

NOT WHAT I SIGNED UP FOR



Finding the Strength, Purpose, and Faith
to Get through a Season You Didn't Expect

Nicole Unice

FOREWORD BY LISA WHITTLE

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Not What I Signed Up For: Finding the Strength, Purpose, and Faith to Get through a Season You Didn't Expect

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*To Little Queen Mollie and her brave parents, JR and Stacie:
“ . . . this happened so that the works of God might be displayed . . . ”*

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Foreword

I am a hard sell.

I don't want books to pitch me lofty, lovely ideas written from the pen of a perfect life—I want ones that talk to me like a human being. If authors don't consider that my situation might be complicated or my heartache might be raw, they don't have my attention.

Nicole Unice is an author who has my attention.

I met her some time ago at a local restaurant. After we'd been acquainted for years as fellow authors, she asked if I wanted to have dinner when she came to town. Over messy subpar nachos, the conversation went deep. For two hours, we barely came up for air. There was lots of head tilting (her) and fast talking (both of us), but I learned something important: Nicole was going to be a safe friend. I could tell because she was very, very honest.

Nicole was in the midst of a huge life transition with her family when we met for dinner that night. She didn't try to sugarcoat it. I have found, through the years, that when people who could be guarded choose instead to be vulnerable, you can trust them with your heart.

When I read *Not What I Signed Up For*, it felt like an extension of our dinner. Some books take a “time-share” approach to faith—they sell you on the possibilities of it, minimizing the less favorable realities so you'll buy in. Nicole doesn't do that. She gives voice to

the difficult places while helping guide you to higher ground. She has the pastoral and counseling chops to write with authority . . . and yet, reading every page felt like having messy nachos with her while she shared her heart. Exactly the way I like my books and their authors: wise, warm, and a bit weathered.

Can I be completely honest? The last several years—from a pandemic to riots to political turmoil, from wars to natural disasters—have taken a huge toll on us. Many of us have turned into quite the skeptics and cynics. It reminds me a bit of a story my mother has told in our family for years.

The night my father was going to ask her to marry him, everything went wrong, leaving him feeling exasperated and defeated as they sat together in the car. Instead of sticking to his original romantic plan, he simply blurted out: “*Everything else is going wrong, I might as well ask you to marry me.*” She said yes, so you could say that he still got the outcome he wanted. The beauty of this momentous moment, though, was laced with my father’s skepticism and negativity.

Yes, it’s been quite a couple of hard years. Sometimes I don’t recognize the people we have become. Many of us have developed a *might as well* mentality. And we have paid a hefty price for our agreement to settle for that kind of half-hearted life.

Reading this book is an excellent step toward breaking that agreement. I know life hasn’t been easy for you, but there is indeed more. It doesn’t matter what your “not what you signed up for” issue is. What Nicole Unice wrote in these pages will help you.

Good news. You may be in the aftermath of a life you never asked for or wanted—or perhaps you’re even still in the midst of one—but do not underestimate where God is in all of it.

With you. For you. Loving you to a better place.

Lisa Whittle

Author, Bible teacher,

host of *Jesus Over Everything* podcast

INTRODUCTION

Losing the Horizon

I like to think of myself as an adventurous woman. I like to think that I not only accept but *embrace* change. I like to think that I can adapt, adjust, and go with the flow because I am a mature, responsible adult with a deep faith in a sovereign God. At least that's what I used to think.

One summer when Dave and I were still in the throes of parenting three young children, I decided to escape the monotony of the long, hot days by meeting my sister-in-law at our trailer by the lake, which was located on the border of North Carolina and Virginia. Two moms, six kids, and 350 square feet of trailer space—what could go wrong? Tracy and I coparented like champs, handling meals, activities, and conflict resolution with ease. On our second afternoon, we took the adventure up a notch and headed out on the pontoon boat for a little tubing. It started off great, but quickly sprang a leak—literally—when the tube semi-deflated and pulled the kids under as they were being towed behind a 100 hp motor.

Anyone who has owned a boat, attached a tube, or put kids on a tube behind a boat knows that the driver is always one brain cell away from completely losing their mind. Tracy, although quite helpful, had no experience driving a boat or directing the mechanics of tubing. As a result, I tried to drive the boat while reassuring

the kids on the partially submerged tube that they would be *just fine*, but the crying from thirty yards behind the boat finally got to me. I jumped in like the lifeguard I imagine myself to be, Chaco sandals and all, and decided I would pull the tube in myself. Spoiler alert: I am not a lifeguard. I don't even like to swim with my face in the water.

Since I had only that one brain cell left, I failed to think through the ramifications of swimming to the tube without a life jacket—while the boat was adrift with no driver. Somehow in the chaos, I also managed to disconnect the tube rope from the boat. Despite my imaginative lifeguard status, I struggled to drag the tube back to the boat, which seemed to be rapidly floating away from us. I felt a little bubble of panic rise up in my chest. I was in the middle of a choppy lake, bobbing up and down while trying to keep my eyes on the three little kids on a deflating tube in the distance. At one point as I watched the boat drift farther and farther away, I saw Tracy smile and laugh with the other kids on the pontoon.

I had an out-of-body experience when I recognized that, unbeknownst to her, I was not okay. In fact, I was flailing and feeling like drowning was inevitable. I was stuck, not close enough to the tube to grab on and rest and not close enough to the boat to save us all. I was about to go under and take the three kids with me. But to her, the sun was still shining, the lake was still beautiful, and the boat was gently rocking on a warm summer day while I acted like I was totally in control and confident I could remedy this situation.

Somehow without revealing my near-death panic, I propelled myself and the kids back to the boat. After helping the kids scamper up the ladder, I heaved myself on board, started the motor, and guided us back to shore, never letting on how scared, helpless, and over my head I'd really been. What I knew without a doubt was that I never wanted to feel that way again, and I certainly didn't think it could get worse than that.

Spoiler alert: It can get worse.

Fast-forward several years. My world had upended. In the previous twenty-four months, everything had changed. I'd left a job I loved. My family had lost our church, community, and dear friendships; entered a global pandemic; sold our home. Now I was sitting in my car in a church parking lot, gathering the courage to walk into a church leadership gathering of several hundred people that I'd considered friends—even family. But by this point, I didn't know where I belonged. A foreign, gut-deep panic seemed to be my constant companion. I was gritting my teeth against the insecurity and fear that rose up in me, linked to the powerful, old lies that had been with me since before I could remember. As I sat in the parking lot, the insecurity was building a case against me, hurling accusations:

Yes, you do not belong. Yes, you've messed everything up.

This season caused me to question my work and every relationship I had—even the ones that appeared to be intact. I found myself adrift, not quite lost but certainly not found. I wondered whether it was even worth attempting to walk into this meeting without crying.

That afternoon in the parking lot was like hundreds of moments before it and hundreds more to come—moments when the pain of uncertainty was so palpable that it felt physical. *Who am I? Why is this happening?* And perhaps the hardest of all: *God, how could this be the plan?*

The panic I experienced in the in-between on the lake was nothing compared to the dread that ensued from these massive holes in my life. Losing so many things that I loved, that defined me, that shaped who I was and who I saw myself to be was so utterly unexpected that I couldn't find my bearings, couldn't touch solid ground.

A friend of mine described her own unexpected season like this: “Sometimes when learning to fly, pilots lose sight of the horizon because the sky and the ground look so similar. And when they lose the horizon, they don't even know if they are flying right side

up.” Losing the horizon is an honest metaphor of what we may experience during unexpected seasons.

In my work as a therapist, a pastor, and an author, I’ve had a front-row seat to more stories than most, and if there’s one constant, it’s this: Unforeseen events are always shocking to the person experiencing them, yet the reality is, these experiences are “normal.” Even though we feel completely surprised in the moment, we know that most human beings will eventually experience the overwhelm of the unexpected. It comes to all of us, in one form or another, at some point.

I knew writing a book about uncertainty would be challenging—finding a way to leave space for the uniqueness of each person’s story, finding a way to be helpful without being trite. When our souls have been singed with the fire of suffering, we are sensitive, prone to easily burn. I did not want to heap more guilt or shame into our already tender hearts. So I reached out to you, dear readers. I met you over Zoom in groups and individually, over email, and in person. We talked together from our homes, on my back patio, around soaring redwoods on an afternoon retreat. As we talked, you generously opened your hearts about your own unexpected seasons:

- Robert, who was downsized from his job and diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in the same week
- Nancy, who discovered her husband’s affairs and then found herself divorced and unemployed after thirty-five years of marriage
- Mariella, who left the church she grew up in because of a painful conflict between her pastors (who were also her parents) and the church board
- Jonah, who after a decade of infertility, became the dad of twins with special needs, only to watch the stress and financial burden slowly erode his relationship with his wife and create a joyless marriage

- Callie, whose business partner and best friend of ten years sabotaged their business behind her back and ruined Callie's reputation

The circumstances are different, but the pattern is nearly always the same: Most unexpected seasons are precipitated by an unwelcome change and characterized by an unknown timeline and unsure outcome. Such events force our hand, pressing us to deal with our doubt and evaluate our faith and belief in a good God. They lead to questions of identity, struggles with grief, and a deep test of our ability to hope. There's no one way to describe this season, but you shared with me words that fall into two categories:

Most unexpected seasons are precipitated by an unwelcome change and characterized by an unknown timeline and unsure outcome.

Disorientation: *maze, tumbleweed, desert*
 Darkness: *black hole, dark cloud, deep fog*

Perhaps my favorite way to describe these seasons is “a pit” because that's where our journey will begin—following the story of a betrayed teenager, far from home, deep in a pit. It's a story from the Bible with enough twists and turns to keep us guessing—and so many opportunities to learn more about ourselves, about God, and about His presence and care in even the worst of situations. If you know what it feels like to carry panic because your own life story has become so dark or so disorienting, if you feel like you've lost the horizon, you will identify with the story of Joseph. His story spans a significant portion of the book of Genesis, which covers several decades of Joseph's life, from his teenage years to fatherhood, from the pit to the palace to the prison and back again. We'll take a slow walk together through his story, investigating and discovering together how God showed up in Joseph's life—and how He shows up in ours.

Maybe you wonder how helpful a guide Joseph will really be as you navigate your own disappointment. I can think of two reasons for this: First, you may think you already know everything there is to know about Joseph. After all, he's one of the few biblical characters to show up as the leading character in a Broadway musical!¹

A second reason you might doubt that you can relate to Joseph's experience is simply that you know the shiny ending. It's easy to read a Bible story with the end in mind. If you know how Joseph's story turns out, you may not fully engage with his experience. You may also doubt God would ever work in the same dramatic way in your own life. I know that as I've wrestled through Joseph's story over the years, I've heard a niggling voice in the back of my mind: *Sure must have been nice for Joseph to have things turn out so well.* I lacked faith to believe that God could do as much redeeming and reconciling work in my story. I chose a settled resentment and detached apathy rather than a hopeful acceptance of what God is doing and will continue to do in my own life.

But by lingering in the in-between part of Joseph's story—thirteen years of captivity and imprisonment with no end in sight—you'll learn how to persevere when you have no idea how your own story will end. As you witness his eventual restoration and redemption unfolding in an entirely different way from what he must have expected, you'll find hope that God will orchestrate the events in your life too.

In fact, within Joseph's story you will find signposts for your journey through the seasons you didn't sign up for—tests of character, trust developed through trials of faith, and triumphs of forgiveness, redemption, and hope. You'll discover what it means to believe that God has good intentions for you and that you can rest in His faithfulness and plan. As you do, you'll discover a resilient faith on the other side of your season.

If you've picked up this book because you are in one of those unexpected seasons, I pray that you'll feel seen and understood

here. I can promise you that I won't placate or patronize you with pithy answers or viral quotes. I'm not here to heap more pain into a season you are trying to understand or reconcile, but I am here to invite you to experience your story through the biblical stories God has invited us to enter—stories that teach us about ourselves, about our humanity, and about God's presence with us from beginning to end. But unlike sitcoms, fairy tales, and every other “get there fast” narrative in our culture, this story embraces all our humanity—the good, the bad, the broken, the unexpected.

In each chapter we'll focus on Joseph's ordeal and the stories of people today who are somewhere in the process of being tested, whose trust has been challenged and stretched, and who are triumphing in spite of their circumstances. My hope is that the prayers I've written and the stories you read will encourage you to persevere. And if you have made it through an unexpected season, I pray this book will encourage you to look back and discern even more deeply that God has been present with you in every valley, in every pit; that when you lost the horizon, God did not; and that even in your loneliest moment, you were never alone.

In order to journey fully alongside Joseph, you might also check out the related study guide and video series, which dive even more deeply into the story of Joseph and his family, tracing the incredible thread of redemptive love that God reveals to us from Genesis to Revelation. Through exercises, prompts, and discoveries in God's Word, this guide will enable you to enter into your own story with eyes to see God's redemption for you. You can use the guide individually or with a group. Groups can feel awkward or uncomfortable at first, but reflecting and interpreting our stories alongside of God's Word—*His* stories—is incredibly powerful. It's the power of our individual testimonies that continues to witness to who God is—even (and especially) in our unexpected seasons.

During a discovery session I held with some of you, dear readers, our conversation turned to the lessons learned along the way,

and one of you said, “In the midst of my unexpected season, I’m at peace anyway.” The others there murmured in agreement, perhaps sending up their own quick prayer. And that might be the best prayer we can claim, no matter where we are on the journey:

God, give me peace anyway.

CHAPTER 1

BELIEVE THE DREAM

*The greatest need of collective humanity . . .
is renovation of our hearts.*

DALLAS WILLARD, *Renovation of the Heart*

What do I do when I don't know what to do?

This is my prayer in loss, my most honest prayer, one I've prayed countless times over the past several years. Sometimes in the worst moments of my own unexpected season, I would wait for nightfall when I could go outside and lie on my back in the darkest place I could find—the patio, the grass, the driveway . . . even the cul-de-sac outside our house. When I was at my most disoriented, my spiritual practice was simply to lie down and look up. Seeing stars, repositioning myself as a small, tiny being in the vast space of the galaxy was the only way to find my bearings for one more day.

On a particularly bad day in the middle of this time, I was doing what I do best—venting my anxiety and frustration on the nearest living thing. My husband, Dave, and I were fighting. I was bringing every burden and resentment to a head, lashing out at him as if our petty disagreement was my actual problem; as if

solving that one issue or winning this one argument would somehow fix every other wound I was trying to heal, every other wrong I was trying to vindicate. It was a *very* cold December day, and when I walked out of the house that night and was lying on the driveway, I couldn't find peace with the stars. The ambient light of our Christmas decorations felt like noise, matching the ongoing clamor in my own heart. All the hurt, anger, grief, and unknowns inside squeezed me like a vise. This anxious pressure demanded movement, so I walked down our dark street and then along a little path to the nearby golf course. I needed to seek out that very darkest spot on earth so I could see the brightest lights in heaven. I lay on the grass and shivered, holding my own self tight, breathing into the night air and hearing the cry of my soul:

This is not what I signed up for.

“Not what I signed up for” carried the proper weight for the middle of that season. My unmet expectations were mixed with a deeper sense of confusion and grief—anger, unforgiveness, disappointment, and fear, all crumpled into a tight ball that took

up its dwelling in the center of my chest. The kicker is that this mass of emotion and pain wasn't the worst problem—the unknown timeline was. How long would it be this way?

How would I survive? And who would I be on the other side of this season—if there even was an “other side”? The one moment of panic was painful; the unknown length and outcome felt excruciating.

Perhaps “not what I signed up for” is our modern-day lament, words given to shape our true, living-on-this-earth experience.

Perhaps “not what I signed up for” is our modern-day lament, words given to shape our true, living-on-this-earth experience.

Our Human Response

When faced with a season we didn't expect and don't want, we may try to deal with the pain in one of two ways. On one end of

the “not what I signed up for” spectrum are the “skip and stuff” people. Skipping and stuffing is an attempt to minimize our pain by jumping to a future happy ending as a way to pretend all is well. However, painful emotions won’t pretend, and they can’t be skipped over. They keep coming, and they require a response. Avoiding, ignoring, or denying the pain is a short-term solution that creates long-term damage. Our bodies hold our pain and memories of unhealed storylines, so when we encounter a similar situation, we don’t operate out of a place of health or presence. Instead, whether we acknowledge it or not, we respond out of the pain of our past. Skipping and stuffing tends to lead to superficial living. The number of situations we have to avoid, reframe, or ignore grows over time, and what once felt like a positive way to cope becomes destructive to our relationships, our purpose, and our very soul.

On the other end of the spectrum is the temptation to “dive and dwell.” Unlike the skip and stuffers, people on this end of the spectrum dive right into the deep end of pain. They are willing to say what’s gone wrong, who’s hurt them, and what they are struggling with, but they can get stuck inside the dive and end up dwelling in the pain. Eventually, diving and dwelling ends up feeling like drowning, and these people tend to overidentify with the pain in their stories. They lose hope, live out their victimization story, and arc toward despair.

You may immediately identify with one side of the spectrum or the other, or you may realize that you can swing back and forth depending on the situation. But here’s the promise: God offers us another way.

What unexpected seasons offer is a different way of viewing life: God’s hand, God’s plan, and our faith to withstand. He invites you to the narrow middle of the spectrum, where you can “release and reengage.” The narrow middle requires surrender—releasing what you expected and then reengaging your life from a new perspective. To do so takes compassion and courage—for yourself and

for your future. But the results are beautiful because this narrow middle is where redemption is promised. Right here in the middle is where you can acknowledge and make space for what's painful, what's lost, what's unjust. But the middle is also where you can, as Scripture says, grieve with hope, dream with confidence, and live with joy.¹ That hope is found in connection to a much greater story and in the faith and willingness to relentlessly pursue the renewed storyline in your own life. As you do this, you will become real and redeemed in the process.

Real and redeemed people are re-created people, made in the image of God and moving toward the holiness of Christ. Real and redeemed people are able to be fully present and at home in their stories, willing to embrace their own failures and ongoing patterns of brokenness. Real and redeemed people can look back at the storyline of their own lives and acknowledge that there is real pain and struggle, but they also believe, as we'll see with Joseph, that even that which was intentionally planned to harm them, to silence them, to minimize them can be used for good

in God's hands. Real and redeemed people see that blessing appears when they are pliable in God's hands and open to His story, giving Him all of it—the questions, the unknowns, the undone, the unforgiven—and letting

**Within God's story we discover purpose
for our pain, faith in our uncertainty, and
compassion in our grief.**

Him guide them into the most real version of themselves. Within God's story we discover purpose for our pain, faith in our uncertainty, and compassion in our grief. Only a broken heart has the capacity to expand, and choosing the real and redeemed path is the way to that expanded heart—for God, for yourself, and for the world.

The promise of redemption is true, but first we must respond to the difficulties themselves, whether we are navigating present challenges or are looking back at a rocky season, trying to make sense of it all. The cry of the broken heart is not just the pain of the

wound or loss; it's the agony of the unknown timeline and unsure outcome. In Psalm 74, God's people lament,

*We are given no signs from God;
no prophets are left,
and none of us knows how long this will be.*

PSALM 74:9

So maybe the honest statement “not what I signed up for” puts us squarely in the middle of the experience of God's people throughout the ages—this dark, disturbing time when what we believed to be God's plan is obliterated, our hearts are shattered, and there's no timeline or end in sight.

God, what do we do when we don't know what to do?

When we feel, as the psalmist describes, that we have no signs from God, no prophet or encourager to spur us forward, when words fail and life leaves a bitter taste in our mouths, when we feel utterly abandoned and lost, we still have one powerful, transforming thing:

We still have God's stories.

The stories God tells are designed to invite us in, to help us translate and interpret our own experience of faith through those who have gone before us. God's stories are markers along a twisting path. When we find ourselves lost, we can look for these wayfinders in the wilderness: the courageous men and women who've prayed for bread, who've confronted kings, or who've endured famines, fights, and fatigue to seek God, to stay faithful, and to take one more step forward. Eugene Peterson says it this way: “When we submit our lives to what we read in Scripture, we find that we are not being led to see God in our stories but our stories in God's. God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.”²

It takes faith to look up from your circumstances and your pain and believe that God invites you into a life of biblical proportions, a life in which *God* is the larger context. *He* is the larger plot. The people you read about in the Bible are surrounded by

circumstances that feel far different from your disappearing online retirement account or the hospital machine whirring next to your loved one or the tedium of another day in a job you dread—but somehow these humans in the Bible are surprisingly still a lot like you and me. They are humans caught up in the circumstances of their world and their pain, who have choices to make when unexpected seasons blow into their lives. It's easy to gloss over these stories as ancient fables or the stuff of children's Sunday school lessons. It actually takes courage and grit to believe that you can get to know these characters in Scripture and that you—yes, you yourself—are *a character in God's narrative*.

As I acknowledged in the introduction, I realize you might wonder why I've chosen to focus on Joseph—in fact, you might think that's actually a bad or irrelevant idea. I mean, isn't Joseph the guy who had spectacular dreams about his leadership and influence and then lived through a Disney-movie-like adventure? In the end, didn't he get everything he envisioned? Didn't God restore his whole family in the process? These are the same kinds of questions I've confronted in myself:

“Isn't it a little far-fetched to identify with a tribal family from the ancient Near East thousands of years ago?”

“Do you actually think this dumpster fire of a life I'm living right now can actually be fully restored, like Joseph's story?”

“Are you saying I can keep believing the dreams I have in my life, even when all seems lost?”

I've come to believe that this story is an invitation from God Himself:

- Come and see.
- Come and see what's actually hidden in the details of this story.

- Come and see how I move in unexpected ways.
- Come and see how Joseph lives in the tension of his own sorrow and his faith.
- Come and see how tests and trials do eventually lead to triumph, but not in a way that anyone could anticipate.
- Come and see how Joseph's story is your story.
- Come and see My faithfulness in your “not what I signed up for” season.

As we walk through the details of Joseph's story, we are going to discover that our stories, like his, are full of wayfinding markers. Our trials will most certainly look different, but many of our questions will be the same:

- What does it look like to walk forward when every choice feels impossible?
- How do I prosper in even the most difficult moments, and what does prospering mean anyway?
- How do I keep living with hope when all signs point to the death of my dream?
- What do I do with my grief, sorrow, and pain?
- How do I forgive?
- What does true restoration mean on earth? What can I really hope for, and how do I keep hoping?
- What does redemption look like in my life, and how do I recognize it?
- Can I really trust God?

Start with the Ending

As you think about your story, you will likely find that you have some of these same questions (and more). So before we get into the details, I want to take you to the ending of Joseph's story. When our lives become unpredictable, we crave predictability.

This is the reason for the enormous uptick in viewing old sitcoms during the COVID-19 pandemic³—with so much stress swirling through our lives, our brains craved the comfort and certainty of a twenty-two minute show with a structured format and predictable ending. Ironically, this is one of the many reasons I’ve come to see the Bible as God’s true and inspired Word: If humans wrote the Bible out of their own intellect, we would tie everything up in a bow, delineate clear heroes and villains, and end up with a book of stories that read like spun myths, cheesy sitcoms, and superhero movies.

In sitcoms and movies, we look for circumstances and characters that are framed for us in ways that create the predictable loops and comfort we desire. Even if that movie is a murder mystery or that novel is a devastatingly sad love story, it still follows a format that can help our brains relax into predictability. We escape into a world where conflict comes to a head, murders are solved, and love wins.

Since I know your season feels so out of control, maybe spoiling the ending is just what you need. Here’s the flyover version of the whole Joseph story in case you haven’t read it in a while. (By the way, now would be a great time to pause and read the whole story: You can find it in Genesis 37–50.)

As a boy, Joseph grew up in the glow of being “the favorite”—the favorite son of Jacob, his father, because his mother, Rachel, had been the love of his father’s life. This status came with favor that exceeded that of his ten older brothers (all from other mothers), who grew jealous and resentful of him. Like many popular children, Joseph was either unaware or unfazed by his brothers’ animosity, going so far as to share a dream with them that implied that one day his brothers would bow to him. They did not receive this well, and when given the chance, the older brothers schemed to kill him—though they ended up faking his

death and selling him to some traders instead. The favored son then became a slave and was taken out of his own land to Egypt, becoming a house slave to one of Pharaoh's officials before being falsely accused of a crime and unjustly imprisoned. Years went by, but after an incredible chance to interpret a dream of Pharaoh's, Joseph was suddenly elevated to second in command in all of Egypt, preparing the country for famine that was predicted in Pharaoh's dream. When the famine came to pass, Joseph's brothers traveled to Egypt for food. Joseph's teenage dream was realized: They bowed before their brother, whom they did not recognize. Joseph revealed himself to them, forgave them for their treachery, and was even restored to his beloved father—saving his family in the process. The End.

It's definitely worth a full read—as this rapid flyover doesn't do the story justice. But on first glance, it's easy to see how Cinderella-like the story appears. Joseph, young and handsome, making his way through a foreign land and coming out triumphant. It seems that way—except for a few details in these chapters of Genesis. Like the fact that Joseph was betrayed and abandoned by his own brothers, who then covered up their lies for decades. And an unsavory and quite explicit story about Judah, Joseph's older brother, which gives us a taste of what life was really like in those days. And that little detail about thirteen years passing between when Joseph was sold and when he was reunited with his family. And all the tears shed along the way that reveal his deep grief and sorrow. Maybe it wasn't such a rags-to-riches story after all.

In fact, I'm sure Joseph could relate to the reader who described her own season as “drowning in a sea of unexpectedness.” During all of his twenties and much of his thirties, Joseph's life went from bad to worse—from slave to prisoner—with every hope dashed and good deed forgotten. I don't know whether Joseph, like me,

dreamed of stars in the sky, trying to remind himself that he was part of a much bigger story than he could see in the darkness.

We do know this: Joseph didn't forget his dreams—or the God who gave them to him. In fact, as we'll see, by the time he was reunited with his brothers, Joseph's greatest treasure wasn't found in his exalted social status and wealth but in the settled peace and security he'd found in God.

The best part? God wants to give those same treasures to you and me today. To find this treasure is to turn away from the temptation to skip and stuff or to dive and dwell. It's to release your expectations and face a new reality. It's to take one small, faltering step after another into God's way.

On a warm fall day, I found myself, once again, in an unexpected moment. I had pulled over at a little country park, waiting for the virtual appointment with my spiritual director to begin. My life was still off-kilter and in transition, so it seemed fitting that I sat there eating a Dairy Queen Blizzard while evaluating the state of my soul. I was reminded of other moments over the past few years when I'd sat in my car in a parking lot, wishing I were in bed under the covers. Instead, I was headed to another event where I would need to arrange my face and soul to face questions I couldn't answer: *Why did you leave? What are you doing now? What really happened?*

Years later, the questions remained. But the near-constant panic that I felt at the beginning of this “not what I signed up for” season had mellowed; in its place, I often discovered moments of nostalgia, pensive wisdom, a bit of settled sadness.

I put in my earbuds and walked down a footpath before sitting on a log and signing in to my virtual appointment. I prepared to answer the question Susan always asked: “How's your life with God?” As usual, I thought to myself: *I have no idea how my life with God is.* I was getting comfortable with not knowing, though, because I'd learned that God shows up anyway. I didn't have to pretend or posture with Him.

I looked out from my perch to a path framed with trees in autumnal glory, vibrant shades of red, gold, green. It was beautiful. The metaphor wasn't lost on me—the beauty of the leaves also signified the change ahead. In just a few short weeks the trees would be bare, the path dark. The cycle of growth followed by change and loss would continue, headed into the barrenness of winter. The hope of renewal is only believed by faith when the season goes dark. I didn't know that winters in the soul could also be so dark and so long. I found myself wondering how much of my unexpected season had been about leaving the path I wanted to be on—releasing my expectations and my vision for what life needed to look like, of how I expected (demanded?) God to show up.

I stared through the trees and down the gravel path that stretched ahead of me, ambling upward and around, disappearing out of sight. I couldn't tell where the path was going—but it was beautiful, and it was going somewhere. I finished my call, and I decided to enter the metaphor, walking a few paces down the path. I looked up between the kaleidoscope of colors dancing in the breeze, and I found myself saying yes to God again, surrendering to His way again, choosing Him again. This is the path of the unexpected season: We don't know where it's going, but we can trust that God is with us, that God is for us, and that eventually—the season will change.

To get there takes a choice: *Will you release the path you expected and choose to follow Him instead?*

A PRAYER OF RELUCTANT YES

Lord,

*I'm confused about this path,
which seems to be taking me further away from
what seems good,
and what feels safe,
and what is known.*

*But seeing as all the other paths have disappeared
and I don't want to stay here alone,*

I guess I'll go with You.

*Will You be patient with me as I learn how to trust
that You know the way?*

Amen.