



SHE'S GOT ISSUES

*seriously good news for stressed-out,
secretly scared control freaks like us*

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She's Got Issues: Seriously Good News for Stressed-Out, Secretly Scared Control Freaks Like Us

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The names and identifying details of many of the women and families whose stories appear in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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CHAPTER 1

CHEAP PLASTIC SOULS

I'm a Barbie girl, in a Barbie world.

AQUA

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH on the front porch passed, and I stepped back to life, back to whining babies and tired toddlers and mediocre dinners and brain-dead evenings on the couch. But the door had been flung open, and there was no slamming it shut. And so I did what I do best—I argued with myself about the question that wouldn't leave me alone: *Am I changed because of Jesus?*

First I told myself why I was qualified to decide if I was changed: I'm a counselor, for heaven's sake. I'm a supposed expert on how to be a healthy person.

Then I told myself why I was qualified to be a Christian: I rock at Bible trivia games. I am so legit. I can even pronounce a few Hebrew words, and I know the four different Greek words for love. I've gone to seminary!

Then I told myself the truth: I can't really handle ordinary life

with a constant peace or lasting joy. I do okay loving when it's easy. I don't love much when it's hard.

I was tired. Tired of pretending that everything was fine, that I had this whole good-Christian thing figured out. Tired of worshipping on Sunday morning and yelling on Sunday afternoon. Tired of knowing the answers but continuing to deal with the same ol' ordinary problems that have been around since middle school.

Maybe it was the scandal of the ordinary that kept me there, thinking mundane, everyday problems were too small for God. Maybe I had bought into the lie that I have the power to deal with any shortcomings myself—other women I knew struggled with the same things and *seemed* perfectly fine.

Chalk my unease up to postpartum hormones or new house adjustments or fatigue. Perhaps if you and I were sitting together, sharing the frustrations of our lives, we would attribute it to circumstances like these. Maybe I'd tell you it would get better in a few weeks. Maybe you'd tell me I just needed a nap. We'd laugh, maybe. We'd call it ordinary. We'd tell each other we'd be okay.

The scandal of the ordinary kept me thinking mundane, everyday problems were too small for God.

Control issues, comparisons, insecurity—commonplace issues of the soul that I finally faced on my front porch—lead to a form of bondage. But because the chains of

these issues are so thin, because we don't talk about them much or take them very seriously, we hardly notice their combined effect. We are unaware that these issues hinder us from walking free in the path God has laid out for us. The stuff that affects your inner and outer world might be ordinary, but it's certainly not innocuous.

Take my friend Rachel. I met Rachel when she was a bobble-headed sixth grader, full of chatter and bad jokes, when her most pressing concern was whether to invite one of the girls from Bible study to her sleepover. Friendships and sick uncles and bad quiz

grades were her issues. I watched Rachel grow from a frivolous middle schooler into a brooding teenager, wrestling with boundaries and absolutes and the truth about who she really was. And ten years later, Rachel is still wrestling. She's twenty-five and beautiful now. She doesn't ask me to pray about her sleepovers or sick pets anymore, but some of the same issues that first wrapped chains around her in middle school—the ones we call commonplace—are still at work in Rachel's soul. Rachel's getting tired of the insecurity that plagues her, the always-present voice that tells her she's not pretty enough, smart enough, or loving enough to obtain the life she craves. She recognizes the voice and would love to silence it. But she's not sure how.

You may admit that there are some things in your life that hold you back, but you won't hear much about them anywhere else. Ordinary isn't sexy. Ordinary doesn't make headlines. It's not the stuff of e-mail forwards or YouTube videos. Ordinary transformation doesn't send us up to the front of the church to give testimony. "I used to struggle with comparisons, especially when it came to the size of my jeans . . . but now in the power of Jesus' name, I'm free!" I want to be free of comparison, but it's not exactly a moving testimony.

Sometimes I wish I had a story more like my friend Jen's. She lived life to a whole different kind of "full" in college. She ran fast and wild. Our senior year, my friend group called her "the vampire" because she would slide into our dorm from a night-to-morning party when we were slinging on our backpacks and leaving for morning classes. But she lived her wild life with panache, embracing her party-girl reputation while simultaneously earning a double major. When she, out of nowhere, embraced Christianity, I wanted to hold a pep rally for Jesus. Jen's in full-time ministry now. Her dramatic story is real. She became my hope that Christianity actually did work; that Jesus was real; and that people could change. I clung to her story because it helped me believe in a bigger God—probably because when I, the "good" one, talked

about my relationship with Jesus, I was about as convincing as a hostess on an infomercial.

So as much as I love the dramatic story of my college friend, what matters in our lives, in the way we love, is the story we are all living right now. My story, Rachel's story, your story—not the YouTube viral video or the e-mail forward or that great testimony in church—is the place where Jesus wants us to demonstrate what “life to the full” means. And our story is deeply affected by everyday issues because they impact every aspect of our lives—our understanding of God, our own emotional and spiritual health, and most certainly our relationships.

SO WHAT'S THIS “ORDINARY”?

We all have roller-coaster-mood days, lapses in judgment that lead to bad decisions, and moments (or months!) of self-centeredness. My front-porch moment was all of that, but more, the culmination of consistent and well-worn patterns popping up like a jack-in-the-box in my life. On further inspection, perhaps what I considered “ordinary” was closer to crazy.

When God laid my heart out in full relief, I was shocked enough that I not only wanted to change but realized how desperately I needed to do so. There's a simple exercise that can help you determine the full reality of your own heart condition. Imagine reading a printout of every thought you've had this week. Now picture yourself taking that printout to your best friend, your small group, and (gasp!) your pastor for them to read. Would you be okay with living that transparently? How different would your inside reality be from your outside persona?

Most days, we filter this “ordinary” existence, hoping to leave the dirty stuff on the inside and put forth the cleanest version of ourselves. But on a bad day or in the dark stillness of interrupted slumber, have your thoughts ever wandered to a startling place of

general unease? Have you ever thought, *Is this really all there is? Is this as fulfilled as I can be in this life? Will I ever be who I'm truly meant to be?* These moments are the true revealers of our hearts, showing how puny our “abundant life” really is, how dependent our faith and joy are on feelings and circumstances.

I'm guessing this isn't any surprise to you. I think you want more. We all hope the promise of abundant life is attainable in our lives, but we keep stubbing our toes on obstacles and joy-stealing, love-sucking issues that we don't know how to change.

Sound familiar? It certainly does for me. And after years of living like this, it's not surprising that most of us give up on actually changing. We give our issues cute titles. We shrug off our issues as just “our personality.” We call our stubbornness or pride just being a “control freak.” We call our anxiety our “concerns.” We call a bitter place of unforgiveness a “grudge.” We call our insecurity—well, insecurity. Being secure in yourself as a woman? The exception, never the rule!

When we believe that life is as good as it's gonna get, we make an expensive trade in our souls. We stuff away the raw and messy and put forth a nicer but cheaper, plastic version of ourselves. Our story is clean and easy—but also fake. We aren't seeing a true image anymore—the image God made and is making of us—we have built our own “acceptable” image. This is what living with ordinary issues does to us. It slowly kills what is beautiful and unique and turns us into half-dead versions of what we were meant to be.

FINDING REAL ABUNDANCE

If your normal Christian experience is about a fleeting peace, some emergency prayers, or relief that you have an insurance policy for heaven, I can't wait to introduce you to so much more. Although Jesus does offer you eternity with him, he is just as concerned with

another aspect of living—the part that happens right in the mess of your ordinary life.

But even the people who walked behind Jesus while his sandals kicked up dust, who shared the same loaf of bread and touched his hands, and knew what his voice sounded like when he first woke up—even they were confused about Jesus and what he offered to them. Near the end of his earthly life, Jesus and his disciples shared a special meal—the Passover. Imagine them reclining around the table, talking about the many things they'd seen through the last few years of doing life together. Imagine how their ears perked up when Jesus, the miracle worker, the interpreter of the law, the center of all the action, looked intently at them and said, “A new command I give you.”

Don't you think they leaned in even closer to hear what he would say next?

Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34-35, NIV)

It's not that Jesus was proclaiming something new: he'd been all about love through the last three years of healing and teaching. But . . . well, is that what it's really all about? That the way we love

each other is the way we are to be known to the world?

The number one way we are known as Jesus followers is through, and in, our relationships with one another.

Author Brennan Manning says, “Contact with Christians should be an experience that proves to people that the gospel is a power

that transforms the whole of life.”¹ Being a disciple when Jesus walked the earth meant following a radical call—not of rebellion but of crazy love that defied earthly expectation. And that hasn't

changed. Being a Christian isn't just about going to heaven. It's about a power that transforms your whole life. Your thoughts. Your behaviors. Your relationships. Your love.

SO . . . HOW'S LOVE GOING FOR YOU?

If the grocery store cashier or your kid's teacher or the last waiter who served you described you with complete honesty, would *loving* be the first word he or she would use? Or would you be known by some other nicety, like *control freak* or *frazzled* or *scared*?

Here's the *craziest part* of our ordinary issues: we often have no idea how these issues kill our ability to love powerfully and unconditionally. We all intend to be loving. We try to do a good job of it, but when we are living with a half-dead heart or a plastic existence, we aren't capable of loving the way we'd like. A withered heart just doesn't respond the way we want. And no power of will or self-talk or knowledge can change that.

I have a twentysomething friend who struggles with comparison. She intends to love well. She wants to be happy with her friends when they have a date or a job interview, but the issue of comparison has a hold on her heart. She is so busy evaluating what she doesn't have that she has no energy to be happy for what her girlfriends do have. Her intense preoccupation with self is just one example of how our ordinary issues cripple our ability to love—even our own friends!

Peter, a disciple of Jesus who had control and comparison issues in his early life, later admonished believers to “be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8, NIV). As my friend discovered, even ordinary issues can create destruction in your life.

DO YOU HAVE ISSUES?

The ability to see yourself clearly is crucial in your relationship with Christ and in your subsequent ability to serve well. You

cannot live more abundantly and love better without addressing the underlying issues. You are not after perfection in the way you love, but you do need to cultivate a growing dependency on a relationship with Christ that gives you the ability to love.

The first step, then, is assessing your heart condition. To do that, you need to look for the three signs of an issue-laden life. Think of the way fatigue relates to anemia, or sniffles to the cold, or fever to the flu. These symptoms are your first indicator that you've got something going on beneath the surface. Similarly, there are three overarching symptoms in your life that let you know you've got issues: blindness, lack of compassion, and convoluted conflict.

Symptom #1: Blindness

Let me explain how motherhood and triple bathroom mirrors opened my eyes to this condition in myself. When our oldest son started kindergarten, our family moved to a new level of crazy. A young man of rules, Charlie deals with a little fear issue, and every morning he was terrified of the dreaded possibility of *missing the bus*. That could be manageable, except for the three- and one-year-olds who ruled the house like little dictators.

One morning after we had narrowly escaped the dreadful *missing the bus*, I began helping my daughter prepare for preschool. Finally I stole away for sixty seconds of luxurious "me" time: just enough to hurriedly brush my teeth in peace. But as all mothers know, the click of the bathroom lock is the signal for a code-red emergency to break out. On this morning, it was my daughter's unsuccessful search for a pair of matching socks.

"Mama, I need socks!"

"Mommy, I can't find my purple and white socks. Mommy!"

"MOMMY, I need help! MOMMY, where are you? MOMMY!"

"MOMMMMMYYYYY!!!"

I spit into the sink and screamed so loud that my voice scratched as if it were coming from a blown speaker. “BEEEEEEEEEEEE PAAAAAATIENT!!!!”

At that moment, I caught a panoramic view of myself in the triple bathroom mirrors. With toothpaste on my lip, hair scrambled on top of my head, and a wild look in my eye, I screamed “Be patient!” like a woman possessed. The mirrors captured the irony of my statement in triplicate. I began to wonder how my own issues were becoming my kids’ issues. Ouch.

Eye-opening experiences happen throughout Scripture. Jesus proclaimed that he came to bring “sight to the blind” (Luke 4:18, NKJV). He frequently preached about spiritual and relational blindness, particularly when talking to the so-called spiritual people, the Pharisees:

You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.”
(Matthew 23:24-26, NIV)

Heavy words! Even—and especially—the religious leaders seemed prone to a malignant form of blindness. They could preach the Word. They knew the law, and they knew what to do to appear right and good. But Jesus knew the truth about their hearts. The religious show they liked to put on wasn’t fooling him.

Our ordinary issues may seem so commonplace that we stay blind to the truth of our own condition. But it’s in stories just like mine that we have a choice. We can shrug off reality and use circumstances, personality, or PMS to justify our behavior, or we can face the truth of just how damaging ordinary issues are in our

lives. Without that truth, as painful as it might be, we aren't able to access the kind of compassion and love that should characterize our lives. We will be *known* by our love (see John 13:35). That morning in the bathroom mirror gave me eyes to see the reality of my heart: something crazy was lurking beneath the surface. (I also looked crazy, but that's another story.)

Symptom #2: Lack of compassion

This symptom may be the most obvious: the half-dead heart has no compassion reserve. The word *compassion* means “to suffer with,” and when we are “suffering with” a bunch of our own stuff, it is almost impossible to offer ourselves freely to someone else. We all find it difficult to feel for others at times. Busyness, exhaustion, lack of boundaries, or painful life circumstances suck our compassion reserves dry. But I wonder how often something else is going on.

I recently came through an arduous season in my counseling practice. The downturn in the economy and financial instability pressed me into working more than my husband, Dave, or I wanted. And as much as I loved seeing my clients, the emotional toll of doing ministry, raising young children, and being a “professional” woman was fraying the edges of my soul.

One evening after working with some heavy client issues—like abuse, rape, grief, and chronic depression—I finished the night with a girl in her late teens. As she sat across from me, rattling through the petty woes in her life, my emotional exhaustion won. Usually I find myself relating easily to teenage drama; after all, most girls are only reacting to what they know. But on this day, I felt dead inside. I felt . . . nothing. I felt absolutely no emotion toward this darling little girl pouring out her heart to me.

My compassion meter was running on fumes. I'm used to feeling *something* toward clients, but my own stuff, my marriage stuff,

was smack-dab in the middle of my counseling office, keeping me from feeling what I knew was my job—not as a counselor, but as a fellow human being—to feel, to relate, to empathize.

Here’s the trouble with lack of compassion: God made us in his image, and one of the main ways he describes himself is compassionate. If God had a business card, I think he’d want “compassionate” listed right under “Supreme Creator of the Universe.” He uses this word to describe himself all the time. He practically shouts it throughout the Old Testament: “I am gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love!”² God: compassionate creator. Us: compassionate image bearers. Makes sense, right? And it doesn’t stop there.

God took it one step further when he put on flesh and walked among us. In the New Testament, Jesus modeled compassion *with action*. When Jesus feels *splagchnizomai*, the Greek word for compassion used in the original text, he always does something about it. *Splagchnizomai*—a cool-looking word that I pronounce “splaag-nose-me” or “crazy-free”—literally means to feel it deep down in our guts for someone else. To be moved to nausea for other people’s needs, as my pastor likes to say. That is some deep feeling. That is living life to the full, feeling and experiencing love and pain with others. Yet so often we are wrapped up in our own stuff, and we just can’t feel for others the way God intended.

When things aren’t settled or right in our souls, we are hindered in our ability to feel deeply and take action in love. Compassion is always a prerequisite to love. When we lack empathy, when we feel empty and numb, we need to take a clear, honest look at the issues that block our compassion and love for others.

Symptom #3: Convoluted conflict

Conflict is always hard, but heart issues make it even more painful. The difficulty of expressing feelings, the struggle to be heard

and known, and the pain of compromise make everyone (except maybe trial lawyers) recoil from a fight with a loved one.

Last week I met with a friend who told me about a recent argument with her husband. My friend Liv is what you would term “low maintenance.” She’s a friend you’d love to have. She prides herself on managing conflict well at work, addressing things directly in friendships, and fearlessly taking responsibility for her own issues. So she seemed shocked by what she called “a swing and a miss” with her husband.

Liv explained: “I had just been thinking about how one of my employees—a single mom—lives on *half* of what I make. I started feeling bad about the way I spend money, like my pedicures and the clothes I buy my girls, and I felt like maybe I needed to rein in my spending. So over dinner I said to my husband, ‘I think we need to do a better job managing our spending.’”

Liv leaned back so she could emphasize her point. “I was shocked by his reaction. All of a sudden, it was like I was talking from over here,” she said, swinging her hands apart to illustrate, “and he was talking from way over there.” Next she smashed her fists together and said, “Then we crashed into one another. We didn’t talk the rest of the night.”

As we talked and I asked some questions, I better understood why Liv called this “a swing and a miss.” Liv’s husband handles all the family finances, and he thought her offhand comment was a judgment call on his money management. They both overreacted to the actual conversation at hand.

But here’s the real story, the conversation they *weren’t* having. Liv is the family’s breadwinner. Her husband is a stay-at-home dad. This creates all kinds of insecurity between them. That insecurity, when left unchecked, causes their disagreements to derail faster than a kindergartner trying to tell a joke.

Liv continued, “The conversation became so tense we couldn’t

even express what we were trying to say to one another. He was obviously upset because he thought I was criticizing him. I was upset and angry because I am freakishly insecure about money, my job, and whether it's right that I am a working mom. What a failure to communicate!"

Like it or not, conflict is going to be a part of all relationships—and the way we handle it can be a very good thing. Proverbs 27:17 says, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (NIV). I can't read this proverb without picturing my university's athletes-only weight room. My fellow cheerleaders and I often worked out there next to the varsity football players. That little room in the basement of the basketball arena was so memorable—and I'm not even talking about the muscles! What I remember most is the constant sound of moving iron—clinking, clanging, slamming to the ground—and the hard work it took to move it.

The weight room—and the proverb—reminds me that iron clanging into iron isn't a gentle experience. We need the clang and the sharpening from one another to work toward resolution and to grow as people. But when we are stuck in our own issues, we often derail a conflict before we get close to the good stuff. Maybe, like Liv, we've had some communication failures—so we avoid conflict altogether and miss out on the chance to grow and change. Or maybe we've experienced so much hurt in conflict that we charge in like a lioness, claws unsheathed, lashing out at anyone who stands in our way. A tendency to either avoid or attack in conflict is a sure indicator that other issues are lurking.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Blindness about our issues, lack of compassion, and unhealthy conflict are three symptoms of a heart that needs tending. Although heart issues come in all shades and variations, in this book we'll explore five consistent problems. I've observed these issues over the

past decade of teaching, counseling, and ministering to women of all ages. When I was first working with women, I would sit across from a client and think, *Wow! I'm not the only one dealing with this?!* After thousands of conversations, most around one of these five issues, I find myself wondering, *What woman doesn't deal with this?* Although the details of stories in this book have been changed, you'll probably find a lot to relate to from your own life too.

So welcome to the She's-Got-Issues Club—you're in good company! Here are the top five (drumroll, please):

- control
- insecurity
- comparisons
- fear
- anger (and its cousin, unforgiveness)

In the coming chapters, we'll cover these five ordinary issues that most women face. Most likely, you struggle more with one or two of them, but read about them all. Not only will you find shades of yourself in every struggle, but you'll gain compassion for friends who struggle with issues different from yours.

How to use this book

All you need to begin this journey is a willing heart, although having a Bible, journal, and pen wouldn't hurt either.

Each of the five key issues—control, insecurity, comparisons, fear, anger—is covered in two chapters: the first defines it; the second explores how to deal with it effectively. In the first of the two chapters, you'll find an assessment that will help you identify how intensely you struggle with that issue. Be honest with yourself while answering the questions—you'll find far more to relate to!

The second chapter in each section also includes a “Word Up”

section, designed to allow you a time of focused attention on Scripture that speaks to that issue. If a story catches your interest, put this book down and pick up God's Word. Read the story or verse in your Bible, and the stories and verses around it too. God's Word has the supernatural ability to satisfy your longings in a way that no other word can, and I hope this book will be the first step in a long and exciting journey into the Bible for you.

Every section concludes with questions for personal as well as group reflection. I affectionately call devoting time to such reflection in my own life "taking a space bar."

Taking a space bar

Has it ever seemed to you like life is moving so fast that you are going without space bars? Just as you can probably decipher the jumble of words at the end of the last sentence, most likely you can keep pushing through your crazy schedule—at least for a while. But just as words would eventually lose their meaning if there were never a space between them, so life lived without any spaces or margin comes to feel like a lengthy run-on sentence.

We human beings have an outstanding ability that sets us apart from all other creatures on earth. This is our ability to think about thinking, or what psychologists term *metacognition*. Thinking about our thinking is innate, yet when life comes at us fast, we often forget to do so. We don't take the space bar between relationships, circumstances, and emotions to look back and think. We don't think about the thinking that's driving the action that's driving us crazy.

Scripture instructs us, "Take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously" (Malachi 2:16, NKJV). Taking a space bar is our chance to take heed to our spirit, to pay attention to what the actions of our lives tell us about the condition of our spirit. It's only by paying attention that we can ensure we are not dealing treacherously with people and with God.

I've found three tools to use during my space bar moments to help uncover the issues lurking in my heart:

- **An incident.** Think of a recent situation that didn't go the way you wanted, or of a problematic relationship that you spend a lot of time thinking about. Having a specific example in mind will help as you learn about yourself. What/who drives you crazy? What's a recent interaction that you can use as a case study? Some of the questions at the end of each chapter will help prompt this thinking.
- **Prayer.** It is rare that we set out to intentionally wrong another person or act unkind. So if you're in turmoil over a situation or a recent interpersonal interaction, keep in mind that you likely have already concluded that you are in the right. Ask God in a simple way to enter in with you to this space bar. "God, I know there is a way that seems right to me. Would you open my heart to receive your instruction in this?"
- **Writing on the why.** My counseling supervisor is known to say, "Journaling is the cheapest form of therapy." You must get out what has gotten in, and often writing is the best way to do so. Frequently people don't stop to think beyond whatever's frustrating them. Instead, they camp out on that thought and allow an endless and repetitive complaint to dominate their mind. Writing can help us get unstuck and move on to the final "why" of our actions.

If I find my sister annoying, my natural response is to dwell on what annoys me about her, never asking the next question. Writing on the why is about that next question. It's asking myself in the space bar, "But *why* does she annoy me?" "What do I want to be different?" And then asking the next question, and the next, until I finally get to the rock-bottom statement of my soul, the place often visited by pride

or fear or self-centered desires. That's the place where we can be met by Jesus, our provider, our healer, our savior, our rescuer—the one who can satisfy us in our deepest place of need and direct us back into our lives with freedom and love.

This book will walk you right to the door of this last step, but it's up to you to walk through it with Jesus and into a place of true transformation. And it's worth making the journey.

You might consider using this book with a small group, women's ministry, or another friend. There is great freedom in transparency. My desire is that this book will invite you into that place of honesty, and if you take that plunge with another friend, the reward will be even greater.

A ground rule: please do not assess one another's issues! There is plenty of work for you to do on yourself, I promise. Instead, consider your small group or friendship a place where you can be a cheerleader—encouraging and affirming one another as you peel back some layers of plastic and ultimately discover the beautiful, authentic women God has made. The questions for discussion at the end of each chapter will provide a starting point for real conversation about your issues and God's work.

Now let's move on to the good stuff: our lives, God's Word, and the divine mystery of his transforming work in our hearts!

SPACE BAR

A PRAYER

God, I find my heart confusing! You know me far better than I know myself, but I know I'm not living the full and free life you've provided for me. Would you give me the strength to be honest with myself—and with you—so I can take the next step toward freedom? Amen.

A JOURNALING EXERCISE

1. Which of the following “ordinary issues” do you struggle with most consistently?

Control Insecurity Comparison
Fear Anger Unforgiveness

Describe a recent incident in which that issue was front and center.

2. How have you seen these issues hinder your relationships?
What circumstances make them visible to others?

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Do you feel like you have a faith testimony worth sharing? Have you ever experienced (or known someone who's experienced) *real* change through a relationship with Christ?



Nicole reveals the issues she struggles with most. Snap the code with your smartphone to watch this bonus video or visit the link below.



www.tyndal.es/ShesGotIssues1