

# Living Beloved

*Lessons from my little ones  
about the heart of God*



Erin Hawley

Motherhood is a divine classroom where God teaches mothers about Himself while moms teach their children about God. Author Erin Hawley is an attentive student, plumbing the joys of what it means for us to be dearly beloved children of the living God. With grace and gentleness, insights and discovery, *Living Beloved* invites mothers to enter into the Sabbath of being beloved. Share this sweet gift with the mothers in your circle of influence.

**PeggySue Wells**

Mom of seven and bestselling author of 28 titles, including *Bonding with Your Child through Boundaries* (with June Hunt)

If you are a mom with young children, put this book by your Bible and read it! If you are a mentor of young moms, use this book in a study with them. If you are a grandmother, give this book to all your daughters! With humor and honesty, Hawley combines biblical stories with real-life mom experiences to give us a treasure chest full of new insights about God's personal love, a fresh awareness of what our children can teach us, and the sweet companionship of a "friend who gets me!"

**Susan Alexander Yates**

Speaker and author of *And Then I Had Kids: Encouragement for Mothers of Young Children* and *Character Matters! Raising Kids with Values That Last*

I believe this beautiful book has the potential to change your life—as it carries a powerful message, not only for mothers, but for every girl with a desire to grow in their understanding of God's amazing love for them.

**Debbie Lindell**

Lead pastor of James River Church and author of *She Believes*

This is not really a book about parenting as much as it is a book about “child-ing.” Filled with personal stories and insightful research, Erin’s intelligent writing style captures deep theological truths that will transform how you think of God as your Father. Although written particularly to young mothers, as a pastor I recommend this book for everyone.

**Dave Cover**

Pastor of The Crossing

By the end of the first page of *Living Beloved*, I was breathing a sigh of relief and solace: *this is a safe place*. There are no comparisons here, or expectations, only an opportunity to find rest and identity in God’s grace. Erin weaves the stories of childhood and motherhood truthfully, inviting us tired mamas to remember that we are children, perfectly loved and nurtured by the parent-heart of God.

**Catherine McNiel**

Author of *Long Days of Small Things: Motherhood as a Spiritual Discipline*

So many of us are moving through this life in “survival mode,” just trying our hardest to make it through each day. We’ve become a generation of do-it-all moms, multitaskers to the max. What a beautiful reminder Erin Hawley has given us to pause, ponder, rest, and purposefully recognize the numerous lessons the Lord wants to reveal to us about Himself and His steadfast love through our children and motherhood.

**Julie Manning**

Author of *My Heart*

living  
Beloved



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Erin Hawley



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*To Elijah and Blaise. The two of you have brought so much joy, laughter, and light into my life. I am so very thankful to be your mom and for the privilege of seeing the childlike in you. I love you.*







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## Foreword

# Living Beloved

I remember with perfect clarity the moment I knew I loved Erin. We were working together at the time—office mates, actually, in a small office with high ceilings and two substantial desks pressed together in the center of the room, facing each other, so that every time I looked up for a year I saw her.

Though it didn't take me a year to know about Erin. We started on the job in early July, and it was an afternoon in the middle fall, maybe October: Our employer, a federal judge, had invited us to join him on a patio outdoors in the autumn sun, and we were gathering up plates and forks and a cherry pie someone had made to take out with us. I had plates in one hand and the pie in another, and as I started toward the door I bobbed the pie. And before I could say a word, Erin instantly, without a second's hesitation, reached out and took my hand.

There was something about that touch. It said something to me in that moment, to my heart—an offer of help, but also of solidarity, of standing together; a touch that said *I'm here when you're weak, I'm here in your need*. I've loved Erin ever since. And cherry pie.

In these pages, Erin comes alongside you to steady, to encourage, to inspire. She shares from her own life what she has learned as a mother about the loving heart of God. And she draws out in ways only a mother can what that mighty love amounts to. She helps us

see that God's love invites us to be cherished children, beloved sons and daughters, defined by a passion that beat for us before we were born and makes us all that we are.

I can't help but think, in reading Erin's pages, of the apostle Paul's conviction that God had set him apart "from my mother's womb and called me by his grace." Erin helps us understand how true that is for each of us, loved by God before we have done a thing, loved for who we are as *His*. May the Lord help you experience that love in new ways through these pages.

Erin urges her readers at the outset to take it slow, to allow the Lord space and time to work as you read. I couldn't agree more. Savor every page. Maybe read it with a piece of cherry pie.

JOSH HAWLEY

# Introduction

Motherhood has brought me nearly to the end of myself. And for that I will be forever grateful.

The early years felt overwhelming. The math just didn't work. A full-time job squeezed into part-time babysitting hours and a husband with a travel-heavy work schedule added up to not enough hours in the day. As busy days followed sleepless nights, I began to identify with Psalm 79:3's lament, "They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them." For me, there was no one to bury the aspirations of being a wonderful wife, mom, professor, author, Bible study leader, and friend. No one to bury the need to have it all together, to be the on-top-of-things twenty-first-century wife, mom, and career woman.

As the daughter of an alcoholic, I had long defined my identity by my performance. Through a series of remarkable, only-God-could-do-this events, a small-town girl attended the nation's best law school, worked for its top judge, and participated in cases discussed on the six o'clock news. But I was never sure I was good enough. My response to each new opportunity was to resort to one rule: Work harder.

This self-imposed rule didn't leave a lot of room for me to fail. Nor did it leave much room for the Lord to move in grace and power. As a result, I was unprepared for the reality that is motherhood—where control is beyond one's ken. When my husband was disappointed, or my son cried at being left with the babysitter (or because his stomach hurt or because babies sometimes cry), or

when I called to tell the conference organizer that I couldn't make it to speak, the walls closed in. It wasn't possible to work harder to fix things. Oh, believe me, I tried. I walked miles up and down our staircase trying to comfort the acid-reflux stomach of our oldest son, banged out legal articles during nap times, tried to cook *Food and Wine*-worthy dinners, and hosted Bible studies on nights my husband was out of town. But the pieces kept falling. There wasn't enough. *I* wasn't enough.

One tired evening, the thought hit me: God *could* have made motherhood easy. It would have been simple enough for the King of kings to create babies who slept through the night. The God who made the stars might easily have gifted me with intuitive knowledge of how best to deal with a tiny acid-reflux tummy. So if God is good—and I believe He is—and if God is sovereign—and I believe He is—my tired mind wondered, why all the sleepless nights? Why are human babies (in marked contrast to many others in the natural world) so dependent?

C. S. Lewis reminds us that we are never told another's story. Your own motherhood journey has unique God-imprints, sweet whispered love songs to you alone. But for me, the Lord has quietly and steadfastly been showing me that, although little ones might not sleep the night through, the Lord is always there to catch my falling pieces.

Those early months brought me to the end of myself in a way nothing else has, and thus to the beginning of God. The promised grace, the working of all things to the good, the God-plan, was ever so much more wonderful than I could have dreamed, because God was there. He met me at my worst when I was not enough (and still am not) and proved Himself all sufficient.

It was as a mom that the Father God invited me to become a child again—His child. To rediscover, or discover anew, the joy of being fully, unconditionally, and perfectly loved. Through the transition to motherhood—a transition that has not always been easy—I’ve been given a second chance to become childlike, to rest in God’s provision and protection, to dance with joy, and to dream the impossible. My children are teaching me to be comfortable with dependency, to anticipate and wonder and praise and live life all-in. Every day my boys show me what it means to have a childlike spirit and what it is that the Father invites me to become.

I’ve discovered that part of God’s grand plan for me as a mom is to see my children as He created them—with all of their joy, exuberance, trust, desire for relationship, and ability to rest. In the Bible, Jesus talks a lot about children, which is surprising when you consider that children had no place in society at the time. Jesus upends all of that. Instead of being the least and the last, children are the chosen, the first in, the ones Jesus time and again welcomes with outstretched arms.

Children are important to Jesus, and not just because the God of the universe uniquely designs each one, but because they possess and reveal the characteristics of the Kingdom. Jesus, in other words, not only adores children, He teaches that to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven we must *become like them*.

When the disciples were arguing over who among them would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus did something shocking. He called a small child to Himself and upended the disciples’ world. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:14). One like this—this small, humble child, Jesus



explained—will be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Indeed, becoming childlike is the key to entering heaven in the first place: Jesus told His disciples, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

As moms, we have a ringside seat to the heavenly characteristics Jesus emphasized to the disciples. Through a haze of tiredness, we receive an unexpected and priceless gift: By focusing on the unique attributes of our children, we see how God created them *and us* to be. That is, when we see our children as Jesus saw them, we see the very characteristics that the Lord desires to see in us. And as we become childlike, we learn to embrace our identity and live fully from a place of adoption—adoption as beloved children of the Father God.

Now, a brief note is necessary to point out what every mom knows: Children are *not* perfect. They learn “no” and “mine” at a very early age and often behave like tiny dictators. It’s even been said that two hundred toddlers could conquer the world. (Personally, I think that number may be too high.) When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven being made up of children, He isn’t talking about childishness but the natural, spontaneous traits of very young children.

Children, for example, don’t work at being children. They just are. And this is important. Being childlike means *becoming* more without *doing* more. Our children show us how. In their desire just to be with Mom, they show us how to lean up into a relationship with Jesus. In finding their identity in their parents, they show us that the key to identity is not inward introspection but outward focus on our Father. They risk and they trust and they are

transparent—sometimes all in the same breath. And they do all of this because they understand who they are in relationship to their parents.

Of course, children are also unbelievably active. Some days they don't stop moving—ever. But children are unique in that they act from a position of being. They make outrageous requests of their parents. They find joy in every frog, fish, and even dead mole. They explode in spontaneous expressions of wonder. They show us that following Jesus actually means being pursued by Him. They rest. They show us how to actively participate in life by being secure in love. They act out of a place of being.

Every day my children show me the Father's heart, what He longs to see in me. As Jesus taught the disciples with parables, the word pictures of His heart, He has been teaching me in this hard season of motherhood through those He's entrusted to my care.



Dear one, this book is not a how-to on motherhood. It's a book for the mom whose memory is foggy, whose patience is fraying, and who desperately would like a good night's sleep and a peaceful shower—or at least one of the two. It's for poured-out moms who desperately need spiritual refreshment. It's about discovering God's unique and surprising invitation to moms as they go about the vital but so often exhausting business of nurturing their children.

If the early years of motherhood are challenging for you, I am right there with you. There have been (and still are) days I have felt insufficient and depleted. On the most difficult days, God has provided spiritual nourishment from a surprising place: He has taught me lessons about living as a child of God from my own children.

Through my young boys, God has shown me more of what it means to be His child. Dear ones, I'm so very excited to share with you the ways that seeing my children's childlikeness has encouraged and emboldened me to live as a beloved child of God.

Through your everyday, ordinary task of loving and nurturing your children as no one else can do, the Father God is inviting you to learn from them how to grow closer to Him, how to accept His invitation to be His beloved child. He wants to shower you with grace in the midst of chaos. He wants to refresh and renew you through those He has entrusted to your care. Dear one, hear Him today as He invites you to think of yourself as a child of God in a whole new way.

My prayer is that this book might encourage and refresh you, help you grow closer to the Lord, and enjoy being His beloved child. I pray that this book might nourish and speak to your soul as you nourish and care for your children. It's my hope that the Lord would use this book to affirm you in your motherhood journey, to remind you of His promises and your identity as a daughter of God. Most of all, I pray that as you snuggle your own children close, you'd feel the Father's arms around you, assuring you of His love.

Dear one, I urge you to take this book slowly as you study your children. Read it in bits and pieces when you can manage between the dishes and the diapers, and ask God the Father to show you the lessons He has to teach you through your children.

# 1

## Humble Imitation

*Therefore be imitators of God [copy Him and follow His example], as well-beloved children [imitate their father]. And walk in love.*

—EPHESIANS 5:1-2, AMPC

Elijah's three-year-old legs pump as hard as they can go, his head is flung back, and his hair blows in the breeze. His breath comes in audible, hard rushes. He looks like he's running the last ten meters of a two-hundred-meter dash or perhaps running for his life. Every ounce of energy, every fiber of his being, is stretched to the breaking.

I imagine the crossing of a finish line, the breaking of a taut ribbon, the victory dance. But instead of victory, there's a miscarriage of hope. Elijah gradually slows, from full-on irrepressible run to timid trot and, finally, to a dejected walk with his head hanging down. Then his feet stop moving entirely. He's motionless; his goal is beyond reach, his dreams crushed, and his heart broken. It's the three-year-old version of locusts and ashes.

You see, Elijah was not chasing after a blue ribbon but rather stretched out in pursuit of his father. My husband, Josh, was running

his three miles on our long driveway. Up and back. Up and back. Up and back. We were playing outside when Elijah saw his daddy run past and wanted to run with him. He wanted to be doing just what he saw his father doing.

The sight was beautiful and heartbreaking. As hard as he tried, Elijah was unable to run as far or as fast as his dad. His lungs were too small and his feet too slow. His body failed him, his efforts insufficient.

But then from around the bend came Josh. Seeing the tears flooding down Elijah's face, he scooped him up and ran a few hundred yards with him in his arms. Tears of sadness turned to tears of joy. The run with the father was sweeter because it was unexpected; the arms that held the boy dearer because of his own failure; the closeness cherished even more because *it was all grace*. It was just when hope was lost, and a small heart thought its desire was out of reach, that the father reached down to turn heartache into relationship.

How like our heavenly Father. It is often when night seems darkest that our Father God's pursuit of us becomes clear and real. It's in the hour of defeat. It's when we break off from running, our feet motionless and our heads hanging down, feeling discouraged and disillusioned. It's when our efforts and our intellect and our stubbornness run out. It's when we need God—when we acknowledge that need to ourselves and to Him.

It's *then* that our Father makes His presence known. He picks us up and holds us close with arms full of strength and grace and forgiveness. He delights in us. He upholds us. And our tears turn to joy. Our ashes turn to beauty and our mourning to dancing. He redeems the years the locusts have eaten (Joel 2:25). He renews our

strength. He promises that those who hope in the Lord will run and never grow weary (Isaiah 40:31).

Our children are constantly imitating us. In their unselfconscious desire to be like us, their moms, we see Ephesians 5:1-2 lived out. We see what it means to be “imitators of God”; it’s living as beloved children, children who copy their parents. As imitators, children also show us that the one who loves us is nearby and always pursuing us. They teach us that following Jesus means radical freedom and that, when we follow and humbly imitate Jesus, we’re surrounded by love on every side. Let’s explore each of these ideas in turn.

### PURSUED FOLLOWERS

I watch in awe as my two-and-a-half-year-old mimics my morning contact routine down to the last idiosyncrasy. He opens the contact case and takes out a pretend contact. He rinses the clean contact with solution—never you mind that it’s been sitting in fresh solution all night. He peers up into the mirror, a move made more difficult by the fact that he’s standing on the sink counter. He scrutinizes his face critically, pries open his right eye, and gently pops in the contact. I am speechless. I had no idea Elijah had been watching my morning routine, let alone so closely. He was beyond excited to be doing something big, to be doing something that I do, and to be doing it just the way I did.

My awe turns to dismay as I realize how closely those little eyes have been watching. Every small moment is one of impact when the eyes that see have yet to turn three. Little eyes watch to see how I react to the slow grocery-store line or to the service representative

on the other end of the phone. Impressionable eyes observe the way I drive, the way I talk to my own mom, and the food (including massive amounts of Diet Dr Pepper) that I put in my body. I desperately want to be a good example.

Then a bigger realization hits even closer to home. Do I seek to emulate the person who I'm supposed to be becoming like? Am I living out the Ephesians 5:1-2 exhortation to be an imitator of God, to copy Him and follow His example, *as beloved children imitate their own* parents?

Jesus is spotless. He is righteousness. His loving-kindness knows no end. His Spirit reveals His character, one of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). The entire universe was created by Him and through Him and for Him (Romans 11:36). And somehow we are supposed to become like Him, as Paul said he did in 1 Corinthians 11:1. We are to follow in Jesus' steps (1 Peter 2:21) and to have His attitude and mind-set (Philippians 2:3-8).

But am I living this? Am I imitating Him as a beloved child? Do I begin my day studying Jesus, as my two-year-old clearly studies me? Do I see, really see, how He loves people, how He approaches the unapproachable, how He gives away grace, always? Do I see the patience with which the Lord treats the Israelites? Time and again they rebel, yet the Lord continually pursues them with His "never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love."<sup>1</sup> Or am I too busy? Too distracted? My son desperately wants to become like me. Do I desperately want to become like Jesus?

The answer is painfully clear. No. Not always. Not often, even. There's certainly a place for my heartfelt prayer, "Lord, help me to be more like You; Lord, help me to *want* to be like You."

But as I watch my children, I realize that even as Jesus calls us to follow Him, He's pursuing us. Our relationship is all grace. Even the imitation and the following are more about Jesus than about me. Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith. He draws us close and enables both our desire and our transformation. Jesus promises to be with us, to give us new hearts, and to keep working in us until He returns. We *are* His workmanship.

You see, Elijah's morning contact routine was made possible only with my support. My arms held him close, preventing a tumble from the bathroom sink and enabling his imitation. Elijah's imitation was facilitated by me, his mom. The same thing is true of our imitation of Jesus. When we seek to follow Him, He pursues us. It's God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit holding us close, supporting us, enabling us, sustaining us, giving us life and breath and all. As we take a step to follow His example, we can be confident that He is with us.

And during the times when we fail, or the times when we fail to begin, the Father comes close and runs with us. He scoops us up and holds us close. It's His arms that support and His legs that run the distance. The Father always pursues us.



When Jesus says "Follow me," the disciples do and we should too. But time and again, Jesus makes it clear that He's pursuing us. It was Jesus who continually turned back to shore up and encourage the disciples. Think of Peter walking on water: When fear overwhelmed and the waters rose, it was Jesus who stretched out His arms. When Thomas doubted, it was Jesus who held out His hands and His side. When Peter denied Jesus three times in His hour of



greatest need, the risen Lord later sought him and restored him, asking one question—“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (John 21:15-17)—for each denial. It was Jesus who offered each question as a healing touch on a painful wound.

God pursues us relentlessly. Psalm 23 famously proclaims the truth that the Lord’s goodness and mercy shall “follow us” all the days of our lives. But the original Hebrew word used for follow, *radaf*, is much stronger than a passive sort of trailing behind. *Radaf* is a bold, active, life-changing word most often translated as “pursue.” Psalm 23 easily could be translated to mean that the Lord’s goodness, mercy, and unfailing love shall *pursue* us all the days of our lives. In fact, in *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates *radaf* as “chase after,” telling us that the Lord’s goodness, mercy, and love shall *chase after* us every day of our lives.

As we follow Jesus, we realize that we are the ones being pursued. God chases us with an unfailing love—He runs after us with His blessings. He pursues us.

### RADICAL FREEDOM

Some of my favorite memories of my children come from when they were knee high. This height was perfect for the “knee check.” The boys would careen about playing with friends or exploring a new playground, but every so often they would zoom back to me, wrap their arms around my legs in a full body hug, snuggle their faces in my knees. Because Mom’s knees were close, my boys were at liberty to explore and discover. They were radically free because of their relationship to their parent—a parent who pursued them should they wander too far. In a similar way, when Jesus invites us

to follow Him, when He pursues us, it is then that we are radically free.

There is nothing wishy-washy about Jesus' invitation to the disciples. Mark tells us that when Jesus saw Simon and Andrew fishing in the Sea of Galilee, He said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men" (Mark 1:17). Mark goes on to describe how Simon and Andrew *immediately* left their nets and followed Him. They left their boats, their businesses, and their families. Similarly, when Jesus called Matthew He said simply, "Follow me" (Matthew 9:9). Matthew immediately got up from his tax-collecting booth, "left everything behind" (Luke 5:28, NASB), and began to follow Jesus.

Can we imagine leaving home, vocation, and family on the basis of only two words? "Follow me." Yet there is something so irresistible about Jesus that Simon and Andrew and Matthew did just that, without a moment's hesitation.

All of this does not compare, of course, to what Jesus gave up. As Philippians 2:6-8 reminds us,

[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And it does not compare to what we receive: abundant life today and eternity with Jesus.

But there is no question that when Jesus calls He asks us to put

Him first. Ironically, this radical notion of loving Jesus more than our own spouses, children, parents, and friends is what enables us to love each of them better. Jesus teaches us what it means to be a better mom, spouse, and friend.

I'm struck not only by how Jesus asks us to put Him first, and thus put everything else second, but also how Jesus invites us to leave behind the baggage that holds us captive. Beth Moore describes a person's captivity as "anything that hinders the abundant and effective Spirit-filled life God planned for him or her."<sup>2</sup> Anything—our pride, our inadequate sense of who we are in Christ, our past, our hurts, the idols we have set up in place of God—anything that hinders us in the life God has called us to has taken us captive no less than prison walls.

But God became man and died on a cross to free us from physical *and* spiritual captivity. Isaiah previews the Messiah, announcing, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" (Isaiah 58:6). Jesus came to loose our bonds, to set the oppressed free, and to break *every* tie that binds.

In following Jesus, then, we leave behind those things that yoke us to sin and death and keep us from living fully the life He has called us to. No matter how deep or old or secret the wounds, Jesus invites us to lay them at His feet. As counterintuitive as it sounds, following Jesus means radical freedom.



I was about eight years old, and my sisters and I were on our way to Grandmom's house—a place I knew I didn't belong. Because, well, Grandmom's house was *normal*. There was no screaming. Chairs

were not overturned, dishes did not crash against walls, and pickup trucks did not flip after one drink too many. I knew what to expect at Grandmom's house: laughter, enormous meals, and relief from the constant worry that any small incident, any out-of-place word, or even some good intention might result in the latest breakdown of family harmony that showed up in angry words, swift punishment, and, worst of all, the oft-made accusation that we three children did not love our father.

Even though Grandmom's house was blissfully predictable and safe, our weekly visits were fraught with peril. I knew deep in my being that I did not belong in a place like this and that, if I was found out, I might not be invited back.

As a child of an alcoholic, I had developed a keen, unhealthy attention to the emotions of those around me. While my maternal grandparents loved us dearly, my sisters and I were quite aware of the tension between extended family members. My parents' marriage had not been easy. My dad suffered from alcoholism and severe depression—diseases that often left him incapable of being a loving husband and father. Try as he might, he could not get better, and home life got progressively worse.

During my parents' twelve-year marriage, I can remember only one time that Grandmom visited our house (Granddad never came, to my knowledge). That single visit ended memorably when Dad screaming at Grandmom. She left in tears. And she never came back.

Thus, "going to Grandmom's house" evoked many emotions. Some of my happiest childhood memories are of the extended family gathered around her huge dining-room table, relatives crowded together, laughing. The food was wonderful, the cousins plentiful, and the fights nonexistent. The house was an oasis of peace and

consistency for three girls who were used to the upheaval and chaos that accompany alcoholism.

The differences between our home and Grandmom's home were palpable: My sisters and I could *feel* the difference. To me, the gaping gulf between the normal and the chaotic was so large it was impassible. This perception led to my own sneaking suspicion that, even at Grandmom's house, everyone was looking for signs of errancy, waiting for us to turn out badly. I felt as if I were on probation, an interloper in that happy place, and so very fearful of discovery.

As a result, I was determined to be the best kid possible. To my eight-year-old mind, that meant washing dishes. So before the meal was complete, I would jump up from the table and begin clearing it. I'd fill the sink, scrape the plates into the trash, and scrub. Behind the mound of dishes was a small girl looking for some sign of approval, an acknowledgment that my sisters and I could stay. That we belonged. I can remember watching my uncle lean back in his chair, laughing, while I wished for the quiet confidence that it would take to sit back and enjoy the meal, to linger over dessert, to simply *be*.

Simply *being* was not enough in my family. It was not enough for my dad, who could not see love through the fog of alcohol and depression. It was not enough for the little girl who was so very desperate for unconditional love that she scrambled to receive approval for washing dishes, of all things. And it was not enough (still sometimes is not enough) for the adult me, who still longs to belong, who often works at the task set before her with a frenzy born not of desire but of fear.

I didn't think being me was enough for the Lord, either. In *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller writes eloquently about the difficulty

of knowing a loving heavenly Father when our relationships with our earthly fathers are difficult. I knew John 3:16 by heart, that the Lord had sent His Son, His only Son, to die on the cross that we might have everlasting life. And I believed. Yet while I believed that the Lord had made the ultimate sacrifice, I didn't see Him in the day-to-day of childhood. Family life—from my dad's unshakeable conviction that I didn't love him, to his unpredictable behavior and harsh words, to his final decision to take his own life—was difficult to reconcile with a God who sees the details. I knew God not as a loving Father but as a sovereign, all-powerful, and yet unreachable God.

It's taken me a long time to understand that simply being *is* enough for Jesus. He doesn't lose His temper when the pieces fall. No plates crash and no angry words are exchanged. In fact, when we fail, Jesus is not even disappointed in us but sees in us His own hard-won righteousness. He meets us in our brokenness. He sees us and feels with us. He not only looks down from on high and loves us, but He gets down in the trenches with us. He pursues us.

And He wants us to lay the things that bind down at His feet. He wants us to follow *Him* and lose *them*. As *The Message* paraphrase of John 3:16 puts it, "This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone *can have a whole and lasting life*" (emphasis mine). Jesus sacrificed so much so that we might have a "whole and lasting life." Even today, that phrase brings me to tears. He doesn't want us just to survive, to wade through the long days, trying to avoid as much pain as possible. He doesn't want us to grow brittle shells or present a perfectly coifed imposter to the world.

He wants us to *live*. Fully and wholly. Abundantly. And we can because He came to loose every bond as we follow Him. Even if your family looks something like mine or is unbearably difficult in some other heartbreaking way, hear me say this: Jesus cares. He is with you now and He was with you then. When Jesus says “Follow me,” He’s inviting us to follow Him and to lose those things that imprison us. In following Jesus, there’s radical freedom.

### SURROUNDED BY LOVE

I’m reminded of my two-year-old, Blaise, sitting under a tangle of blankets on top of the couch. We were playing peekaboo as I multitasked putting laundry away and watching his older brother in the bath. Finally, Blaise got tired of having one-third of my attention. As I peeked my head in the room, he pulled back a blanket, patted the couch, and said, “Come sit with me in the piles.” And you know what? This mama did. I left the laundry, got Elijah out of the bath, sat down “in the piles” with my two-year-old, and pulled him close.

Dear sister, how much more will our Father God sit with us in our piles and pull us close? The Lord doesn’t run from our mess; He embraces us in it. We don’t scare the Lord. He loves to come and sit with us in our piles. All we have to do is pat the couch and ask. And when we do, we find that He is already there.

“I am with you always,” promises Jesus (Matthew 28:20). And He is. His light is what makes the darkness bearable. But this isn’t a promise of a trouble-free life. In fact, Isaiah 43:2’s famous promise that the Lord will be with us when we pass through the waters *assumes* that through waters we *shall* pass. Nor is it that we will

understand everything once we put our faith in Jesus. The Bible tells us that there are some things we will not understand this side of heaven. But we can be certain that we are never alone. God the Father is the one who sees us always, Jesus the Son became man because of His overwhelming compassion for us, and the Holy Spirit lives within us comforting us and advocating for us at every turn.

For me personally, I may never know why some things happened, but I do know that I was not alone. It took me years to face some of the hard things about my childhood. Through my church's healing prayer ministry, however, Jesus showed me a vision that changed everything. As I prayed, I saw Grandmom's kitchen clearly, as if I were there in the moment.

*The double sink below the wide window looks out into a flower garden and a small fruit-tree orchard beyond. The Formica countertops are piled high with dishes, the fancy ones reserved for holidays. The island overflows with food. The dining table stretches out nearby, its leaves extended to accommodate the large gathering. Family members are sitting, laughing, lingering over dessert and coffee.*

*There's a skinny blonde girl at the sink. She's washing dishes. Alone.*

*But suddenly she's not sad anymore. And she's not alone. The sink is overflowing bubbles, and a little boy, not much older and not any bigger than the girl, is washing dishes too. They are up to their elbows in soap-suds. Dishwater splashes high as four arms—not a lonely single pair—plunge into the soapy water. Their eyes are full of laughter, and as sunlit faces turn, I know it's Jesus, come to wash dishes with a tiny little girl.*

Jesus knew my little-girl heart, my feelings of inadequacy, and my desperate desire to belong. He knew the fear that drove me to wash dishes before dessert was finished, and He met me there. He was beside me washing dishes too and delighting in me. While I



might have worried about fitting in with my family, He was telling me that I belonged to Him. There was nothing I could do that would make Him love me any more or any less. I could simply *be*.

This example may seem fantastical, but for me it is a picture of the truth that Jesus never forsakes us. The vision helped me to see that He was with me all along—protecting, loving, laughing even, with the little girl I was. For me, Jesus makes every memory bearable, beautiful even, because He's in every one.

Jesus sees, and He cares about the little things. He cares about the small girl who doesn't belong, and He cares about you. Dear friend, I pray that Jesus' love would envelop you. I pray that you would see His hands and feet at work in your life right now, and that if you have memories that are difficult to bear, Jesus would reveal Himself to you there too. He is there.



As we follow Jesus, He surrounds us.

We were visiting with friends who had children just a few years older than ours. Our oldest was still sleeping peacefully, so we enjoyed story after story about their eldest child's ability to escape from crib and room (little knowing we were hearing our future). The mom recounted their solution: a baby monitor with a two-way speaker. When their son popped up and began climbing out of his crib again, his mom spoke sternly into the monitor: "Get back into bed." The poor little guy had no idea that his mother could see him, much less that she could speak out of thin air, and was nearly startled out of his wits.

As we follow Jesus, we find out that He is and has always been with us. The *Lorica of St. Patrick*, written, as tradition has it, by

St. Patrick for protection in bringing the gospel to Ireland, puts it this way:

May Christ shield me today.  
Christ with me, Christ before me,  
Christ behind me,  
Christ in me, Christ beneath me,  
Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit,  
Christ when I stand,  
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.<sup>3</sup>

What wonderful truth. Christ within me. Christ above me. Christ in every eye that sees me and every ear that hears me. Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit, Christ when I stand. And for a heartbroken eight-year-old girl, Christ when I wash dishes. Christ is *always* near. Christ is nearer to us than even a mom with her little ones.

As we watch our children imitate us, let it be a reminder of how we're to humbly imitate Jesus, firm in the knowledge that as we do so, Jesus is pursuing us, surrounding us with the protection of His loving care, and freeing us from any obstacles to the full and abundant life He offers.

### *Reflection Questions on Humble Imitation*

1. Can you think of a time when you have attempted to follow God and failed? How have you dealt with that disappointment? What does the way we view our failure to imitate God say about our concept of God's character?
2. Can you recall a time in your life when you knew God was pursuing you? What did that feel like?
3. What Scriptures remind you of God's faithfulness to be with you? Deuteronomy 31:6, Psalm 37:28, Psalm 94:14, Isaiah 42:16, and Hebrews 13:5 are a few good places to start.
4. Are there painful areas of your life that God is calling you to leave behind as you follow Him? Jesus came to set you free. Pray that the Lord would open your eyes to see Him at work in your situation and to experience His forgiveness, freedom, and pursuit of you.
5. In what areas of your life is God calling you to imitate Him now? Are you experiencing His presence with you there? If not, what aspect of His character are you not believing? Ask Him to grant you faith to believe that He is who He says He is.