

Family

How to LOVE yours
(and help them
like you back!)

A Life, Love & God Book from JESSIE MINASSIAN

God is in the habit of using broken families for His glory. In *Family*, Jessie vulnerably and authentically shares the power of that truth through her own story and then effectively empowers young girls to discover it for themselves. Wow. This book is for all teenage girls who want to discover purpose and find healing within their families; for parents who long for deeper, richer, God-honoring relationships with their daughters; and for small group leaders who want to bring reconciliation into the lives and homes of their students. Grab this book, read it in community, and expect to receive gospel truth, fresh perspectives, and life-altering advice.

MEGAN FATE MARSHMAN

Director of women's ministries at Hume Lake Christian Camps

An easy read with lots of fun, useful, and engaging exercises for teen girls. This book belongs in the hands of every Christian girl trying to do the teen years right. It is biblically solid, relationally focused, authentic, and very practical.

DANNY HUERTA

Vice president of parenting and youth at Focus on the Family

In *Family*, Jessie is honest, relatable, and completely down to earth. She doesn't shy away from sharing the good, the bad, and the ugly about her own family and growing-up years. She gives you an honest inside peek that not many people are willing to give. This book is filled with solid biblical truth and practical advice on how to love and live with your family well. Jessie is the big sister that every teen girl wishes she had. We highly recommend this book!

KRISTEN CLARK AND BETHANY BAIRD

Founders of GirlDefined Ministries and authors of *Girl Defined: God's Radical Design for Beauty, Femininity, and Identity*

Jessie has done it again! She's written an easy-to-read and down-to-earth, practical guide for getting along with your family. She doesn't pull any punches as she shares the joys and pains from her own family. It's a must-read experience of changing attitudes, forgiveness, and looking ahead to your future family . . . and you will laugh when you meet Mr. Big Toe.

BOB PHILLIPS

Licensed therapist, director emeritus at Hume Lake Christian Camps,
and bestselling author

At our residential program for struggling teens, we are constantly looking for great resources. Many teens come to us when their family relationships are at their worst. After reading Jessie's book, I had to wonder, *How many of our girls would have even needed to come to us if they had read Jessie's book when things at home began to get tough?* Jessie uses stories and questions to help readers deal with the pain of their own family brokenness. And then she leads them through the process of finding forgiveness, redemption, perspective, and hope. We will be getting a copy for each of our girls at Shelterwood!

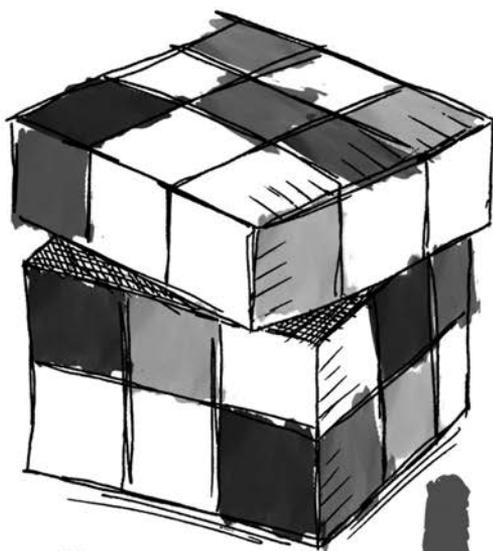
JIM SUBERS

President and CEO of Shelterwood Academy

Jessie Minassian has a high calling in connecting with teen girls about the issues closest to their hearts. In this vulnerable, practical, and thoughtful book, she speaks to that perennial struggle of every teen: how to relate to family through the good and bad. She helps teens understand their families better—while also giving girls tools to better connect and find understanding in an often fraught relationship. This book is an excellent and much-needed resource for every teen girl.

DAVID EATON

CEO and cofounder of Axis



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JESSIE MINASSIAN

NAVPRESS 

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Family: How to Love Yours (and Help Them Like You Back)

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Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-61291-630-9

Printed in the United States of America

23	22	21	20	19	18	17
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

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Introduction

I'VE READ A lot of books—*lots* of them—and all my favorites have something in common. Each one made me feel as if I were talking with a friend, or at least someone who cared about my life. I guess when it comes down to it, I don't like having someone I've never met tell me how to live. Wild guess here—maybe you don't either? It's easier to listen to advice when we hear it from someone we know and who we know cares about us, right? (And let's be honest, sometimes it's really encouraging to hear that an author is *human*, just like the rest of us!) So before we dig into this book together, it's only fair that we get to know each other a bit.

I'm Jessie. My given name is actually Jessica, and my last name is so hard to pronounce that I avoid using it when possible. (Just for kicks, it's pronounced min-à-see-in.) My single momma brought me into this world on a beautiful Californian March day just a *few* years ago (wink). She got married when I was five, and I grew up in a blended family of five kids. (You'll get to hear more about them later.) I played

lots of sports in school and tried to figure out how to love God with my whole heart when it seemed to be *way* more interested in boys. (Maybe you can relate?) I liked school when I had friends, thought it was miserable when I didn't. I got good grades, ate too many Twix for lunch, and never got used to spending ten to twelve hours a week on a school bus. (We kind of lived in the boondocks.)

After high school graduation, I went to a Christian college in Southern California. I played volleyball there and then got into rock climbing. I studied abroad two semesters, one in Israel and the other in Costa Rica. I still liked school when I had friends and learned not to be miserable when I didn't. I got fewer good grades, stopped eating Twix for lunch, and traded the school bus for my first car (a ridiculously small gold Toyota MR2). There were ups, there were downs, and then there was *him*.

I married my match made in heaven the weekend after college graduation. For now, let me just say that Paul (or "Paco," as most people know him) swept me off my feet and I have never looked back. Best friends make the best soul mates, and he was—and is—both. (*Awww!*) I didn't think I had room for any more love in my heart until God gave us two daughters, Ryan and Logan. They're sweet li'l blessings wrapped in two feisty packages!

Besides loving on my family, my greatest joy these days is to help girls find their identity, pleasure, and purpose in God. I'm the resident big sis for a website called LifeLoveandGod.com, where I answer girls' questions about

. . . well, life, love, and God. (I know, pretty creative, right?) Now that I have two daughters of my own, I'm all the more passionate about seeing girls understand their unique beauty, know how amazing God is, and hold their heads high in dignity.

That's where the LIFE, LOVE & GOD series comes in. These books are meant to be the closest thing to just hanging out at my house, going for a hike together, or meeting for a small group in my living room. Each book covers different stuff you're facing, whether it's relationships with guys, shameful addictions, body image, or getting along with your family.

You'll want to have a notebook or journal handy for the discussion questions at the end of each chapter. Trust me, you'll get so much more out of this book if you take time to think through those questions. Even better, grab a couple of friends (or your mom or a youth-group leader) and go through the book together! My heart is to see you grow in your relationship with God and shine with confidence, and that happens most often when you're in community with others.

You can find out more about my random favorite things on the "Meet Jessie" page at LifeLoveandGod.com. I'd love to hear a little about you, too, if you'd like to send me an e-mail at the website!

Now, if you're ready, let's dive into the messy, beautiful, infuriating, and comforting world of family life. I can't wait to help you love them more (and help them like you back)!

Love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "jessie".

CHAPTER ONE

The Family Secret

MY HANDS WORKED with angry determination, stuffing random items into my faded JanSport backpack. Through tears, I shoved in a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, a surfboard necklace given to me by an old crush, two granola bars, and a few crumpled bills I'd pulled out of a wooden piggy bank. At fourteen, it felt like my family was spinning out of control, and I wanted out. Now the biggest question was whether that out would be through my second-story bedroom window or the front door. The decision kept me occupied longer than I wanted it to, and while I thought about it, my mind wandered.

I had planned my escape just that afternoon, while listening to a Depeche Mode album that had recently become my

anthem. It was dark and depressing music, matching (causing?) the storm clouds that now filled my heart and darkened the sky outside my window. Dad had yelled at me again. I felt like whatever I did wasn't good enough. He seemed to get mad at me for no reason, and even though I knew my attitude had room for improvement, it all felt so unbearable. Unfair. Unreasonable. Unloving. *Un-everything*. Maybe once I was gone, he would realize that I wasn't such a bad kid.

Gone.

The word sounded both exciting and final. Would I do it? I knew I would miss my mom. Maybe my brothers and sister, too. But the thought of being free to make my own decisions—go where I wanted with whomever I wanted—filled me with a wild excitement. It ignited something in my teenage heart that felt rebellious and right all at once. Plus, I was so angry with my dad that I couldn't really think straight.

I looked at the Rollerblades leaning against one corner of my bed—my “getaway vehicle.” Brilliant, right? My brother Henry had given them to me when he got a new pair, and for the past few months I had been practicing in a small, relatively flat parking lot a few miles from my house. Getting my blading legs had been slow—*really* slow. I mean, I could stay on two feet and turn wobbly circles if I wasn't going too fast, but . . . *stopping*. Oh man! In all my angst and determination, I had completely forgotten that because my brother had been into trick Rollerblading, my new wheels were missing one important feature: *brakes*.

I looked out my window again, tracing the road with my eyes. Downhill to the right, even steeper downhill to the left. And we're talking mountain roads, so when I say downhill, I mean some long, steep grades on cracked pavement. Fear suddenly replaced the tug of freedom as I pictured myself speeding out of control down Voltaire Drive on my brakeless Rollerblades, crashing in a tangled mess of bruised ego and broken bones at the bottom.

And that, my friend, was the end of my runaway plan.

Of course, it wasn't the end of the heartache I'd feel in my family. It wasn't the only time I wished I could do something to change my circumstances or just change families altogether. There were other moments when I'd wonder if things would have been different if my mom had married my biological father or if my three stepbrothers lived with us full-time or if my half sister weren't seven years younger than I am. But my decision to stay was the beginning of a long road to learning to love my family better. I figured that if I wasn't going to leave, I might as well learn to stay well.

In case you haven't caught this yet, my family wasn't perfect. And (I know this might come as a shock) I wasn't perfect either. There were nights I cried myself to sleep, wishing my parents would get a divorce because I was so sick of the fighting. There were days when I rolled my eyes, slammed doors, and probably made my parents, brothers, and sister wish they could divorce *me*. My family had some stellar strengths too—such as humor, work ethic, and devotion

When Family Is Unsafe

Right out of the gate, we need to talk about a big ol' elephant in the room. I know the statistics: Too many girls have been abused by people who should be protecting them. If you have suffered harm—emotional or physical—at the hand of a family member, I want you to know that I see you. I care about you. And because God is giving me this moment in time with you, there are a few things I want you to know before we go any further in this book.

First, the obvious: Abuse is never okay. I'm sure you have heard that before, but if you or someone else in your family is the victim of physical, sexual, or verbal abuse, I'm begging you to take action. Get safe and get help.

Second, I'm writing to a wide spectrum of girls, so as someone who's been abused, you might react to some parts of this book differently than other readers do. For example, when we talk about honoring our parents or building their trust, you might feel confused or uncomfortable. When in doubt, I want you to filter what you read through this truth: You are not responsible for the abuse, and under no circumstances should you allow it to continue. Beyond that, most of what we'll discuss in the chapters to come is universal to family, and I think you'll find some useful nuggets no matter how deeply you've been wounded in the past.

Finally, will you do something for me? If you haven't already, will you please reach out for guidance from someone you trust or who is trained to help girls work through the tangles of trauma? There is no shame in letting someone walk this journey toward healing with you. If you're not sure where to turn, you'll find resources listed at www.LifeLoveandGod.com/family. Don't hide from help. You don't have to walk through this alone.

to one another—but I'm not going to gloss over the ugly family moments that marked my growing-up years, because there's about a 100 percent chance that your family isn't perfect either. And I'm guessing that you want to know how to fix what you can and how to make it through what you can't.

As kids, we don't get to choose our families. We have no control over our family members' issues and, if we're honest, we rarely understand our own. Family can be awesome, and it can be just plain messy. There might be times when we feel secure, safe, and thankful, and other times when we feel afraid, unappreciated, and unloved.

Whether you are nothin' but thankful for your family or have a genuinely warped family life, I have some really good news and a handful of tips that will show you what it means to love your family well, how to help them like you back, and a secret plan God has for you through—not in spite of—your family.

We're going to get down to business soon, but before we do, I want you to take a few minutes to sum up your family life by taking a little quiz. Let me give you two reasons why you shouldn't skip this part: (1) It's going to help you pinpoint where you stand in your heart with your family, and (2) We're going to refer back to your answers in chapters to come, and you can't refer back if you skip this. Savvy? That said, if you're afraid someone (read: little brother) is going to find your answers or if you're going to lend this book to a friend, you can write your answers down in that journal I mentioned in the introduction and hide it in your underwear drawer.

Who's My Family?

We're going to be talking a lot about your family in the coming chapters because, well, this is a book about family and all. But "family" can mean a lot of things these days, so it might be helpful to clarify what I mean by the word. Whether you'd describe your family as blended, state enforced, stable, or pretty messed up, when I talk about your family, I want you to think of the people God has put in your life to take care of you and for you to take care of. They might be blood relatives; they might not. For example, if you don't live with your biological parents, when I talk about "Mom" and "Dad" in this book, I want you to swap those for the names of the authority figures in your life, whether they are adoptive parents, stepparents, grandparents, or even an aunt and an uncle. Same thing with your siblings. They don't have to share your DNA to count as brothers or sisters.

Mi Familia

1. This first one's easy. Draw a mini family tree of your immediate family members: parents, brothers, and sisters. (*For who counts as your family, see the "Who's My Family?" box.*)

Now rate each of those relationships on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being "We have a great relationship" and 1 being "I'd rather be related to President Coriolanus Snow.") Write a number next to each person's name.

2. What frustrates you most about your

- Dad?

- Mom?

- Brothers and sisters?

FAMILY

3. What do you like most about your
 - Dad?

 - Mom?

 - Brothers and sisters?

4. From your perspective, do your parents trust you?

5. Do your parents act more like parents or friends? Do you like it that way, or do you wish they acted differently?

6. What's your favorite memory with your mom?
Your dad?

7. What do you argue with your parents about?

Check all that apply, and then circle the top two.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attitude/respect | <input type="checkbox"/> Friends |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Social media | <input type="checkbox"/> Faith or what's right/wrong |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Boys | <input type="checkbox"/> Food and health issues |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Money | <input type="checkbox"/> Brothers/sisters |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chores | <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Freedom | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: |

8. On a scale of 1 to 10, rate the level of respect you show your dad and mom, with 1 being "I can be pretty snotty" and 10 being "I always show respect." (Put an initial above each rating if they are different for each parent.)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

9. If you could ask your parents one question about anything, what would you ask?

10. What's the most important thing you wish your parents knew about you?

FAMILY

11. What do you argue about most often with your brothers and sisters?

12. On a scale of 1 to 10, rate how well you treat your siblings, with 1 being "I treat my dog better" and 10 being "I'm an All-Star Sis." (Again, you can have separate ratings; just put an initial above the number you choose for each person.)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

13. If you could ask each of your siblings one question, what would you ask?

14. If you could change one thing about your family, what would you change?

15. What's the best advice a family member has ever given you?

16. If I asked your family to tell me one thing they wished they could change about you, what do you think they would say?

17. What would you say are the ingredients to a happy, healthy family?

18. Is yours a “happy, healthy family”? If not, what do you think it would take to change your family dynamics to make it a loving, safe place?

19. What do you think other people would say is your family's greatest strength?

20. Did you discover anything new about yourself or your family by thinking through these questions? If so, what?

Thanks for taking the time to answer all my questions. I know from experience that when we're in the middle of family life, whether our family relationships are fairly healthy or need a whole bunch of work, we can have a hard time seeing the real issues and how to solve them. Sometimes it's good to take a step back from our world and evaluate why things work the way they do.

The Big Why

Why has always been one of my favorite questions (which I'm sure my parents *adored* about me). I believe that if we're willing to keep digging for answers, asking why can help us understand ourselves and the world around us better. In fact, I discovered that secret I mentioned earlier—the secret plan God has for you through your family (which I promise to share with you before this chapter is through!)—by asking some key whys. Topping the list: *Why do I exist?*

Revelation 4:11 says,

You are worthy, O Lord our God,
to receive glory and honor and power.
For you created all things,
and they exist because you created what you pleased.

That means everything in this life is from God, for God, and about God. For some of us, that's a hard pill to swallow. We're used to people—from teachers to parents, from friends

to a gazillion advertisers—making it about us. They tell us that we should go for our dreams, make names for ourselves, do what feels good, treat ourselves like princesses, and do whatever makes us happy. So if you are (as I was) used to feeling as if the world kind of revolves around you—at least in your own mind—you’re going to need a big heart adjustment for the secret to stick. This is not for the faint of heart. It’s tricky to change the point from which we see the world—to move from seeing everything as it affects *me* to how I affect *others*. And the most important “other” is God.

It’s all about God, from the galaxies overhead to the microscopic critters beneath our feet. He made this all for Himself—for His enjoyment, yes, but also for His glory, His greatness, and His fame.

We exist to bring God glory.

Okay, then *how*? (Coincidentally, my second-favorite question.) How do we bring God glory? Well, one way that God gets bunches of glory is when we live our lives for Him and take daily, careful steps to become more like Jesus.

In case you’re wondering where in the world I’m going with this, let me assure you that this has everything to do with your family scene. See, God is in control, doesn’t make mistakes, and sometimes does things that make no sense to us. And the family He has put you in? Yep, He did it on purpose. He had a reason for choosing your parents at the beginning of your life, and He has a plan for all the ups and downs since. That plan just might not be what you’ve thought it was up till now.

God's ultimate goal for putting you in your family isn't your happiness, although happiness might come from it. It's not to make you feel safe, though at times you might feel secure. It's not even to give you an example to follow, though you might pick up some good family habits before you leave home. His reason for choosing your family for you is way bigger than those things. He chose your family because of the secret, which I will share after one more pit stop—promise!

What about Abuse?

If you've been abused, that last paragraph might have you asking more questions. Namely, if God chose your family on purpose, does that mean He wanted you to be abused or abandoned? I mean, if God is all-powerful, couldn't He have prevented it? And because He didn't, does that mean He isn't loving? These questions, dubbed "the problem of pain" by famous theologian C. S. Lewis, might be the number one reason people reject God. And I get it. How could a good God allow such wicked things to happen in this world?

I wish we could talk about this while sitting curled up on my couch with cozy blankets so you could see the tears in my eyes as we dive into these difficult questions. When I say that God wants to use the *pain* caused by your family members, I am not saying that He wanted you to be abused or abandoned. And yes, I do believe that God is all-powerful and *could* prevent evil if He wanted to. I also believe that God is love. So how can both be true?

When God created humans, He wanted us to choose Him on our own, without being forced to love Him. Love isn't love unless it's a choice. And the only way we could choose Him is if we had something called free will (i.e., the ability to choose right and wrong). So God gave it to us: He allowed humans to choose to love Him or choose to reject Him.

God loves us so much that He respects that freedom of choice to the point of letting us make a mess of the perfect world He created. Sis, it isn't God's fault that evil runs rampant; it's ours, as a human race. When we reject God and do what seems good in our eyes, rejecting His ways and will, then we also say "no thanks" to the blessings He wants to give us. It breaks God's heart to watch us self-destruct.

Even though this seems completely backward at first glance, only a *loving* God would allow evil to exist, because it's the by-product of the free will He gave us. Only a humble God would allow Himself and His plan to be rejected by His creation.

My favorite thing about God, though, is that instead of saying, "Well, y'all made a hot mess of things, so good luck—I'm out like trout," He swept up the splintered pieces of this world and built a cross with them. He made a way to dwell with His people (through His Spirit in the hearts of those who choose Him) so He could walk with us through the pain, catch our tears in His nail-scarred hands, and promise to redeem every hard thing that has happened to us, including the evil committed against us, for His glory and our good.

So the people in your family who have hurt you are, in

their free will, saying no to God's plan for them. And that has consequences, sometimes for the people they are supposed to love the most. My heart breaks if you've experienced that. It is not what God wanted for you. But because He is good and loving, He can take what is painful and make it something beautiful. And *that* takes us right back to the secret.

The Secret

This family stuff is no joke. It can be hard and messy, painful and confusing. But it all has a hidden purpose built on the truths we've discovered through the questions we've asked: *God wants to use your family—whether it's close to perfect or completely messed up—to make you more like Jesus.*

That's His secret plan! Romans 8:29 says, "For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them *to become like his Son*" (emphasis added). That little *for* at the beginning of the verse is really important. In hermeneutics (the science of interpreting the Bible), it's called a "causal conjunction." That's fancy speak for telling us that this verse explains why the verse just before it is true. And the verse just before it is one you've probably heard before. In fact, it's one of the most read and highlighted verses in the Bible!

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

ROMANS 8:28

Don't you love that verse? It's been one of my favorites for like forever. But I just recently made the connection between this verse and verse 29. I'm bursting to share it. The whole reason we know that God makes everything work together for our good is because "the good" isn't our happiness, good grades, making it on *The Voice*, winning the state championship, or even getting married. The good—the biggest good in the world—is becoming more like Jesus! And if that's true, then God has most definitely given us our families for our good. Come on, they're a perfect boot camp for becoming like Jesus, aren't they? Can you think of any better place to learn and live out Jesus' patience, obedience, selflessness, compassion, grace, forgiveness, and genuine, never-giving-up love?

Yeah, I'd say families are a great way for us to test out all that we're learning from God. All the ugly selfishness, snippy attitudes, anger, and plain ol' sin I struggle with almost exclusively show up in my own home. There's nothing like being surrounded with the same group of people, in a confined space, for lengths of time, through the stresses of life, to show us what we're really made of and where we need to grow! Amen? And for that reason, our families are a *huge* blessing.

The Foundation

My sister, Alicia, is an amazing makeup artist. Whenever she comes to visit, I get excited because, well, I love spending time with her but *also* because there's a chance I'll feel like a celebrity for a day. We've settled into this sort of mutually

beneficial routine. First thing in the morning (while her nieces jump rambunctiously into bed with her), I put on a pot of coffee. To butter her up. You see, she loves coffee; the smell alone makes her happy. Then sometime after her caffeine fix and a yummy breakfast, I'll ask in my sweetest big-sister voice, "Leash, will you *pretty please* do my makeup today?" To which she never says no. I love her for this.

If you've read my book *Backwards Beauty: How to Feel Ugly in 10 Simple Steps*, then you know that I'm learning to do beauty on the cheap. Left to myself, I buy my makeup at Target, not MAC. My sister, on the other hand, has the good stuff, and it shows. Also, she has the hand of a makeup magician. Many would kill for her gift. For some reason, no matter how many times she explains the techniques, I never can get my makeup to look *quite* the same when she leaves. (Possibly a combination of shaky skills and those second-rate products I'm fond of?) I've picked up a few things during our morning makeup routine though. Topping the list: Don't cheap out on the foundation.

Foundation is to the rest of your makeup as a good sauce is to a perfect pizza. It's the base, and without a good one, your makeup is going to fall flat and rub off by noon. If you want your artistry to glow till the night hours, use a quality foundation.

The secret we just discovered is like that. It's the quality foundation for this entire book that is going to help the changes we make glow and go the distance. Not to overstate it, but this little tidbit alone might revolutionize your family life. Seriously, it just might. Because in light of the secret, the

question changes from “Why can’t my family make me happy?” (or understand me, or cut me some slack, or support me) to “How can I become more like Jesus through my family?” And that, my friend, is some quality foundation. As we tackle big issues in the pages ahead—stuff like forgiveness, freedom, and fighting fair—let’s remember that the point of all of it is to bring God glory by learning to live and be more like Jesus. For that reason—and maybe that reason alone—I’m glad my brakeless Rollerblades kept me from making an escape after all. I wouldn’t be who I am today if I had run away from the pain.

Dear God, I admit that sometimes I really don't understand why You've chosen to put me in the family you have, but I want to trust You. I believe that You have my good in mind, and I want to learn how to love my family better. Make me more like Jesus through the good, bad, and ugly of my family life. More than anything, I want to bring You glory! Amen.

Application Questions

1. *Have you ever been tempted to run away? How do you think your life would be easier? Or, if you have ever succeeded at running away, did your life get easier? In either case, what got you to that point of despair?*

FAMILY

8. *What do you hope will change in your heart or in your family by the time you finish this book?*