter, on issues that will quickly fade away?”

All eyes were glued on our earnest, solemn speaker, and a profound hush hovered over the packed gymnasium as we allowed his words to wrap themselves around our deepest thoughts.

More than seven thousand people had gathered for a national ministry’s staff training conference at Colorado State University in 1976. The tension in the air was so heavy that it was almost palpable.

I was twenty-two and had just completed my first year in campus ministry at the University of Texas. My heart was filled with passion and excitement after being involved in personal ministry with hundreds of college students that year. I felt in awe at being part of a conference with so many seasoned staff members.

Although it was an annual conference, this year was different. The day before, about thirty-five of our women staff leaders had met for training at a retreat center in the nearby mountains. The weather that morning had been pleasant, but heavy downpours led to horrific flash flooding by evening. As the women relaxed together at the end of the day, they were startled by orders coming through

bullhorns outside: “Evacuate immediately! A flood is coming this way! You must get into your cars and head for higher ground!”

The women raced to the cars and piled in, and they ended up driving in different directions. In the course of the raging flood, seven of our young staff women drowned in the surging waters. The sudden death of seven of our most vibrant leaders, who had lived passionately for Christ, reminded all of us in that gym of the preciousness and brevity of life and filled us with overwhelming grief.

Consequently, the words of the speaker, delivered just one day after the flood and the news of their deaths, flew like an arrow into my heart. At that moment, life seemed fragile, short, something to be honored and invested in with great intention and care. The speaker’s words helped shape the destiny of my life by making me pay attention to the choices and decisions I was making at an early age.

Later that morning, another speaker shared passionately about how millions of people all over the world did not own a Bible or know the personal love of God. At the end of his talk, he announced an unprecedented opportunity for a team of missionaries to enter Communist Poland as teachers to bring the gospel to this suppressed country.

“If you have only one life to live, wouldn’t you want the privilege of being strategic for the Kingdom of God?” he asked. “Will some of you consider joining us to bring the light of the gospel to this place?”

I sat riveted, my heart pounding, thinking, *Oh, how I wish I could have an opportunity to make a difference in this world! God, I am just a young, untrained, unskilled person, but I want You to use me during my lifetime. Please let them pick me to go if it is Your will. I am Your girl, forever.*

As soon as the meeting was over, I practically ran all the way to the international office. I wanted to be sure I was one of the first to fill out an application to be a part of the team to Poland. I knew they would probably not take me because I was so inexperienced, but I prayed all the way there. When I arrived, I was shocked to learn that only a handful of the thousands of people at the conference had filled out

an application. It was the first time I learned that God often does not work with the most qualified, but with the most available.

Soon after that, I was assigned to work in Poland and to travel throughout six Communist countries, training groups of young believers in the foundations of the Bible. After completing international ministry training a year later, I moved to Eastern Europe. For the next three years I cut my spiritual teeth in a foreign land. I learned a difficult language, bore the loneliness that came from being cut off from family and friends in a Communist country, and worked with college students who were passionate to study the Word of God.

I was merely a small brick in the foundation of a ministry that eventually reached countless thousands for Christ, but that one choice to follow Him transformed my life into a spiritual adventure. My determination to follow hard after God, to make decisions based on faith, and to seek to be a part of His Kingdom work was the pathway that transformed the rest of my life.

In fact, being challenged to live every day as though it might be my last has made an immense difference throughout my life. “Seeking first the Kingdom of God” became a life focus. Knowing I have only one life to live, one opportunity to invest it fully in the Kingdom of God, has given energy and purpose to each day and every season of my life.

While at that first staff training conference, I began to understand what “owning” my life really entails.

It means taking responsibility for my

own behavior, decisions, and attitudes so I may fully embrace God’s amazing vision for my life and leave a legacy that points others to Him. Quite simply, owning my life means living up to my spiritual potential.

I understood very clearly that life is indeed a vapor. Making possessions, accomplishments, or influence my heart’s treasures would

Owning my life means taking responsibility for my own behavior, decisions, and attitudes so I may become all God created me to be and leave a legacy that points others to Him.

be a waste of time and energy. Instead, I determined to take God at His word, to risk living beyond my circumstances, and to lean into His call.

Over time, I would formulate a series of questions, or a grid, that I've turned back to again and again as I've tried to evaluate the legacy of faith I'm leaving.

Am I being intentional?

Am I making decisions based on biblical values?

Am I choosing the pathways that will create deep, loving relationships and give value to the people personally connected to me?

Am I willing to take risks of faith to invest my life in the things of eternity?

Am I listening to the world or to the voice of God?

Am I living with Christ and His life as the pattern for my own life?

Do I see this day, these circumstances, as a place in which I can fulfill God's will?

Even now, these questions help me evaluate whether I've really abandoned my life to God. As I look ahead to the next decade of my life, I have been praying, "God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, what do You want me to dream for You? How do You want me to serve? What work do You have for me to do?"

I don't know whether your world has been impacted by a life-altering storm like that flood. If it has, perhaps you've already been forced to face the question of how to live with true purpose. But even if you haven't experienced such a cataclysmic event, I suspect that the deepest part of you longs to live a life that matters. After all, Scripture tells us that God "has planted eternity in the human heart" (Ecclesiastes 3:11, NLT).

The first question all of us who consider the claims of Christ must

answer is this: Will we live for God’s Kingdom, or will we live for ourselves? As a young Christian, I had no doubt that I wanted to devote my life to Christ. Years later, I can look back and see God’s fingerprints all over my life. One reason I wrote this book, in fact, is to let you in on the lessons I’ve learned as I have tried to follow hard after God. I want to encourage you to live intentionally, too—to make choices from bold faith and generous love that will make a lasting impact.

The keys to living a life of purpose aren’t all that mysterious—they’re spiritual principles found in the Bible. Yet they must be followed intentionally with the understanding that God has hidden potential in your spiritual DNA. That potential is like a seed waiting to be planted into the circumstances of your life. When you commit to following God through your attitude and actions, that seed will sprout and you will begin to thrive.

Remember—it’s not just *possible* to live a full, flourishing life; God actually *designed* you to live this way. At sixty years old, I can look back and see that God has honored those decisions I made to live a life set apart for Him beyond what I ever imagined. I’m grateful that I embraced these values when I was young, but you can begin investing your life for His Kingdom at any age. God is always ready to respond to the one who listens to His call: “The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him” (2 Chronicles 16:9, NLT).

Your Life Matters! Live It with Intention!

Have you known people who seem to be alive with the reality of Christ and the winsome ways of His love? Like everyone else, their lives are filled with stresses, challenges, and difficulties, yet somehow they rise above their circumstances and live with the tangible reality of God’s blessing and favor. They exude confidence and a willingness to live with risk because of their faith in Him. They are morally strong, spiritually vibrant, and emotionally resilient.

Many of us begin with that same passionate desire to follow Jesus

wholeheartedly, only to discover that circumstances sometimes make it difficult to live out that commitment. Hearts broken from the disappointments that come in a fallen world or from burdensome life tasks are often accompanied by depression and discouragement. We all feel this way at times.

In such situations, we may assume that the circumstances of our lives define the spiritual condition of our relationship with God. Often in this place, our lives become filled with mediocrity and compromise. In the end, we may not even live all that differently from those who do not know Christ. Struggles weigh us down and silence any expression of faith. Often, we live as victims of our circumstances instead of mounting up over the difficulties in our lives. We may be troubled because we feel far from God, but our lives are so busy that we never stop to ponder how to change things.

I know how easy it is to start out strong—full of vibrant faith and firm resolve to live for Christ. In fact, as a young woman, I imagined I would give boldly and perhaps even make one big sacrifice, like dying for Jesus after standing up in a great public arena to give testimony of the relevance of the gospel. As a staff member with an international ministry in Communist Eastern Europe, I enjoyed seeing God work in dramatic ways. I also lived as a single woman, wondering if I would ever get married.

Then just a few years later, I was a young wife and mother back in the States. Life became monotonous and ordinary. Could God still use me? I thought about the common men and women whom Christ had called, the ones He challenged to drop their fishing nets, tax-collecting businesses, and normal lives to follow Him. Because those first-century believers were faithful and partnered with God, the gospel of Christ went all over the world in one generation, without the Internet, without phones, without televisions. Person to person, parent to child, neighbor to neighbor, these sold-out men and women delivered powerful, look-me-in-the-eye messages that resulted in transformed lives.

When I imagine the first followers of Jesus, I often think of the

disciples who accompanied Him in His ministry. These are the men and women who willingly journeyed far from home to spread the gospel, and many eventually gave up their lives for Him. Yet I've come to the realization that many of those who followed Christ did not leave their communities. Some were called to be quiet radicals who provided the meals, homes, and finances that enabled the twelve apostles to keep going. Others took care of their children and whispered Kingdom messages into those little ones' souls. Some prayed or taught other believers in their homes, or cared for sick and handicapped relatives, bringing joy and beauty to their lives every day.

There is no single way to serve God, but the point is this: We each have only one life to live to tell a story about Him, about His ways, about His love. And if we are Christ followers, then God calls us to use our gifts, to exercise our faith, and to become salt and light right where we are.

For most of us, spirituality is a long-term work of service carried out in ordinary days. For me, it's a moment-by-moment choice to put aside my own needs and selfish desires to give one more time—to grocery shop and cook for guests; to listen to someone in pain; to attend to my garden so that it brings beauty to those who sit on my front porch; to cook one more healthy meal and wash the dirty dishes afterward with a thankful heart; to pay bills; to stay up late with a teenager; to work hard to meet one more deadline. Lasting love and influence for the gospel happen in the hidden moments of life when only God sees my heart and my faithfulness.

***Lasting love and influence
for the gospel happen
in the hidden moments
of life.***

Until we accept God's desire to work powerfully through even the most ordinary people, we may settle for humdrum lives, missing the opportunities that God places all around us to make a lasting impact. The first three chapters of this book examine some of the barriers that prevent many women from living all out for His Kingdom.

Once we understand our identity as women redeemed by Christ and created with meaningful purpose, we can start to map out our specific life mission. We'll look at how we begin that process in part 2. In the next section, we'll acknowledge a few of the mysterious ways in which God empowers us—but only when we open ourselves up to His transforming work. Owning our lives is not a passive exercise, however; we must choose to embrace, with God's help, certain attitudes and actions that enable us to give all of ourselves to Him. We'll explore those in part 4. The final section of the book centers on the ultimate purpose of all of our lives: to love well. When we own our lives, we choose to make love the priority in our homes, our marriages, and our parenting. From it flows the very legacy that God created us to fulfill.

Each chapter concludes with a section I call "Own Your Part." Here you'll find discussion questions and exercises designed to help you make the most of your own life. I wish I could personally sit down with all my readers so we could learn from and encourage each other, but since that isn't possible, I've ended each chapter with the prayer I would offer if we were meeting together.

When my children were young, I would tell them, "I believe God has given you the capacity and the ability to grow strong inside, to live courageously, to have great faith, and to become a person of considerable influence in your lifetime. God has made you with such wonderful potential. But I cannot make you strong and good—you will have to choose that for yourself. I will love you, encourage you, and help you in every way. But I cannot make you a great person.

"You will have to decide that you want to be excellent of character and then make the hard decisions to become the best you can be, to follow hard after God, and to live into your potential. You have a choice to make!"

Similarly, God has created you with the potential to live a purposeful, meaningful life that is spiritually strong and vibrant. But you have to choose to follow Him, to believe Him, to live for Him. You must choose how to live every day.

Own your life. Choose whom you will serve. Live into Christ's love and the power of His Spirit working through you.

If you follow hard after Him, God will make your life count in ways you can't even yet see. May you be blessed in the chasing after Him in your own life, and may you see evidence of His strong support for you because you have given your heart completely to Him.

PART 1

Barriers to Owning Your Life

Don't Settle for a Mediocre Life

CHAPTER 1

SEEING BEAUTY AND PURPOSE IN YOUR ORDINARY DAYS

Owning the Hero Who Lives inside You

What distinguishes men of genuine achievement from the rest of us is not so much their intellectual powers and aptitudes as their curiosity, their energy, their fullest use of their potentialities. Nobody really knows how smart or talented he is until he finds the incentives to use himself to the fullest. God has given us more than we know what to do with. SYDNEY J. HARRIS

The people who know their God will display strength and take action.

DANIEL 11:32

STANDING TO MY FULL HEIGHT, I pranced down the imaginary platform in my den, acting out the time when I would be crowned Miss America. As with many girls born in the 1950s, watching this contest on television had become a yearly ritual. Even as a little girl posing as a beauty queen, I knew in my heart I was born to become someone significant.

Reading books about heroes of history further fed these dreams. Whether Florence Nightingale, braving the filthy trenches of war to save lives, or Madame Curie, who helped pave the way for new cancer treatments, I was right there with them in the story, visualizing how I would help save my world in some small way.

Fast-forward a couple of decades, when I found myself squishing next to my seven-year-old son on a couch, munching chocolate chip cookies and sharing a “little boy” moment.

“Mama, you know what? I think Superman was just like Jesus. He came from a far-off place to save his world. I think I am going to be Superman when I grow up because I am going to do something to save my world.”

Sitting up straighter with his chest puffed out, Nathan said, “You know what? Superman is inside me just waiting to come out!”

Perhaps all children anticipate how they might fulfill some great destiny in their lifetimes. *I believe there is also a heroine in each of our hearts waiting to come out.* Yet somewhere along the pathway of our lives, we lose our innocence, forget our dreams, and succumb to a life filled with monotony and responsibility. I remember pondering this very thought when I was a young wife and mother feeling “stuck” at a particular moment. I wondered how I had gotten there, since I had always hoped to do something of significance.

As a young adult, mission work had taken me to many exciting cities. I had moved to Communist countries throughout Eastern Europe, meeting secretly with people to teach them the truths of the Bible and to train them to share faith in their own countries.

As a single missionary, I lived in Vienna, Krakow, and Warsaw. After Clay and I married, we moved to Vienna and then worked in Long Beach, Denver, and Nashville. Being a part of so many urban communities gave me a taste for city life. Having friends from many backgrounds and cultures brought me great pleasure and stimulation. A charming coffee shop was always just a fifteen-minute walk or drive away. We regularly dined at cafés and restaurants with international cuisine, but our lives were about to drastically change.

When our children were young, Clay and I began dreaming of starting a publishing company and family ministry. To fulfill that vision, we moved with our three oldest children, who were eleven, eight, and six, from Nashville to my mother-in-law’s house. Our new home was located in a tiny town of 712 people, forty-five minutes away from the nearest grocery store with fresh food or a loaf of whole grain bread.

Life in this tiny old town left me feeling disoriented and frustrated. The temperature surpassed one hundred degrees almost every day, and chiggers—those tiny bugs—chewed on my children and me every time we went outdoors, leaving countless itching bumps. The only place to shop was a little convenience store two miles away in town (and it smelled like grease from all the fried chicken sold there). We had no babysitters, no friends, not even a church or library—and the graduating class at the local school was seven in a good year. There was no coffee shop or café—and we didn't have money to afford eating out anyway. Paying for groceries, clothing, and doctors' bills devoured our small income. Goodwill and secondhand stores were my only shopping options, and then only if we had a few dollars left at the end of the month and could make the long drive to a bigger town.

My mother-in-law's house was laid out in such a way that our kids could make a circular path through it—starting in the living room, going through our bedroom, then continuing through the hallway to the kitchen, and finally reaching the living room again. Round and round they would run! One day, not long before I had my fourth child, I was sitting on the floor of our bedroom in front of a small couch. I guess I was hidden from the children's view because when they ran their standard route, they came in one door and went out the other while calling, "Mama, Mama, where are you?"

When I realized they couldn't see me, but only the back of the couch, I did not answer. There I was, an adult in my early forties, hiding behind the couch and hoping my children would not find me. As I sat on the floor, I was Eeyore living under clouds of "Woe is me."

My mind scanned the past year and came up with a number of disturbing memories: my two miscarriages (one in which I had almost died); the packed boxes and messes all around us; our regular encounters with spiders or snakes; a mother-in-law who hovered and followed me around the house as I worked and cooked; three kids who would not go outside and play in the scorching heat; and the squishy squash bugs on our outside plants in what was supposed to be my

country garden. On top of that, I had no nearby friends or support systems and, did I mention, no strong cup of coffee?

More thoughts came: My family wanted to eat so often, and they made so many messes every day. This was not at all how I'd envisioned my life. I considered myself a professional, adult sort of person, not a pregnant forty-two-year-old mama with secondhand clothes who was throwing up and sweating through life with children and messes all around me.

In that moment, my life was a pile of puzzle pieces, all mixed up with no seeming pattern or logical way to fit them together. And a heroine was not to be found in the picture. As I scrutinized the landscape of my soul, I saw endless darkness down a gloomy hallway that seemed to end in despair. Nothing in my life seemed to be matching up with my ideals; I was physically, spiritually, and emotionally drained, and everyone and everything depended on my keeping it all together. This place was as far from an adventure requiring heroism as I could imagine.

Add to that, a number of critics waited in line to freely voice their opinions to Clay and me.

"Have you lost your mind, moving to such a tiny town? Are you sure this is where you are supposed to be?"

"Ninety-five percent of all new businesses fail the first year, and they end up bankrupt!"

"What experience do you have in publishing? I thought the real publishers already rejected your book ideas—what makes you think you can publish them yourselves and find anyone who wants to hear what you have to say?"

Then there were the warnings from family—"You know, someday you are going to have to get a job that pays real money. You can't just fiddle around your whole life. You need to think of your children and how you are raising them!"

And "After three miscarriages—one you almost died from—you are pregnant again? You are tempting fate. If something more serious happens, it will be your own fault."

“I think it is fine if you homeschool your children when they are young because you can’t mess them up too badly. But what about when they’re older? What will you do then about your children’s education when the nearest big school is in another county, miles and miles away? And have you considered that they won’t get the socialization they need?”

It was while juggling these pressures on our marriage, finances, spiritual life, family life, and ideals that I felt breathless with fear and insecurity as I hid behind that couch. It was then that I had a big “come to Jesus meeting.”

Tears flowed down my face uncontrollably. Miraculously, no one found me.

“God,” I whispered, “I have served you faithfully for many years. What am I doing here? Life is so hard. This place doesn’t suit my personality. And my mother-in-law is no Naomi. Does it really matter that I have served you as best I know how all of these years? How can any good come out of these circumstances? I don’t think I can make it here. Please take me out of this situation.”

Escape. That was my first line of defense when I was in this very rough place. Where could I go to get away from these problems?

Looking back, I realize my response was pretty typical. We live in a culture of runaways—rushing to another marriage, job, house, Internet thrill, vacation, drug, whatever. Yet when we run away all the time, our “demons”—the problems, difficult relationships, scars, fears, insecurity, selfishness—seem to follow us. Ironically, the very difficulties we want to escape can be overcome only when we face them head-on. Otherwise, they have a way of following us wherever we go. Not only that, but running away from them keeps us from growing stronger and eventually becoming heroes in our own stories.

After I said my brief prayer and spilled all my tears, quietness came. The sun was setting outside and cast soft shadows in our room. Finally, the kids had gone outside to play with the dogs.

The comfort of God’s Spirit gently began to blow through me, as I was finally ready to open my heart in humility and prayer. A little

song my children had been listening to pressed upon my mind: “This is the day that the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it.”

This day, this place, these circumstances—God had made them!

The Lord seemed to speak to me from all the devotions I had been having with my little ones, and a verse came to my mind: “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to

those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Hebrews 12:11).

The very difficulties we want to escape can be overcome only when we face them head-on.

The words that captured my attention were “those who have been trained by it.” Training is something

that is repeated again and again over a long period of time, in order to build strength and endurance. God wanted to train me in holiness right where I was, in these circumstances.

Then I felt Him impress the following on my heart: *Sally, this is the place I want you to worship Me. Being faithful in these circumstances is where you will find the glory of My favor. This is exactly where I want you. This time of testing will be the making of your faith, the humbling of your heart, the shaping of your character, the writing of your story. You can choose to waste this time with a bad attitude, to leave this situation, or to waste your days in ungratefulness and complaints. And then your life will continue moving through darkness and dim hallways.*

You have a choice to make: If you trust Me and live faithfully in this juncture, I will make this a place of favor and honor for you. But if you look for a way out and disqualify yourself from the blessings and favor I had planned to give you, you will find yourself in the midst of a prolonged wilderness.

And so the itchy, green shag carpet behind the tiny, worn loveseat that hid me from view became an altar of worship for me. *Lord, I will choose to find light in this darkness. I have no guarantee about how any of this will turn out, but I am planting a flag of faith. No matter what happens, I will be as obedient as I can to bring joy into this place, to create beauty in this wilderness, to exercise generous love, and to persevere*

with patience. I will choose to believe that wherever You are my faithful companion is the place where Your blessing will be upon me.

Peace clothed me like an embrace from God. I had been tested and had come through with grace. This was only one of many dark and difficult junctures on my life pathway, and yet I was now learning to ask at each turn in the road, “What is the lesson here, God? What wisdom can I learn? How can I bring grace, beauty, and order to each day, and live as though it is a place of worship?”

Later that evening, I committed my thoughts to my journal, writing down life goals that would help determine the kind of woman I would become in the years ahead. I resolved:

to be a joyful person
 to practice being thankful
 to see God’s fingerprints each day of my life, as I knew my
 children probably longed to have a happy mother
 to live every day by faith, choosing to believe that God was real,
 that He listened to prayer, and that He would provide the
 grace to get through every trial
 to love, as much as possible, all of those who came into my life

Finally, I committed to work hard and to grow in strength, as I was beginning to understand that living up to these ideals would require a lifetime of working, cooking, cleaning, writing, living, teaching, and speaking.

Reflecting on Sixty Years of Walking with God

Hindsight does indeed bring great insight. Though there are some images I’d still rather forget from that time—such as the scorpion that fell from the ceiling and stung me on the thigh when I was 9½ months pregnant (and even then the baby would not come!). And yet it was in that remote house in a tiny town that my children learned to love the country, living wild and free in the place I first thought

cursed. The time with fewer friends, distractions, and lessons, though often lonely, drew our family circle closer together than ever would have happened if we had been in a large city with limitless choices.

My marriage grew stronger because I was forced to be less selfish and to believe in the dreams of my husband. My compassion for those who were lonely, who lived on little income, and who were forced to overcome seemingly impossible circumstances grew out of the humility that developed as I waited on God in faith. My ministry messages grew out of my life experiences.

These were the memories I pondered as I sipped the warm cup of tea my daughter Joy brought me on the morning of my sixtieth birthday. Her instructions as she met me coming down the stairs from my bedroom had been, “Mom, we have a whole day of celebration prepared for you. But I want to give you a few minutes alone first while we finish cooking breakfast so you can ponder all those sixty years. That way we can hear the stories and celebrate all the meaningful days with you today!”

And so I did take some time to sift through my memories. As I wrote in the introduction, I had been challenged early in life to live every day as though it were my last. Now I asked myself, *Have I lived into the spiritual reality of the God who brought me to Himself? Have I written a story of faith and faithfulness that will speak inspiration to generations to come?*

As I reflected on the years, the first inklings of the thoughts that led me to write this book developed. I realized that God had been faithful and that I had lived a life sprinkled with His favor, miracles, and blessing. I wanted to share, from a perspective of deep gratefulness and gathered wisdom, some of the spiritual secrets I had learned about how to live a flourishing life.

I also had come to understand and appreciate the ways God had taught me. Many of the years I spent serving Him with my whole heart had been invisible to the public. I had not lived a perfect life. At times, I resisted the very pressures that God wanted to use to train me to become strong. But I could see that when I yielded to His ways

and lived with His hand holding mine, my life story had become more than I could ever have imagined.

I know now that heroes come with a variety of stories. A radical life for Christ is not always visible to outside eyes. Even Jesus lived in a tiny town, never venturing more than fifty miles from His home during His ministry. Though He did not work with great world leaders and was obscure in His commonness, Christ's love and service literally changed the history of the world. So many of my own years had been poured into the mundane moments of life, yet I sought to make each one a celebration of His reality.

Through seventeen moves (six international), car accidents, illnesses, church splits, seven pregnancies, three miscarriages, four children, and even a house fire, life had indeed been an adventure. God had been my companion throughout, and He had enabled me to emerge with a legacy of His faithfulness.

My sixty years had been sprinkled with small miracles, hard work, endless days of faith through the darkness, and so many moments of pleasure and deep blessings of love. I thought of my marriage of thirty-three years, and how my husband and I had come to understand the real meaning of love and commitment. The hard work of our marriage had shaped each of us, one humble day after the other, to become more understanding, more accepting, more thankful for each other than we ever could have been when we started. Of course our lives had been fraught with the pettiness of our own selfishness and, at times, loneliness, and yet we had persevered and made it through the years with such a meaningful heritage of family.

A radical life for Christ is not always visible to outside eyes.

What a blessing to have dreamed together about becoming message makers to strengthen families. After thousands of hours of work, we had built a ministry together, written a number of books, started a publishing house, and seen our books translated into eight languages.

And what a miracle to have been able to parent, having no

experience with children and no natural patience for all the work it required. We had not only faced the challenges of living in a remote location but had also faced severe bouts of asthma, OCD, learning challenges, and all the difficulties that naturally come as a result of children's inherent selfishness. Yet thirty years into parenting, I rejoiced as I thought about my children: four vibrant, beautiful adults who cared about life, loved us, and were committed to faithfully serving God.

The grid through which I had lived my life was based on my understanding that in order to live a flourishing life of influence, I had to own my life—to take responsibility for my choices, attitude, will, and actions, knowing they would all have consequences for eternity. Once I understood that my integrity was built when no one but Christ was looking, I was motivated to remain faithful in moments alone with Him and my Bible.

The moment so many years ago in our bedroom at my mother-in-law's house, when I had felt trapped in the wilderness of life, had been a turning point. The desert years, in fact, had become the deepest blessing of my life.

There I learned that life was not about my ease, but about God's desire to help me become mature. He wanted to take from my hands the very things I was holding on to for security so that I could find lasting happiness in the simple things that could never be lost—the breathtaking beauty of a wilderness sunset; the contentment that my children learned from having few toys and only the open land in which to pretend and play; the soul-satisfying relationships that develop in a family who have only one another to rely on; and the gratification that comes from learning to be happy apart from material possessions.

Perhaps most important, I discovered that heroes are made during the secret moments. Though they practice faith, integrity, and courage when no one else is there to see, at the right time, they will come out of spiritual “basic training” with the integrity and action required to accomplish something great.

Putting Together the Pieces of Your Unique Life Puzzle

Each of us has a different life puzzle to assemble. The choices you make in the midst of your life journey do have eternal consequences. Yes, you can throw the pieces at God in anger and say, “I do not like the life You have given me, and I refuse to live within these limitations with a humble heart. You have made me a victim. You have ruined my life. I will choose to live in darkness.” If that is your choice, the puzzle of your life will remain fragmented and separated, with holes in the picture.

However, if you choose to bow your knee and submit to the varied circumstances of your life, God will do miracles. If you choose to trust and develop your integrity and an inner standard of holiness that isn't dependent on cultural standards, the puzzle pieces will begin to come together. No matter what your limitations are—health issues, financial problems, a difficult marriage or divorce, a loss of friendship, death of a dream—your life is meant to be filled to the brim with the potential of God's blessings. But in order to thrive and heal, you must accept any limitations by faith, trust in His faithfulness each step of the way, and wait for His grace so you can live a faithful story right in the place you find yourself.

If you embrace your unique puzzle of life, you will find wholeness. As you look to God to slowly figure out how to put the pieces together, you will see a beautiful picture emerge. Your story lived faithfully will become your glory—the place where He builds messages, provides answers to prayer, and teaches wisdom.



Own Your Part

I have a collection of teacups and mugs. Each is different in size, shape, and color—but every one of them is functional and beloved by my family. In the same way, each of our lives is unique. Our differences do not devalue our intrinsic worth, but they do create a different design. I have always told my children, “You might as well

decide to like God's will for your life, since your circumstances are probably not going to change just because you wish they would."

1. What defines and makes your life distinct? What resources do you have? What do you consider to be advantages to your particular puzzle? Are there any areas that seem impossible at this moment that you need to put into God's hands?

We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. ROMANS 8:28

How does the verse above apply to your own life right now?

2. Learning to see each turn in the road and each unique circumstance as a part of what God has ordained has helped me find purpose at each juncture. I ask Him, *Lord, what can I learn from this? What message at this moment might prepare me to encourage someone in the same circumstances later? Show me Your faithfulness now so I can keep learning.*

Trust in the LORD and do good;
Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness. PSALM 37:3

This verse has helped me learn to stay in the moment and grow where I am. How is God asking you to be faithful wherever you are today? What does it mean to cultivate faithfulness?

Praying with You

Lord, each of us finds challenges in each season of our lives. Help us today to cultivate faithfulness right where we are. Give us the spiritual eyes to believe that You will work this situation out for our good. We come in Jesus' name. Amen.